



*Time, Power, and Resistances in Latin America:
Narratives, Democracy, and Global Reconfigurations
(English Version)*

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The homeland is thus formed. Cultural construction of national identities and their logics of exclusion-inclusion

La patria así se forma. Construcción cultural de las identidades nacionales y sus lógicas de exclusión-inclusión

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how historical narratives and rituals of collective memory in Colombia have been fundamental in constructing a national identity that, far from being inclusive, has reinforced ethnic, racial, and gender hierarchies. Drawing on the concept of “imagined community” (Anderson) and the notion of “invented traditions” (Hobsbawm), it analyzes the cultural devices—school textbooks, national commemorations, foundational literature, musical representations—that have shaped an official, selective, and exclusionary memory. The study shows how the ideology of mestizaje has operated as a strategy of homogenization, rendering invisible the contributions of Black, Indigenous, and Palenquero communities and relegating their presence to folklorized or romanticized expressions. Examples such as the exaltation of July 20 over the November 11 date in Cartagena, or the teaching of national history through the texts of Henao and Arrubla, illustrate how these practices consolidate a single narrative, articulated by the state, elites, and the church, that marginalizes other memories and experiences. The analysis reveals that these mechanisms of collective memory not only legitimize the nationalist project, but also perpetuate symbolic and material boundaries that fragment the nation. Following Bhabha, the paper proposes rethinking national identity from a critical and pluralistic perspective that recognizes diversity, hybridity, and ambiguity as constitutive pillars of shared memory.

Keywords: Imagined Community; Political Rituals; Nationalisms.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo examina cómo las narrativas históricas y los rituales de memoria colectiva en Colombia han sido fundamentales para construir una identidad nacional que, lejos de ser inclusiva, ha reforzado jerarquías étnicas, raciales y de género. A partir del concepto de “comunidad imaginada” (Anderson) y de la noción de “tradiciones inventadas” (Hobsbawm), se analizan los dispositivos culturales — manuales escolares, conmemoraciones patrias, literatura fundacional, representaciones musicales— que han configurado una memoria oficial, selectiva y excluyente. Se muestra cómo la ideología del mestizaje operó como estrategia de homogeneización, invisibilizando los aportes de comunidades negras, indígenas y palenqueras y relegando su presencia a expresiones folclorizadas o romantizadas. Ejemplos como la exaltación del 20 de julio sobre el 11 de noviembre cartagenero, o la enseñanza de la historia nacional con textos de Henao y Arrubla, ilustran cómo estas prácticas consolidan un relato único, articulado

por el Estado, las élites y la iglesia, que margina otras memorias y experiencias. El análisis revela que estos mecanismos de memoria colectiva no solo legitiman el proyecto nacionalista, sino que también perpetúan fronteras simbólicas y materiales que fragmentan la nación. Siguiendo a Bhabha, se propone repensar la identidad nacional desde una perspectiva crítica y pluralista que reconozca la diversidad, la hibridez y la ambigüedad como pilares constitutivos de la memoria común.

Palabras clave: Comunidad Imaginada; Rituales Políticos; Nacionalismos.

INTRODUCTION

The creation of nation-states in Latin America was a complex process that extended beyond legal and institutional matters. On the contrary, it was marked by the production and circulation of cultural artifacts, rituals, narratives, and symbols that, taken together, served to sustain nationalist ideologies.

Following Benedict Anderson, we can affirm that these efforts sought to consolidate imagined communities: groups cohesive around a shared memory and a common identity, even though in practice these communities were deeply heterogeneous and fragmented.

In Colombia, from the second half of the 19th century through much of the 20th century, a national narrative of unity was imposed. The 1886 Constitution summarized this project under the slogan “one people, one religion, and one language.” This formula condensed what Clifford Geertz called the normative phase of nationalism: a moment in which multiple racial, cultural, and linguistic categories are reduced to a simple and seemingly natural ideal of collective identity.

However, here a key question arises: who was recognized as part of that “single people” and who was left out of that common identity?

Mestizaje played a central role. According to Peter Wade, it was presented as an inclusive ideology, a way to erase differences and pave the way for a homogeneous nation. However, its real effect was to exclude and subordinate those who did not fit into that model, especially indigenous and Afro-descendant populations. Far from guaranteeing equality, mestizaje operated as a mask of inclusion that, in practice, reinforced racial and cultural hierarchies.

In this sense, we can say that the construction of the Colombian nation was more a political-cultural artifice than an effective recognition of the country’s social and ethnic diversity.

DEVELOPMENT

Logics of inclusion-exclusion and the cultural meaning of nationalism

The ideology of mestizaje was only one way this logic of inclusion-exclusion was expressed. As Chaves and Zambrano point out, the transition from a unitary model of nationhood to a multicultural model did not eliminate inequalities, but rather produced new forms of stratification and dispute.

Colombian nationalism was also sustained by a cultural framework that included language, national symbols, invented traditions, and political rituals. Hobsbawm reminds us that many of these traditions are not “ancient customs,” but rather strategic creations designed to give the

illusion of historical continuity and social cohesion.

A clear example is the contrast between two dates of independence. July 20, celebrated as the great day of independence in Santa Fé de Bogotá, with Creole heroes as protagonists, is celebrated throughout the country with official events, flag-raising ceremonies, and religious ceremonies. November 11, on the other hand, the date of absolute independence in Cartagena, featuring the Black and Mulatto population, occupies a secondary place in the national memory. The commemoration exists, but it lacks the visibility, resources, and symbolic display of July 20.

Another example is the history textbooks by Henao and Arrubla, used in schools for much of the 20th century. These texts narrated national history from a Hispanic and Catholic perspective, reinforcing the colonial heritage and extolling Creole heroes, while rendering invisible the role of indigenous communities, Afro-descendants, and women in historical processes.

Civic and religious rituals were added to these artifacts. A particularly significant case is the military prayer, which thousands of students in Catholic schools in Colombia learned by heart and repeated at school events. Allow me to read it: “Colombia, my homeland: I carry you with love in my heart. I believe in your destiny and hope always to see you great, respected, and free.

In you, I love everything dear to me: your glories, your beauty, my home, the graves of my ancestors, my beliefs, the fruit of my efforts, and the fulfillment of my dreams.

Being your soldier is my greatest glory. My greatest ambition is to bear with honor the title of Colombian, and if necessary, to die defending you!”

This sentence encapsulates several elements of Colombian nationalism: the sacred nature of the homeland, the idea of absolute sacrifice for the nation, and the association between citizenship, masculinity, and military duty. Far from being a simple school exercise, it was a symbolic ritual that naturalized the subordination of the individual to the state and erased differences in class, gender, or race under the fiction of a common love for the homeland.

In these processes, women, Afro-descendants, and indigenous peoples appeared in the national narrative, but under very specific logics. Women were represented mainly as mothers of the nation, reproducers of citizens, but not as political subjects. Ethnic populations were exalted in folklore, music, and literary narratives, yet their role as social and political actors was not recognized.

The 1991 Constitution introduced multiculturalism as a horizon. However, as recent research shows, multiculturalism did not resolve these exclusions. Rather, it opened new avenues for dispute in which indigenous and Afro-descendant communities must continue to demand recognition and legitimacy.

CONCLUSIONS

In short, nation-building in Colombia was based on a framework of rituals, symbols, and cultural narratives that sought cohesion but actually deepened fragmentation and hierarchies. Rather than a cohesive community, what emerged was a nation riddled with racial, regional, and gender exclusions.

Following Michael Taussig, we could say that the state serves as a substitute for God: a sacralized power that legitimizes itself through fear, sacrifice, and invisibility.

The current challenge is to rethink national narratives from a different perspective. As Homi Bhabha argues, we need a more critical and pluralistic view of national identity: one that recognizes hybridity, diversity, and ambiguity as constitutive elements of the nation rather than threats to unity.

Only in this way can we construct a national narrative that is less violent, more honest, and faithful to the complexity of those who inhabit this country.

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