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Environmental Migration and Indigenous Cultural Degradation: The Wayuu in Colombia

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Abstract

Climate change has affected the patterns of displacement for many minority groups, yet its impact on indigenous communities is not addressed from a perspective of their cultural legacy. In La Guajira, Colombia, the Wayuu indigenous people face environmental degradation and reduced access to resources that threaten their survival. Although climate change is a key migration factor for this ethnic group, there are political and legal frameworks, such as the Cartagena Declaration and the 1951 Refugee Convention, that fail to protect them and further contribute to their crisis. This paper looks into how climate displacement leads to cultural generational loss from environmental, political, legal, and social perspectives. By centering on the Wayuu case, the paper argues that climate migration needs to be understood as a multilayered process where various factors contribute to the decline of indigenous cultural systems.

Keywords: Climate change, Environment, Migration, Wayuu people, Political neglect.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Introduction.....	4
Climate Migration Through the Misleading “Resilience” Narrative.....	5
The concept of environmental degradation and Wayuu Land-Based Cultural Practices.....	6
Political Negligence and Abuse of Power as a Potential Driver.....	8
Legal Protection Gaps in International and Local Law.....	11
Multilayered Cultural Consequences of the Wayuu.....	12
Conclusion.....	13
References.....	15

Introduction

Climate change has accelerated exponentially during the past couple of decades: natural disasters, extreme changes in temperature, and unexpected weather patterns in regions where they are uncommon. These circumstances have prompted a wave of migrants looking for new alternatives in places where they don't have to constantly struggle for survival.

In La Guajira, Colombia, the current desert winds carry stories of disappearing livelihoods and old storytellers. For the Indigenous community of the Wayuu, climate change is not a distant threat but a daily negotiation for survival. The Wayuu are an Indigenous ethnic group native to the Guajira Peninsula, recognized for preserving Colombia's biocultural knowledge and ancestral techniques such as weaving, their dances, and their normative system recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the pütchipü'ui (Uriana, 2009). This community from Northern Colombia and Northwest Venezuela shows how decades of governmental neglect and environmental degradation have caused displacement, resulting in cultural loss.

In this region, malnutrition-associated death rates are one of the highest in the country. 2014 reports from the ICBF (Colombian Institute of Family Welfare) indicate that 2,223 children under five years old deal with serious problems of malnutrition, of whom 525 tend to be at risk of dying before they reach the age of 7 (Bahamon et al., 2016). If these children survive until an older age, they suffer lasting consequences for their health and development. This crisis can be assessed as a fault of government neglect and corruption; yet the first reason to justify the need for these communities to leave their land is the climate deterioration they go through, where the political neglect adds up. As environmental deterioration grew stronger, the government settled even more on a narrative of indigenous self-sufficiency and did not consider the community's

evolving needs (Mason, 2025). Although climate change is a relevant driver of displacement, the case of the Wayuu in La Guajira shows that environmental degradation alone does not explain climate migration. This research paper analyzes the behavior of climate migration as slow-onset changes, political neglect, and gaps in refugee protection frameworks contribute to the cultural loss of indigenous heritage. By examining the Wayuu challenges, we address the complex consequences and interactions among different frameworks.

Climate Migration Through the Misleading “Resilience” Narrative

How modern society interprets the difficulties minorities worldwide face is a key factor that allows a thorough investigation into the many ways deterioration of their quality of life happens. The framework in which climate migration operates is set on a combination of environmental triggers and social vulnerability. Piguet et al. (2011) refer to this challenge as such factors that cause it to be intertwined and numerous, such that it can be described as “a complex environmental process that does not have uniform consequences everywhere, and societies have always had to adapt to.” This leads to an early conclusion that, as we delve into what it truly means for the concept of climate displacement to take effect in real life, we need to consider many distinct scenarios. And so do many perspectives to see this concern from. Scholars have discussed the causes of displacement, which are based on a cause multiplier where one pushes another, similar to a domino effect; however, the focus of this study will be on environmental and political bases. It is important to note that, despite which subject matter the focus is on, there is an underlying context of this kind of displacement to be softened by those who intend not to be associated with the consequences. Methmann (2016) explains how the term "climate-induced migration" has been subjected to a minimization of its danger by using the terminology of

“resilience.” Specifically, the political implications of the term have come to deprive one of their rights “with an emphasis on ‘new paths of developments’” (Methmann, 2011, p. 62). An example of this view is how governments and private businesses in search of new resources use the narrative of “resilience” as it “promotes adaptability so that life may go on living despite the fact that elements of our living systems may be destroyed.” (Methmann, 2011, p. 62). The combination of causes and effects takes a toll on the true meaning that each human is meant to take on in their life. This impact is profound for indigenous communities that center their lives on non-negotiable traditions. The reality is that with all its connected reasons, climate displacement remains overlooked from this perspective.

The concept of environmental degradation and Wayuu Land-Based Cultural Practices

As climate pressures intensify, establishing a clear connection between the environment and the transformation of the Wayuu’s cultural foundations will provide a stronger basis for understanding the future consequences. In the context of migration, environmental refugees can be classified by the reason for displacement: temporarily displaced due to short-term stress and will return to their original habitat, permanently displaced due to a change to their habitat, and permanently displaced because their original habitat does not fulfill their basic needs. Although there are more studies nowadays intending to further understand the position that these people are facing, this does not mean that they are being recognized and protected against it yet. Lonergan (1998) explains how the role of environmental degradation creates a push and pull effect in minority communities. The author supports this argument by expanding on the idea that different climate shifts create different responses from the victims, leading to the key concept of “Slow-Onset Changes.” Slow-onset changes are defined as “natural processes occurring at a

slower rate which interact with—and are advanced by—human activities” (Lonergan, 1998, p. 9). This refers to the case where communities are affected by heat waves that consistently grow in time, and their resources start deteriorating, and in consequence, the land becomes uninhabitable. An example of how culture loss connects to this concept is illustrated by Alvarez et al. (2022), where the long-term droughts in Alta Guajira, Colombia, and their dangers are discussed: “Another of the rituals that the community of Guerrero identifies and performs in times of difficult drought is the call to rain; the ritual consists of performing the yonna (typical dance) and playing the drum to implore Juyá (rain) its prompt arrival.” (Alvarez et al., 2022, p. 897).

Taking a look at how Wayuu people feel about these changes guides this study to have a deeper intention to recognize that, more than focusing on causes and consequences, it is to reflect on what is being lost in the process. An individual from the Wayuu del E'iruku Pushaina expresses, “The idea of well-being has to do with the urgent need to return to our origins, to Wayuuwaa a'in. This does not mean abandoning the tools and advances of modernity, but rather giving meaning to existence by bringing ancestral voices into the present.” (Epinayu, 2024, para. 19). Epinayu goes on to explain how, when the grandfather, Juyaa (the rain), visits the grandmother, Mma, the land and the people grow, and then it's supposed to prepare for times of droughts. Yet, lately, they feel like the grandfather is mad at them; he slowly shows up less and less, and it is because their people stopped dreaming and remembering his name. This single climate factor of droughts and its cultural connection shows that this is just the beginning of how environmental degradation weakens the ability to not only practice their culture but also to be themselves.

Political Negligence and Abuse of Power as a Potential Driver

The Wayuu dedicate all their tributes to the land that provides them not only with essentials to sustain themselves but also with their day-to-day motivation to honor their ancestors with future generations that truly appreciate what it means to stand in their land. However, among several reasons, growth in population and exploitation of resources became a factor that was a priority for the government, which is meant to protect all land in the territory.

In times of greater need, like the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the Wayuu have been ignored by the governments of both Venezuela and Colombia due to corruption and mismanagement of climate dangers. Amid the pandemic, many families in La Guajira were living in settlements due to the uninhabitable circumstances where their rancherias were located. Maria Clara's family was living in the Torres de Majayura settlement near Maicao, La Guajira, when her 15-month-old daughter, Yamilet, died of severe malnutrition (Human Rights Watch, 2022). In this region of the country, the rates of malnutrition are six times higher than anywhere else in the country, and data highlights that "In 2019, La Guajira accounted for over one-fifth of deaths due to malnutrition in children under five in Colombia, despite having roughly seven percent of the country's population. Many more deaths, occurring in homes rather than hospitals, go unreported." (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Climate migration is reason enough for these communities to live in horrible conditions; even more, these examples show how the state's neglect is only worsening their crisis.

The government of Colombia presents frameworks that are meant to protect indigenous lands in the territory, but these are not always implemented the right way. In 2015, an interview with the senior advisor to the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) exemplifies how laws that are specifically destined for the comprehensive reparation and

restitution of territorial rights for indigenous victims are not being complied with, such as the Decree Law 4633 of 2010. Interpreted by the ONIC, “Finance Minister Mauricio Cárdenas and the director of the Victims Support Unit, Paula Gaviria, were 'unclear and unethical,' as they argued that by 2014, more than \$57 billion had been allocated, and by 2015, a total of \$55.473 billion had been allocated for investment in indigenous peoples.” (Indepaz, 2015, para. 5). Yet, the ONIC argues that INCODER (Colombian Institute for Rural Development) has not done its job to allocate those resources and that, “72% of these resources were allocated to INCODER, which invested them in 'expansion, construction, and sanitation of reserves.' In other words, these are resources that Incoder must invest in its legal functions and have nothing to do with the specific purpose of assisting victims from indigenous communities.” (Indepaz, 2015, para. 6).

Another way political neglect is hindering the steady growth of the Wayuu culture is by allowing private companies to take over protected land for resource exploitation projects. The pandemic was also a time when many issues, like the health dangers, implied that people wouldn't be able to fight against a project that could take over their land. At first, it was not evident that the government-approved private project was further destroying habitats and ecosystems, worsening a series of problems that would only increase the endangered community. An example of this is how the Cerrejon Mine, owned by global mining companies BHP, Anglo American, and Glencore, has added to the shortage of water in the region. These companies have helped the community in many ways, but the air pollution and water shortage have done more damage, according to Feria-Tinta, who helped in 2020 with the UN Wayuu appeal against the companies (Hermann, 2020, para. 3). Hermann (2020) exemplifies directly this issue: “Water from the Ranchería River, the main source of water in the region, is released from the Cercado dam. Though the Supreme Court of Bogotá ordered the dam to release water at a specific rate in

2016, locals say the riverbed is often dry. The mine uses water upstream of the dam for its operations.” In the long run, the appeal led to the operations shifting to a reduction of operations to comply with environmental frameworks and cultural conservation (OHCHR, 2020). Taken together, these perspectives show that political neglect of this community adds up to the increasing climate threats, and as a consequence, the response of these communities is to leave in search of a better place, even if it means leaving who they are behind.

The interactions among political, social, and environmental factors drive the argument that these are a threat multiplier, like a chain of events that will keep on growing climate migration if it is not managed correctly. Hoffman (2020) reiterates this as, “The relationship between environmental factors and migration is not deterministic and unique across countries and over time, as the heterogeneity of the findings for different economic and sociopolitical contexts suggests,” where the case explored of political negligence equals increased social pressures. As an example, social push factors like the 2020 pandemic add up to the chain of factors that conclude in what the author calls ‘increased human mobility.’ Similarly, when it comes to entities of authority like the government or private companies, we can represent these interactions as a roleplay where there can be a one-way exchange if one of the parties is not aware of the suppression they are acting upon the other. Nabong et al. (2023) represent this in the climate migration system feedback loop, where “the factors added in order of increasing loop length were livelihood, food security, health, political stability, environmental degradation, and resource security. These loops illustrate the most significant interactions and dynamics leading to migration.” Lastly, Harper (2021) wraps this frame of arguments by suggesting that it is a constant unfolding of existing vulnerabilities that become apparent, multiply, and contribute to migration decisions (hence, climate migration).

Legal Protection Gaps in International and Local Law

On a more encouraging note, we can analyze the available protections and possibilities that have been presented to these communities and what role they play. In a deep look for protection, it is evident that there is a protection gap for these people, as they are not designated as refugees. Toscano (2015) explains how there is a legal void faced by people displaced by climate or environmental harm, not being covered by the 1951 Refugee Convention, a binding global treaty that addresses the rights and legal status of refugees. Furthermore, a refugee is defined as an individual who is outside of their country of origin and it is “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, . . . unable or . . . unwilling to return to [their country of origin].” (Sussman, 2023, p. 12). Toscano (2015) and Sussman (2023) argue that climate disasters do not map onto refugee grounds and that “environmental factors . . . are not grounds, in and of themselves, for the grant of refugee status.” (Toscano, 2015, pg. 18) Wayuu, as part of the group that is enclosed by the “forgotten cities of climate change,” Toscano explains, has no formal rights in place, creating a significant legal void.

Locally, there is a similar obstacle: the Cartagena Declaration of 1984. The Cartagena Declaration is a regional refugee instrument in Latin America that references the interpretation of refugee protection in this region; yet, unlike the 1952 convention, this is not a binding treaty (UNHCR, 1984). The document does not explicitly refer to itself as nonbinding, but the language throughout does. This is exemplified by the fact that the declaration is adopted by a colloquium, making it legal guidance, and it is not subjected to ratification; in Section IV it ‘recommends’ and does not impose obligations; in Section III(1) it encourages future national laws; and lastly,

there is a consistent use of non-mandatory language, including “to promote,” “to invite,” and “to call on,” which does not create binding obligations. This declaration holds a very similar definition, yet it states how a climate-induced famine can plausibly be framed as an “event seriously disturbing public order that threatens lives, security, and fundamental freedoms on a systemic scale” (Sussman, 2023). This makes the declaration qualify for a much-needed protection for these refugees.

Multilayered Cultural Consequences of the Wayuu

In the search for a deserving quality of life where the Wayuu get the proper care and honor that they deserve as part of Colombia’s cultural patrimony, the complex nature of migration has an impact on them. What Nabong (2023) calls a “multilayered migration process” is read through the intensification of cultural loss in different ways: separation of class and disruption of matrilineal structure, and the lack of refugee status that makes long-term cultural restoration impossible. More precisely, Alvarez et al. (2022) show different ways in which the effects of climate change take a toll on various Wayuu cultural practices. Burial ceremonies where salt water from El Cabo de La Vela, La Guajira, is used as a ritual for the deceased; the call to the rain (Juyá), where they perform in times of hard droughts, “the ritual consists of performing the yonna (typical dance) and playing the drum to implore Juyá (rain) its prompt arrival” (Alvarez et al. 2022, p. 4); and the wakes, where they gather to celebrate the deceased with goats, chinchirre (traditional drink), and corn chicha (fermented beverage) as a meal for the activities, and “in their sadness celebrate and honor the passage to Jepirra (place where the deceased go in Cabo de la Vela)” (Alvarez et al. 2022, p. 4-5). These are a few of the many examples that show the crucial role that their land plays for them.

The disruption of the matrilineal structure and the role of the pütchipü'ü (palabrero; recognized by UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity) are a key part of their cultural heritage. As they migrate to different urbanized regions of the country or cross-border migrate, their lifestyle is dictated by the eldest maternal uncle losing authority, and the clan structure guided by a single leader fades away (Thompson, 2024, para. 33). Thompson (2024) indicates how Pütchipü'ü has already called out for preservation of the territory, but it is never taken into consideration by the Colombian government. The internal feeling of the wayuu also fades when their way of living becomes modernized; Mancuso (2025) states, "... 'Becoming alijuna' is seen as a process closely related to following less and less the sükuaitpa wayuu, an expression that can be translated as 'that which has proceeded together with the Wayuu.'" The many challenges the Wayuu have confronted not only show a loss in the territory but also what it is for them to be Wayuu. Townsend et al. (2020) support this argument with the idea that indigenous relationships with land are reciprocally spiritual. Climate change not only disrupts the quality of life and the ecosystem surrounding it but also affects strictly interdependent relationships between people and what they are/represent.

Conclusion

The Wayuu work every day to keep their identity close to their hearts. Among many challenges, especially environmental and sociopolitical, migration emerges as a response in their search for a better quality of life. Water scarcity and slow-onset changes in their environmental systems have contributed to their relocation and the deterioration of cultural structures. The reciprocal relationships with their land and ancestors fade away due to harmful frameworks imposed by governments and other bodies of power as they take over. Yet, the work of activists

and organizations dedicated to cultural preservation, along with support for new legal systems, offer hope that they will be protected on their journey back home: their land, or dreams that connect them to who they are.

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