

The Wayuu Mochila: A Weapon of Survival

Maria Doria

Crochet bags in acrylic threads of bright colors and geometric patterns begin their journey in an arid desert region in the Guajira peninsula of northeastern Colombia and northwestern Venezuela. This desert is home to the indigenous Wayuu tribe as well as to corruption, crime, and extreme poverty. The Wayuu bags —mochilas in Spanish— more than being recognized throughout the world for their lively colors and indigenous origins, are the most important source of revenue for households of this tribe. The weaving of the mochilas comes to symbolize more than a specific piece of clothing that keeps the customs and traditions of a tribe; these objects unite women from the community and even men to help in the process. Mochilas are a symbol of resistance, legacy, and hard-work amid the poor conditions they have to battle with every day. Globalization even created awareness of the situation in which this region lives. People from other nations can connect and aid this community in its intense poverty through the buying of mochilas. As the women of the Wayuu tribe share their vivid mochilas with the rest of the world, they want the world to see them. They want us to help them survive. They're fighting and working with all they have, with all they are.

My mochila is a medium-size bucket bag woven with fluorescent acrylic thread colors. Colors such as pink, green, orange, blue, and yellow with beige in the background. The design forms patterns of geometric flowers. It has a flower of pointed petals of different colors in the center surrounded by a diamond in which parts of itself create other gridded flowers. The person who made this item lives in Bogotá, Colombia but she is originally from La Guajira. Her name is Nelsy Argota. She is an acquaintance of an aunt that lives in Bogotá. I believe her life is a clear example of the striving of members of the Wayuu tribe. It was the poor conditions in her hometown that made her move to a metropolis such as Bogotá in search of better sustenance. She made use of her skills to excel in this new world.

I started investigating deeper into how Wayuu mochila producers are organized, the factors hindering and contributing to the crafting of these items, and the role of foreign consumers. The results helped me see the mochilas in a different light. According to an interview with Wayuu women from Daniel Castellanos, for a woman to weave a mochila takes fifteen to thirty days because the work is combined with their housework. They produce mochilas at home. A woman named Christina from the interview stated, "Here, women have to fetch the water, look for firewood, cook for the children, and households must be taken care of." She also held that the making of the mochilas was a lengthy process since they have no electricity and have to wait for sunlight to work on them.

Correspondent Toby Muse from CCTV tells us more about the step of selling them. In the streets of Riohacha, La Guajira's largest city, Wayuu women sell their bags to tourists. If the women sell directly to a tourist they can earn around thirty dollars per each bag. But, if they sell in bulk to the retailers as it's normally done, the bags can go for as little as ten dollars. However, the real money is made abroad. These same mochilas can be sold for as much as 500 dollars. Among the Wayuu women, they have heard reports of companies copying the designs and making the bags in other countries. Against such injustice, they feel frustrated, since that money shields consumers from the real origin of these mochilas. A brutal desert where its tribe's only concern is to survive and others have taken away what is theirs and profited from it.

As an alternative, women from this tribe partner up with foreign small stores that offer to purchase their mochilas at above-market prices and sell them abroad. For instance, there is the digital store Lombia which employs more than 100 artisans for the production of hundreds of mochilas with unique and beautiful designs. There is also the digital store Wayuu Made which not only buys the mochilas directly from them but also gives back a portion of their sales to the tribe, specifically, water resources via the organization Aguayuda. Much of the Wayuu mochilas abroad are found in digital stores, and in some cases, these stores can sell them in fleas as in the case of Wayuu Tribe which sold mochilas in Brooklyn and downtown LA. Foreign consumers contribute to the

subsistence of these people every time they buy an item handmade by this tribe. Their purchase should bring awareness to the struggling times the people from this region of Colombia are facing. However, the situation is always more complex than just buying an item.

At some point, the Wayuu mochilas were perceived differently inside the fashion industry as their consumption was globalized. "Recently, the mochila has become something of a cult item, toted around town by fashion editors and "It girls", and the subject of chatter on style blogs. 'It seems to be the iconic tribal bag,' said Anne Slowey, the fashion news director of Elle, who has picked up a few on her travels. 'The perfect mix of practical, exotic and chic'" (Nelson, 2010). There was even a project among high-end fashion designers that recognized their popularity and used the object for their own purposes without appreciating their true symbol and identity. "Much of the craze can be traced to November when the Vogue editor Lauren Santo Domingo organized the Mochila Project. For it, 40 designers, from Alexander Wang to Oscar de la Renta, were each given a traditional bag and asked to rework it in their own style. The extraordinary results — the Calvin Klein was trimmed in snakeskin; the J. Mendel, in fur — were then auctioned off at a charity event in Miami" (Nelson, 2010). In fact, according to this same New York Times article, these altered bags ended up being \$1,100 to \$2,250, while J. Crew, a shop owner in Manhattan sells the 'dusty-hued' mochilas from Colombia at \$175. Perhaps, there was no intention to undermine the identity of the Wayuu bags since the globalized attitudes on these items are to be exotic, practical and chic. They were expanding on these views. Developing this new trend makes the mochilas solely another trend, but in reality, they have another level of significance.

The mochila Wayuu has always been for the tribe a way to preserve the art and cultural teachings of their ancestors. Women in this community start to learn the art of weaving at a very early age, and this teaching is always passed on from generation to generation through the women of the household. Moreover, according to some women from the community, the way they patterned the mochilas comes from dreams they had the night before. However, the meaning of these patterns is in fact rooted in their own

way to see everyday life. The geometric shapes in each mochila reflect on the individual people and their worldview interpretations. These geometric symbols are called Kanaas. "The Wayuu people extract the essence of their land and daily life by simplifying and abstracting their shapes and translating them into the magical art of Wayuu bags. Therefore, the meaning behind a drawing is more important than its appearance. Because these Kanaas, or drawings are not an accurate representation of reality, but part of Wayuu's magical realism" (Lombia, 2018). The Wayuu bags are created out of the simplicity of the tribe's life in their objects, animals, and perceptions; the mochilas are the most profound embodiment of their culture and life. In fact, not two bags have ever the same designs —each mochila is unique in representing a different part of each weaver's life.

For instance, there are patterns to symbolize the rabbit's teeth, a termite, a cows' nose, a fly's head, the star that announces the arrival of rain, the eye of a fish, the shape formed on the roof of a house, the footprint left by a horse, and many more. These are all objects and perceptions they experience daily.

On the other hand, to understand how the weaving of the mochilas is a way of surviving brutal conditions, we need to learn how they live and the social limitations that surround them in the process of making these objects. The Wayuu tribe doesn't have electricity or drinking water. They are a matriarchal and matrilineal society, even though polygamy is common. The women own the houses, run the families, provide the main economic support for families with their weaving, and even in traditional dances, they're the ones taking the lead. Traditionally, men would work the land, in the herding of animals —goats— hunting, fishing, and pearl diving. Nevertheless, global warming and El Niño phenomenon have caused ongoing droughts for years making agriculture and the keeping of animals impossible as well as having clean water for consumption. Women usually have to walk from three to five hours through the desert to find water that is usually salty and with bacteria causing diseases.

These droughts have brought other problems. According to a 2017 Washington Post article, "Gnawing hunger and thirst never leave the Wayuu. As many as 5,000

Wayuu children have died over the past decade from malnutrition and a lack of basic medical care, according to activists and aid groups” (Rosso, 2017). Even when the Wayuu people have been forsaken from both governments —Colombia and Venezuela— when they receive aid many Wayuu leaders and local officials take the money into their own pockets. Besides that, with men losing their traditional occupations as farmers and tending animals, many have turned to petty crimes and alcohol. The Wayuu land has always been recognized for contraband gasoline from Venezuela to Colombia and cocaine in the other direction since they can travel between nations with no difficulty.

“As the tribe struggles for survival, the mochilas have become one of their primary sources of income... The more ability a woman shows in her woven creations, the more prestige she’ll have inside the clan.” (Erazo, 2017) The weaving tradition is vital and a prestigious skill inside the community. Beyond being economic support, mochilas Wayuu serve as weapons of resistance to fight against corruption, crime, unemployment, starvation and the abandonment of central governments. The women from this tribe use all they have, their legacy and cultural traditions in the form of a piece of clothing to survive. A tribe that has its language, its own rules, has never been conquered by other nations and has lived in this region for centuries opens its doors to the outside world and shares its way of life through their mochilas to resist against all evils that endanger their indigenous legacy and own life. These are people proud of their roots that love their land. Land that was green with pastures and flowing with rivers. Their connection with the world is a cry for help to keep standing, to keep living. With every purchase of a Mochila Wayuu, we can contribute to that dream. Yet, there are numerous digital stores that claim authenticity on their goods when truly, have no connection to this community. The solution as vague and practical as it seems would be to research thoroughly on the legitimacy of the stores' goods. To investigate and know about the value an item such as the mochila has on the Wayuu tribe, and the ways we can help them survive.

To conclude, researching this particular item made me more aware of the significance a piece of clothing can have for an entire region. More than being about texture, color, patterns, and sophistication of the object, it's about its people. It was impossible for me to separate the bag from the hands that made it. Through the mochila, I saw their pain, struggle, and despair as they shared these precious objects with the rest of the world. I believe the best lesson and experience I can take from this research is that it connected me more to humanity. I was submerged into this journey where I, through an item of clothing, had to see and understand this community that seems to usually be forsaken.

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