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THE WAYUU WOMEN'S NETWORK

**AN INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S MOVEMENT BRIDGING TWO
SOCIETIES: THE DOMINANT AND THE INDIGENOUS**

by

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A thesis submitted to
the faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
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Abstract

This thesis studies the emergence, approach and significance of the Wayuu Women's Network (WWN) in Venezuela. It seeks to understand the success this indigenous women's movement has had in actively involving women in its first year of existence. The analysis indicates that the WWN proposes an innovative approach to the problems of their society. The Network calls for bridging the Wayuu society with the dominant society. It is hoped that by borrowing elements from both cultures, the Wayuu people can re-acquire their strength. In so doing, the WWN is redefining both societies. At the same time, it has the potential of charting the parameters for a new identity. The task is huge, difficult and risky. The responsibility taken by the women reflects their traditional role to transmit culture, only now they must be creators of culture. To guide the analysis of this case study, I refer to the social movement and feminist literatures.

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I

Introduction

Since the beginning of the nineties, indigenous women worldwide have come to the forefront as never before. Within and across national boundaries, women are organizing, speaking out and displaying their banners. At the latest U.N. women's conference in Beijing in 1995, indigenous women came in great number to the NGO Forum, making their voices heard, and demanding more space than given to them in previous World Conferences on Women. Months before the Beijing conference, indigenous women in the four corners of the world mobilized to prepare their platform for action. The number of articles specifically addressing indigenous women's issues in the UNs official Platform of Action increased from only three in the 1985 World Conference of Women in the Nairobi Declaration, to over a dozen a decade later.

The rise of indigenous women is part of the indigenous peoples movement started in the 1970s. At that time, indigenous peoples began to develop a common consciousness of a shared identity (Bodley 1990). The definition of an indigenous person is at the outset a debated topic. According to the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP), the criteria for determining who constitutes an indigenous person lies with them. "Indigenous peoples know who they are, and they know they are unique" (Bodley 1990: 153).

Over the last couple of decades, indigenous peoples have made breakthroughs both at the international and local levels. A change in the

world governments' attitudes is evidenced, for instance, by the decision to declare 1995 to 2004 the U.N. Decade of Indigenous Peoples, and the prominent place given to Indigenous Peoples in the Convention on Biodiversity adopted at the Earth Summit in 1992. At the level of individual indigenous nations, innovative means are being developed for their people to live on the terms, and in the ways set by them.

Until recently, indigenous women remained at the backstage of the indigenous peoples' movement. Or rather, they worked alongside their men. Indigenous women explain their reluctance, until now, to organize separately from men on account of their societal responsibilities. It is noteworthy too, that indigenous women have probably been active participants in resistance movements all along. Historical biases and the more subtle means of expressing their resistance have, however, often meant that their presence went unnoticed (Shoemaker 1995; Cusicanqui 1990).

The *Beijing Declaration of Indigenous Women*, resulting from the NGO forum, reflects indigenous women's call for fundamental changes. These changes are essential for the respect and recognition of their livelihood as Peoples. Indigenous women adamantly express their continued commitment and adherence to a different world view: "we have been and continue to protect, transmit, and develop our indigenous cosmovision, our science and technologies, our arts and culture, and our indigenous socio-political and economic systems" (NGO Forum 1995: art. 5).

How must one understand and study the indigenous women's movement? In this paper, the case of the Wayuu Women's Network (hereafter referred to as WWN) is analyzed.

The WWN, initiated by a group of urban Wayuu women in Maracaibo less than two years ago, has been warmly welcomed by women in many

Wayuu communities. The active involvement of a large number of women from the communities is impressive. In the first year of existence, eighty local branches were established.

More specifically, I am interested in studying how one explains the emergence of the network and what defines its approach? In other words, how do these indigenous women define their struggle, the problems to tackle and the remedies to apply.

At the outset, it is important to know a few things about the Wayuu people. The Wayuu (also known as Guajiro) come from the Guajira Peninsula, at the extreme north of the South American continent. This long strip of land is the Wayuu's traditional territory, but since 1874 it has been divided between Venezuela and Colombia. An estimated 20.42% of the territory lies on the Venezuelan side of the border, the rest belongs to Colombia. The total Wayuu population is estimated at over 300,000, over half (179,200) of whom live in Venezuela (census 1992). The Wayuu people account for 62% of the indigenous population in Venezuela. There are 27 different indigenous societies in the country.

The Wayuu people have had early and continual contact with outside people because of their geographical location. Nonetheless, they maintained their autonomy until the 1950s. The Wayuu people are well known for their cleverness, and their ability to resist colonizing pressures. Since the middle of this century, they have established indigenous organizations and actively participated in political parties to defend the rights of their people, and claim the services they are allowed as Venezuelan citizens. It is interesting that an important number of Wayuu people have also taken professions in the dominant society. In general this means that the Wayuu people have been more present in the dominant society than have been other indigenous

societies of the country. Despite the existence of different initiatives to protect the interests of the Wayuu people, Wayuu women organized amongst themselves, and the WWN was established. The reasons why this happened are addressed in this thesis.

As argued in the chapter outlining the framework (chapter 2), indigenous women's movements cannot be understood as women's movements within the western feminist perspective. The former cannot be merged with the global women's movement, for the two differ diametrically on their strategies and contents, and more generally in the worldviews they represent and promote. The feminist literature has relevance to the study of the indigenous movement only when it recognizes and allows for difference in worldviews. This is the case of the post modernist perspective and ecofeminism. Even so, the appropriateness of these frameworks is limited. Neither do they offer the necessary elements to conceptualize indigenous women's movements fully and in appropriate terms.

In this paper, it is argued that indigenous women's movements must be studied as a social movement. This emphasizes the goal of an indigenous women's movement -social change- without defining the boundaries of the struggle. The social movement literature also provides appropriate tools for guiding the analysis and the questions I am investigating. In particular, I refer to the concept of opportunity and framing. The former serves to study the emergence of the Network, and the latter to define the struggle.

In order to study the WWN, I spent close to a year carrying out fieldwork in Venezuela. My methodology was based on participant observant , as well as some elements of participatory research. Throughout my research inquiry an emphasis was put on working with and supporting the Network and being an active participant. Obviously, I became very involved. As

explained in the chapter (3) on methodology, I consider that social research gains from accommodating the humanness of social reality.

In order to understand the emergence of the Network and the way women define their struggle, it is important to take into consideration the 'traditional' Wayuu society. As will be seen, Wayuu women in the Network are not making a plea to return to past indigenous ways of life. Indigenous ways and the past are referred to as sources of inspiration, and guidance to solve the present challenges.

Before undertaking the study of the Network, basic features of the Wayuu's traditional socio-political organization and women's traditional role are discussed in chapter 4. Knowledge of Wayuu 'tradition' is necessary to define the WWNs struggle and approach.

To further understand the rise of the Network, one has to take into consideration the challenges that Wayuu society has experienced since the 1950s. A description of Wayuu's loss of independence and the Wayuu's present socio-economic situation is made in Chapter 5. The chapter that follows identifies and explains the more immediate reasons for the rise of the WWN. As will be explained, these include the presence of strong Wayuu women in the dominant society as well as a redefinition of Wayuu values. The presence of a woman leader constituted the catalyst. The analysis of the WWN indicates that it arose as a grassroots movement.

Once provided with the necessary parameters, I focus more specifically on the WWN. In the first part of Chapter 6, I present the Network and how it operates. The remaining portion of this chapter analyzes the Network's approach.

As shown in this thesis the WWN is adopting and integrating elements from their own society as well as the dominant society. It turns to

elements of their own society, such as the pre-eminent role of women, and their responsibility to transmit culture to future generations. At the same time, it calls for effectiveness by acquiring the tools of management and organization used by the dominant society. It is in borrowing elements from both societies and in bridging the two entities, that the Network searches for remedies to the problems it frames.

The task of the Network is not easy, yet it has many potentials. The final chapter makes an assessment of the Network's first year of operation and discusses some of the major challenges the Network will have to tackle.

II

Theoretical Framework

The grouping of indigenous women is fairly recent, and little analysis has been done on them as such.¹ Existing approaches and references however provide significant direction in order to build a relevant framework of analysis. The present endeavor aims in particular at providing tools of analysis for answering two basic questions: (1) How and why did the WWN emerge? (2) What is the WWN struggling for? The first question refers mostly to structural aspects, and the second to content issues. Insights on how to define and analyze these two puzzles are provided by a wide-range of literature. The different contributions are presented below.

2.1. Indigenous Women's Movement as a Social Movement

The Wayuu Women's Network is studied as a social movement. Central to a social movement is social change. As Lowi writes, a movement "unavoidably focuses on the processes of change rather than the processes of persistence" (1971: 35). In the words of another scholar, movements are "one of the most important ways through which social change is manifest and cultural change produced" (Turner 1964: 428).

Apart from this critical aspect, what defines a social movement and how must it be studied? These questions have been looked at differently in

¹It must be noted that the indigenous women's movement is recent therefore little scholarly texts have been written on the subject. Most of the analysis on the nature of the indigenous women's movement is therefore based on documents (declarations, articles, speeches) coming out from indigenous women's worldwide gatherings.

the abundant and broad literature on social movements. The terms of reference guiding my research are derived from an analysis of some of the major trends in the social movement literature.

According to Tilly, a well-known researcher on social movements, " A social movement is a sustained series of interactions between power holders and the person successfully claiming to speak on behalf of a constituency lacking formal representation, in the course of which those persons make publicly visible demands for changes in the distribution or exercise of power, and back those demands with public demonstrations or support" (1984: 306).

In this view, the emergence of social movements corresponds to the rise of the nation-state. Since the beginning of history, people have grouped together, but only since the nineteenth century do people get together voluntarily, and deliberately commit themselves to a shared identity, for a common struggle (Tilly 1984: 303). The nation-state plays here a central role in defining and giving substance to social movements. " Yet national social movements occupy a privileged position, shaping other social movements more than other movements shape them (...) states hold an exceptional power to define actors in any arena as legitimate or illegitimate, hence to support some actors and destroy others" (Tilly 1984: 312).

Tilly focuses on social movements means of protest, termed repertoire of collective action. This is necessary for the "inventory of available means of action draws us at once into a specification of opportunities, threats, repression, facilitation, power, and -most important- the relative costs and likely benefits of the array of choices actually confronting the group in question" (Tilly 1984: 308).

Tilly's approach to social movements is part of the Resource Mobilization Theory (Guha 1993: 3). This categorization englobes an entire

stream of the social movement literature, of which Tilly is one of the most influential authorities.

The French sociologist Touraine gives another version of the Resource Mobilization Theory. Contrary to Tilly, Touraine claims social movements cannot be identified with the state and must be distinguished from the activities and strategies of political parties. Social movements are "defending another society" (1981: 80). He sees social movements as the most important form of struggle (1981). According to his theory, a struggle requires four principal conditions. There must be (1) a committed population, (2) an organized struggle, (3) a fight against an adversary (4) and the conflict with the adversary should concern the whole society (Touraine 1981: 85). This last feature is considered to distinguish social movement from pressure groups.

In the perspective of the Resource Mobilization Theory, protest is a fundamental element, oriented towards bringing about economic and social transformations. In analyzing social protest, the proponents of this theory look for regularities, drawing large generalizations and adhering to strict notions of causality (Guha 1993: 4).

The above approach offers some insights for studying an indigenous women's movement such as the Wayuu Women's Network. The level of analysis must be brought down to a more concrete level, however, and the problematic defined differently. One needs to turn to a literature that provides more applicable guidelines for studying a social movement. Tarrow's approach to social movements is a good starting-point (1994; 1989). He provides useful tools of analysis.

Tarrow identifies four properties of social movements: (1) collective challenge; (2) common purpose; (3) solidarity; and (4) sustained collective action (Tarrow 1994: 3). He considers these elements necessary for a social

movement. Each concept is defined differently depending on the social movement. For instance, collective challenge can be more or less disruptive and take many forms ranging from action against authorities to affirmation of new values. Likewise, solidarity can be based on nationalism, ethnicity, or social class. This needs to be defined and spelled out for each individual movement. The combination of the four elements provides the strength of social movements. They "have power because they challenge opponents, bring out solidarity and have meaning within particular groups, situations and political cultures" (Tarrow 1994: 3).

This begs the question: how do the four properties come about? As Tarrow points out, "outbreaks of collective action cannot be derived from the level of deprivation that people suffer or from the disorganization of their societies" (1994:81). The emergence of social movements does not just happen, there are a set of variables that need to take place in order for a movement to arise.

Two concepts used in the social movement literature are helpful: 'opportunity' and 'framing'. Both concepts unfold simultaneously and are critical to the existence of the social movement. These serve as a guide for analyzing a social movement.

The concept of opportunity relates to the conditions that allow for the emergence of social movements. It refers to those factors that encourage and explain why a group mobilizes at a given point in time.² By extension, it can be assumed that in the absence of these conditions people's dissatisfactions or vision would remain dormant. The concept of opportunity points to the importance of the surrounding environment, and reminds us that a social movement arises within pre-established structures. It is changes within the

²This concept of opportunity is a version of Tarrow's (1994).

environment that account for the emergence of a social movement. These need to be identified.

Analysts such as Tarrow (1994) focus on the opportunities that occur in the political environment. Indicators include increased access to power, shifts in ruling alignments, availability of influential allies and cleavages within and amongst elites (Tarrow 1994: 18). Over emphasis on macro political elements, however, can be restrictive, or even misleading. This is suggested by some of the analysis done on the emergence of social movements in Latin America in the eighties amongst women, and other deprived people (Safa 1995).

A number of researchers such as Jelin (1987), have explained the rise of social movements in South America on account of the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes. This focus on the opportunity created by openings in the external political environment leads Jelin to seriously question the continual existence of these movements once the transition period ends (1987). Safa, however, who also studied the recent rise in social movements in the Continent looks at other factors. She finds that the changes at the national level correspond to "profound cultural changes in the private sphere" (Safa 1995: 208). The consideration of this additional factor makes Safa argue that the mobilization of women, for instance, is likely to continue. The above point indicates that opportunities cannot be limited to macro political structures or formal discourse. If social movements are about bringing in social change, it cannot only depend on changing conditions in the external environment. Transformations also need to take place at the individual level.

Lesage points to the changes required at the individual level for a movement to take form. " A social movement, as an expression of words and

of a collective desire, can take form only to the extent that it translates discomforts and a strong desire to change (...) The social movement transforms into actors individuals and groups who live with discomforts and feel the need and desire to think and act differently at the individual level (...) A social movement brings into the open rules and conventions. From the normal, it liberates the abnormal. It is at the same time the result and the reason for the assertion of a new conscience. It traces an identity, or rather it allows for a suppressed identity to appear" (Lesage 1997: 98). A social movement requires both an awakening at the individual level, and an environment where it is possible to channel this awareness in a common direction.

The concept of framing, on the other hand, is useful to point out how the common purpose and solidarity is created. Snow and Benford explain framing as an "interpretive schemata that simplifies and condenses the *world out there* by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one's present or past environment" (1992: 137). A social movement is involved in the task of naming grievances, connecting them to other ones and constructing larger frames of meaning that will speak to a population's predisposition. The task of a social movement is to develop a new diagnosis and remedy for existing forms of suffering .

The 'framing work' as it has been termed is not easy, because it involves and requires innovation. "But movement entrepreneurs do not simply adapt frames of meaning from traditional cultural symbols either -if they did, they would be nothing more than reflections of their societies and could not change them. They orient their movements' frames towards action,

and fashion them at the intersection between a target population's culture and their own values and goals" (Tarrow 1994: 122).

The above theories provide some guidelines for addressing the question of why and how the WWN emerged. In order to understand what the WWN is struggling for, and to get a better idea of the diagnosis and remedies proposed one must turn towards another literature. I propose to look at the feminist literature. The indigenous women's movement is often associated with feminism and therefore, one could expect this literature to shed some light on the object of indigenous women's struggle.

2.2. Feminism and the Indigenous Women's Movement

There does not exist a feminist framework. Feminism is today so diverse that the wide variety of perspectives sometimes intersect, but at other times contradict each other (Braidotti 1994; Young 1993). I shall first look at the appropriateness of some of the precepts of western feminism for studying the indigenous women's movement; then at the contributions of the feminist literature that has arisen from internationalization. It is clear that feminism becomes relevant to the indigenous women's movement only once it broadens its boundaries. Even so, one must be cautious in the use and appropriateness of feminist frameworks for understanding the indigenous women's movement.

Western feminism and indigenous women

The second wave of feminism arose in the sixties in the West (hereafter referred to as Western feminism).³ It arose from a growing awareness that women suffer from oppression and exploitation because of their gender. This also explained the secondary position they occupied in society on account of their gender. At this point, women identified men as the origin of their problem. They separated themselves from mixed groups, and organized amongst themselves. Women felt they shared a common reality. Describing the beginning of feminism, Mies writes: "The new concern that arose, the commitment to fight against male dominance, against all humiliation and ill-treatment of women, and against continuing inequality of the sexes created a new feeling of sisterhood among women which was an enormous source of strength, enthusiasm and euphoria" (1988: 7).

The feminist literature in this period uses indicators such as increase in women's right to vote, to run for office and to own property as measures of growing gender equality. Women's emancipation required moving away from traditional occupations, considered to be part of women's 'problem'. The following remark from the editor of *Women in the Modern World* is illustrative: "The old order, which confined women to the home as servants, and helpers to their men folk, has been, or is in the process of being, replaced by a new one in which women increasingly undertake to fill many roles within the home, as wives, mothers, and homemakers, and outside as partners and coworkers of men in all types of enterprises" (quoted in Bossen 1975: 588).

³It must be underlined that Western feminism does not refer to women from the West . As indicated by Mohanty, some Third World women can equally be termed Western feminists because they use "identitical analytical strategies" (1991: 52). According to Mohanty's definition, Western feminism refers to writers " which codify Others as non-Western and hence themselves as (implicitly) Western" (1991: 52). The meaning I give to Western feminism is detailed below.

In this stream of thinking, the rise of the women's movement has often been associated with modernization (Chavetz and Dworkin 1986). The basic assumption made in modernization theory is that social change is unidirectional, progressive, gradual, irreversibly moving societies from a backward stage to an advanced stage, and making societies more like one another as they proceed along the evolutionary path. More specifically, modernization involves transforming societies which are characterized by a low degree of specialization, a high level of self-sufficiency, respect for tradition, strong family ties, and a barter economy.

The view that women's emancipation is part and parcel of the development process (industrialization, urbanization) is widely spread today (Moghadam 1992; Basu 1995). In this stream of thinking, feminist analysts consider the democratization of authoritarian regimes and state consolidation an opening for women's emancipation.

From the outset, this positive perception of the development process and its association with greater gender equality makes the Western feminist approach inappropriate for understanding indigenous women's movements. As Bodley entitles his book, indigenous peoples have been the *Victims of Progress* (1990). "Contemporary colonization -for that is how it is seen by indigenous peoples -is made in the name of development. Proponents of this predatory form of development argue that beneath indigenous peoples' soils are the minerals to fuel economic growth, their under-used lands can be made available for a growing landless population or export-led agribusiness, their river valleys can be sacrificed for the production of hydro-electricity, and their forests can be felled and shipped overseas. Indigenous peoples are told they must make way for progress" (Burger 1994:42). Resource exploitation,

and more generally ethnocentrism, have been at the origin of the destruction of tribal peoples (Bodley 1990:11).

The philosophy of the colonizers has been termed eurocentricity by Mehmet "Eurocentricity is a European-centred world view in which the interest or benefit of Europeans and their descendants is pursued at the expense of others while justifying the world view by paradigms or ethical norms that proclaim universal benefits for all" (1995:8). The impacts have been both physical and mental.

If indigenous peoples in general have suffered from development, the losses have been greater for women. Several studies have shown that entering in the modern economy has led to a deterioration of women's status. A groundbreaking work on this type of research was done by Ester Boserup (1970). She argued that introduction of new agriculture machinery in Africa resulted in a weakening of women's position. In African societies, women's status was positively correlated to their role in food production, but because men took control of the new machinery this role was lost. Her study challenged the standard assumption that with modernization women's rights and status increased exponentially.

Ehlers and Bossen, doing research in Latin America amongst indigenous communities, observed a similar process. In 1975, Bossen, studying T'oj Nam (an indigenous rural community living in the highlands of Guatemala) found out that women's status weakened with the community's increased dependence on cash and modern employment (1982). Bossen evaluates the impact as follows: "In T'oj Nam the impact of the international money economy has been such that the resources which men traditionally control (land) and the products for which they are responsible (corn) have higher commercial values than women's traditional resources

and products... The traditional balance of dependence between the sexes is beginning to be transformed into a system of female dependence on men" (1984: 305-306). Ehlers, studying Maya women in the town of San Pedro in Guatemala, found likewise that women encounter obstacles that prevent them from gaining or maintaining economic interdependence, and are not able to 'benefit from modernization in the same way as men' (Ehlers 1990: 4).

It would be wrong to discard Western feminism on the basis of its positive outlook of development alone. In the last couple of decades, women's movements have sprouted worldwide and Western feminism has accommodated itself to this spread. The expansion of the feminist movement in the eighties to include women of colour from the South and the North has broadened the feminist agenda considerably. Greater emphasis is put on socio-economic issues for instance, and greater recognition is given to the interconnectedness of issues (see Bunch and Carillo 1990).⁴ Does this make it more relevant to the indigenous women's movement?

The difficulty of including the indigenous women's movement under the Western feminist umbrella becomes apparent if one takes a look at international gatherings of women. At the global level, it is often pointed out that better communication between women from the South and the North exists since the 1985 Nairobi U.N. conference on women (see Bunch and Carillo 1992). In this conference, "they abandoned the myth of global sisterhood and acknowledged profound differences in women's lives and in the meanings of feminism cross-nationally" (Basu 1995: 3). This constitutes

⁴See Jaquette (1989) for an interesting analysis of the emergence and different expressions of feminism in Latin America in the transition from authoritarianism to democratic politics in the eighties. In this case, the women's human's rights groups grouping mothers of the disappeared and the neighbourhood-based organizations of poor women focused just as much on socio-economic injustices, human rights violations, as women's problems per se.

an improvement in the relations between women from the South and the North compared to the previous two U.N. conferences.

According to Rigoberta Menchu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, at the last U.N. conference in Beijing in 1995, Western feminism has yet to accommodate indigenous women: " The delegations were very racist in relation to the indigenous women's groups. This is what happens in all national platforms as well. This event has not been an exception, because here there was not a true representation of the mothers, the women and their lives. Nonetheless, I hope at least that in this meeting there is an account and a testimony of those women who have made it to China. Let us hope they don't get discouraged and keep up their strength to continue until the year 2000".

The difficulty of incorporating indigenous women's issues with the other concerns of the women's movement is also apparent in Latin America (Alai 1994). Women started to organize in the continent at the beginning of the 1980s. The women's movement in Latin America has been dominated by the issue of guaranteeing women's participation in the democratic regimes, as well as building the identity of the women's movement (Jaquette and Vargas 1992). The latter task involves differentiating themselves from left-wing parties and other movements (Vargas 1992: 204). Indigenous women's issues made way on the agenda only in the 5th Encounter in 1990, but no breakthroughs were achieved from the point of view of indigenous women.

In my view, a central reason for the difficulty of incorporating indigenous women's issues into the mainstream women's movement arises from the fundamental differences in the goals of the two entities. Indigenous women are likely to increase their presence and may achieve successful gains in international women's gatherings, yet indigenous women can never

become part and parcel of the global women's movement defined on the terms of Western feminism. Understandings may improve, but the gap between the two is unlikely to be bridged. If this gap disappeared, indigenous women would be losing their identity.

Theoretical approaches arising in the feminist literature in the early eighties provide some useful elements for conceptualizing the indigenous women's movement and its distinctiveness. These are explored below.

Postmodern feminism and indigenous women

Postmodern feminism provides a better perspective than the modernist approach for studying the indigenous women's movements. In postmodern feminism basic assumptions of universality and the existence of a universal truth are questioned. In the words of Fuglesang, a postmodernist: "There is no scientific evidence that civilization is synonymous with Aristotelian rationality. We are oblivious to the fact that all other cultures are described and interpreted in the concepts of our own culture. Our ethnocentrism is close to total. We are not able to sense how literally and daily we express our arrogance in our language. The negation is both a thought-tool and a thought-trap" (1982: 18).

Postmodern feminists challenge the notion that concepts like knowledge, justice and equality can be defined and evaluated according to universal criteria (Parpart 1993: 439). By doing so, post-modernism recognizes and allows for difference: the right to one's own culture, history and world-view. It seeks to understand local knowledge both as sites of resistance and of power. As Parpart writes about post-modernism: "Attention to difference, language and resistance provides new insights into Third World peoples' behavior and undermines the tendency to unthinkingly apply western

standards to all Third World societies. Attention to difference and to multiple power/knowledge systems can encourage self-reliance and a belief in one's capacity to act. It cuts through western arrogance about modernity, whether from an Enlightenment or Marxist point of view, and provides the intellectual basis for a new understanding of global diversity" (1992: 456).

In highlighting the relation between knowledge and power, postmodern feminists denounce the colonizing tendencies amongst feminist scholars. This is the case of Chandra Mohanty, for instance. " I argue that assumptions of privilege and ethnocentric universality, on the one hand, and inadequate self-consciousness about the effect of Western scholarship on the *third world* in the context of a world system dominated by the West, on the other, characterize a sizable extent of Western feminist work on women in the third world. An analysis of *sexual difference* in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly reductive and homogeneous notion of what I call the *third world difference* " (1991: 53)."

The absence of openness leads Western feminism to draw a dichotomous picture of the non-modern and modern. The analysis reflects their own value-system. As Ong points out: "The feminist work (...) seek a modern form of individual freedom in their analyses of gender relations in the non-Western world. There is insufficient attention to non-modern social values which do not conceptualize gender relations in those terms (of individualism)" (1994: 377).

Post-modernism offers an appropriate and valuable approach for studying indigenous women's struggle. Central to their struggle is a call for respect for difference. Indigenous women possess their own definitions and world views. What the indigenous women's movement strives for must be

understood and appreciated within these terms of reference. This constitutes the basic dividing-line from other movements.

A central and basic difference with western feminism arises from the distinct significance given to gender equality. In indigenous societies, gender equality is often understood in terms of complementarity between sexes (Miller and Churchryk 1996; Wilson 1983). "Men and women are different, even opposed, but complementary of one another, not antagonistic." (Alderete 1991:43) This complementarity between men and women is often associated to the indigenous world view that sees human beings co-existing in equilibrium with nature and other communities (*Women's Health Journal* 1990: 33).

Men and women each have respective roles and responsibilities. They are both valued in their respective fields of competence. No precedence is given to one or the other. The division of labor in indigenous societies has been described by Shoemaker as follows: "Men received public honor for achievements in hunting and warfare. Women received public honor for achievements in fancy beadwork or other arts, exceptional farming or gathering productivity, and coming of age at menarche " (1995: 5). Men may have a greater public role than women, but this does not indicate they are more powerful.

There are many ways of expressing and measuring 'power'. This varies from one society to another, and each needs to be defined on its own term (Shoemaker 1995: 13). According to Leacock's analysis, women's equality in hunting-gathering societies arises from the fact "that they held decision-making power over their own lives and activities to the same extent that men did over theirs" (1978: 247). She claims that the economic contribution

per se is irrelevant, the key lies in "how this contribution is structured" (1978: 252).

Indigenous women's understanding of equality is largely based on their interpretation of the gender relations that existed in their societies prior to contact. The lack of written records on pre-Colombian America and the cultural and gender biases of the sources, however, make it impossible to know as much as one would like about the history of Indian women (1995: 3). Therefore, it is not possible ever to verify the presumptions made on gender equality. Shoemaker argues in an introduction to a book on American Indian women's history that Indian women had more authority and were more respected than their counterparts in Europe. Indigenous women in general appear to share this view.

The different conceptualizations of equality is a fundamental issue. It entails for one thing, that the *raison d'être* of the indigenous women's movement is fundamentally distinct from the Western feminist perspectives. A prominent woman in the indigenous movement from Mexico explains , "the indigenous women's struggle is not an issue of women defending their rights. The indigenous women's struggle is the same as the indigenous men's: that of indigenous peoples. We want equality not to be identical. We are not feminist "because our struggle is collective, it is not separate from men's. We are pushing forward a struggle together, though we are aware that we as women need to create our own space to talk about the body, sexuality and women's health" (translation -Ecuador 7 August 1996).

Indigenous women have particular problems that relate to their condition as women as indicated in the above quote. At this point in time, however, indigenous women consider their problems to mainly result from contact with the other society. In the words of an indigenous woman from

Peru: " The machismo, the abuse, the lack of respect and the marginalization of the Indian women is a new cultural invasion that affects us today and that our men adopt because they are petty-minded and ashamed to show our reality which is more dignified" (IWGIA 1990: 45). Viewed in this light, indigenous women do not identify the root of their problems as stemming from their own men. They do not consider that the key to bringing about equality lies in opposing themselves to their own men.

Post-modernism helps in terms of providing guidelines for undertaking the inquiry on the purpose of the indigenous women's movement. It points to the importance of defining indigenous concepts, and guards against making presumptions and generalizations. But this perspective has little to offer in terms of determining the content and parameters of the struggle. As Hutcheon writes: "Post-modernism has not theorized agency; it has no strategies of resistance" (1989: 168). In this sense, post modernists have been more interested in deconstruction than construction. For further insight into the nature of indigenous women's struggle, I turn to ecofeminism.

Ecofeminism and indigenous women

In the last decade or so, ecofeminism has become popular amongst researchers in the South and in the North. This perspective situates itself within a more radical stream of feminism with thinkers like Mies. According to her, feminism is bringing about a new society. She writes: "the nature of the 'woman question' is such that it cannot simply be added to some other general theory, but that it fundamentally criticizes all these theories and begs for a new theory of society altogether" (1986: 12). She provides a whole

argument, whereby getting rid of the discourse of ever-increasing growth, forces of production and never-ending accumulation is considered essential for ending women's inequality, nature's abuse and exploitation (Mies 1986: 23). Her argument is based on the presumption that patriarchy is a function of capitalism (Mies 1986: 39). According to her, the different streams within the feminist movement, whether it be the liberal, Marxist or socialist one are largely irrelevant as long as they do not call for a thorough overhaul of the existing system (Mies 1986: 12).

Although there are many parallels between Mies's analysis and ecofeminism, the latter perspective offers more practical applications and has greater relevance to the study of the indigenous women's movement.⁵

Ecofeminism's basic argument has been summarized by Agarwal in four points (1992: 120). (1) There are important connections between the domination and oppression of women, and the domination and exploitation of nature. (2) Women are seen as inferior to men because in patriarchal thought, women are identified as being closer to nature considered inferior to culture which is men's domain. (3) Women have a particular interest in ending the domination of nature because of their special relation to it. (4) An egalitarian and non-hierarchical society is necessary to preserve the diversity of all life forms and cultural expressions, as well as guarantee well-being and happiness.

Ecofeminism emphasizes the 'nature' variable which in a number of ways is appropriate to the indigenous women's movement. These are presented and explained below.

⁵It must be noted that Mies co-authored a book with Shiva, the most prominent defender of ecofeminism (Mies and Shiva 1993).

Ecofeminism relates to the indigenous women's worldview in its denouncement of development. It shows how development has been violent for many people, especially for people from the South and minorities. Ecofeminism criticizes and radically opposes itself to progress, development, and modernization. Development is considered patriarchal, hierarchical, and at the origin of socio-economic and gender inequities. Shiva describes the impact of the British colonizing India's forests as follows: " it amounted basically to the normalization of the erosion both of forests and of the rights of local people to forest produce " (1988: 63). Ecofeminism is different from postmodern feminism, which allows for criticism but does not necessarily take sides.

An important point in ecofeminism is the positive depiction of traditional societies.⁶ The past serves as a reference point in this school of thought.⁷ This point must be emphasized; the high value placed on traditional society is critical in the indigenous women's struggle. The conclusion to the Declaration of the First Continental Meeting of Indigenous Peoples states : "We must claim our traditional values, our indigenous ways of organizing ourselves, of conducting ourselves as communities... In order to re-establish balance in our homes and in order to realize the self-determination and liberation of our oppressed peoples, women and men must participate equally in accordance with the traditional values of our indigenous nations" (ISIS: 92). The solution to Indigenous Peoples 'problems' is found in turning towards the past, and not in rejecting it.

⁶ It is interesting that there are some similarities between the ecofeminists' and the indigenous' depiction of the past. Both, for instance, emphasize the interconnectedness of human beings with nature. The parallels between ecofeminist's depiction of Mother Earth and indigenous' are such that one scholar guards ecofeminism against 'importing' pieces of indigenous culture, and being a case of cultural imperialism (see Gaard 1993).

⁷See, for instance, Shiva (1988) in her discussion on forestry.

As indicated earlier, ecofeminism has paid particular attention to current events, such as the Chipko movement (Shiva 1988). The analysis and significance given to the Chipko movement have some pertinence for understanding the indigenous women's struggle. The movement started in 1977 in the Himalayan foothills when workers from a local worker's cooperative and 100 villagers prevented the Simons Company's agents and their men from felling by embracing the trees. The movement caught worldwide attention and has been analyzed from several points of views (Bandyopadhyay 1992: Gadgil and Guha 1992). According to ecofeminists, women were the backbone of the movement and the source for ecological, moral, and political strength. Shiva interprets the opposition women had to their own men's desire to promote local logging as evidence of women's inherent relation to the environment. "Peasant women came out, openly challenging the reductionist commercial forestry system on the one hand and the local men who had been colonized by that system, cognitively, economically and politically, on the other" (Shiva 1988: 77).

In the above comment, Shiva attributes specific characteristics to women, and men. As indicated in the discussion on the indigenous definition of gender equality, indigenous women likewise do not see men and women as being identical. But indigenous women do not pose men and women in a good and evil framework like ecofeminism. The black and white distinction made by Shiva between the feminist principle of conservation and the masculine principle of destruction goes against the indigenous concept of complementarity (Bandyopadhyay 1992: 267).

Indigenous women argue that if they take on a leading role in changing society, it is because it corresponds to their traditional position. It must not be read as women defending their own domain. As Rigoberta

Menchu suggests, the Nobel Peace Prize winner, women have a responsibility towards society that men may not have. This fact has made women reluctant to establish their own organization. "Our struggle has shown us that many *companeros* have clear ideas, but if they don't follow in the footsteps of their women, they'll never have the clarity that she has, and they'll be left behind. What is the point of educating women if men aren't there to contribute to the apprenticeship and learn as well?" (1983: 222).

One reason for the limitation of ecofeminism is that it is in the first place a theoretical argument, which has thereafter been used to interpret events. Many scholars criticize ecofeminists for imposing pre-conceived ideas to explain events (see Cecile Jackson and Kirk 1995: 80). Ecofeminism may espouse a different world view wholeheartedly, but remains closed in its eagerness to find evidence for its theoretical argumentation.

Paradoxically, ecofeminism does not resolve some of the major criticisms of essentialism made of Western Feminism. Ecofeminists' "have reached an impasse in its project of thinking its way out of the dualism and hierarchies on which the Western frame of mind is founded" (Braidotti 1994: 174). As Agarwal writes in her criticism of Shiva: "By locating the 'problem' almost entirely in the Third World's experience of the West, Shiva misses out the very real local forces of power, privilege, and property relations that predate colonialism. What exists today is a complex legacy of colonial and precolonial interactions that defines the constraints and parameters within which and from which present thinking and action on development, resource use, and social change have to proceed" (Agarwal 1992: 126).

As long as feminist analysis' continue to view the issues in terms of a 'good' and 'bad' framework, the use of this framework will be limited. In the following section, using the Wayuu Women's Network as an example, I

propose a distinct framework of analysis for studying an indigenous women's movement.

2.3. Setting the parameters for studying WWN

Defining the purpose of the indigenous women's movement is central for studying the Wayuu Women's Network (WWN). The above discussion provides some elements for doing so, but there is a need for a clearer focus and more substance.

In my view, the principal objective of an indigenous women's organization like the Wayuu Women's Network is to restore a balance between the traditional and dominant societies. This possibility has generally been overlooked. As Ong indicates " *the non-Western woman* as a trope of feminist discourse is either non-modern or modern; she is seldom perceived as living in a situation where there is deeply felt tension between tradition and modernity" (1994: 337).

The use of the word 'restore' indicates that balance did exist at one time, the challenge is to bring it back. The issue at stake can be explained with the help of the concept of the 'two worlds'. This concept is often used to illustrate the transformation of cultures (see Amadio 1988), and is used by indigenous women themselves (see quotes later). It is based on the idea that there is on the one hand the indigenous world, and on the other 'western society', 'modern society', or alternatively 'dominant society' .

The indigenous society possesses its own social, economic, and political system (Aga Khan and Talal 1987: Bodley 1988). In the indigenous world view, emphasis is often put on the interconnectedness of all elements constituting the world, community, consensus in decision-making, unity and

balance. Pepper and White identify the following values as characterizing First Nations: connections with the past, importance of family, egalitarianism, nature as part of life, commitment to spiritual life, religion and health (1996). Other lists of characteristics of indigenous societies are available, such as in Georhing's *Indigenous Peoples of the World* (1993: 53-56). The particular elements that define an indigenous society vary from one society to another and need to be studied for each and every society. The basic point is that these societies possess their own structures and mechanisms. They have adjusted to changing environments over a long period of time and in the process have been transformed, yet many have been very resilient. For illustrative purposes, the indigenous society can be represented by a circle.

The other world represents western societies. Like indigenous societies, it has its own political, economic and social systems. Centralization, industrialization, competition, hierarchy, material success, power concentrated in the hands of a few, and achievement, are generally part of this world (see Goehring 1993 and Banuri 1990 for a list of modern values). Again the features of western societies need to be defined for a given case and a given time in history. Like the indigenous society, this world is self-contained and can be represented by a circle.

As seen earlier, the modern world has for a long time been forcefully presented as a model that all societies should emulate.⁸ The basic problem of indigenous peoples arises from this generally unwanted and unprepared meeting between two societies. The impacts have often been disastrous, bringing social disorder and socio-economic hardships. These have been

⁸Hereafter I refer to the western society as the dominant society because of the particularly important dominance this worldview has occupied during the last 500 years in the case of the Americas (adapted from Mehmet 1994: 8).

expanded on extensively (see Bodley 1988 and 1990; Rojas 1990). Defining the problem this way, indigenous women can theoretically look for solutions in three different directions: by turning towards their own society, the dominant society or by building on an analysis of the strengths of both societies.

Seeking elements from both societies is the avenue most likely for indigenous women to bring harmony to their societies. This is the view expressed by indigenous women activists. In the words of one woman, " It has been a long journey without communication, but now is the time to communicate and we are opening our eyes, and this is the time that the women throughout the world can get together. I am talking about this world, because we are living in two worlds. One is the white world, and the western way. But inside of the community we are living in another world, the world of indigenous people. In that way, we have to learn about these two different worlds. If we know our own knowledge, but don't know how the other world acts, it will be very hard to defend ourselves from them, and it will be easy for them to continue to oppress us " (Abya Yala 1992: 23). The attention to ways of referring to both societies is the view espoused in this paper. Doing otherwise would be inappropriate.

Adopting a preservationist view point would not reflect indigenous peoples' position. As the following statement indicates: " Indigenous people accept that their futures are linked to those of the dominant societies which surround them, although they do want an end to domination and repression. (...) They are not closed to outside influence and values and are ready to adopt practices which may make life less arduous. (...) They have shown ability in the past to resist their colonizers, retreat with wisdom, and win concession by negotiation. Their cultures have proven to be highly resilient, flexible and independent despite concerted efforts to erode them. The survival of

indigenous peoples is due to their capacity to borrow what is useful rather than blind commitment to tradition for its own sake." (Aga Khan and Talal 1987: 40).⁹

Moreover, present socio-economic conditions make it unrealistic to promote isolation. Indigenous peoples, in material terms, are at the bottom of national societies. In Latin America, statistics indicate that 79% of them live below the poverty line (Alai 1993). Their lamentable situation has largely been the result of exploitation, neglect and isolation. Improving their well-being requires increasing their participation in the dominant society. This does not mean integration, but it definitely calls for a radical change in the present state of affairs.

Accepting change calls for preparation. " We realize that we need to improve our capabilities and that many of our sisters must have the opportunity to acquire experience and training, so we can better work for the well-being of our people" says Wara Alderete in Argentina (Abya Yala 1991). While encouraging women to learn the tools and language of the modern world and to succeed in the dominant society, indigenous women are also stressing the need to remain attached to their own identity.

Indigenous women's struggle is about putting a halt to the disintegration of their society, or more modestly put, as having a little more say in what results from the meeting between the two worlds. Given this position, one expects that the success of a women's organization must be measured in terms of its ability to link in some way or another its guiding principles, methods and strategies to both societies. It is expected that their organization will be much stronger and enduring if this happens. Thus knowing the main precepts of the Wayuu society as such is necessary for

⁹See also Brascoupe (1992), Bodley (1988).

assessing the Wayuu Women's Network. The work of the WWN also involves awareness-building at the level of the individual. This is harder to measure, yet it is important to keep an eye on all indications that could suggest this is happening.

The analytical tools presented earlier for studying a social movement will serve as a guide for studying how the WWN articulates its vision and structures itself. One expects the Network to engage in some sort of framing. This should involve defining the struggle and the basis for the common purpose. Such a process should demonstrate the four properties essential to a social movement -collective challenge, a common purpose, solidarity and sustained collective action.

III

Research Methods

Participant observation was used for my research. As Jorgensen defines this method, "It focuses on human interaction and meaning viewed from the insiders' viewpoint in everyday life situations and settings (...) The methodology of participant observation involves a flexible, open-ended, opportunistic process and logic of inquiry through which what is studied is subject to redefinition based on field experience and observation. (...) Direct observation and experience are primary forms and methods of data collection, but the researcher also may conduct interviews, collect documents, and use other methods of gathering information" (1989: 23).

Being concerned with social phenomena, and with understanding the appreciation of actor's perspectives and world-views, participant observation seemed most appropriate. Particularly important too was the openness it allowed. This was necessary, for when starting my fieldwork, I knew the general topic, but the specifics unfolded as I went a long. The participant observant methodology was valuable because it allowed for the use of different techniques for data collection. This allows one to collect a range of perspectives, and gather rich information.

Essentially, participatory research uses the techniques associated with participant observation, but it differs in the research process and the objective of the research inquiry (see Wright and Nelson 1995: 57). Some of the basic points in participatory research serve as reference points in my research method.

Central to the participatory research method is the emphasis on change. This is considered to be the purpose of research. The nature of participatory research has been characterized as follows: " In the process, research is seen not only as a process of creating knowledge, but simultaneously, as education and development of consciousness, and of mobilization for action." The research is done to bring social change in the interests of the oppressed groups, not merely to gather information on a social phenomenon (Yeich and Levine 1992: 1896). Thus, emphasis is put on people's involvement in, and contribution to, the research process. The "participants are transferring local knowledge to the researcher; and the researcher is conveying not only research skills, but theoretical frameworks and comparative information which help participants analyze the local situation in terms of how wider system work" (Wright and Nelson 1995: 51). There are three major components to participatory research: research, education and social action.

The participatory research's preoccupations tend to be neglected in the methodology of participant observation (Wright and Nelson 1995: 58). Participatory research "is most closely aligned to the natural processes of social movements. As groups begin to organize there is almost always a need to understand more about the situations which people are facing together" (Hall 1993: xv). This is most relevant for studying the Wayuu Women Network, which as explained in the theoretical section can be considered a social movement. However, as Maguire indicates in a discussion on doing participatory research for her doctoral thesis amongst battered women, many components of this method need to be tuned to local realities in the field. Her own research led her to question the extent women in her study fully defined and controlled the research process. She realized that in many ways, she was

the one laying the research agenda. They also expected her to put more time in the project (1993).

The feminist perspective, as discussed by Reinharz (1992), Schrijvers (1995), and Harding (1992) complements my research method. This perspective is appealing, because of its approach to the relation between the researcher, the people studied, and its general outlook on how knowledge is generated. The feminist perspective attempts to accommodate research to the fact that as soon as one selects information, an element of subjectivity enters into the research process, and a researcher's gendered identity and background necessarily condition the direction of the research. In this sense, it recognizes the complexity of social phenomena.

The feminist perspective questions the objective of scientific rigor, highlighting the problematic nature of representation . It brings to the forefront such questions as whose voice, whose perspectives and whose theories are being postulated? (Schrijvers 1995: 21). According to Hall, " Its nature challenges the arrangements of knowledge into academic disciplines; its methodology breaks down many of the traditional distinctions between theoretical and empirical and between objective and subjective. It is in the process of redefining knowledge, knowledge gathering and making..." (1992: 21).

This approach is dramatically different from mainstream perspectives, which aim at eliminating the humanness of social analysis. Scientific methods of research assume the expert is neutral, gathers objective facts, and can compartmentalize them into pre-determined categories (see Nelson and Wright 1995). The researcher's rigor and 'objectivity' is expected to allow an efficient and reliable means of gathering data and deriving knowledge.

By recognizing and valuing the subjectivity involved in research, the feminist perspective appears to be honest and realistic. Researchers are encouraged to acknowledge subjectivity and even include it as a component in the research. "Personal experience typically is irrelevant in mainstream research, or is thought to contaminate a project's objectivity. In feminist research, by contrast, it is relevant and repairs the pseudo-objectivity." (Reinharz 1992: 258).

Taking sides is not regarded as contaminating the research process in the feminist perspective. As Mies argues, "The postulate of value free research, of neutrality and indifference towards the research objects, has to be replaced by conscious partiality, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects" (Mies 1983: 122). Conscious partiality allows for a researcher's engagement, as well as encourages dialogue and reflection between the researcher and the people researched.

As the researcher's involvement is recognized, some feminist theorists have reflected on the impact of the identity of a researcher (see Wolf 1996). Some researchers analyzed the relation between knowledge and experience, and wondered whether it was necessary to have shared the experience of those being studied to generate knowledge (see Harding 1992). In other words, would being an insider produce a better representation of reality?

One study that tested this relation indicated that sharing the identity of the people researched was impossible (see Wolf 1996: 15). Researchers who thought in the beginning of their research that sharing the ethnic origin of those they were studying made them insider, found out later that factors such as education and class made them outsider (see Lal 1996). In other words, the notion of insider and outsider are extremely *fragile* notions, their distinction is easily blurred. Besides, some authors indicate that one can learn to see the

world from the perspective of experiences and lives that are not one's own (see Harding 1992: 188). Belonging to a subjugated group does not necessarily mean one understands the causes of the situation, nor that one struggles for its change. This is something acquired, and therefore outsiders can also acquire it. There is an element of consciousness.

By questioning the role of the researcher and the relation between the researcher and the people studied, the feminist perspective is likely to reduce the risks of misunderstanding and misinterpretation when studying different cultures. In the very least, this method acknowledges the inevitable biases. These points are emphasized because the difference between native and non-native world-views is a central component of my research inquiry. This calls for a research perspective sensitive to all elements of interference and cultural nuances.

In terms of research methods, a feminist researcher borrows methods from different disciplines and learns how to apply them (Reinharz 1992: 243). A single feminist research method does not exist. This openness is relevant for my research inquiry.

My research includes some aspects of the education and research component required in participatory research. In particular, special emphasis is placed on involving the women in the research process, and seeking their participation. This is not research in the full participatory sense, whereby the group formulates an explicit research problem or collective design, conducts and controls the participatory research design (Maguire 1993: 173). Likewise, my discussions and interviews with the women invited them to think critically about their world and situation (Yeich and Levine 1992: 1897). Whether or not this is translated into critical awareness, I can not say with certainty. From the beginning, I did not consider nor aim at making my

research initiate or mobilize action. Rather, the research aimed at supporting a process already taking place, as exemplified by the WWN. As explained below, the action part of my research consisted of my personal decision to actively participate in the Wayuu Women's Network. How my research was conducted and the preoccupation that accompanied my research inquiry are looked at more closely below.

I seek to use research methods most appropriate for my research topic, yet the following note of caution still applies: " Whatever his research methods, his approach, his views always take form in an environment, a culture. The past escapes him, the future remains unpredictable. His sayings can never carry the seal of certitude. At best, they are an approximation of the world" (Lesage 1997: 15).

Carrying out Fieldwork

The decision to do research in Venezuela amongst the Wayuu people was largely the result of the meeting and warm invitation by the Wayuu vice-president of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples (WCIP), Noeli Pocatererra. I had initial interest in doing research on indigenous women's issues, but until this meeting had no preference in terms of country or people. Previously, I had done research on indigenous women in Latin America, and in the course of my involvement in indigenous issues with WCIP in Ottawa attended a few international gatherings of indigenous women. All together this experience had introduced me to many of the contemporary issues of indigenous women.

Hearing about the activities of Wayuu women, it seemed like a good basis for a case study. The environment was welcoming. And I had the

advantage of speaking Spanish, and having some knowledge on Latin America.

When I arrived in Venezuela in February 1996, the Maracaibo Wayuu Women's Network had just been established. I indicated to the coordinators of the organization that I was interested in doing some research on the network for my M.A. thesis, and that I hoped it could be done in a way that could also be helpful to them. They told me that the material could be useful for them to get a more global picture of the situation and challenges of Wayuu women. From the start I decided to support the work of the Network, rather than concentrate on my research. At the early stage, I did not feel comfortable placing my research as a priority, however participatory the research would be. I wanted to carry out research, while identifying with the people and supporting their struggle, and be recognized for doing so. The latter soon became my primary occupation.

The moral and technical support I provided absorbed me in the first four months of my stay. I ended up providing technical help, such as transcribing meeting notes and producing write-ups on the computer. This was appreciated by the Network, which in the beginning had little material or technical capacity. I went to as many meetings within the Wayuu community as possible, as well as to the regular meetings of the women's organization in Maracaibo. In all meetings, I took notes on how they were conducted and the issues discussed by the women and facilitators. These notes taken at the meetings later served as material for the WWN's archives as well as for my own research.

The few months of immersion proved very beneficial for a number of reasons. In the first place, it allowed me to make connections with the people and gain their trust. Downplaying my academic background and becoming a

support person made me more of an 'insider'. I was presented as an *alijuna* to those who did not know me.¹⁰ But considering my dedication to and identification with the Wayuu peoples' struggle, I tended to be viewed and treated as an ally.¹¹ This was extremely important considering the constant and central emphasis on native and non-native identities within the Network and Venezuela where ethnic divisions are extremely pronounced, especially in the state of Zulia. I consider that my integration was appreciated. As my knowledge and closeness to the Network increased, I was invited to participate more in the discussions between the members of the Network. In this first phase of the Network everything had to be defined, and much trial-and-error was involved. The feed-back and ideas I could provide were welcomed.

The necessity to have a close relation with those to be studied has been pointed out by a number of feminist researchers. Many researchers carrying out fieldwork have found that the quality of the information gathered is better when the researcher is knowledgeable and integrated into the community under study (Reinharz 1992: 26). The researcher's connectedness to the people studied and personnel involvement can be extremely positive for the research as such. Obviously, there are some pitfalls to being closely associated and emotionally involved with the people researched. As one becomes part of the project and close to the people, one loses some objectivity (Francis 1993: 89). But as explained earlier, this is only part of the humanness

¹⁰An *alijuna* is a wayuu word commonly used to refer to the non-wayuu, and in general those who are not native. It can be noted that in the other native communities in Venezuela, such as those in the state of Zulia, also have a word in the native language to refer to others.

¹¹The fact that I lived at the house of Noeli Pocaterra one of the founding facilitators of the WWN in Maracaibo also made it easier for me to be accepted. Not only did this gave me the opportunity to discuss at length the ins and outs of the network, but it allowed me to participate in all activities relating to the organization. As community commitments increased this involved considerable mobilization.

of social analysis, and I consider that the advantages of involvement far-outweigh the disadvantages. In the end, the data as such and the contribution to the people researched are likely to be much greater.

Giving myself time also allowed me to appropriately use qualitative research methods. My participation, observations and discussions with the women directed my research inquiry.

After a while, I realized individual interviews, more focused and better structured, were necessary to supplement the information I collected through informal interviews, observation and group discussion. Interviews were necessary to cover issues which needed further inquiry, and to discuss more systematically some of the observations I made initially. Having a greater knowledge of the situation and people, I felt better prepared to ask relevant questions, and to make worthwhile interviews.

Basically, I did the interviews during the last three months of my stay. At that point, I had a better idea of the research focus and could direct questions appropriately. Knowledge of the subject is important when interviewing, for as Jones indicates "the art of good interviewing lies in being able to keep most of the interview conversational while following various digressions, remembering which questions the flow of information has answered and yet being prepared to question more deeply and precisely when necessary." (1983: 203)

In general, I found interviews varied significantly. In some cases, women were at ease and answered at length the different questions. While in other instances, it was difficult to solicit in-depth answers. Sometimes it was clear that women did not feel comfortable with the technique of interviewing. Probably, they were not familiar with the directness involved in this method. I was often reminded that as in many native traditions,

explanations are often communicated through story-telling. To ease the atmosphere, I often felt it helpful to mention the views expressed by other women. This helped women relate to the questions. It was interesting that women often interrupted the interview to ask my thoughts on a topic. Women invited my feedback.

In total, I interviewed 40 Wayuu people. The great majority were women (35), either WWN coordinators, students, community leaders or elders. The people interviewed were chosen because I knew them, or because I had been told these were good resource people for the subject of my inquiry. I looked for Wayuu who could talk about their culture, had reflected on its transformations, and people (mostly women) who were actively engaged in its defense.

In most cases, I arranged for the meeting beforehand, explaining that I wanted to ask a few questions on Wayuu culture and women's leadership. Women in general were welcoming. Those having little contact with the *alijuna* technology were a little intimidated by the idea of recording the interview. I explained this was important so I could concentrate and listen to them when they were talking, and not be preoccupied by transcription. It was also more likely that I would have a more exact account of what they said.

The interviews were all done in Spanish, because most people interviewed live in the city or near-by and therefore speak the language of the dominant society. I realized there was a price to pay in having the interviews in Spanish, because it is their second language and I lost the nuances of the poetic language Wayuunaikii is said to be.

Few, simple and open-ended questions were asked. This allowed women as much as possible to express their thoughts. Basically, the questions centered around the following issues: What role did Wayuu women play in

the Wayuu socio-political organization? What did they think about Wayuu women's situation today compared to yesterday? What were the qualities encouraged in a Wayuu women? What were the traditional characteristics of a leader in Wayuu society and today? What challenges did they see women had to overcome today? How did they see the WWN? Did they find the work of WWN corresponded to Wayuu society? How did it meet their needs?

In testing the questions on a few people, I soon realized they often had to be personalized in order for women to relate to the issues. Instead of asking, for instance, 'What did they think about Wayuu women's situation today compared to yesterday?', it was preferable to ask, 'What is the difference between your life and your grandmother's?' The latter was less abstract than the former, and made it easier for women to respond. Also, generally being familiar with the interviewees background, I emphasized certain issues more than others depending on the cases. For instance, if I was interviewing a professional I asked specific questions on how she dealt with living in the two worlds. In talking to an elder, however, more time was spent on explaining the past and their opinions on how Wayuu society had changed.

Some time was spent reviewing secondary sources, a necessary task whenever one undertakes research on a given subject. Most of the literature review on Wayuu people had to be done in Maracaibo and Caracas, even though in Venezuela access and availability of information was not easy. Most often, there has only been a small number of books printed, and they are no longer in circulation. The only book easily available on the Wayuu in non-specialized bookstores is *El Camino de los Indios Muertos* written by the French researcher Michel Perrin in 1976 (Curvelo 1996).

Ever since the 1940s, though, there have been a fairly large number of investigators doing research in the Wayuu territory, either on the

Venezuelan or Colombian side of the border. There have been Colombian, Venezuelan and foreign investigators. In recent years, the number of researchers of Wayuu origin appears to have increased.

As pointed out in an article summarizing the state of ethnographic research on Wayuu people (Curvelo 1996), "The first situation that investigators were obliged to come to terms with was that they were not in front of a static or isolated society but one immersed in a complex network of economic, political and ideological relations with the dominant society." As a result, a number of researchers have done comparative studies, whereby they compare fieldwork observations of different time periods. This has provided interesting ethnographic material, which helps understand the changes experienced by Wayuu society.

Most research on women deals with their role in the traditional Wayuu socio-political organization, and the matrilineal aspect of Wayuu society. In general, the existing literature provides little insight into the challenges faced by Wayuu women today. A note of caution is necessary: this absence in the literature must not be read as a disinterest for the issue within the society. Women's changing role is a theme largely discussed amongst Wayuu activists, as we shall see in chapters to follow. There are some extremely competent people analyzing the transformations in their society, but often they are too busy to isolate themselves and write. One wonders if this is not evidence of their commitment to oral tradition, which after all is considered the medium par excellence for communicating in Wayuu society.

Regardless, the above reasons made it essential for me to carry out my field work and gather data from primary sources.

IV

Traditional Wayuu society

The following section presents the Wayuu's 'traditional' socio-political organization and women's 'traditional' role. Presenting aspects of the Wayuu's 'traditional' society is necessary because the Wayuu Women's Network (WWN) claims to draw on elements of their society. How is this so? This is a question underlying the analysis made of the WWN.

Above I have used the word tradition in quotes (not henceforth) to point to the ambiguous meaning of this concept. Very much like Levi-Strauss argues in his essay on *The concept of archaism in anthropology* the lines of demarcation between the authentically primitive or traditional are difficult to draw (1967). Tradition like 'primitive people' have a history. The specifics however may be largely unknown to us on account of the lack or paucity of oral traditions. As observed in Davis' edited book on *Choice and Change*, researchers particularly anthropologists have tended to omit this historical and dynamic dimension in their description of traditional society (1974).

The description made hereafter of the Wayuu's traditional socio-political organization and women's role uses materials from academic researchers having written and described aspects of traditional Wayuu society since the 1950s. Being aware that interpretation is always involved in these accounts and that one can never know with certitude the nature of traditional Wayuu society, I have chosen to present this material in light of my interviewees depiction of

traditional Wayuu society. As pointed out below, there are discrepancies between the contemporary views of Wayuu people and the academics description. It is to be noted that given that I espouse the cause, I have chosen to give greater validity to the constructed depiction of tradition made by my interviewees rather than the written material of researchers. After all, it is the depiction of tradition held in the minds of the actors of the Network that inspired the movement.

4.1 Traditional socio-political organization

The Wayuu people's socio-political organization is complex. According to Watson's taxonomy, there are four key units involved: the nuclear family, the matrilineal extended family, the matrilineage, and the clan (see Watson 1968). To each of these units corresponds a set of roles and responsibilities.

The nuclear family is composed of a woman, her husband, and their unmarried children. This domestic unit is responsible for producing and consuming basic resources, such as food, clothing, housing and for educating the children. These tasks are carried out according to a strict division of labor based on gender. Men are responsible for pasture, and outside activities. They keep an eye on the herds and hunt wild game; where agriculture is practiced they clear the terrain and prepare it for planting. They also build the domestic structures. Boys helps their fathers in these activities. Women gather wild plants, do the agricultural work and milk the animals. They are also responsible in the domestic sphere for preparing the meals, gathering firewood, weaving articles for daily use, keeping up the

house, and caring for the young. Young girls help their mothers in these activities.

The conjugal family is part of the extended family, organized according to the prevailing rule of matrilineal residence. The role of the extended matrilineal family is basically an extension of that of the nuclear family. Usually, one finds a group of 100 - 400 matrilineally related families living together, though the number varies. According to Saler generally: "an older and respected woman is the head of the *rancheria*.¹² The other members of the *rancheria* are flesh relatives" (1987: 58). Generally, the permanent head of a household is a woman. According to the Wayuu custom, men are allowed more than one wife, therefore they tend to move from one place to another.

Above the extended family, there is the Guajiro matrilineage whose importance is reflected in its corporate-like functions. These have been described as follows: "it [matrilineage] has structural persistency through time, collective legal responsibility before society, an internal political structure of its own, joint ownership of important resources, and common rituals" (Watson 1968: 29). In general, each lineage recognizes their common ancestors and shares a strong sense of solidarity. It has a recognized territory where important activities are conducted: pasture their animals, find their wells and locate their cemeteries (Montiel 1984).

Each lineage is headed by a chief , who is responsible for the well-being, security and subsistence of his people, and finding ways out of difficult economic situations (Montiel 1984). More specifically, "he

¹²A *rancheria* is a conglomeration of households, and where Wayuu traditionally live (see Saler 1987: 55)

resolves disputes arising between members of the lineage; he collects and distributes property connected with marriage and funerals; and he organizes and supervises work projects of benefit to the lineage, such as the building of wells and maintenance of lineage cemetery" (Watson 1968: 29).

An essential part of the leader's responsibility is to act as the legal representative of his group in its relationship to outsiders. If a member of his lineage has become involved in a serious conflict with the members of another lineage, and a claim of damage has been presented, the chief must meet with the head of the various family lines to decide upon a course of action (Montiel 1975). " The lineage, symbolized in the person of the chief, must therefore assume formal legal responsibility for the behavior of any of its own members who become involved in a breach of custom, regardless of whether they are the offended or the offending party" (Watson 1968: 30). It must be noted that the chief can refer to a third party to act as a mediator between the two parties. This person is known as the *putchipuu*, and an extremely important figure in Wayuu culture well-known for his wisdom and negotiating abilities.

In general, Wayuu law is based on the concept of compensation. This means every abuse, physical or psychological must be assigned social responsibility and compensated for by payment, or in extreme cases by blood revenge (Watson 1968: 31). A peaceful agreement involves the offending party giving the offended party the agreed upon amount of cattle, jewelry or whatever. In the case where no agreement is reached, a war is declared, and the available men and youth of a lineage must partake in the war party.

The chief is chosen because he is considered the group's most powerful economic force, and has been socialized to occupy this position (Watson 1970; Montiel 1982). "Essentially, the prospective *cacique* [term used by outside researcher, see comment later on] embodies the attributes of the Guajiro ideal self in their noblest form: responsibility, compliance, unaggressiveness and respectfulness" (Watson 1970: 28). Though he is given a special education, he generally inherits the position from his maternal uncle.

Beyond the lineage is the clan. There are an estimated 30 clans composed of a number of lineages each (Watson 1968; Montiel 1982). To each clan name corresponds a totemic animal. For instance, the *Uriana* are affiliated to the tiger, the *Shooliyuu* to the cat, and the *Uleewa* to the donkey (see Montiel 1982: 6). The Wayuu, however, do not consider themselves descendants from these animals. The most that can be said is that a Wayuu feels an affinity with the psychological characteristics of the animal of his clan. Especially, if the latter is a powerful, commanding figure like a tiger or hawk (Chaves 1953: 170-171).

The affinity between members of a clan is weak. These units are not corporate descent groups, and do not perform collective activities (Watson 1970: 26). It is rare for the chief of one lineage to become the representative of an entire clan. However, the Wayuu's story of creation says the Wayuu are born in clans, after the plants and animals (GEMA 1996). This suggests that clan affiliation occupies a mythical place (Perrin 1976), and in this sense plays a role in Wayuu identity.

Decentralization is probably the most distinct characteristic of Wayuu's socio-political organization. As explains Semprun, there is no

single and overriding leader in Wayuu society. : "As Guajiro society is organized in clans and autonomous matrilineal groupings, it is impossible to speak of a single cacique who politically centralizes all communities. It is also impossible to speak of a cacique who exerts a central power. Instead, each lineage has its own spokesperson" (1993: 110).

Law Professor, Dr. Domingo Labarca's, description of the Wayuu socio-political structure in comparative terms points to the difference from the western structure: "The Guajiro is not acquainted with and does not need, a juridico-social pyramidal structure like the (modern state) at whose summit is a central power (generation of law) and at whose base are the subjects or subordinates who are on the receiving end of law. In fact, the existing social structure is horizontal in the sense that nobody, at least as an individual, holds the function of setting laws, imposing order, and maintaining security by specific and particular means" (quoted in N. Montiel 1984).

Despite decentralization and weak affiliation between clans, solidarity, respect, sharing, hospitality and reciprocity are guiding principles amongst Wayuu (Pres. Jorge Pocaterra 1996).¹³ Many Wayuu legends speak to these values. According to one legend: "the Earth told man: everybody must be united because the Wayuu is one who listens, he is the child of the rain and the earth. Through time he must listen to the words of elders" (Pres. J. Pocaterra 1996).¹⁴ The story of creation also refers to unity amongst the Wayuu. It says the Wayuu are born

¹³Throughout the paper " Pres." has been used to refer to the fact that the comment is based on a presentation, and " Int." to say that it comes from an interview.

¹⁴According to the story of creation, the Wayuu are born from a union between the earth and the rain.

together like the plants. Being born as a community, it is said the Wayuu cannot walk alone and be egoistic (Pres. R. Martinez to a group of children).

Tradition is not static. Probably the most important change in the Wayuu's socio-political organization followed from the introduction of the pastoral economy after contact with the Spaniards in the sixteen hundreds. As explains Curvelo, "The introduction of cattle and other technoeconomic elements from the West brought about the notion of wealth and prestige in Wayuu society, and the concept of social inequalities based on cattle ownership arises between the different indigenous social groupings"(1996).

In the past, Wayuu society is said to have been fairly egalitarian. The introduction of a pastoral economy in a fishing and hunting society caused large socio-economic disparity between social groupings. The growing inequalities and hierarchy amongst the lineages increased the conflicts (Curvelo 1996).

Another impact of contact has been efforts to centralize power within the hands of a few. Wayuu people argue that the concept of an overriding chief, such as a *cacique* in the Spanish sense of the word is foreign to Wayuu society . "Arcadio points out that historically and according to the cultural conceptions held by the Guajiro, caciquismo did not exist. He considers its appearance to be relatively recent, dating from a hundred years or so. It came about with the creation of the Guajiro Federal Territory (1874) and the centralization of power in Caracas. Governor of the territory, such as the Colonel Reyes, started to establish this state of affairs" (Semprun 1993: 112).

If anything, the concept of the cacique has been appropriated by the Wayuu. As Watson explains, the term 'cacique' does not retain its original Spanish meaning of political authoritarianism for the Guajiro (1970: 23). It is more commonly used to designate the chief of a matrilineage who is the old one, the wise one, called *alat'laa* in Wayuu language.

The examination of the Wayuu socio-political organization suggests that tradition is dynamic, constantly being refined. There is no such thing as 'authentic tradition' for tradition changes when new ideas and ways are introduced. As these become incorporated into the local systems, they become an integral part of the tradition.

This is the case of cattle which was adopted from the Spaniards in the 16th century, and incorporated into the Guajiro culture. The pastoral economy became an integral part of the Wayuu culture and identity. Some authors (Saler 1987:36) claim this has been the key for the survival and expansion of Wayuu society. Limiting themselves to hunting and fishing would have made expansion difficult, given the arid state of land in the Guajira Peninsula.

As an individual in a seminar-workshop explained, "The Wayuu people have absorbed many elements of the Hispanic culture, but they were selective and not disorderly." According to a number of Wayuu analysts (Montiel 1982; Curvelo 1996), this adaptive ability has been crucial. On some accounts, it explains the present strength and unity of the Wayuu people.

In summary, all traditions face inevitable change in the long run. But it is important that the incorporations and adjustments made be at the choice and in accordance with the ways of the local people. In

other words, they have to remain in control of the process to some degree. As seen in chapter 5, the Wayuu lost this control in the middle of this century. It is at this point that Wayuu culture started to seriously be threatened.

4. 2 Women's traditional role

Defining women's role, and determining their status in traditional Wayuu society requires in the first place to restate a point about gender equality. As indicated earlier, equality does not require men and women being identical. This was pointed out to me a number of times during the research. "The conception of equality of the Wayuu women and the *alijuna* is completely different. The *alijuna* women struggle for being equal to men. Indigenous women already have that equality, which arises from the specific role each one has to carry out within the society. On the contrary for the *alijuna* this role is unknown and unclear. Equality for us is to be respected as women and mothers " (Int. R. Fajados).¹⁵

When determining the status of women, one must always be careful in the criteria used for measuring equality. I remember, for instance, asking why Wayuu women were not allowed more than one man, whereas men are traditionally allowed as many women as they can economically afford. If one used the western feminist concept of equality, this custom seemed to indicate gender inequality. The answer

¹⁵ The term *alijuna* is a Wayuu word used to refer to the non-Wayuu. As in most indigenous societies, a native word exists to refer to the non-indigenous. I have used the word throughout the paper because of its wide spread use amongst the Wayuu, and the absence of an English word that perfectly translates the concept.

I was given left me reflective: " In Wayuu society, women must follow stricter rules of conduct than men because they are the mirrors of the nation. Therefore, they must set the example and be responsible" (Int. R Martinez). This comment calls for a more careful look at Wayuu traditions and to what they indicate on women's status.

There are many customs within Wayuu culture that attest to the high status occupied by women. Firstly, Wayuu society is matrilineal. A feature described as the "most important dividing line in intra- or extra-group relations....It is also the main mechanism that has blocked the intrusion of non-Guajiro elements" (Wilbert 1970: 310). The Wayuu conceptualize matrilineally related kinsmen as "flesh" relatives, and paternally related kinsmen as "blood" relatives (Wilbert 1958). Kinship ties between "flesh" relatives are much stronger than those between "blood" relatives. Flesh is eternal constantly regenerating itself. Blood from the father, however, diminishes through the generations and eventually dies away (Wilbert 1970: 309). Wayuu society is not matriarchal, though Wayuu's conceptualization of matrilinearity places additional importance on women.

In principle, the father has no legal authority or obligation over his children (Wilbert 1970: 310). As such, children do not belong to the father. "Given the family organization in the Guajira, in which descendants are matrilineally related, the father is only a biological element without *nexos sociales ni familiares* with his children" (Chaves 1953: 127). In the words of Watson: " in the Wayuu culture his children do not belong to him [the father] ; socially he is considered a good friend of the household, and caring" (1968: 157). A father can play an important role in his children's education, but only if he chooses to,

for society does not expect this from him (Saler 1987: 78). The male that does play a critical role in the child's education, however, is the maternal uncle. This will be discussed later on.

The above traditions have interesting implications for inter-marriages between Wayuu and outsiders. As long as the mother is Wayuu, the origin of the father has no importance. According to certain authors, these customs are "survival values for the culture" (Aschman 1960: 413). This is especially of importance in a region where there is a large number of tradesmen who in their visits take a native wife, and upon their departure leave them behind with children. I have not come across any data on the subject, but from simple discussion with the people and a look at their genealogy, I found most had extremely mixed origins. However, Wayuu often do not mention their part *alijuna* heritage unless explicitly asked about their origin. This points to the strength of matrilineal identification.

A further indication of Wayuu women's importance is the special education girls receive at the age of puberty. Essentially, upon a girl's first menstruation she is secluded for a period that can last several weeks to five years, depending on the family's wealth. This practice is known as *majayuraa* in Wayuu, and has been translated in Spanish to *encierro*.

This rite of passage aims at making a woman responsible, so she can guarantee continuity for future generations, care for the family, and lead them on a path that promotes peace (Watson 1968: 36). She is mentally prepared for these tasks from the moment she comes out of her mother's womb (Int. R. Martinez). The education is intense, lengthy and integral (see N. Pocatererra 1991). It attends to the

psychological, social, historical, geographical, ethical and economical dimensions.

More specifically, the rites of passage involve cutting a girl's hair and placing her in a hammock raised to the rooftop upon a girl's first menstruation. She remains suspended in the hammock for two or three days. During this time she must fast. She is only allowed to take a medicinal potion believed to have a magical influence on her future development, such as to remain beautiful and attractive (see Watson 1968: 37).

When the hammock is lowered, she is bathed and remains in a closed-off section of the main *rancheria*. During her confinement the girl does not see anyone outside of family members. She receives comprehensive instruction on the duties of an adult married woman from an older female caretaker. This person is carefully chosen, generally known for her excellent character and as a successfully married woman who works hard and is well liked by others (Watson-Franke 1974: 105). This is important because of the belief that a girl is particularly vulnerable during this period and likely to take on the characteristics of the person teaching her.

Special emphasis is put on acquiring weaving skills. As in other native societies, learning crafts skills are particularly important in a girl's formation. According to one legend, it is with the beautiful weaving skills that a woman made a man fall in love with her, and forget her ugly looks (story told by R. Martinez). But also, weaving skills are taught to prepare women to be economically self-sufficient. "This [weaving] is important not only because this will allow her to provide well-woven pieces for her husband, but because it will be a

source of income, for the income she receives from selling her weaving belongs to her" (Watson-Franke 1976: 204).

In general, the Wayuu woman is brought up to be independent. She is trained to rely foremost on her own resources. From an early age, she is equipped with the tools to prepare herself for all situations, including the possibility that her husband turns out to be irresponsible.

As the one guiding the family, she is to turn only to family members for support or advice, more specifically the elder women of the family. Developing close relations with women from other families is strongly discouraged from the time a woman enters adulthood. According to the elders, friendship with people from outside the household can lead to disrespecting elders' teachings and is therefore not recommended.

One of the few important places women from different families relate to each other is at funerals. These are a social event in Wayuu society, and one of the rare times when men and women from different regions of the territory get together in an atmosphere of camaraderie, feasting with alcohol and food (see Perrin 1976). Funerals which last up to a week are a time for strengthening family relations, and easing-out divergence and conflicts between families. Women from different families relate to each other while preparing the festivities and mourning for the deceased. Apart from these few instances, women do not get together amongst themselves.

Boys on the contrary do not receive an intense and lengthy training at the age of puberty. Compared to women's education, Wayuu men's education is somewhat lax. The different education of

men and women has been explained by Pocaterra as follows: " We should understand that it is not a question of superiority in relation to men, more exactly it is the diversification of functions within a system of mutual-sharing. It is more a system which gives a meaning, a view, a special place to women that follows from her role as bearer of life, as an advisor and educator of the family. Women hand down culture and guarantee continuity, and the quantitative and qualitative growth of our people. Wayuu would say *Wayuu Jieri Tuu Wouralakaa* , meaning it is our roots, our knowledge" (1993).

Wayuu law and marriage customs are also used to point to the respect for women in Wayuu culture. According to Wayuu law if a husband maltreats his wife, she can denounce his misbehavior by turning to her maternal uncles to ask for justice from her husband. Harming one's wife is failing on a promise, and therefore according to Wayuu law must be punished. To reach peace with his wife and her family, the husband must pay the amount of cattle, goats or money demanded. If he refuses to comply to the demands, he will be ignored by the family and have no say in the family's decision-making. Private behavior becomes a community issue, and thereby of great significance. This practice is considered most effective for correcting social misconduct because it impacts upon a man's pride and material wealth (Int. F. Morales).

Though there are numerous practices indicating women's high status, there are also many customs within Wayuu society attesting to men's high position. In the first place, according to the rules of matrilinearity, the mother's brothers play a key role in the management of family affairs. Children turn to their maternal uncle

for support and guidance. The latter generally defends and represents the interests of his nieces and nephews when they are insulted or harmed (Saler 1987; Lopez 1956). This leads one researcher to write: "The power is held by the head of the household, which as we have indicated is in the hands of the maternal uncle. This power involves decision-making on daily life issues, management of animals, water, etc." (Perez 1989).

Clearly, the maternal uncle plays a key role, but it is probably more appropriate to view it as different rather than superior to that of the woman. As indicated by N. Pocaterra, family authority is shared: "Within the Wayuu culture, the juridico-political base is the nuclear family; its authorities being the grandmother, the mother, and the maternal aunts. This, in turn, establishes the continuity of a given clan, including forging lineage relations for several generations" (1995).

It is clear that there can be lots of place for interpretation when women's status is studied. The significance given to the rights can vary depending on the era, as well as the background and identity of the person making the statement. This has happened with the meaning given to bridal payment.

According to Wayuu custom, the young man who falls in love with a girl and wants to marry her must discuss bridal payment with the girl's father and most importantly, her maternal uncles. If the match is considered desirable and on acceptable terms, with the right amount and date of payment, the marriage can go ahead. "For several weeks afterwards relatives of the prospective groom help him gather together enough cattle, horses, and mules to meet the agreed-upon bride payment" (Watson 1968: 38).

According to Lopez, a Wayuu researcher, writing in the 50s, bridal payment guarantees mutual respect. He refutes any other meaning given to this rite. "Civilized people have until present had a wrong perception of the situation. It has been imagined, that parents are selling their daughter, as any merchandise (...) This economic deal with which the husband consecrates the marriage is not, properly speaking, a payment. It is a kind of bond, or treasury, which guarantees the marriage's stability and without which the conjugal link would be fragile. This economic pledge serves to control the man's lust, and voluptuous sensuality, and acts as supportive insurance for the woman's fragility" (1953: 72-73).

One realizes that tradition can be altered because of different understanding and interpretations. It is interesting that at present, a large number of Wayuu researchers are taking a more critical look at the research and writings of foreign researchers. They are denouncing some of the analysis made, and question the representations made of the so-called reality.

The way tradition is depicted varies depending on the perspective and the identity of the person writing about it. In addition, it changes depending on the point at which a society finds itself. At present, Wayuu society is taking a critical look at its own society, analyzing and debating the significance of different customs. As they do so, they are likely to re-define tradition.

One can see that our assessment of women's status can vary depending on the criteria used. If one takes as an indicator women's status in the public sphere, it is easy to conclude that women occupy a secondary role. The traditionally important public figures, such as the

chief of the lineage or the *putchipuu* are not women (Senprum: 106-109 and Int). Is this indicative of the importance given to women? The following points suggest that one must be careful of jumping to a conclusion too soon.

The topic was brought up at the First Seminar of Wayuu Law held by the Law Faculty of Zulia University. The debate started on the issue of whether or not there were women *putchipuu*. The *putchipuu*, who acts as an intermediate between two families in inter-clan conflict, is an important figure in Wayuu society, and therefore could be an indication of woman's position. The five *putchipuu* attending the conference said that a female *putchipuu* was extremely rare. However, both they and people in the audience emphasized the fact that women's role was nonetheless critical. Throughout the period of negotiation between the clans, women provide the advice and economic support. As Curvelo explains: "Wayuu women can play an important role when conflicts within the family become complicated... They usually give advice to the male relatives, help mobilize support, contribute by giving their property for compensation payments, and speak up strongly during negotiations... The women don't only concern themselves with providing an important part of the group's basic necessities, but also obtain certain consumer products (i.e.. liquor) for their maternal uncles and their biological and classified brothers to ensure that the latter don't put themselves at risk of attack by their enemies in much frequented places " (1996: 7).

Wayuu women's authority to intervene in all matters largely follows from their motherhood. As G. Gonzalez, mother of two, explains: "In the Wayuu environment, in the public it is the man;

never the woman; because that comes from our ancestors. Of course, the woman is strong, she advises. If there is a problem between Wayuu families the woman, because she has sons and gives births to those of tomorrow, has the right to intervene, to advise, and to tell them it is not good to be in war."

The above points makes one wonder whether presence in the public sphere is an appropriate indication of an individual's importance in Wayuu society. As pointed out a number of times, the leaders of a community are often the quietest in a meeting. As a wise person, he or she listens before advising.

In general, it is clear that Wayuu society recognizes women's role as caretakers and guides of their nation. They are equipped from birth to be strong and responsible, their voice sound and wise.

V

Contemporary challenges to traditional Wayuu society

As indicated in the previous chapter, the Wayuu have shown a remarkable ability to adjust to contact with people of other cultures. In spite of almost 500 years of contact with the Spaniards and other Europeans, the Wayuu culture is still very much alive.

Up until 40 years ago, the Wayuu could afford to only be 'visitors' in their contact with western culture, selecting the aspects they wanted to from the other society. This freedom to choose has been considerably reduced as a result of the intensified pressure for Wayuu society to integrate.

5.1. Wayuu's loss of independence

Until the 20th century, Wayuu people depended mainly on a subsistence economy. Basically, a pastoral economy complemented by some fishing, hunting, gathering, and craftsmanship. They also bartered with neighboring communities, and traded with foreign merchants coming to the territory (Saler 1987: 105). The Wayuu people had few needs to go outside their territory, and to deal with other societies. This reality has slowly changed as the Wayuu's need to deal with the national society increased; their capacity to be independent has diminished.

A key issue faced by the Wayuu has been the difficulty to meet the economic needs required in the modern economy. With Wayuu

losing control over their territory, possibilities for employment creation have been scarce.

Since the 1950s, a number of large development projects have been implemented on the territory. These have included hydro-electric dam constructions, coal and salt exploitations. The impact of these projects on the Wayuu people have largely been negative. The following statement was made in a document from the Wayuu people: "Large-scale mining, the creation of important infrastructural works, pressure from large corporations, huge tourism projects and other investments, all alien to the Wayuu ethnic people, are contributing to an accelerated displacement of the native population, dislodging the natural communities, robbing us of all our property and belongings, offering nothing in return and, in the final analysis, turning us into foreigners in our own land" (*Tierra de los Wayuu* 1989).

The impact of development projects has been profound and thorough. "These projects have transformed just as much the environment as the social organizations, our representation of the world, to see and understand life. Once the damage is done, the responsibility of institutions and industries disappears; a large part of today's critical situation has to do with these projects" (Pres. R. Fajados 1993).

In addition, dependence on government authorities for social services has increased. But state services are generally poor. At present, many community schools are under-funded with teachers not receiving a salary sometimes for years. Since the adoption of the Decree 283 in 1979, schools in Venezuela should be provided with an Intercultural Bilingual Education program. The Decree, however, is

not put in practice (Pres.). Mothers complain about the insensitivity of the school curriculum to Wayuu reality. No consideration is given to the fact that Spanish is a second language for most Wayuu children.

Women also talk about the inappropriateness of health services, the absence of close-by health services, and the unavailability of medicines and doctors. Mention is also made of the medical professions' ignorance of Wayuu medicine and culture. Absence of a secure source of water is a real problem for those living in the territory. Government services continue to be inadequate.

A number of Wayuu have been forced to turn to commerce to feed their children. "The Wayuu, not to die of hunger, turn to every imaginable occupation. Commercialization has become a means of survival on a territory which at the moment does not produce sufficiently" (Montiel 1988: 80). Opportunities for commerce are considerable, given the border-zone location of Wayuu territory. Wayuu can buy goods like whisky, cigarettes or clothes in Colombia and then sell them for a small profit in Venezuela (Saler 1987: 106). The activity is nonetheless risky, for the national Armed Forces on both sides try regularly to control the goods transported across the border. The Armed Forces can be particularly controlling given that smuggling of narcotics also takes place through these borders.

A large number of women are involved in smuggling small quantities of goods from one side of the border to the other. When asking about the omnipresence of women in small trade, I was told women always had greater ability to deal with the Armed Forces than men and were more responsible (Int. President of Small Commerce). But the impact on Wayuu society of women's involvement in

commerce is criticized: "We have been obliged to do commerce for the economic necessities that we have, but the impacts have been numerous. It has been bad for our families, especially for our children who are abandoned. Sometimes at a very early age, they want to abandon their studies to work in smuggling with the parents, seeing that this is a quick source of income" (Int. E. Montiel, prefect).

Recurring droughts, and greater dependence on consumer goods have obliged many Wayuu to emigrate. In the beginning of the thirties many settled in northern edge of Maracaibo. In 1944, the Barrio Ziruma was created there. This is meant to be a homestead for the Wayuu.

Today, the number of Wayuu people having emigrated is substantial. They live in different areas of Maracaibo, its suburbs, and across the Zulia state. The last census indicates that 60% of the Wayuu people in Venezuela do not live in their traditional territory (1992). One-third of Wayuu people live in Maracaibo, the closest major city to the Guajira territory in Venezuela. The remainder are scattered in the rest of the region. A considerable number emigrated to agricultural regions.

In summary, the dominant society is now present in Wayuu peoples' most daily and basic activities. The Wayuu depend on the state for education, medical care, and even water services.

Wayuu people must interact with the dominant society to negotiate different matters relating to their socio-economic situation. As one woman put it, "We cannot ignore the presence of the system, and we need it" (Int. S Fernandez). Wayuu are no longer autonomous. Besides, most Wayuu now see themselves as Venezuelan citizens, and thereby entitled to benefit from state programs, just as other

Venezuelan citizens.¹⁶ This new reality requires that the Wayuu learn different ways of dealing with the dominant Venezuelan society. In order to be effective, they must develop ways of interacting which correspond to those of the dominant society. The Wayuu people require, for instance, spokespersons and representatives, elements that do not exist in the traditional society, where each lineage works separately under a decentralized system.

5.2. Local Responses

Until recently, local responses to the challenges of the Wayuu people have been to form indigenous organizations, and to actively participate in political parties. Wayuu started to form organizations to interact with the dominant society in the 1940s. In this regard the history of Venezuela's indigenous movement is recent (Int. A. Montiel). It arises from an awareness of the need for mechanisms to interact with the dominant society. As Nemesio Montiel points out: "The indigenous or traditional organization exists, and regulates internal relations. However, the dynamics of the relation between indigenous and non-indigenous at the global level, and more specifically in the commercial, labor and resource exploitation areas call for an instrument valid for both realities, without the indigenous

¹⁶ This is quite evident from indigenous organizations' position papers (see final document, Paraguaipoa 1992).

losing his own. A structure or way of channeling the problems, worries and expectations is looked for" (1992: 20).

The birth of the indigenous movement also corresponds to an openness and readiness at the national level to strengthen civil society, and establish democracy in Venezuela. As Arcadio Montiel, a long-term activist in the Wayuu peoples' struggle explains, the indigenous movement is born alongside the peasant and trade union movements (Int.).

Not surprisingly the first Wayuu organization started amongst Wayuu having migrated to the city, in the Barrio Ziruma, where the Wayuu settled down. In 1941, an organization called the *Patronato Nacional Indigena* was established by Wayuu and non-Wayuu together. They were able to bring funds to the Guajira territory, and are responsible, for instance, for building the first health center in the Guajira.

During the 10 years of dictatorship, indigenous people's activities were severely restricted. The Venezuelan government exiled key leaders. In 1965, the Committee of Defense for the Guajiro was established. They demanded recognition and equal treatment from the national government.

Following the Committee of Defense for the Guajiro, a number of organizations were formed. MOIIN, (*Movimiento Indigena por la Identidad Nacional*), for instance, was founded in 1979. This organization makes awareness-building a priority. It played an important role in creating consciousness amongst the Wayuu, as well as amongst other indigenous communities in the country. MOIIN has encouraged other communities to mobilize and organize. According to

the MOIIN, it is necessary for each indigenous community in Venezuela to organize themselves according to their own model of organization. In large part, they are responsible for the background work necessary to found the national indigenous organization in Venezuela, CONIVE (*Consejo Nacional de Indigenas de Venezuela*) in 1989.

In a number of different ways, the national government has paid greater attention to the Wayuu people since the 60s. This includes the establishment of the Venezuela's National Indigenist Commission. Designed in principle to look after Indian welfare, many of the government's projects seek to replace indigenous initiative and involvement, rather than to support the indigenous initiatives. "As time passes, institutions are established and programs for indigenous areas appear. Important decisions are made by non-indigenous professionals in the Indigenist Commission, these are often permeated by a paternalistic note and characterized by little consultation with the natural leaders" (Montiel 1993: 22).

Parallel to the rise in Wayuu organizations, indigenous peoples have started to participate in political parties. From the 1940s, the main political parties of the country -COPEI and Accion Democratica- built strong support bases amongst key leaders in the communities.

As explains Benito Castillo, a Wayuu leader in a suburb of Maracaibo, building alliances with political parties and seeking their support is necessary. "If we do not have allies with political parties which approve budgets and laws in Congress, what are we going to do?" (Int.)

Since the 40s, the Wayuu people have been organizing, attempting through different means to improve their situation and safeguard their rights. How does one explain the emergence of the Wayuu Women's Network and its 'success' at this moment? An analysis of the different elements necessary to answer this question will be undertaken below. However, first I shall present an overview of the Wayuu Women's Network.

VI

The Story of the Wayuu Women's Network

The Maracaibo Wayuu Indigenous Women's Network (MWWN) was founded on the 22nd of February 1996, at a meeting of Wayuu women professionals (teachers, merchants, lawyers etc.) and students. Twenty-four women were chosen to co-ordinate the organization. Each person was put in charge of a distinct subject-area. These included communications, music, identity documents, border-zone, research centre, education, basic services and environment. As a horizontal structure was adopted, no single person is in charge, apart from a general co-ordinator legally responsible for the organization.

The legal document for registering the organization states 51 objectives. These cover a wide-range of issues including: (1) representing Wayuu women members of the network in front of public and private institutions and organizations, (2) contributing to recognition of indigenous rights in constitutional reforms, (3) promoting capacity-building of Wayuu women from childhood, (4) increasing Wayuu women's presence in decision-making positions, (5) promoting and struggling to maintain indigenous women's role in transmitting culture and advising the family and (6) strengthening ethical and moral values of the family and community in general.

Basically, the objectives cover the many dimensions of the indigenous peoples' struggle, adding the special focus on women and children. However, the objectives laid out must not be taken as an indication of the organizations' platform of action (Int. N. Pocaterra).

Many objectives are included to protect the Network. By mentioning them in the legal documents, the network will not be prohibited from working on them in the future. The Network included them as a security, more than anything else.

The coordinators held regular meetings to define the goals of the organization and the responsibilities of each co-ordinator in the first few months of establishing the MWWN. The co-ordinators participated in workshop-seminars on different aspects of Wayuu culture. Generally, these were headed by Wayuu people who had either written on their culture or were occupying positions in which they promoted Wayuu culture.

The workshops aimed at filling up possible gaps amongst the co-ordinators, each having different backgrounds and 'relation' to their culture. Some co-ordinators have a lifetime experience of defending and promoting their culture. Others, in the process of becoming professionals (lawyers, teachers, engineers) have rejected their Wayuu identity and background. Their renewed interest in the Wayuu identity is often the result of greater awareness and realization that being a professional does not require throwing out one's Wayuu identity. There are also university students who value their culture, and want to keep and promote it while going to university.

Co-ordinators were also encouraged to attend meetings held by national or regional state departments on social policies and programs. In general, a priority was put on building Wayuu women's capacity. Time and again, emphasis was put upon the importance that Wayuu women be informed on the state policies and initiatives.

Once the structure of the Maracaibo network was in place (with regular events -at least weekly- happening), the more prepared and dedicated co-ordinators started to hold meetings in other Wayuu communities.

The task of the Maracaibo co-ordinators (hereafter referred to as facilitators) is basically to facilitate the multiplication of women's organizations in each communities. In this early stage, the Maracaibo Wayuu Indigenous Women's Network is the heart of the network, responsible for initiating women's organizations in other Wayuu communities. The general objective is to mobilize a larger number of Wayuu women, and constitute organizations similar to that of Maracaibo, although adjusted to reflect local needs and visions.

I refer to the Wayuu Women's Network (WWN) because all activities regarding the organization of Wayuu women function as a whole and are included in my analysis. The making of a weaving is the symbol used to explain what the WWN is working towards. The comparison with weaving is made because being women's traditional occupation they can relate to it, and second, it refers to the closeness, grandeur and unity expected within the WWN. By January 1997, a total of 80 WWN units were established across the Zulia state.

6.1. Emergence of the Wayuu Women's Network

The emergence and rapid expansion of the WWN needs to be explained because its popularity is in many regards suprising. As a researcher carrying out fieldwork in the 70s wrote: "Guajiro women do not effectively develop efficient networks outside the altered but still

dominant traditional kinship system to help them cope with their new environment" (Watson-Franke 1979: 105).

Watson-Franke explained the absence of women's networks on account of the following. "Living traditionally in a matrilineage, Guajiro women are born into a support group. Through birth they acquire the right to be part of a group which is actually defined through them. They do not have to work at it. The pattern is predefined. This experience is consolidated by a strong matrilineal tendency in the residence pattern. It may be that the total reversal of this situation in the city is too much of a shock to their predefined expectations to allow them to bond together again but on the basis of a totally different principle. This would imply a structural change, and, as I have argued earlier, changes of such a nature generally take a long time unless they are forced upon a people" (1979: 106).

My own analysis suggests that if there is anything that impedes Wayuu women from organizing, it relates to the precepts of traditional Wayuu society.

Drawing from the presentation made earlier on traditional Wayuu society, the concept of women grouping amongst themselves is foreign to the traditional society at least in two ways.

In the first place, women from different clans do not regroup amongst themselves because of the Wayuu law. According to Wayuu law, the person inviting is responsible for the well-being of his or her guests. If something should happen during the time together or on their way to the meeting point, the one inviting is accountable. When involving people from two different clans, reaching an agreement between the two parties can be quite costly. As one woman explained: "

It is better to organize within the same clan, because each clan has their own secrets. There could also be a problem in a meeting and it is your responsibility. If something happens on their way you are assuming a responsibility, and you must respond for that person" (Int. M. Silvia)

In the second place, it is not customary for women to be at the forefront in the public sphere. Traditionally, women occupy a leading role only within family boundaries. Relations with the outside are part of men's domain. Besides, the Wayuu culture does not encourage maintaining relations with other women.

Why are women coming together at this point in time? Why breaking away from tradition is now acceptable? Or more generally, how does one account for the emergence of the WWN?

The Wayuu Women Network is in part a response to a dissatisfaction. Political parties and indigenous organizations, for instance, have paid little attention to indigenous women. In the final document of the meeting of the Wayuu nation in Paraguiapoa in March 1992, no specific mention of Wayuu women is made. The 47 recommendations cover a wide-range of issues from traditional medicine, bilingual education, recognition of Wayuu territory, participation in governmental programs, language recognition, and promotion of arts and crafts. To my knowledge, this document is quite representative of Wayuu organizations' preoccupations until recently.

With regard to political parties, there is the frustration and general feeling that indigenous support is usually wanted solely for election purposes. Politicians visit the community and make promises in exchange for political support; once the elections are over they forget their commitments. As indicated in the following remark, political

parties are not viewed as an effective voice: "If we do not speak for ourselves, nobody will do it for us -political parties do it only for votes. We interest them only for a moment" (meeting comment). Thus, many Wayuu feel political parties do not represent them.

In my view, the emergence of the WWN indicates something more profound: it constitutes a new approach to the contemporary challenges of Wayuu people; it reflects women's desire for another approach, one entirely distinct from political parties and indigenous organizations. This is discussed more thoroughly in sections below. But it is clear, that if the WWN has this significance there are other factors, apart from dissatisfaction with traditional responses, that account for Wayuu women's responsiveness to the WWN. An important pre-requisite for the WWN is the changes in Wayuu traditions that have taken place as a result of women's greater contact with the dominant society. This has created an environment favourable for the WWN. This is part and parcel of the 'opportunity' necessary for the emergence of a social movement (see Chapter 2).

Favorable environment

Significant changes are occurring as a result of women's involvement in the dominant society. Most importantly, Wayuu women are occupying new positions in the dominant society; and in the meeting between the Wayuu and dominant society Wayuu precepts are being modified. These processes happened independently from the WWN, but constitute necessary pre-requisites for its emergence.

Generally, as a result of contact, indigenous women's status declines (see Tinker 1990). As shall be seen later, this has also been the case for Wayuu women. Despite this, some Wayuu women have been extremely active and outspoken in the dominant society. Within the dominant society, there are a number of models of *successful* Wayuu women. Their role must not be underestimated.

Tradeswomen, who smuggle goods from Columbia to Venezuela constitute an important figure.¹⁷ Their role is somewhat two-sided: in many ways their work go against Wayuu ways and the impact of their work on society is criticized, but at the same time they are admired for their ability to confront the dominant society. In this sense, tradeswomen stand as an example, showing Wayuu women are capable. As explains an ex-tradeswoman, " The rest of the population admires the tradeswoman for her work, for how she talks. They say she has lots of money, because she knows well the Armed Forces and speaks well Spanish" (Int. M. Pocaterra). As the tradeswoman is mainly involved in petty trade, she does not make lots of money as such. But in the eyes of her people, her material success stands out.

More *noble* occupations of Wayuu women include political positions. It is interesting that three of the nine councilors of the municipality Mara-Paez on the Venezuelan-side of the Wayuu territory are women. A number of women are also active in political parties. In general, there is a fairly large number of Wayuu women professionals with university degrees, this includes lawyers, engineers,

¹⁷I do not have any data on the number of tradeswomen. Based on observations and interviews, there appears to be a large number on the border of Columbia and Venezuela.

and university professors. This reality sets the Wayuu apart from other indigenous peoples.

In the interviews carried out with tradeswomen and professional women, I found their identification to Wayuu people strong. Many I talked to point out that success in the dominant society did not require rejecting one's Wayuu identity. As one tradeswoman said, "One can do commerce and remain Wayuu. If one wants to, it is possible. It is not because one starts talking with the Generals that one stops being Wayuu. The women can maintain their customs. The Wayuu women's leadership helps her in her commerce. It makes people respect her" (Int. M. Pocaterra).

As one of the three councilors explains, to become successful in the dominant society at the cost of one's culture is regrettable: "There are Wayuu women who have changed because of the penetration of civilization. However, I do regard our culture highly, and by all means, we must maintain it. As a representative of Wayuu, I try to inculcate this idea, especially in schools. I think that through our culture we maintain our values, and also it is true that a number of Wayuu as they become professional refuse to wear the *manta*" (Int. M. Rodriguez).

Successful Wayuu women have impacted Wayuu society to the extent that some women consider their status has improved from the past. As explains the woman prefect of the Mara-Paez municipality, "The Wayuu woman has always played an important role because we are a matrilineal society. The Wayuu woman is trained to play an important role in society... before, a woman's participation was limited to her own clan. The woman was considered, but not in public

organizations. Today, there are councilor women who play a function both within their family as well as the larger community. The good thing now is that women participate and are no longer submissive. The woman struggles to have a position in society. She tries to go to university " (Int. E. Montiel).

Parallel to the emergence of an increasing number of Wayuu women in the dominant society, Wayuu precepts are being modified in the meeting of the Wayuu and non-Wayuu world. We observe, for instance, that in dealing with the *alijuna* different rules of conduct apply for women. "To ask a service in the alijuna world there, yes the women can intervene or whoever can do so. But always remembering that in our environment for resolving a big conflict, a death of family member for instance, the Wayuu women should never sit down to dialogue with people from the other family because she will never be considered" (Int. G. Gonzalez).¹⁸

When interacting with the other society, Wayuu women undertake non-traditional roles. One woman, for instance, reports being chosen to act as a *putchipuu* upon the accidental death of her uncle in an hacienda in Perija (within the Zulia state but outside the Wayuu's traditional territory). She was chosen to negotiate peace with the hacienda's owner, who, according to Wayuu law was legally responsible for the uncle. Her task involved agreeing upon a sum of money to be disbursed to the victim's family. As she pointed out, the responsibility given to her was foreign to the Wayuu culture. " I don't

¹⁸It may be noted that I have already come across recent cases where women did negotiate with the other clan. However, this appears to be extremely rare, and even when this was the case men were always ready to intervene if there were complications.

think there are women *putchipuu*. Of course the woman plays a role but when different clans are involved, it is the man. I did it because it was with an *alijuna*, that is different " (Int. C. Palmar).

We also see some Wayuu women question certain traditional customs. In the past, Wayuu men were allowed to have many women, today this is less accepted. " The Wayuu man use to be allowed to have two or three women. Before for the Wayuu women that was normal. I think there was respect because the man would always tell the woman -look I have another woman over there, the day she comes you will talk to her as though she was your friend. Today, the Wayuu woman does not accept this. At least, I am Wayuu and I would not accept it because of my studies, my changed views. For the same transculturation we do not accept it " (Int. F Morales).

The above elements indicate that breaks away from the Wayuu culture are taking place. This explains why, at this time, deviations from Wayuu culture by those involved in the WWN are accepted. It is within this context that one understands that: "It is the first time that a group of women organize themselves, and that there is no difference made between clans. I tell them that we come from the same tree trunk only we are distinct branches. In the eight women's organizations I have helped established till now, I have never been presented with a community that did not want to work with another clan. They say it is very good, because it is the first time that the organization is not composed of people all from the same family" (Int. WWN facilitator).

Moreover, the existence of a growing number of women living in-between the two societies, and who remain attached to their Wayuu identity, creates a favorable environment for the emergence and

growth of the WWN. It means there is a group of people ready to welcome and to support the idea of the WWN. In the absence of these conditions, it is difficult to see how the WWN could have been a grassroots movement. A favorable environment is not however the sole condition required for the emergence of a movement. A Wayuu women leader was critical in initiating, conceptualizing and motivating the network. She played the role of a catalyst.

Profile of a leader

Noeli Pocatererra is a recognized leader in both the Wayuu and dominant Venezuelan society. Her name is well-known in Venezuela's indigenous movement in Venezuela. She has been a regular and constant participant in all the important groupings and events concerning indigenous peoples in the country. As found in N. Montiel's book on the Indigenous movement in Venezuela her name comes up time and again (1993). In the words of a Wayuu literature professor and political activist A. Montiel : "I do not know a leader [like Noeli] more identified with the indigenous peoples. I am not talking about an occasional leader, but a permanent one with a profound preoccupation for solving the problems of indigenous peoples" (Int.).

N. Pocatererra played a critical role in the foundation of MOIIN (Indigenous Movement for National Identity), CONIVE (Indigenous Council of Venezuela), and ASEINLUZ (Student Association of Zulia University). All these organizations aim in one way or another at strengthening Indigenous peoples' situation in the dominant society.

The WWN is her last *child* some colleagues will say, and the one she cares for the most (Int. R. Martinez).

It is important to note that N. Pocaterra has a training both from the dominant society and her own society. As explains, A. Montiel, N. Pocaterra is the product of the leadership of elders. She is the daughter of a great leader in the Guajira, who also participated in the formation of the first Wayuu organizations in the 1940s, and of a well-known women leader. According to Noeli's father, " Noeli's leadership is hereditary. Her mother was very preoccupied with other people even though she did not have any resources. She was always struggling for other people. Where Noeli grew up, there was always great preoccupation for other people" (Int. H. Pocaterra).

In many regards, Noeli unites the qualities of a traditional leader: righteousness, goodness, commitment and generosity. She is a person who through her good works has been recognized as a leader. As a woman activist put it: " Of course Noeli is a leader since she opened her eyes. She was always there preoccupied. That is someone who does something for her people. In what can be done, she is always supportive. In terms of women leaders, there is Noeli. The leader is the person who preoccupies herself, the one who resolves the problems, so his people confide in her. Noeli is always there preoccupied" (Int. C. Palmar).

It is interesting to note that Noeli was once asked to act as a negotiator in an inter-clan conflict (Int. H. Pocaterra). As a woman, she is not suppose to play a role in inter-clan conflicts. This shows a recognition of her leadership.

At the same time, N. Pocatererra is prepared to work in the *alijuna* society. At an early age she had regular contact with the *alijuna* world and she studied social work at the university. More recently, she has participated in many international conferences on indigenous issues. It is important to note that in the last decade she was involved with the *World Council of Indigenous Peoples* (WCIP), and played a key role in the formulation of the WCIP's position paper on women's issues. The contact with indigenous women's initiatives in other countries, inspired her and certainly motivated her in encouraging the creation of a women's movement within her own community.

In many regards, the philosophy underlying the WWN reflects N. Pocatererra's own views. According to her, maintaining one's Wayuu identity while succeeding in the dominant society is of utmost importance. One should not take place at the expense of the other, despite external pressures. She uses her own experience to illustrate the point. "We live in both cultures, we must be proud of our culture. When I was studying at university [BA social work], people would laugh behind me saying what was that Indian girl dressed in her *manta* doing with an executive agenda and a tape-recorder" (Meeting notes).

N. Pocatererra's preparation for both societies as well as recognition from both societies constitute enormous assets for the WWN. Often the WWN is welcomed in different communities, simply because Wayuu people feel confident. They know about the past good works of N. Pocatererra, she has the reputation of being a real leader and always working for her people. Her reputation in the dominant society also makes it possible for her to knock at different doors, and call for support on different issues. This is important, as the

effectiveness of a leader is also measured by the ability to obtain things. Many doors have been opened for the WWN because of N. Pocaterra's credibility. It is hard to imagine the existence and success of the WWN without her. This is clearly suggested by my interviews.

It must be kept in mind, that a leader can play a critical role in setting up a process, but what is done from then on largely depends on the people. The activities and approach used to reach the women are discussed below.

6.2. The WWN's Activities and Approach

In this section, I shall illustrate how the WWN diagnoses the 'problem' and articulates its 'remedies'. My focus is on how these concepts are framed. First, I shall briefly present the basic structure of the WWN's community meetings, then turn to a content analysis.

In the first year of operation, the MWWN established women's organizations in every region in Venezuela where Wayuu live: the Guajira Peninsula, the Maracaibo slums and suburbs, and the fertile regions in the Zulia state where Wayuu have migrated. The communities were not chosen systematically. The initial contact in the community is usually via someone known by a facilitator. This person was usually someone with the credibility to call a meeting. It is not difficult for the WWN to introduce itself in a community, for amongst Wayuu there is lots of familiarity and N. Pocaterra is well-known amongst them.

Meetings are usually called a few hours in advance, except in areas where women work, such as in the Maracaibo suburbs and slums.

Usually, women prefer the meetings to take place in early afternoons. This allows them to complete home tasks and prepare lunch in the morning. Usually, the contact person in the community invites women through word-of-mouth. Twenty to thirty energetic women interested in taking initiatives are brought together. The meeting usually takes place in the courtyard of the person from the community calling the meeting, or on public school grounds.

The duration of the first meeting can vary immensely, from a minimum of an hour and a half, to half a day. In the first part of the meeting, women tend to share their views on the state of Wayuu culture and the socio-economic hardships of Wayuu people today. After lengthy discussion between women from the community and the facilitator chairing the meeting, women are asked what they want to do in order to address their concerns. The idea of organizing and forming part of the WWN's is then presented.

Most often the community's women's organization is established following a single meeting. Occasionally, there are not enough women attending this first meeting, or some just want to think about it more.

Setting up an organization involves choosing co-ordinators. The number of co-ordinators for a community organization depends on the issues of a given community. The discussion prior to choosing the co-ordinators serve to identify these out. Special care is taken to include at least a general co-ordinator, and one responsible for the women and family portfolio. These two positions are necessary to maintain unity within the network. The principle is to create a loose network with

autonomous community organization, but that can be grouped if and when necessary.

In this first meeting, the responsibilities of each co-ordinator are briefly described. These vary depending on the portfolio, but generally include developing contacts with people outside the community, and keeping women from the community involved. The date of another meeting is arranged for the co-ordinators to get together and further discuss their responsibilities, and elaborate a plan of action for the community's women's group.

How the WWN diagnoses the problems and articulate its remedies will now be examined in greater detail.

Framing the problem

The tone of the discussion in the first meeting with the community is set by the WWN facilitator. The latter uses the following guiding questions to chair the meeting: Has there been a loss in the cultural identity of our people? What aspects or customs have been lost? Why has this happened? Has the language been lost? Is the culture transmitted to children and youth? Why is it not transmitted? What can we do to strengthen our cultural identity? Are the values of solidarity, respect, sharing, hospitality and reciprocity still practiced? Are elders respected? Are women respected, and are they leaders as in the past? What are the difficulties regarding economic, education, social services and citizenship card for the Wayuu (WWN 1996)?

It is noticeable from the outset that by the way the questions are posed, the WWN is assuming that there is a 'problem'. They are not

asking whether or not one exists, they want to know more about what it is. The central issue the Network focuses on is the loss of Wayuu culture.

During my fieldwork, I attended 15 WWN community meetings. The following section is based on information gathered from notes taken at these meetings. In general, they point to women's deep concern about the growing indications of the loss of their culture and Wayuu ways. Some of the main concerns mentioned are presented below.

Women voiced concern over the loss of language, seeing this as an indication of a loss of Wayuu identity. As one woman said: "Language is a fundamental part of us. We are Wayuu so we must speak our language". Mothers say their children refuse to speak Wayuu out of shame. Mothers are concerned that learning Spanish takes place at the cost of the native language.

Another concern voiced by women relates to young women's refusal to wear the traditional dress – the *manta*. Like language, the *manta* is a symbol of Wayuu identity. Wearing the *manta* indicates one belongs to the Wayuu nation.¹⁹ Interestingly, the continual use of the traditional dress amongst the Wayuu is often used to point to the Wayuu's strong resistance to the dominant culture and continued attachment to their own culture.

In the words of a mother of seven, living in a Maracaibo slum: "We are losing our identity, the young no longer want to wear the *manta*. They want to put on trousers and dresses where we see their

¹⁹It must be noted that in some interviews, particularly with professionals and university students, the significance of the *manta* was questioned. Some saying they had no need to wear the *manta* to show their identity.

shapes". Western clothes are usually disliked because discovering parts of the body or wearing tight clothes is considered improper in Wayuu society. In fact, the traditional Wayuu dress is totally loose, only recent designs have added a belt to underline the waist and opened up the collar

Another issue frequently raised relates to the fact that fewer girls receive the traditional education, and undergo the customary rites of passage. Mothers said girls no longer understood the meaning of the rituals surrounding the seclusion. Nowadays, girls do not tell their mothers about their first menstruation. Mothers find out only after two or three months that their daughter has started her period. Moreover, women say their daughters do not know how to weave.

Many women complain about the youth being ashamed of their ethnic identity. Children are reluctant to show their Wayuu identity, to walk around with their mothers dressed in a *manta*, and to invite their friends to their *rancheria*. Surrounded by a materialist society, they ask their mothers to sell their *rancheria* and to buy shoes, western clothes, and jewelry. Often as they learn how to read and write, they reject their Wayuu culture even more. They identify their roots as synonymous with backwardness.

Older women comment on the loss of moral values, and the irresponsibility of parents. "Before culture was taught by the parents and grandparents, they would talk with the children (...) If a person showed disrespect for an elder person, the person would say you have offended me. You do not have grandparents, parents? They have not taught you? Today, little heed is given to this moral. The culture of the white and drugs say stop working with cattle that brings you little

money. You can earn lots of money. Today's education is very poor. They think a lot about money. According to me, one must tell parents to teach their children our morals"(Int. elder L Paz).

Many elders attending the meetings share their sadness that the youth no longer listen to them. They are being put aside, and mothers no longer teach their children to speak to their grandparents. As one elder said: " My grandchildren tell me, that was in the time before. We are in different times. I start talking to them telling them this is like this, that is like that. But no, they say your things are of no use to us today. They tell me I am crazy. Before, grandchildren would sit down with the grandmother, and listen to her."

In general, however, Wayuu culture remains highly valued. This point comes out strongly from community meetings. Time and again, mention is made of the role and importance of Wayuu customs. Mothers, for instance, consider the rites of passage important for their daughters. As one mother explained, "It was important to give the *encierra* to my daughter so that she be grounded, so that she does not turn wrongly. It provides her with a mind, and a set of ethical and moral values to guide her life".

Comments are often made of the different ways of life of the *alijuna*. The *alijuna* is viewed as someone lonely. Some Wayuu even feel sorry for the *alijuna* in the hospital because they receive so few visits. Quite a difference from a Wayuu who is paid a visit and even given considerable sums of money when in hospital by close and distant relatives. I recall one woman in Barrio Carmen Atencion saying that the *alijuna*, always seeing the Wayuu walking together, compared

them to frogs. The woman however found the animals were more rightly the *alijuna*'s because they did not pay attention to their family.

Most importantly, in WWN community meetings, emphasis is put on the high status women occupy traditionally. WWN facilitators point to the respect for women in Wayuu culture. They underline that the first teaching given to a Wayuu is: "You come from a woman who has suffered when bringing you to this world. And it is a woman who will give you your last bath, as you leave this world" (meeting WWN facilitator). Emphasis is put on the *nobility* of Wayuu values, "Why does the Wayuu man walk in front? He does so because he is very special, he does so to open and facilitate the woman's path" (meeting WWN facilitator).

In the meetings, women say that the traditional leadership of Wayuu women is disappearing as a result of *civilization*, as they put it. In the words of a WWN facilitator: "I have noticed that women's influence and credibility has reduced, I don't know for what reason. Women have married with non-Wayuu and have accepted things from the other culture. People start having less confidence in women's decisions".

Another woman put it the following way: " In the family, we are everything. Today, we are losing these values because we are copying the western world, letting the man manage the household. We now let the man make decisions". Women complained about men coming home drunk and penniless with women being often the only bread-winners. Men were also said to be highly irresponsible, dating more than one woman although the money was insufficient. Women

suffered often in silence. As one married woman living in a Maracaibo slum said: "Many times, we eat our food with tears in our plates".

Moreover, today, women are reluctant to use Wayuu law. They often do not tell their family when the husband maltreats them, suffering in silence. In other instances, they use the white man's law. As one woman explains, in the white man's law the husband simply goes to the court and occasionally spends 36 hours in prison. She considers the Wayuu law much more effective because the husband has to give some of his assets if he wants to sleep with his wife and regain value in her family (meeting F. Morales).

In summary, increased contact with the dominant society is bringing instability and discontent. Moral values and directions are being lost, and not being replaced. The dominant society does not offer an answer for the Wayuu people either. N. Pocatererra explains the issue as follows: " The woman is inserted in a new modality that prepares her for another society that is not her own; what is worse is that she is not prepared to survive in the dominant society, which tends to reduce her to sub-salary positions and condemns her to a socio-political marginalized position" (Pres. 1992: 3).

Framing the remedies

The WWN's approach is designed to counteract increasing acculturation. It considers limiting oneself to protecting and defending Wayuu interests at this point insufficient for responding to the daily pressures.

According to the WWN's diagnosis, the approaches taken by indigenous organizations and political parties' discussed in Chapter 5, are not a solution. One recalls that indigenous organizations have mainly paid attention to protecting, defending and representing the interests of Wayuu people in face of the dominant society. Their focus has been on the relation with the dominant society. Until the WWN, no emphasis was put on the impact that contact with the dominant society has had on their own society. The uniqueness of the WWN is that it identifies the problem to be situated both in the relation between the indigenous and the dominant society, as well as with the Wayuu themselves , in particular those living in-between the two worlds.

Women realize that the discomfort with one's Wayuu identity brings about disorder, anxiety, uncertainty and confusion into their families. This only contributes to their poor economic situation. It creates a vicious circle whereby Wayuu are led to repress their Wayuu identity because they associate it with the low economic status reserved for Wayuu in Venezuelan society. This leads to a low self-esteem, which in turn means that they are not likely to undertake challenges. Strengthening Wayuu society is therefore necessary for solving the problems of the Wayuu people.

As a WWN facilitator explains: "Each day we are more and more preoccupied that the dominant society assimilates us. We do not know how to oppose it. The only way of resisting it is that we have good knowledge of our history, our language and identity... When we are clear on who we are and have a good organization we can go on" (Meeting Pres.).

Looked at closely, the WWN in framing the remedies is borrowing elements from both the *alijuna* and western world. The new reality of co-existence with the dominant world calls for an organizational structure and operation mechanisms linked, yet distinct from the traditional ones.

This view was also reflected in my interviews. According to my interviews with active Wayuu women, many consider strengthening the relation with the dominant society as important as strengthening Wayuu identity itself. Mothers, for instance, want to give their daughters a Wayuu education and also prepare them for *alijuna* society. In a mother's words: "I want my daughter to be able to evolve in the environment where she is. To be Wayuu above all and to continue studying to guarantee her future for the day of tomorrow, and that she not be like us today in the same situation." An important reference to Wayuu tradition relates to women's role and traditional responsibility. It seems to be used by the WWN to increase its chances of reaching the women and getting their involvement.

As one facilitator explains, "In addition to be prepared the woman must become a community promoter, because women within Wayuu culture held the values, we have the big moral responsibility to transmit those values from one generation to the next" (WWN facilitator). Wayuu women are called upon to play the leading role for their own society. " I think we have to see ourselves as women, as leaders like before but within western society. We have to recuperate our leadership once more in this western world. At the same time never forget our customs and that we are Wayuu and heads of our families" (WWN facilitator).

It is important to underline that in focusing on re-building women's strength, the WWN hopes to reach the entire Wayuu society. As N. Pocatererra explains: " We have to look for peace... before, women were prepared to give that teaching. With the process of acculturation what happens? Don't you realize now we are losing a little that role. How can we regain that power? Why are the young stealing today when it is a crime? Why have we lost our solidarity? We have acquired a quantity of vices. We have decided to organize ourselves, and to establish the network, so that women can regain their leadership" (Pres.).

Underlying the WWN is the assumption that re-establishing women's role is necessary to resolve the problems of Wayuu society at large. " We are co-existing with another society, we must be prepared to confront this otherwise we run the risk of being assimilated. The other culture will slowly absorb us, and logically women will lose their values. If women lose their values, those of an entire generation will be lost and those of our people" (Int. R. Fajados). Thus, women should once more assume their crucial responsibility for transmitting and maintaining Wayuu culture. This is virtually their duty, one given to them by their parents and ancestors. By doing so, the benefits will be for everyone.

Apart from reference to Wayuu's traditional role, the connection to the Wayuu culture is found in the WWN's structure. For instance, the organization has a horizontal structure, there is no single person in-charge of the organization. The general co-ordinator is provided with legal responsibility, but does not occupy a superior position. There are 24 co-ordinators in the Maracaibo organization and

between 4 and 11 in the other community organizations. Both the decentralized structure, and the absence of a single leader correspond to the traditional Wayuu way of organizing.

The absence of a hierarchical structure is also evidenced in the relation between the different women's organization and the one in Maracaibo. Of course, because of its geographical location, the Maracaibo network serves as a basic unifying and rallying point, but there is no centralizing structure in place or intent to introduce one. The network is conceived as a loose structure, intended to facilitate exchange of information amongst the different organizations across the region and to facilitate mobilization on a given issue when necessary.

Another feature related to Wayuu culture can be found in the qualities looked for in the co-ordinators of the women's organizations. As I was repeatedly told in interviews, leaders in Wayuu society are chosen 'naturally'. One's behavior, goodness, righteousness and dedication to the community determines whether or not one is a leader. These qualities are also looked for in the co-ordinators: she must be someone dedicated to the cause of her community, and who feels for the Wayuu nation. The personal gratification comes thereafter from the good provided to the community. In general, the co-ordinators are chosen by consensus. There is seldom competition for the positions.

In community meetings, facilitators make the link to Wayuu culture by using Wayuu concepts. This helps women understand the idea of the WWN and the co-ordinator's responsibilities. Otherwise, these concepts are often foreign to women and somewhat intimidating. To explain the purpose of the WWN, the Wayuu word *shikiikasachiki*

is used, meaning to resolve a problem. The role of the co-ordinators is compared to that of the *putchipuu*. The co-ordinator, like the *putchipuu*, acts as a mediator between two sets of people, and negotiates for reaching peace for the best interest of all parties.

Moreover, the approach used by the WWN to build women's awareness reflects Wayuu educational methods. According to the Wayuu's educational philosophy, the responsibility to learn lies in large part with the individual. As explains a WWN facilitator on the teaching skills of N. Pocaterra : " Noeli never says: listen, sit down, I am going to give you a lecture. Those who really know how to learn from Noeli are those who know how to listen. Noeli talks, talks and talks and within these words are the messages and the lecture. From her stories told at any place and time, you learn. Those who do not learn with her is because they do not listen" (WWN facilitator). A similar approach is used in the network. Moreover, importance is given to the example set by WWN facilitators. Many of them lived and succeeded in both societies, and in the process did not reject their own culture. By talking about their experience, it is believed other Wayuu women will be encouraged to take a similar path.

Alongside the many references to Wayuu traditions, the WWN also borrows many principles from the West. Having women unite themselves, co-ordinators responsible for different portfolios, a written-up document stating the purpose and objectives of the organization, are all part of the western world.

Women in the network repeatedly said that if organized and in control of the different information systems used by the dominant society to take decisions, they would be listened to, and in this way

resolve the many socio-economic problems of Wayuu people. In the community's plan of action, the WWN encourages communities to first undertake a survey. Determining such facts as the number of children who attend school, who possess citizenship cards and who receive scholarships, are considered important. Thereafter, this data can be used to lobby government officials and other social institutions. Women feel that mobilizing against the dominant society requires arming oneself with the right tools.

In summary, the framing of remedies for the WWN involves borrowing different elements from the two societies. The WWN centers on combining those elements that will enable it to awaken and mobilize the Wayuu women and bring them together to struggle for a common goal. The task corresponds to the work of a social movement; it identifies the grievances, underlines the abnormalities, and uses these to make people reflect on their own situation and to seek a solution.

As discussed in chapter 7, the task at hand is not easy. The WWN opens new avenues, but the challenges are huge. An important issue relates to the difficulty of reaching the appropriate balance between the Wayuu and the *alijuna* elements. There is also a tension between the extent Wayuu culture should be preserved and adapted. If adapted, in what ways and how to guarantee that assimilation does not take place?

VII

Assessing the WWN and its challenges

I left Venezuela before the end of the first year of the WWN's existence. It was therefore too early to make an exhaustive evaluation of the WWN's work.

A number of times I did see the role the WWN could play once the communities organized. This was the case, for instance, when the Regional Epidemiology Institute called upon the Network's support to help prevent the expansion of a cholera epidemic amongst Wayuu communities in November 1996. The Network was an effective means for reaching the communities. In the organized communities, contact was made with the co-ordinator responsible for the health portfolio. She was invited to information sessions on cholera in Maracaibo, and then given the responsibility to spread the information to her community.

According to the Regional Epidemiology Institute, working with the WWN is an extremely effective means for reaching the Wayuu population (Int. Regional Epidemiology Institute Coordinator). Without the Network, this would have been extremely difficult. In this case, the WWN was also helpful for facilitating connections. Facilitators referred to elements in Wayuu culture to support women's dedication to work in this area. Mention was made, for instance, of the Wayuus' obligation to help each other, and to mobilize when the community had a problem (Cholera meeting). The Network was also critical for translating the medical language into one the Wayuu could

understand. In this case, as in many others, the Network can play an important role in facilitating communication between the two societies.

The WWN can also play a more active role. The fact that a community is a member of the WWN makes it possible for them to have access to different levels of government. In one community, the women wanted to ask support for building a school. They first carried out a survey to count the number of children who could not attend school due to the long walking distance. These results were then used to pressure the government. The professional experience of some of the facilitators and their knowledge of how the dominant society functions is an important asset for the communities. In many cases, Wayuu women do not know how to write, and are intimidated by western institutions.

As the organization expands and becomes recognized as a voice of Wayuu people, it is expected that more and more doors of the dominant society will open. Until now, women had always felt that there were many services which they could not access because they were not organized.

In the first year of existence, the WWN put considerable emphasis on showing the bread-and-butter advantages of being organized. To what extent successes at this level can be translated into strengthening Wayuu identity remains somewhat uncertain. The work of the Network centres on showing that being Wayuu is positive. The impact of the WWN depends to a large extent on the individual.

In my interviews, a number of people talked about the difference the WWN had made in their lives. According to one mother, her

daughter's involvement in the WWN had awakened an interest in her identity. Seeing other professional women being proud of their identity, and preoccupied for their society, had a positive influence on her. The mother hoped this would continue (Int. L. Paz).

As the mother explained, she had not been able to educate her daughter the way she wanted to. She had no control over her daughter because she went to school and now to university and therefore received many other influences than those from the home. The education given at home had to compete with many different teachings, which probably contradicted each other. What her daughter decided to adopt as her own values was largely her own decision. This situation was very different from her mother who grew up with no choice. The role of the WWN is to encourage women to be proud of their Wayuu heritage.

Measuring the impact of the WWN at this point is difficult; the WWN faces a number of critical challenges. These mainly arise from the difficulty of blending both worlds. Exactly how this must take place is not clear. In the words of a WWN facilitator: " We are using many elements of the other culture to function. We are immersed in that culture. But always we must choose from that culture, and the good from our own culture. It is a challenge that is still unclear. As we experiment ourselves and talk about it, we reach agreements. However there is still lots of confusion" (Int.).

One of the main issues relates to the difficulty of satisfying the expectations of the Wayuu and non-Wayuu society. Being based on entirely different value-systems, both societies have their own

understandings of an organization's work and responsibility. These are hard to reconcile.

To the *alijuna* society, the WWN has to show its seriousness and effectiveness if it wants to represent Wayuu people. The Network must be an effective intermediary, capable of mobilizing society, acting as a voice for communities, and delivering whatever information is asked for. When I was there, I saw that government institutions and other social actors of Venezuelan society were extremely eager to work with the Network. They saw it as a direct means of reaching the communities. Does the WWN have the technical capacity to respond to the *alijuna* world, and meet their logic of productivity and efficiency?

To the Wayuu society, on the other hand, the Network has to be dutiful to the Wayuu people at all times. In many regards, the Network is expected to take upon the comprehensive responsibilities associated with Wayuu leadership. This means that up until now the WWN has been involved in a wide-range of matters. Each community has its own concerns and asks for the Network's support on given issues. Some communities want the Network to focus on asking the government for more tubewells, and others, for building a school.

Today, there are a wide-range of issues affecting the Wayuu people, much more than in the past. State departments have responded by compartmentalizing the different subject-areas. This does not correspond to the Wayuu's way of working. Can the WWN tackle all issues effectively? Even now, the Maracaibo Network runs the risk of being submerged by the variety and number of demands. The heavy expectations put upon the Maracaibo Wayuu Women Network is

because here are those with the most experience in dealing with the dominant society.

As mentioned earlier, a number of these women are professionals capable of dealing independently with their own network. Initially, each community network was expected to be autonomous. However, this does not seem to be what is happening.

Moreover, the WWN's 'pressure' to deliver services to the communities could put the task of strengthening Wayuu identity in jeopardy. During my stay, I observed that in introducing the WWN to the communities the main emphasis was put on esteeming Wayuu identity, and highlighting the positive impacts that would follow. Later on, however, greater time seemed to be spent on resolving the community's practical needs. It may be that the Network's success in solving practical needs leads to strengthening of the Wayuu identity, but this is not certain.

Attempting to live peacefully in the two societies is an issue Wayuu people deal with on a daily basis. One co-ordinator, for instance, who is now an engineer, shares her experience on the thorough Wayuu education she received. The two years of secluded education she received at the age of puberty gave her a strength and a peace she would not otherwise have. However, her Wayuu education makes it difficult for her as an engineer. She says most difficulties arise from the different behaviors encouraged in the two societies.

In Wayuu education, one is encouraged to listen, to be thoughtful and calm. Before giving one's opinion, one must listen to what everybody else has to say. A decision is taken on the basis of the community's interest. In the *alijuna* society, on the other hand, people

are encouraged to be outspoken and to stand-up as individuals. This education prepares the *alijuna* to be competitive, something largely absent from Wayuu society where everyone's role and capacity is recognized and accepted. As the co-ordinator explains, "This makes it difficult for me at the time of evaluation in my work, because they may think I am not competent; but in reality it is a cultural question. I am not taught to by-pass someone, and to think in individual terms, something they require from me in my work as an engineer " (Int.).

The WWN allows women to share experiences. This can encourage others to undertake professional training, and at the same time remain Wayuu. As the pull for integration increases, Wayuu people are left with a choice: adopt the dominant society's ways or combine aspects of the two culture. Based on what women said in the WWN community meetings, the first does not bring peace to the Wayuu person, and therefore does not constitute an option. The second option requires being innovative and building bridges between the two worlds. The task is not easy but it is necessary.

One difficulty comes from the fact that the distinction between the two entities -the Wayuu and non-Wayuu world- is obscure because the Wayuu world is itself in a period of transition. The impact of acculturation is such that the definition of Wayuu identity is unclear for those people living in the two worlds.

Often, there are discussions about what is and what is not Wayuu. Once, I attended this meeting at the archdiocese, between the Monsignor and a community from the Guajira Peninsula. 35 members from the community came to complain about two sisters working in the community school, and their discontent with the Monsignor's

decision to transfer the Catholic priest. The criticism made was that the procedures were not Wayuu. From the beginning the community representatives were aggressive. They bluntly told the Monsignor upon his entrance into the room that, according to Wayuu ways, he should listen to what every member of the community had to say before opening his mouth. Some Wayuu people claimed these ways did not correspond to the way of resolving a problem between two parties in Wayuu society.

Similar discussions took place on other occasions. Once I was doing an interview with a health worker and general co-ordinator of WWN in a Maracaibo slum. She was talking about the present laziness of young women, and said that in the past parents could discipline their children harshly. Today, this was no longer possible, the children could call the police on that account. The interviewee suggested that parents should be stricter with their children like in the past. Following the interview, another WWN facilitator from Maracaibo, listening to the interview, interjected to say that harsh discipline was not part of Wayuu education. On the contrary, parents were taught to talk to their children calmly. If a child misbehaved, a parent should talk to the child early in the morning when his anger had disappeared. In the Wayuu culture, the parent should always control his/her temper.

Amongst members of the WWN, there are disagreements on the definition of Wayuu identity. This is largely because members of the WWN are themselves living in-between both worlds, and still finding out what it entails, and what values they should live by.

Moreover, active members of the network have often had previous experience in political parties or the trade union movement.

It is not uncommon that they transpose this experience to the WWN, and want to use similar methods.

I recall one meeting of co-ordinators from a Maracaibo suburb women's organization where ways of mobilizing women were discussed. One co-ordinator proposed Mother's Day as an appropriate date for inviting women from the community. She also suggested giving the women a gift to encourage them to attend the meeting. At first, the women liked the idea, but then there were some second-thoughts regarding its appropriateness. The fact that neither Mother's Day nor the gift were part of Wayuu culture were brought up. On the issue of the gift, the women proposing the activity argued that this was a strategy often used by political parties to attract women's participation. The woman proposing the idea had in the past been active in political parties.

The WWN, however, attempts to differentiate itself from political parties. In presenting the WWN to communities, non-affiliation to political parties is emphasized. The WWN wants to have genuine participation and commitment from the community, and does not want to buy people's involvement, as is well-known to be the case of political parties. Political parties' relation to indigenous communities is criticized for being inconsistent and corrupt. Nevertheless, women's training from political parties does not disappear overnight. Viewed this way, the WWN's task is manifold and challenging. The members of the Network need to build an identity that reflects the WWN's proposed vision. This involves communities putting aside past political influences.

The WWN's task is a difficult one for it requires the presence of certain strong Wayuu values in the members of the Network. Values such as solidarity, and in general women's dedication and commitment to their community are all essential. It must be noted that until the present, the WWN functions with an extremely small budget.²⁰ Largely, the women are required to work on a voluntary basis. Will co-ordinators accept this today? Can they afford it at a time when monetary pressures are ever-increasing? In Wayuu society, traditional leaders never receive a salary for their work. If the Wayuu values of engagement persist and are recognized, this may not be an issue.

At the same time, the WWN ways and expectations do not correspond exactly to Wayuu ways. Often, what the WWN claims to be traditional in Wayuu society is a re-adapted version. This follows from the fact that the Network is choosing some elements within the tradition that they want to bring forward. They have decided to focus on certain past ideals, such as the strong role played by women. The purpose is to encourage Wayuu to be proud of their identity, and this means building on the identified strengths of Wayuu culture.

The importance given by the WWN to the role played by women represents a deviation from past customs. In the past, women did not occupy a role in the public sphere. But this is an unstated requirement in the WWN. In the traditional society, women were given a strong status because they had the important responsibility to transmit values to the present and future generations. In defining

²⁰There was only a small amount of international funding for renting a local office, a basic support staff and to cover some mobilization expenses.

women's status, this collective purpose of women's so-called power must remain. It must not serve a woman's own gains and interests. Otherwise, the basic precepts of the WWN would disappear.

Likewise, as a culture in transition, the Network must be careful not to go too far away from Wayuu traditions. These can be badly distorted. This has happened, for example, with Wayuu law. Applied according to tradition, the Wayuu law is wise and solves conflicts. However, as a result of contact and modern socio-economic pressures, the spirit of the Wayuu law has been abused (Montiel 1984). It has become an economic affair for building private wealth, rather than for re-instating peace between two parties. As S. Fernandez explains: " The Wayuu law is still practiced, but it is often used as an economic incentive. Now, it is economic, a question of money I notice. But before it was to pay for the pain of the family, for instance, if a son died" (Int.)

The WWN opens up a wealth of opportunities. What is achieved and the direction it will take lies largely in the hands of its members.

VIII

Conclusions

The case of the Wayuu Women's Network provides important indications as to where Wayuu women stand today, and how they define the problems and solutions required for their society. A few of the main points raised in this paper are stated below.

The approach and role taken by the Wayuu women in engaging in the Wayuu Women's Network reflects the training and preparation that the women traditionally receive. This includes the lengthy and comprehensive education Wayuu girls are given at the age of puberty, and in general their responsibility to transmit Wayuu culture to future generations.

By participating in the Wayuu Women's Network, women are taking an additional stance. They are indicating that they want to have a say in the way their society changes. They want greater control in their society's destiny; they do not want this to be imposed or left unattended such as in the present state of affairs.

The analysis of the Wayuu's history of resistance reminds us that change is positive as long as it takes place according to the wishes and on the terms set by the people. Problems arise once a people's ability to control their own destiny diminishes. In the case of the Wayuu, this has been taking place since the 1950's. The WWN aims to put a halt to this trend by calling for awareness and action.

The Wayuu Women's Network identifies both the problems and solutions for the Wayuu society differently from previous processes. Prior to the WWN, political parties and indigenous organizations in Venezuela

largely concentrated their efforts in defending and promoting the interests of their society, as well as protecting them from the dominant society. The WWN, in its approach and operating philosophy, asserts that much more is needed.

People in an indigenous society are themselves under great pressure to change. As integration increases, the distinction between the Wayuu and dominant society becomes fuzzier. In this process, the values and ways of life of the people start to come from the two worlds. For the Wayuu, this results in an unsettling state of affairs, bringing about confusion and instability. If people are ashamed of their ethnic identity, their self-esteem is low and they cannot cope with the challenges present to live in contemporary Venezuela. The situation is urgent, for now it is the reality of an increasing number of Wayuu people. In the current socio-economic situation most Wayuu are forced to live within the two societies.

The solutions according to the Wayuu Women's Network are found within both their own society and the *alijuna* society. They recognize that it is no longer feasible nor sufficient to turn to the Wayuu society alone; solving the problems of the Wayuu people requires some aspects of both. This is necessary for building the strength of Wayuu society. In this sense, they advocate bridging the Wayuu and dominant society.

In focusing on specific aspects from their own society as well as identifying elements that they need from the dominant society, Wayuu women are engaging in a process of re-definition. They are altering the basics of both societies. The Wayuu women are giving different meanings to customs and values of the two societies, ones that correspond to the *new* society they want to put forward. It is interesting that the indigenous and dominant society presented as autonomous circles in the theoretical chapter

disappear. In fact, one realizes that the concept of the two worlds is more for illustrative and rhetorical purposes than an adequate representation of the real world.

In many ways, Wayuu women are undertaking an extension of their traditional responsibility to pass on culture to future generations. But given that in the present context Wayuu women cannot carry out their role fully and effectively, they are taking on additional responsibilities. Women's engagement in the Wayuu Women's Network suggests that to adjust to the new reality, indigenous women have to become creators of culture. The works of the WWN can be seen as one of charting the parameters of a new identity.

It is particularly interesting that the favorable environment which allowed for the rise of the Wayuu Women's Network includes the presence of strong and successful Wayuu women in the dominant society. Integration into the dominant society has not eliminated the pre-eminent role Wayuu women occupied in their own matrilineal society. In this case, development has not completely altered gender relations, nor weakened women's position. The present study points to the importance of culture in resisting pressures for integration and assimilation.

The task of the WWN, however, is difficult and not guaranteed of success. A key issue is whether the WWN will be able to manage the use and integration of the Wayuu and the *alijuna* features they are promoting. Tensions exist between the extent to which the WWN wants to preserve Wayuu culture and adapt to the changing environment. The main difficulty is that, in adapting Wayuu culture, the line between assimilation and keeping control of the process is a fine one. The challenge of the WWN is to find and maintain the right integration and balance.

An immediate issue the WWN must guard against is not to be overburdened by the demands for addressing economic needs at the expense of more fundamental goals. The Wayuu Women's Network cannot disassociate itself from solving the daily issues facing the Wayuu people. Yet this is not its main purpose, nor its goal.

The success and continuity of the WWN depends largely on its ability to act upon and pursue the diagnosis and remedies it has framed in this early stage of its existence. The analysis made of the WWN in its first year of operation points to a good start. Wayuu women were eager to participate in the Network. As a result, it has expanded rapidly into the communities. But once the novelty of the first moments of eagerness settle down, will the WWN maintain its momentum? Most importantly, will the engagement in the Network translate into an awareness and change as defined by the Network? This after all is one of the main goals of the Network. The success of the Network, in this sense, remains to be seen.

The work and goals of the WWN are critical for the Wayuu society today. Dealing with day-to-day issues and protecting the societies rights are necessary; but for the purpose of continuity, survival and strength of its people, the fundamental issues addressed by the WWN are essential. This fact should not be underestimated.

More generally, the WWN as an example of an indigenous women's movement, offers important insights into the nature of an indigenous women's struggle. It is expected that amongst indigenous societies, there are cultural differences in the way women's role expresses itself and how they articulate it in the present context. This study has shown that the Wayuu had a number of elements in their own society that allowed for and facilitated

women's emergence. Whether or not similar elements are found in other indigenous societies needs to be further investigated.

The case of the WWN shows that indigenous women are capable of laying the ground for an alternative and constructive response to counteracting outside influences. This conclusion is welcome since there is rising evidence that the conventional model of development is neither viable nor desirable.

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