



## **An approach to the upsurge of children, childhood and education in Colombian anthropology**

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## Introduction

Children, childhood and education have been considered in Colombia from an anthropological perspective since the late 1990s. The study of children has been used mostly as a way of investigating anthropology through topics such as social organization, kinship, family structure, gender studies or conflict resolution, among others. Previously, childhood had taken into consideration mainly as an ethnographic verification of *a stage* in the cycle of life: moving from infancy to adulthood and the elder years of members of societies.

Along this process, new anthropological questions and research problems have emerged in the studies of childhood in Colombia. The relationship between the ideas of and about children in different cultures and their life experiences has acquired great importance. The numerous ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>, the diverse geographical environments, the complex history and the socio-economic conditions in Colombia are providing a rich possibility for ethnographic evidence regarding the diversity in definitions, meanings and ways of being a child, in environments that could be considered as *different worlds*.

Only during the last decade, child-centered anthropology focused on children, their own accounts and their surroundings, as well as their capability of constructing culture through agency, has been included as a point of view. Today, this is giving children's participation not only in academic studies but also in political life, a new perspective of their place in society.

The role that formal or informal education plays in children's learning processes and the transmission, acquisition or construction of cultural knowledge is especially relevant nowadays. The impact of educational interactions upon children's worlds, social and cultural practices, and the way it compromises cultural rights, self-determination and autonomy of ethnic groups, are just some of the contemporary research subjects.

It is not a surprise that the studies are very heterogeneous since this sub-field is quite recent in a worldwide scale of anthropology (*AnthropoChildren* 2012) and even more in Colombia. However, there are various differences in the theoretical and methodological lines; the extent of the fieldworks and the framework established by academic research or institutionalized action programs make significant contrast. One way or another, it is a great asset placing Colombian children's and educational realities in the horizon of empirical studies and theoretical debates. This is a re-establishment due to the social and political processes that are taking place in Colombia, as well as those elsewhere.

This paper approaches some of the current research problems that have come up with the upsurge of childhood and education in Colombian anthropology, which as a point of view, are especially significant. The methodological and different ethnographic results are also quite revealing as to which strategies are being explored. They will be mentioned as a horizontal aspect throughout the paper. To achieve this purpose, some examples of what are considered to be predominant contemporary tendencies will be addressed: (i) studies on interpretations and representation of childhood in different cultural contexts; (ii) studies on education and intercultural relations; and (iii) studies related to the protection of children's rights.

## Interpretations and representation of childhood in different

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## cultural contexts

An anthropological perspective in understanding that the idea of children and childhood does not have only one meaning is gaining place in Colombian society; therefore they cannot be treated in a homogenous way. There is a growing conscience of the complexity of the relationship between the ideas surrounding childhood and the life conditions that societies create for them. Protection programs or the research in disciplines such as medicine, psychology and architecture, among others, are progressively recognizing they must take-in cultural diversity and develop a true distinct approach to their interventions. This feedback has created an important platform for exploring complex topics in the sub-field of childhood anthropology in Colombia.

Historical research and ethnographic studies of children have been providing significant support to the guidelines of investigation. Ximena Pachón (2012) has provided an important contribution from this perspective. She points out how only recently children are no longer viewed and treated as simple objects of investigation in anthropological analysis, and have begun to be represented as active subjects that create social relations. Her work suggests that along this guideline, anthropology in Colombia has challenges, such as the study of childhood that goes beyond the traditional representations of the middle class: boys and girls who are involved in delinquency, abandoned, labor or linked to armed groups, among others. Ximena Pachón also reminds us that, in contemporary anthropology, the voice of parents, teachers and adults is still more present than the boys and girls. She points out that it is still a challenge to carefully collect and represent the voices of children in anthropology and ethnographic work. This challenge offers us the possibility to create new theoretical category and fieldwork methodologies suggesting we stop talking about children and start talking to them.

There has been only one cross-cultural ethnological study done in Colombia led by François Correa (2010), as far as records show. Even though the main concern of this study emphasizes on indigenous child labor, the papers written by a group of anthropologists in six cultural complexes do give an important contrast about the interpretations and representation of childhood between them. The study shows how there is a different status and nature between the unborn and the new born. The moment when childhood begins is conceived in different ways: for some, childhood begins during pregnancy, while in other communities it only begins until birth or when name is given to the child. When and how the child is considered a human establishes limits between the fetus and child which can lead to a distinction between *being* and *not being* considered a person, *life* and *no-life*.

In the Amazonian groups, it is considered that only through the rituals that connects children with the spiritual dimension, is possible to acquire the status of a person. Some of the communities of the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta point out that childhood begins when a couple of future parents consult the *mamo* when they want to conceive a child. Thus, the child is a person even before conception, through the possibility of entering into a dimension and time that allows them to connect with the orders of the universe (Díaz Barón 2010).

A related research is that of Alexandra Peña-Bautista (2010), where she shows how for the *Misak* people (also known as the *Guambianos* of the Cauca region), the relationship between knowledge and children are settled in the deepest root of their culture. Children are not something empty; they receive all their knowledge before birth so they can perform their mission in life. They are granted the *seed of knowledge* that speaks to them “from the inside” throughout life and must learn only to

interpret the signs and to hear the knowledge they already have, which comes from the *Pishimisak* (great spirit):

“Through the voices of the Pishimisak, that exist in the stars, animals, fires, the body itself, waters and dreams, life goes between the hot and the cold, among the circle that marks the path of the sun and the moon, as each person is governed from birth, between masculine and feminine and between two worlds with dissimilar temporal rhythms, but by no means discordant” (Peña-Bautista 2010).

Other studies indicate that the situation of children as full persons is equally diverse. The *Kancuamo* (also of the Sierra Nevada), recognize the existence of an inner child in every human being. When the *Witoto* from the Amazon want to conceive a child, they ask for advice to the elders who can communicate with the ancestors that will guide the spirit of the child’s being so it can take human shape. In this way, aspects such as the beginning and the ending of childhood or the interpretations of the body fluctuate according to features of social organization, the cosmology and without doubt, cultural identity (Díaz Barón 2010).

The thesis that boy and girls access the world through the body is located in the center of the discussion about the conformation of the subject and social relations. Ana María Arango (2014) has succeeded in a pioneer research about early childhood among the afro-descendent people of the Chocó region of Colombia. The analysis aims towards the relation of dance-music with the social life of the *afro-chocoanos*, as a way to defining themselves. She highlights childhood as a concept that is built in early life experiences and accompanies a person throughout his life. Ana María Arango finds a particular meaning in bodily practices associated to the presence of sounds and music surrounding conception, pregnancy, childbirth and parenting based on their cosmic and social view of life. These interpretations and representations of childhood support the access of the *afro-chocoano* children to the world. They are the focus of the author’s debate about the conformation of the person’s self, of his or her relationships, of the modes of learning and of the ways of life present the internalization of culture. Her work also enters in an interface between ethno-musicology and anthropology of education.

François Correa (2012) has also made an ethnological study aiming to identify basic characteristics of childhood between Colombian indigenous people and their place in the production and reproduction of social and cultural development. By exploring the process of *beinghood* during childhood among the *Pamiwa* people (Cubeo of Vaupés) he aims at theoretical production. His ethnological information shows how there is an outstanding importance given to children during the first years of life. The analysis is focused on the how in children’s stability not only rests the future reproduction of lifecycle and the replacement of human beings, but also the stability of society itself.

The surveillance, care and dedication with which children are treated is center of the most important ceremonies that are carried out during that childhood, with the purpose of introducing them in this world, to all human and non-human relations and to their participation in the reproduction of society. *Pamiwa* deal with this through very well organized shamanic practices, employing spells as prophylactic and therapeutic instruments that, through symbols which create analogies on relationships of humans, connect them to their ancestors and other beings like animals. This procedures are up-dating their knowledge about past relationships kept in a collective memory and are the true power that allows the *child subject* to be kept safe from the risks that threaten the construction of his self-being.

## Protection and assistance of children

For many Colombian anthropologists, the condition on which ethnographic information and anthropological analysis are made leads to strong political debates. This points out to the importance of childhood as a political and social foundation and many of the antagonistic daily realities of children lives. It is said that discussions about childhood must be seen in the context of conflicting and questioning ideas about children and the sort of childhood they should have from what could be called a *cultural perspective of human rights*.

Researches aimed at different forms of child abuse and maltreatment are maybe the most frequent in Colombia. As said before, the anthropological perspective has become an important support for the protection and assistance of children. Some, which have made significant contributions, will be mentioned.

Research and intervention based on the understanding of childhood within the framework of abuse and maltreatment was carried out with the participation of the anthropologist Clara Inés Carreño (2010). In the *Program on Child Maltreatment Prevention* of the Xavierian University (2002-2006), they recreate the highlights of this concern in Colombia. The study offers reinterpretations of what is used to analyse child maltreatment from the perspective of the adult-child relationships.

Children and teenagers which are forced to participate by recruitment or by poverty, in the armed conflict as well as violence has been one of the most persistent topics (Riaño Alcalá 2006) The concept of community resilience and its importance for children and their families to recover from personal and collective trauma have been undertaken from an anthropological perspective. The idea that communities are not static and that they tend to reconstruct themselves reflects people's capacity of agency since early childhood above the lack of it in government's institutions. These sorts of studies have mainly been done in the line of applied anthropology.

Child labor has been another strong topic in anthropology of childhood in Colombia since the 1990s. The involvement of Colombian children in all the *worst forms of child labor* according to the International Labor Organization has led to the need of understanding not only the economic and social factors, but the weight of cultural concepts and actions that connect childhood with work. This studies have combined fieldwork and documentary research on gender studies on domestic girl labor, artisanal mine exploitation, agroindustry or informal street commerce.

The cross-cultural study mentioned before shows that between the ethnic groups: *Wayuu*, in the Guajira (Maya Mazzoldi. 2010); *Kankuamo*, in the Sierra Nevada (Patrick Morales T. 2010); *Nasa* in the Cauca (Libya Tattay B. 2010); *Guahibo*, in the Orinoquia (Laura Calle A. 2010); *Tukanos* and *Cubeo* in the Vaupés (Ana María López 2010); *Embera* and *Wounan* in Chocó (Lina María Montoya M. 2010) there is an overview of indigenous peoples in Colombia, of their economies and forms of work, the reasons for child labor and a characterization of the forms of hazardous child labor and its worse manifestations. François Correa indicates that its eradication in the case of indigenous people raises investigative challenges and points out that the key is set on "differentiating the indigenous work that is done under economic systems whose control over the conditions of production and social reproduction is in their own hands and that of the work in which members of indigenous communities are under the control of third parties within the national society" (2010: 18).

Another comparative study, with an anthropological perspective related to child protection, was done by means of an ethnographic study coordinated by a Colombian team in a quantitative study

(2007) about the demand of sexual commercial exploitation among boys and girls (11 to 18 year olds) in Chile, Colombia, Paraguay and Peru. This study developed pilot models for the prevention and withdrawal of children and adolescents from this form of abuse. Additionally, there has been a strong debate among anthropologist regarding opposite positions regarding children's rights and whether they can or cannot be negotiated due to poverty, thus the difficulty of withdrawing all children from work exploitation. Different arguments have been set out as well as guidelines of recommendations.

María Claudia Duque (2010) points out critical questions about the meaning and characteristics of the perception of childhood in the anthropological research their place in applied anthropology. She defines elements which comprise deliberation and action, theory and social praxis, regarding the way childhood is understood and develops an approach that places children as active social actors. Even though children have been included in the ethnographic literature, they have not been taken as trustworthy informants or social actors with the capacity to construct a cultural world. In the framework of applied anthropology, she documents the social and cultural diversity of children that are left behind with "caretakers", while their parents leave the town or the country searching for better economic opportunities. Her analysis goes into the contextual, historical circumstances to find the impact of stereotypes and the phenomena of naturalizing the children's situation. She was able to generate spaces for their voices and experiences, so they could be taken into account in the decisions that affect them. Her results should stimulate investigations or action programs to become new forms of colonization and domination through the use of participatory methods, as well as some ethical guidelines that promote trust, interaction and joint construction of knowledge and interventions.

Childhood brings together a constellation of discourses and practices surrounding children's protection or potential abuses on them. Studying childhood not only includes children's capabilities and autonomy, the communities or ethnic group's cultural notions of personhood, parenting, gender, social order, authority, communicational systems, but also the opportunities they have as integral members of society. The anthropological perspective places a deep link between children's acquisition of culture, upbringing and socialization processes, intergenerational dynamics and the situation of children as subjects of rights. It can be said, that anthropology of childhood in Colombia is becoming a strong support of action programs aiming children's protection and the recognition of their rights.

## **Education and culture linked to culturally directed programs**

Collaborative research work is becoming a more common frame for anthropological studies in Colombia. This line of work is set either through government policies, NGO, the invitation to social scientists to become consultants for the communities or the combination of them. The fruitful bonding between anthropology and child education is one of the main grounds in which collaborative research is uprising.

The introduction lead by Elsie Rockwell in the 1980s of ethnographic studies in school has made an important impact on Colombian teachers, as well as in ethno-educational projects. Since the 1970s, anthropologists have been working with the Nasa people and their Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca, CRIC, on the construction and development of a bilingual and intercultural education program. Libia Tattay (2002) and others have worked as members of the research team and pedagogy of the CRIC at the autonomous indigenous University and Intercultural (UAIIN). Other

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ethno-educational experiences have also been developed throughout the country.

Nowadays, ethno-education has turned towards *inner pedagogies*. Life cycles, inter-culturalism and education raised the need to understand and explore the dilemmas present in the different conceptions of education, construction of knowledge and the role of cultural knowledge that produces relations of learning organization in an educational context. The relations of mind and thought, language and worldview define differential school forms that require focus on the role of language and the logic in forms of learning.

Linked to the experience of the Nasa and the anthropological assistance Mauricio Caviedes (2014) has opened a solid debate about if the interest of a non-indigenous anthropologist in indigenous education is justified or if this should not be an exclusive concern of the indigenous people. As he examines the sustainability in creating their own indigenous education system, he argues that the model of the nation-state and the educational system, make up a framework that outlines a logic for the education of indigenous peoples in a political arena. Here questions arise about the acceptance of intercultural education as something given, without awareness of the obstacles presented by the relationship between dominant and dominated in intercultural education. Based on various experiences reviewed, Caviedes spots gaps present in the struggle for indigenous education and calls anthropological research to go into the mechanisms of “scientific”, “philosophical” and “logical” knowledge, present in the explanation and understanding of the world of indigenous, rural, or urban people.

Another example of the anthropology of education was originated by the need to create *Educational Guidelines for the Indigenous Initial Education in Bogotá D.C.* (Díaz Barón 2010) through a participatory process that reunited 300 members of 18 indigenous communities that live in the city and with whom it was possible to work. This document guides the pedagogical projects of 6 kindergartens in Bogotá, where approximately 500 indigenous children and about 200 non-indigenous children attend. In response to the right of participation and consultation that indigenous people have, the formulation of the guidelines for indigenous kindergartens was developed together with representatives of about 300 members of 18 indigenous groups. This process led to the notions of childhood, approaching matters such as: What are children made off? When is a person fully developed? What should a girl or a boy understand and know in different moments of childhood? Do the experiences of childhood have any significance during the rest of the lifetime? Schooling was approached mainly through topics if knowledge is built or acquired by children and how does that process occur. In a collaborative line of anthropology, each one of the indigenous communities involved in the project discussed lifecycle descriptions, child rearing and inner pedagogies. An important “validation” of the ethnographic information about childhood, mainly done in anthropological studies was done during this process. The ethnographic studies on indigenous children done by anthropologist were presented to the delegates of the different communities and validated with “the elders” inside their groups. Most of the anthropological descriptions on childhood were accepted.

The support, the care and the education that adults offer children in some of the indigenous groups of the Colombian Amazon that Maritza Díaz Barón (2010) observed in her fieldwork in the Vaupés region with Paminwa (Cubeo group) led to an analysis regarding how children are taught and how they learn. This study gives an account of the way transferred care and teachings are mediatized by experience and advice, and it is also strongly based on questions. The process of learning arises from the implicit sense of their acts and the recognition of the potentials in boys and girls that

allows them to actively participate and to make reflections that lead to inferences, to anticipate, to formulate hypotheses about the world which they are discovering and constructing by means of their explorations and agency. Trial and error is central once there is a strong sense to reconstruct what has been experienced. Advice necessarily compromises the process of learning but connects to ancestral teachings. Thus, the knowledge integrated to the culture in the scopes of intellectual, emotional and affective growth, is present in a particular form of thought. The educative theses that grant to the problematic query the source of knowledge have been a resource of inspiration in pedagogical matter. This paper approaches a conception of construction of knowledge that entails a form of thought based on the creation of senses and feelings, from which a proposal of initial education, called *attended exploration* has drawn up and has been implemented also with non-indigenous children in urban contexts.

In a more theoretical line of work, Zandra Pedraza (2001) has taken a study on the way the education of the body links to some specific forms of knowledge that are present in school education. She makes a dissertation on an interpretative analysis of the relation between knowledge, power and body, in relation to the specific form of knowledge that is acquired in school; power as the power of the student (the way to use reason, will and discipline) and how that sets the relationship between teacher and student, and the way student learning is conceived. The process related to education and culture linked to culturally directed programs is one area where there is an important contribution to ethnic communities, academic production, educational transformations and society as a whole. Still, there is an evident need to deepen on education as an object of anthropological research. Some important aspects worth mentioning are:

- How culture is learned, taught and built in different social contexts;
- The relationship between social movements and the scholar world;
- The way ethnic construction of identity in childhood is framed by public policies;
- If the differences between indigenous way of thought and education, the homogenization of educational paradigms and the asymmetry of the relationship of indigenous peoples with the national society, generates more sophisticated forms of subjugation and cultural transformation.

## Final considerations

The growing research about children, childhood and education in Colombian anthropology has yet great challenges to sort but it is surely opening itself to pertinent topics, exploring methodological alternatives and strong social and political commitments. Even though there is a growing national academic activity and scientific meetings, with special mention to the *First Symposium on Childhood Anthropology* in 2010, and two more after (2012-2014) led by the Anthropology Department of the Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, as well as child and youth observatories, the teaching of anthropology in the 13 schools in the country has yet to provide a focus on childhood in their undergraduate and graduate programs.

Students and some teachers show an increasing interest in topics such as childhood agency, infancy and human development, educational patterns, and childhood in metropolitan anthropologies or in indigenous societies, among related topics. They also have a strong commitment regarding the impact of the national conflicts over children. This is probably more due to the increase of public policies and social programs that demand anthropologist as part of interdisciplinary research teams and applied anthropology projects, than to concentrated academic events on childhood and youth

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in these faculties. Giving childhood a strong place as an option in the teaching of anthropology may be one of the most important goals to accomplish in making this a strong line of work in Colombian anthropology.

It is also important to emphasize that these lines and methods of research in anthropology of childhood have a deep relationship not only with the academic interest, but what the social and political conditions in which they are generated. It can be said that childhood research in Colombia is developing an analytical approach where childhood is a social and cultural category. These results are based on the consideration that societies are not static and confined to the perpetuation of the social order, but subject to a permanent dynamic, not free of tensions and internal conflicts. They propose a reorientation to the understanding of childhood and warn epistemological procedures for study. It must not be concluded that childhood has a complete “world of its own” - independent of adults - and that the lives of children cannot be reduced to mere integration into civil society.

As a result, building a vision of childhood through research must not only cover socio-cultural diversity, but the social action and the voices of the children, of their interest, and their rights as infants. This would build a social category based on the capabilities of their experience as subjects; that is, in the recognition that their interaction gives an *own sense* to society and culture. Therefore, childhood is constructed not merely to the interior of the societies and cultures they live in but they are related to a globalized world, which often subordinates children to violence, segregation, marginality and asymmetry.

Even though the local theoretical debates are mostly set in on specific experiences and situations on children’s life and ways of growing up, Colombian childhood anthropology is aligning itself with contemporary international academic practices in this field. A path has been set for scholars from other countries to talk with Colombian colleagues; the gap is progressively being filled in a growing perspective of the importance of working in Colombia guided by anthropological studies of childhood.

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## Notes

1 In Colombia there is a population of approximately 1.400.000 indigenous people, representing 14% of the total population. The National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) confirms the existence of 102 different indigenous groups. There are approximately 5.000.000 black or afro-descendent people in Colombia, witch sums up to almost 10% of the population. The *Romani* community (gypsy) is composed by nearly 5.000 people.