

# Macucu: Experiences in Long-term Collaboration between a Museum and an Indigenous Community

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**Abstract:** This article describes a long-term, process-oriented collaboration between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Kotiria community of Macucu in Colombia. This cooperation has evolved into a deep relational engagement in which cultural objects are seen as living entities and mediators between the Museum and the community. Through joint activities, such as the construction of a traditional long-house and the creation of a botanical garden, cultural practices were revitalized and intergenerational learning was fostered. However, the article also addresses the tensions, power asymmetries and challenges that can arise in transcultural collaborations of this kind.

*[Long-term collaboration, Indigenous knowledge revitalization, museum-community relations]*

## Introduction

Looking at the discourse surrounding ethnological museums and the resulting programmes of recent years, one might be tempted to think that collaboration is a kind of magic formula with which these institutions deal with their collections, which are marked by colonial guilt and traumas. Establishing contact with the descendants of the former creators and owners promises insights into the past and present significance of the cultural belongings and perhaps also assistance in dealing with them in the future, whether in relation to exhibitions or other museum activities.

However, collaborations between museums and so-called source communities are usually project-based. After establishing initial contact, the focus is usually on collaboratively solving tasks that are often predefined, such as joint provenance research or curating an exhibition together. External factors such as financing and time-frames naturally limit the scope. These circumstances initially also apply to most of the projects initiated as part of the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse). Since the whole endeavour is a project, its parts are also necessarily project-like.

In my contribution, I will introduce the somewhat different long-term cooperation between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Kotiria community of Macucu in the lower Vaupés region of Colombia. This cooperation is different simply because it started as early as 2018 as part of a project to connect Indigenous students with the cultural belongings of their ancestors. Since then it has gone through many phases, not to mention financial frameworks. Over time, the resocialization of the Berlin collection

developed into a joint deep dive into the community's knowledge and ancestral stories, in which the 'objects' are less important than dreaming for a better life, especially for future generations. The CoMuse framework gave the cooperation the opportunity to continue 'the process' (a term used by community members to describe the different activities and phases of the collaboration) by creating a community garden to preserve traditional knowledge of medicinal and dye plants.

In this article, I will briefly describe the various steps in 'the process', highlighting the specific tensions that arise in transcultural constellations, in particular when they last longer than the normal time-span of a project. I myself am involved in this process in various ways. On the one hand, I helped initiate it; on the other hand, I have become so closely connected to the people in Macucu that I find it difficult to take a step back and write about it. At no point did I assume the position of a researcher in Macucu, so this text is much more a personal account than a systematic analysis of a museum collaboration.

The following question, which I consider particularly relevant and pressing in long-term collaborations, is addressed in the article: How is it possible to deal with the obvious power imbalance between the heritage institution with the collections and the money on the one hand, and the Indigenous community with its site-specific problems on the other hand, especially in moments of tension and in the long run? I also reflect on the deeper meaning and future perspectives of such long-term relationships. What is their transformative potential, and how can it be unfolded sustainably?

## Digital Beginnings with the Indigenous School in Mitú

Contact with the community of Macucu in Colombia was first established in 2017/18 in the context of a third-party funded project<sup>1</sup> with representatives of Indigenous educational institutions; its objective was to develop a digital platform for joint research on the Berlin collection (Scholz 2017 a/b, 2021 a/c).<sup>2</sup> A close partner in this four-year project was Diana Guzmán, a teacher at the Indigenous secondary school Escuela Normal Superior Indígena María Reina (ENOSIMAR) in Mitú, the capital of the state of Vaupés in Colombia. Diana Guzmán runs a small community museum at the school, and she also uses the museum space for teaching. In the early years of the collaboration, the aim was to introduce the Berlin collection to Indigenous students from different

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<sup>1</sup> The project, called 'Living objects in Amazonia and in the Museum – Shared Knowledge in the Humboldt Forum', lasted from 2016–2021 and was funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung and the Kulturstiftung des Bundes, with Indigenous partners from Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela.

<sup>2</sup> See also <https://www.smb.museum/museen-einrichtungen/ethnologisches-museum/sammeln-forschen/forschung/lebende-dinge-in-amazonien-und-im-museum-geteiltes-wissen-im-humboldt-forum/>, accessed April 1, 2025.

backgrounds and to establish joint digital research. However, this proved to be very cumbersome and ultimately not very useful for the dialogue over the artifacts.

At the latest after my first visit to Mitú in 2017, we used the rooms of the municipal administration and the adult education facilities in the evenings in order to have an internet connection, but content was repeatedly lost due to power shortages etc. It then became clear that, although the digital platform was a nice idea, it failed due to the lack of infrastructure in Mitú at that time.

Furthermore, Diana initially pointed out rather hesitantly, but over time more and more clearly, that her strategy in working with the young people was different. Her aim was to introduce the students to living cultural practices that are still being mastered, at least to some extent, by the older people living in the communities, but are increasingly being lost among the younger generation. Working with digital photos of historical museum objects, by contrast, felt lifeless and fell short of this goal.

Diana herself had first visited the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin in 2014 together with her husband Orlando Villegas, also a teacher at ENOSIMAR, as part of a workshop organized by colleagues from the universities of Berlin, Bonn and Marburg (Kraus et al. 2018). During this visit, the Indigenous guests discussed, among other things, the storage of ritual objects such as the dance ornaments of initiated men, which should be kept together in a so-called 'feather box' made of palm leaves when not in use. The discovery that the individual elements, which the Indigenous people see as the body parts of clan elders, were stored in different boxes and shelves was met with great irritation. Furthermore, the visit triggered a process of reflection on the preservation of cultural practices and the state of traditional knowledge for Diana and Orlando, who after 2016 became my close partners. According to them, much of what they found in the museum had been lost locally over the course of the violent history of contact and colonization, especially because of missionary work.

In the following years, Diana and Orlando, along with other Indigenous guests from the upper Rio Negro, visited the museum again, when the strategies of conserving the ritual dance adornments in the storage room were an important topic of discussion. As a result, which is not the focus here and will therefore not be discussed in further detail, we jointly decided on some changes to the Museum's storage practices (see Scholz 2021b). Over the course of the project the focus shifted to the Indigenous community, but the choice of topics for the work there was directly related to the experiences in the storage room. Handing over the lead for concrete activities to the Indigenous partners was for me a clear strategy of dealing with the inevitable power imbalance. However, this does not make cooperation any easier because the Indigenous partners have their own internal struggles, hierarchies and power imbalances, a factor I will discuss below.

## Connecting with Macucu

The first workshop in Macucu took place in March 2018. For Diana's husband Orlando, who was born in this community, it was a reconnection with his roots. Since the death of his father a few years earlier, he had only been to Macucu very rarely.

Macucu is located about a half day's journey from Mitú, on the lower Vaupés, half an hour by boat from the Brazilian border in the core territory of the Kotiria. According to the traditional marriage rule of the Tukano groups, to which the Kotiria also belong, marriages are only possible between members of different ethnolinguistic groups, so that not only the Kotiria but also the Cubeo and Desana live in Macucu, as well as individuals who have a non-Indigenous parent. Traditionally, members of the Ñahori clan, one of the high clans in the hierarchy of the Kotiria, are settled in Macucu. However, many of the clan's descendants do not live there permanently; most of those who have higher education seek work in Mitú, Villavicencio, or Bogotá. The community thus consists of only four or five (partly young) families all year round, but all children older than four years of age spend the week at the boarding school in Villa Fátima, which is about an hour's boat ride away. These circumstances, especially the school system, put the community at risk of fragmentation and the gradual loss of traditional cultural practices and Indigenous languages.

The first workshop that Diana organized together with Orlando in Macucu was dedicated to the topic of plant fibres, among them the *cumare* fibre. This is used to make dance ornaments like those in the Berlin collection, and many other items of daily and specific use. The instructors were people from the community, particularly the elders. The students travelled together with Diana, myself and Natalia Pavia, who documented this and all subsequent workshops in Macucu audiovisually from Mitú.

This first workshop initiated 'the process' without having been planned (because the focus here had actually been on the ENOSIMAR students). The fact that Macucu had become the site of a heritage project through Orlando's mediation caused something in the residents, as Orlando emphasized again in November 2024 in an interview for the CoMuse podcast:

What we really have to recognize is that the community has been kind of abandoned, people have been kind of discouraged, and when we were able to make contact with the museum and Andrea's work, which has also supported us, I think that somehow the community has gained new energy and support, kind of like reclaiming their territory.<sup>3</sup>

For my aim of reconnecting the Berlin historical collections with living people, the stay was an essential experience and the starting point for the 'deep dive' I undertook at the beginning. Diana had told me many times that the artefacts in the Berlin museum col-

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<sup>3</sup> <https://comuse.org/en/podcast/11-long-term-cooperation-with-the-village-community-macucu-in-colombia>, last accessed September 11, 2025.

lection are not mere objects: they should actually be treated as living beings, as if they were ambassadors of the Indigenous territories. Through my practical engagement with the plants, fibres and techniques, and by observing their embodiment by the people, the sentence started making a lot of sense to me.

## Cultural Elements as Ambassadors: Feather Box and Longhouse

Some months later, in October 2018, I organized a small conference in Berlin to which I invited Indigenous representatives from all the educational and political organizations I was working with in my five-year project, as well as some colleagues from other museums. The event was predominantly Indigenous, and there was a clear consensus about the relational condition of certain artefacts in the collection, among them the ritual dance ornaments of the Tukano groups. As they are conceived as body parts, it was considered very dangerous to give them back to any community without knowing exactly where they belong. But the fact that they were kept by the museum in Berlin implied that the latter had a responsibility towards the communities of origin. Behind these consensual statements stood a wider conception of conservation. Conservation from an Indigenous perspective should go far beyond the storing of artefacts in a safe and dry storage room. Conservation also meant direct engagement for the territories where the collection items come from. A Ye'kwana representative<sup>4</sup> from Brazil even stated outright that without safe and sane Indigenous territories, the artefacts in the museum would completely lose their meaning.

Referring the discussions at the conference back to the situation in Macucu, it was clear that the next step in 'the process' would be to build a traditional longhouse.<sup>5</sup> The first workshop and the obligatory celebration with lots of manioc beer at the end had been realized in a simple communal house with a metal roof, leading the community members to complain about the lack of a proper house of knowledge. The discourse of loss was in general very dominant among the people in Macucu, which is not surprising given local accounts of the history of contact, and especially the activities of the missionaries. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many people died due to forced labour in the rubber forests or from disease, and the few who remained were prompted to give up their communal living in the longhouses and to start dwelling in individual houses.

Leticia (a now 65-year-old woman), who came as an adult to make her living in Macucu, told us the story of her grandparents in November 2019:

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<sup>4</sup> Julio Ye'kwana, then president of the Ye'kwanas organization Wanasseduume (Roraima, Brazil).

<sup>5</sup> While the construction itself was declared a 'workshop' and was financed by the Volkswagen Stiftung, the documentation was possible due to additional funding from the Humboldt Forum foundation. The result was a 25-minute documentary that was first shown during the Humboldt Forum's East Wing opening in 2022.

My grandfather had a *maloka* (longhouse), and I lived there with him and my mother... My father went to San José to work. At that time, the work with rubber was done under coercion. And my father left and my mother stayed behind alone. [...] When I was little, we lived at the headwaters of a small river and had a *maloka* there. Everyone lived like that, our grandparents... And why? Because the rubber tappers came and took people away, just like that, here on the banks of the rivers... So they hid [...], they lived in a large *maloka*. Then the nuns came, to where my grandparents were, they visited them and took them to Colón. [...] They took them, built houses there, and that's where my grandfather lived.<sup>6</sup>

There was only one person in the community left who could remember the last longhouse in Macucu, the then 87-year-old *abuelo* ('grandfather') Casimiro Villegas. He was the one who gave the instructions, as Jaiver, the leader of the community narrated:

For us of the new generation, it is the first time we are building a *casa ancestral* (ancestral house), which is also called a *maloka*. It was a bit hard. We had never built a house that big before. But thanks to the help of Casimiro, the grandfather, with what he knew, what he had experienced with his parents; well, he had the knowledge. When we started building, he passed it on to us, we asked him all the time. He showed us, and in this way we kept building. It was hard, yes, it was a bit tough because it was the first time we had done a job like this. But with pride and because of this initiative, we had the courage to finish the work. And now we feel a great happiness to be under the house we built! First, the *abuelo* showed us the orientation of the *maloka*, where the doors belong, where the sun rises and sets. That is the direction of the doors. You can't do it the other way around, like with the houses where we live now. That's why you always build the doors in this direction, where the sun rises and sets. We knew about most of the parts (of the house), because we still use the leaves of the *karaná*. With the materials, yes... but we had never built a house of this size before. That was the only difference. Thanks to our grandfather, thanks to the knowledge he has, we made it.<sup>7</sup>

But grandfather Casimiro himself still expressed the feeling that something was missing, despite feeling happy with the construction of the longhouse, as Jaiver recounted, translating from Kotiría into Spanish:

The only weakness he feels now is not being able to dance with all the equipment needed for it, the instruments and so on. He feels that he has failed. [...] the whites took everything, leaving us with nothing, and it is very sad not to have anything to show for it. If we still had all that, then everything would be different. [...] All this happened mainly because of evangelization, through the missionaries. They said

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Leticia Acosta in November 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Jaiver Ramírez in November 2019.



Fig. 1 Filming of the last step in the construction process. Photo: Mikko Gaestel, 2019

that the Indigenous people were like animals that they had to make human. They took everything and destroyed what the Indigenous people had here that they could have used to show that they had their own, a different culture. To destroy all that is like losing an arm; you are left all alone. That was the hardest blow we had to take here, we who live on the Vaupés River. I think that those with the most vibrant culture at the moment are those who live at the headwaters of the small rivers because the missionaries didn't go there. I think they are the ones who have the tools and everything they need to show that their culture is alive. Unfortunately, we can't do that because we have been hit hardest in this area.<sup>8</sup>

The construction of the longhouse was a very complex process that lasted at least from June to November 2019, when the new house was inaugurated. I will not go into further details here, but it is important to mention that there is not only a clear connection between feather ornaments and body parts, as Jaiver implicitly states, but also one between the longhouse and the feather box. According to Hugh-Jones (2019:84), 'leaves,

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<sup>8</sup> Interview with Jaiver Ramírez and Casimiro Villegas in November 2019.

feathers, and, by extension, feather ornaments, are all one and the same. This is also suggested in a Cubeo story where the Owner of Caraná gives the deities a box whose top half contains leaves to roof their *maloka* and the bottom half contains the ornaments they should use in a dance to celebrate the end of house-building.<sup>7</sup> The Kotiria's story of the origin of Caraná is very similar. Thus, it was not by chance that the initial encounter with the dance ornaments in the storage room had led to the construction of a traditional longhouse/house of knowledge.

The filming of the last steps in the construction, all the in-depth interviews we conducted with the community members and the inauguration of the traditional longhouse together with guests from neighbouring communities marked a clear peak in 'the process' and evoked many hopes regarding the steps to be followed. While the men wanted to go more deeply into the topic of the dance ornaments, the women wished to conduct a ceramics workshop and to revive this important women-centred knowledge, which they were on the verge of losing.

Unfortunately, what came next was the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, I could not travel for a while, and it was not possible to organize any further workshops.

## Ceramics and Fractures

As the project was funded by the VW foundation, which ended during the pandemic, i.e. by the end of 2020, funding for the workshops became more difficult. Through the CoMuse project, we were finally able to organize the ceramics workshop in 2023, instructed by the then 63-year-old Leticia, who had been taught by her mother, grandmother and some Cubeo people in a pottery workshop.

For the first time, this workshop also had official participants (not only guests) from the neighbouring community of Naná who had become interested in 'the process'. On the one hand, this was appreciated because it clearly showed the success of the cooperation. On the other hand, some strange rumours started that exploded during the next workshop in November 2023.

There were always certain tensions during the visits. But as everything in Macucu was intimate and based on family ties, it was possible to ignore downsides, such as the heavy, sometimes violent energy that started to emerge when people were drinking. Among health workers who are engaged in mental health issues in the state of Vaupés, it is well known that Indigenous people use their traditional drinking parties to get rid of their suffering and trauma, sometimes with very tragic consequences. Indigenous people are used to carrying a big burden, be it the early loss of parents, close relatives, children, violence, racism and the lack of educational and labour opportunities, not to mention the everyday struggle to survive as an Indigenous person in a postmodern world.

In November 2023, several complicated issues came together. This workshop was organized in the context of another third party-funded project in which I collaborated

with my Brazilian colleague Thiago da Costa Oliveira, who himself invited Indigenous persons from the Brazilian part of the upper Rio Negro to participate.<sup>9</sup> Those individuals, who had to travel very far, received a payment, as they were treated as instructors by my colleague. This was partly true because they were experts in the traditional ecological calendar, the topic of the workshop. When the drinking party at the end of the workshop started, some young men from Naná became very angry about the fact that ‘the Brazilians’ had been paid and put in the centre of the event, while the people from Naná were largely ignored regarding both their knowledge and their lack of payments. Furthermore, the pure size of the endeavour, with many people moving by boat downriver, created the impression of a huge project with a lot of funding. Orlando had to answer very confrontational questions in the next zonal assembly about ‘the exact amount of money the museum and Orlando are handling for Macucu’ (some people imagined a sort of infrastructure project), while the regional leaders complained about the lack of transparency. I think the fact that Orlando does not live permanently in Macucu but most of the time in Mitú made everything even more difficult.

Again, I will not go into further detail here. I learned a lot from the 2023 confrontations, and I had to correct my image of the lower Vaupés as a big family in a natural paradise where people just love each other. Internal hierarchies and competition between communities should never be underestimated. After that, Orlando and I decided to reduce the next workshops, as Macucu was simply too small to house bigger groups with all the confusion that might entail.

## The Garden and the Future

The current step in ‘the process’ (2024/25) at the moment of writing this article (also financed as part of CoMuse), consists in the ‘botanical garden’, a project people in Macucu very much desired to realize because they wanted to be able to treat diseases and injuries with traditional medicines and wished to deepen their knowledge of the plants that are used for body painting and the dying of artefacts.<sup>10</sup>

Again, the people from Macucu collaborated with their relatives from Naná, who also contributed plants to the garden. The fact that the lot for the garden was opened in Macucu and not in Naná was again criticized by some, but this time Orlando implemented a very clear and transparent payment system, and I tried to explain to the people in Naná that it was not possible simply to double the project and open a new branch in the other village, as that this would exceed my possibilities.

In general, I find it difficult to explain the Macucu collaboration to outsiders. It is definitely much more than a project because there are very strong affective relations

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<sup>9</sup> See <https://amazoniafuturelab.fh-potsdam.de/>, Workshop on the Tukano Calendar.

<sup>10</sup> Interview for Podcast „Gegen die Gewohnheit“, November 2024, cf. link above.

involved that almost feel like family ties. At the same time, I cannot help myself falling time and time again into the role of explaining to my partners that the museum is not a funding agency, that the goal of the project can never be ‘just helping people in Macucu out of their misery’, that there must always be a degree of mutual learning involved and that it must be consciously promoted to the outside world. I genuinely do not know if there is any hope in ‘the process’ continuing independently of myself and the Museum. Jaiver stresses the importance of having not only financial but also mental support, expressing this clearly:

I believe that without you, these steps that we have taken, that we have been taking in the different activities, [...] we would not have succeeded. Yes, because [...] for all activities, you need support, someone who is there to help us, right? And this is a very important tool, the support you have given us, and I hope that we continue working together towards the future and help to preserve all that is traditional in the culture of the Indigenous peoples that has been lost over many years, but that little by little we can rescue [them], eh? The little we have, eh? To encourage and motivate all young people and future generations so that this beautiful wisdom of the Indigenous peoples is not lost.<sup>11</sup>

I find it particularly important that, through the long-term collaboration, I myself have incorporated the relational perspective on the cultural elements from the upper Rio Negro and feel a responsibility for the territories and the people, especially for future generations, as do my partners. Despite the fact that the concrete future of my collaboration with people in Macucu is now very open – CoMuse funding is almost over, and the Museum cannot subsidize projects in Macucu forever – ‘the process’ has shaped the way I work in the museum, and this will continue in one way or another.

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11 Ibid.

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