

# Museo Comunitario De San Jacinto\*

## Co-creating Common Narratives as a Way to Reconstruct a Social Fabric Torn by Violence

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### Introduction

Amidst the crudest violence Colombia experienced between the 1980s and late 2000s, a community museum was erected as a form of resistance. Located in the municipality of San Jacinto in northern Colombia's Department of Bolivar, the museum became a way to surpass the hardest days that the San Jacinto people had ever endured. The museum's and the community's cultural activities embodied the people's fight to maintain their identity as peasants, an identity based on their long relation to the land as subsistence. The San Jacinto people collectively resisted the pressures of illegal armed groups, upholding their cultural expressions throughout this period of violent conflict.

The resistance began in 1983 when a group of brave young leaders, part of the National Peasants Association,<sup>1</sup> created the Civic and Cultural Committee of San Jacinto. Their goal was to promote the development and cross-generational transmission of their traditional cultural expressions, such as the

1 The National Peasants Association, or *Asociación Nacional de Usuarios Campesinos*, since 1967 represented peasants before the state in order to gain land rights, public subsidies and credits for agricultural development, among other services. San Jacinto community leaders were part of the regional Sincelejo strand, one of the most active groups in the association, based in Sincelejo, a city located in the Caribbean Region of Colombia.

Peasants in Colombia constitute an identity, which relates to rural life, working the land through agriculture. Historically, peasants have claimed their rights of land ownership in a context where land accumulation by landlords and violence against peasants' movements have been closely linked.

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\* Community Museum of San Jacinto

The 1908 republican-style house façade of the Community Museum of San Jacinto's premises, exhibiting the Montes de María Natural Heritage, 2019.



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Colombian bagpipe,<sup>2</sup> the Cumbia dance, and the handcrafted hammock. One of their main actions was the creation of a cultural center, where they practiced Cumbia dances and played the *gaita*, and a public library. The library, which later became the community museum, held the archeological artifacts collection that the peasants had discovered while working their lands in San Jacinto's rural areas. In 1992, in the midst of the violent conflict, the museum became an inactive and passive space, but its dormant spirit arose again in 2008 when the socio-political conditions permitted it and the leaders returned.

In this article, we explore how exhibitions can play an essential role in the social fabric reconstruction of a community touched by war through the story of the Museo Comunitario de San Jacinto in the mid-1980s and its renovation after 2008, which embodied a collective co-creation process. Juliana Campuzano, one of the co-authors of this article, is the Community Museum's archaeologist; she became part of the team in 2008 when she supported the museum's renovation process. Diana Ramírez, the other co-author of this article, is a political scientist who became interested in the community co-creation process as a form of collective knowledge production and social fabric reconstruction in a post-conflict context.

### Culture as a Form of Resistance

In Colombia in the mid-1980s, as paramilitary groups and leftist guerrilla

2 The *gaita*, also known as the *Kuisi* or Colombian bagpipe, is a traditional flute of indigenous roots from the northern lowlands, in the Caribbean region in which San Jacinto is located. It is made out of a hollowed cactus stem and beeswax, and due to its similar sound to the European bagpipe, was named *gaita* at the arrival of the Spanish conquerors, and was documented by the Spanish chronicler Bartolomé Briones de Pedraza in 1580.

groups disputed territorial control, the government's military forces did not provide security to the population. These armed groups committed human rights violations against peasant communities, which led to massive forced displacements, massacres of civilians, and land grabbing from peasants.<sup>3</sup> The inhabitants of the rural territories were forced to flee and many took refuge in the town of San Jacinto. As they congregated, bonds of solidarity between forced-displaced individuals and townspeople became a means of resistance towards the intense, ongoing conflict. Following the murder and/or forced displacement of many of San Jacinto's Civic and Cultural Committee members due to their leadership in the National Peasants Association's land rights movement, and despite the surrounding violence, the people of San Jacinto – the *sanjacinteros* – strove to maintain their cultural activities, exemplified in the continuation of the National Autochthonous Colombian Bagpipe Festival, which began in 1988.

In 1986, one of the key museum leaders appeared: Jorge Quiróz, or Braco as the San Jacinto community calls him. He began efforts to consolidate the community museum.<sup>4</sup> Braco sought research and funding support from the major archaeological national museum, Museo Del Oro (the national Gold Museum of Colombia, located in Bogotá). The museum provided support through the visit of the archaeologist Augusto Oyuela to San Jacinto in 1986. This visit resulted in one of the most important archaeological findings not just in Colombia,

3 Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *La tierra en disputa. Memorias del despojo y resistencias campesinas en la costa Caribe 1960–2010*. CNRR Grupo de Memoria Histórica/ Ediciones Semana (2010): 52.

4 Braco's brother, Guillermo, one of the Civic and Cultural Committee leaders, envisioned the Community Museum before he was killed in 1985. Clara Isabel Botero Cuervo, "La construcción del museo comunitario de San Jacinto, Montes de María, Bolívar," *Boletín de historia y antigüedades* 101, no. 859 (2014): 497.

but in all of South America: pottery dating to between 6,000 and 5,300 years B.P., the most ancient pottery found to date.<sup>5</sup> The interest in objects that peasants were finding in their fields took on increased value since they and experts realized their antiquity and their rarity. This finding generated a new valuation of the past, which was incorporated by the community in their understanding of their cultural heritage.

However, the fieldwork of the “San Jacinto 1” excavation came to an end in 1992, and the archaeological team left, also concerned about the risks that they faced due to the ongoing violence in the region. Likewise, the paramilitary group forced Braco to leave San Jacinto. The community again resisted after Braco’s forced displacement, by safeguarding the archaeological artifacts in their houses as a sign of unity and collective support to withstand violence. Thus, the museum was on stand-by mode throughout the 1990s through the late 2000s, when the violence de-escalated.

### The Museum’s First Restoration

Braco, who had taken refuge overseas, returned to San Jacinto in 2004. He sensed that the time was right to resume the Community Museum, as the paramilitary group operating in the region had demobilized. When he arrived, he saw that a new generation of young people had revived the Civic and Cultural Committee, and with it the hopes to rekindle the community cultural initiatives – the Community Museum being a central part of this reconstruction. Over the next four years, Braco reunited the

<sup>5</sup> Fiber-tempered pottery dating from the Archaic period, between 6,000 and 5,300 years B.P. An archaeological excavation was developed between 1991 and 1992, San Jacinto 1. See Augusto Oyuela, “The Study of Collector Variability in the Transition to Sedentary Food Producers in Northern Colombia,” *Journal of World Prehistory* 10, no. 1 (1996): 49–93.

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archaeological pieces that *sanjacinteros* had been hiding in their homes. The museum’s team and the people of San Jacinto decided to reopen the museum’s exhibitions to the public in May 2008, becoming an iconic place for the community.

Hundreds of local people assisted at the inaugural event, which celebrated the recuperation of the cultural space they had perceived as lost due to the armed conflict. The lack of archaeological (academic research), museological (narrative content), and museographical (physical exhibition) scripts was not relevant to the titanic act of courage and resiliency, which re-enlivened a cultural place after 20 years of conflict. After reopening the museum, various activities were developed with the aim of maintaining its vitality. However, the absence of funding was an obstacle, and the museum survived only through one-time support from the mayor’s office (which was in itself unusual, since museums in Colombia typically do not receive government funding) and the efforts of an all-volunteer museum team, whose members are still keeping it afloat today.<sup>6</sup>

During the period from 2005 through 2010, the national and regional public policy focused on institutional strengthening for post-conflict reconstruction and peace in

<sup>6</sup> Museum’s volunteers team: Maxima Conde, Jairo Quiroz, Jorge Quiroz, Edison Guzman, Ana Alvarez and Katy Lorena Herrera.

Fig. 1. Community assembly at Barrio El Porvenir (El Porvenir neighborhood), 2012.



the Montes de María region. This political environment was favorable for the museum's renovation process, as it brought resources for the region's development. Among other opportunities, the museum benefited from international cooperation which now focused on the San Jacinto community. The Spanish International Cooperation and Development Agency (AECID), which funded post-conflict rehabilitation projects, became interested in the Community Museum of San Jacinto and its collective process of safeguarding culture as a way of resisting violence. The AECID funded a project in 2012 for the reconstruction of the social fabric and the valuation of the cultural heritage as a way to mitigate the effects of the armed conflict. This process resulted in the participative development of the museum's renovation.

### Co-creating Common Narratives

What does *San Jacinto* epitomize in a post-conflict context? What do the archaeological antique findings portray about people who inhabited the territory 6,000 years ago? Moreover, what does it denote to be a *sanjacintero*? These were some of the inquiries that permitted the construction of a common narrative for exhibitions during

the museum's renovation. San Jacinto's museum represents the dialogue between different languages – the communitarian and the anthropological.<sup>7</sup>

The project, mobilized by the museum's team (all recognized members of the community), organized a series of reflections in San Jacinto around the local cultural heritage and the experience of resisting the violent conflict. They created a methodology of "community assemblies" (fig. 1), promoted on each neighborhood by "Community Mother Leaders" (the elder female leaders of the community), and most of the assistants were women artisans interested in the participatory process (women were more interested in the process than men, and so participated more).

The gatherings were developed in community leaders' backyards, on the street, in parks or at soccer fields; the only specific requirements were that the venue should

<sup>7</sup> According to Rolando Vázquez and Ipek Demir, dialogue between different knowledge languages, such as the empirical and the technical (communitarian and archaeological in this case), entails an interaction between the borders of different knowledge systems, meaning that it requires the action of translation, and a second language learning, in order to gain a common narrative which enables the co-creation process.

# COMMUNITY ASSEMBLIES STAGES

Stage	Methodology	Results
1 <b>Presentation and Change of Roles</b>	<b>Change of roles:</b> Through an anecdote the expert (the archaeologist) of the museum team, Juliana Campuzano, exposed herself as lacking the required experience and knowledge to understand and explain the local customs, practices and traditions, since she was an external agent.	The dialogue becomes horizontal and participants (mostly women) took control of the assembly. Community members became the experts in regard to their cultural heritage. They explained their local knowledge and practices to the facilitator. Rapport and trust was generated among the participants as way to restore social fabric broken by violence.
2 <b>Valuation of Cultural Heritage</b>	<p><b>Cultural elements brainstorming:</b> <i>sanjacintero</i> identity was defined through the collection of cultural elements mentioned by the participants.</p> <p><b>Game of exchanging cultural elements:</b> they were divided in two groups, one owning the cultural assets, and the other having financial resources to buy those assets. They developed an activity of exchange between assets and financial resources.</p>	Participants reached a consensus regarding the most important cultural elements defining <i>sanjacinteros</i> and their heritage. They collectively identified which cultural elements were more “expensive” than others, and some of the elements could not be priced. Thus, they valued which of the cultural elements were more valuable to them and why.
3 <b>Plenary Discussion</b>	<b>Sharing the experience:</b> participants shared which cultural assets they have decided to buy and the reasoning behind each of their exchanges.	Participants classified the cultural assets in two categories: the ones in risk of disappearing due to lack of transmission of practices and knowledge, and the ones that were not in risk of disappearing.
4 <b>Closing Reflection</b>	<b>Reflecting on the results:</b> participants made final remarks through guided questions made by the facilitator.	Participants were given the responsibility of safeguarding the cultural elements in risk of disappearing. They became aware of the importance of cultural heritage through its valuation, understanding they were owners of this heritage. They felt empowered to safeguard them as a way to reconstruct their social fabric affected by the armed conflict.

Fig. 2. Table describing the stages of the Community Assemblies.



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be a place both recognized and accessible for all the participants. Each assembly was divided into four stages (fig. 2, p.41):

1. initial presentation and an activity including the change of roles – where participants, not the museum team, became the facilitators of the process;
2. exposition and valuation of the cultural heritage, in which participants discussed which of their cultural expressions constituted their heritage, and which of them were in danger of disappearing;
3. plenary discussion; and
4. closing reflection.

The assemblies resulted in the identification of multiple cultural expressions that the *sanjacinteros* recognized as part of their heritage: the *gaita* music, hammock weaving, and traditional practices to work the land, among many others. In addition, participants and museum team members discussed what they considered a museum to be:

“...to me, it is the place where people can enjoy, conserve, observe our history, have dialogues that permit a good

communication and transmission of knowledge” (Máxima Conde).

“...it is the place of exhibition where the legacy of our ancestors is collected and safeguarded so that future generations have a clear vision about their (the ancestors’) way of living” (Jairo Quiroz).

These inputs were essential for the renovation process. The museum’s team conducted an assembly for each of the neighborhoods of San Jacinto. Approximately 3,500 people participated, which represented about one third of the total population of the municipality. A detailed report was made about the topics and ideas that arose during these 42 assemblies.

The result of these assemblies was a collective valuation and categorization of the most iconic cultural elements of the tangible and intangible heritage of San Jacinto, as well as agreement over which elements needed urgent safeguarding before they vanished. This was especially important in regard to the community’s intangible cultural expressions (such as hammock weaving) due to the lack of intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Furthermore, the assembly participants agreed on the importance of conserving the archaeological artifacts of the ancient predecessors, who inhabited their lands dozens of centuries before them. These results informed the construction of the museological and museographical script for the Community Museum of San Jacinto.

### **The Current Exhibition**

The assemblies’ results were organized and systematized by the museum’s team, which was entirely comprised of community members (with the exception of the archaeologist who was supporting the process). Using what San Jacinto’s

community had identified as being the most significant expressions of their culture, the team selected the following guiding threads for the museum's exhibition: the rural life, archaeology, *gaita* music and festivities, the people and their daily activities, gastronomy, and handcrafts. The design of the museum's exhibition revolved around these topics (figs. 3 & 4). The museum's team also developed the curation process, selecting the archaeological pieces that would be included in the exhibition and supervising exhibit design, again guided by the findings of the assemblies. Fifteen women artisans directly participated in the curation process, and the museum director, Braco, conducted interviews with the *Gaiteros* in order to have their contributions in the exhibition.

Presently, the Community Museum of San Jacinto's exhibition is comprised of six exhibits: five internal rooms and an external display on the building's façade.

### Natural Heritage of the Montes de María

The 1908 restored house façade holds a collection of nature images taken from the rural San Jacinto area, representing the collectively valued rural surroundings; some of the images are of archaeological sites that host petroglyphs.<sup>8</sup> The exhibit portrays how the museum was incorporated to the common spaces of San Jacinto. The interaction of the audience with this exhibit is daily (fig. 5, intro image), permitting a direct relation of the museum with the outdoor public, drawing the continued attention of pedestrian audiences.



Figs. 3 & 4. The Community Museum's team while conducting the exhibition discussion, design, and curatorial process, 2012.

8 Petroglyphs in archaeology are images carved on the rocks by ancient cultures.



## Inhabitants of the Municipality

When a visitor comes to the museum, he or she first encounters a portrait of the local population (fig. 6). *Sanjacinteros* not only were physically included in the exhibition, but also are placed to directly receive the visitor. This exhibit permits a direct rapport and sense of belonging for the inhabitants towards the museum.

### San Jacinto 1

The archaeological excavation San Jacinto 1 exhibit (fig. 7) narrates the events related to the finding of ancient archaeological artifacts,<sup>9</sup> told from the perspective of the local workers' who excavated them. This is essential as an example of knowledge dialogue, since the local community voice has been taken into account in the scientific and technical archaeological narrative through their stories surrounding the excavation. The exhibit includes the historical registry of the excavations of the archaeological sites. It also includes paintings and models recreating the lifestyle of the Zenúes culture, the ancestors who inhabited the Montes de María region, predecessors of the Malibú culture and one of the first sedentary groups in the Caribbean Coast.

9 The pottery found in the excavation of San Jacinto 1 site is approximately 6,000 years old, and it is considered among to be the most ancient pieces ever found in the Americas.

## The Malibú

This exhibit presents the daily objects used by the inhabitants of the Montes de María region before the arrival of the Spanish in late 15th century and their conquest of the indigenous groups. It contains musical instruments, food utensils, and weaving artifacts (fig. 8), presenting links between the current cultural expressions and their heritage of the pre-Spanish Malibú culture through the observation of their habits and customs.<sup>10</sup> The exhibit permits a dialogue between the *sanjacinteros* with the ancient settlers, and their forms of working the land, using the local materials and traversing the shared territory.

### The Artisans' Tradition

This exhibit explores the weaving heritage of the Malibú culture through contemporary San Jacinto hammock-weaving practices (fig. 9), which is practiced by women. This knowledge has been transmitted between generations, from grandmother to grandchild, from mother to daughter, aunt to niece, for thousands of years until present day. The exhibit includes the *quiosco sanjacintero* and other daily elements of hammock weaving,<sup>11</sup> as well as objects related to other crafts and their evolution. The women artisans themselves constructed the museographical script for this exhibition.

10 Malibú means "gentleman" in the local ancient indigenous language.

11 A kiosk located in the backyard of the houses in San Jacinto where women weave to make the traditional hammocks.

Fig. 6. Entrance exhibit showing local inhabitants of the municipality in large photographic portraits, 2019.



Fig. 7. San Jacinto 1 exhibit, excavation at one of the archaeological sites, 2019.



Fig. 8. The ancient Malibú culture exhibit. Here, a large photomural of today's Montes de María countryside creates a geographic context, 2019.



Fig. 9. The "Artisans' Tradition" exhibit, which shows the art and craft of hammock weaving. The exhibit includes a real hammock as well as threads that visitors can handle, 2019.



**Fig. 10.** The Colombian Bagpipe, Gaiteros de San Jacinto cumbia group exhibit, containing their awards, which includes the 2007 Latin Grammy for the best folkloric album. The group decided to donate their awards to the museum as a gesture of recognition of the museum's great importance to the San Jacinto community, 2019.





## The Colombian Bagpipe (*Gaita*)

Both nationally and internationally, San Jacinto is also recognized for the Gaiteros de San Jacinto, a traditional folkloric cumbia group. The Colombian Bagpipe, or *Gaita*, exhibit portrays the musical *sanjacintera* tradition, with images of the *gaiteros* (fig. 10), and displays the awards the Gaiteros de San Jacinto have won at various competitions. The exhibit invites visitors to value the significance of this cultural expression in the national, as well as the international realms, connecting it with the local history of resistance – as mentioned earlier, the National Autochthonous Colombian Bagpipe Festival did not cease even during the most intense period of violence in the region.

## Final Remarks

The Community Museum of San Jacinto symbolizes the persistence and empowerment of a local, rural population that resisted armed conflict through its collective cultural actions. The museum's exhibition bridges a community that has been divided and disrupted by forced displacement, and represents the reconstruction of a social fabric profoundly affected by violence. The *sanjacintero* community's direct participation in the construction of the current museological and museographical script is clearly visible to external visitors, who admire and are inspired by their resiliency and the solidifying role of culture during the hardest times.

## Acknowledgements

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## Additional Reading and Information

Ipek Demir, "Lost in Translation? Try Second Language Learning: Understanding Movements of Ideas and Practices across Time and Space," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24, no. 1 (March 2011): 9–26.

Augusto Oyuela, "The Study of Collector Variability in the Transition to Sedentary Food Producers in Northern Colombia," *Journal of World Prehistory* 10, no. 1 (1996): 49–93.

Rolando Vázquez, "Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24, no. 1 (2011): 27–44.

For more information, and if you wish to schedule a visit to the museum, you can access the Community Museum of San Jacinto's website at:

[www.museocomunitariosanjacinto.com](http://www.museocomunitariosanjacinto.com).

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