

Reminiscences of Juan Carlos Peña, with some local color added

Recuerdos de Juan Carlos Peña, con algo de color local agregado
Reminiscências de Juan Carlos Peña, com alguma cor local adicionada

Jimmy Weiskopf

Testimonio

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Abstract

Colombo-American writer and translator Jimmy Weiskopf remembers the Colombian anthropologist Juan Carlos Peña Márquez, who died on August the 5th of 2019. Juan Carlos was professor of anthropology at the Universidade Estadual do Amazonas in Tabatinga and Universidade Federal do Amazonas in Benjamin Constant, and a close collaborator of the Sede Amazonia of Universidad Nacional de Colombia in Leticia.

Keywords: Juan Carlos Peña Márquez; obituary; anthropology; UFAM; UEA

Resumen

El escritor y traductor colombo-americano Jimmy Weiskopf recuerda al antropólogo colombiano Juan Carlos Peña Márquez, quien murió el 5 de agosto de 2019. Juan Carlos era profesor de antropología en la Universidade Estadual do Amazonas en Tabatinga y la Universidade Federal do Amazonas en Benjamin Constant, y un colaborador cercano de la Sede Amazonia de la Universidad Nacional de Colombia en Leticia.

Palabras clave: Juan Carlos Peña Márquez; obituario; antropología; UFAM; UEA

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Resumo

O escritor e tradutor colombo-americano Jimmy Weiskopf se lembra do antropólogo colombiano Juan Carlos Peña Márquez, falecido em 5 de agosto de 2019. Juan Carlos foi professor de antropologia na Universidade Estadual do Amazonas, em Tabatinga, e na Universidade Federal do Amazonas, em Benjamin Constant; colaborador próximo da Sede Amazônia da Universidade Nacional da Colômbia em Letícia.

Palavras chave: Juan Carlos Peña Márquez; obituario; antropología; UFAM; UEA

My friendship with Juan Carlos Peña was brief yet enriching, obviously because he was such a warm, easy-going and very talented person, but also because the two occasions when we were close coincided with memorable events in my own life in which he played a part.

The first was my first visit (with my family) to Brazil and specifically, Manaus, for the specific purpose of participating in the rituals of the Santo Daime ayahuasca church, though it was also to acquaint ourselves with the country in general. Thanks to Professor Juan Alvaro Echeverri, we were taken in hand by his friend Carlos Rojas, a Colombian who was now teaching at a university in that city and even lent us a house to stay in. Now, as often happens with Colombians who live abroad (and more so in a place where they were only a handful), they usually know one another, so it was not surprising that Carlos was friendly with Juan Carlos Peña and another emigrant, Karina.

Remembering that Juan Carlos was an anthropologist, I suppose that Juan Carlos' link with Carlos Rojas was the same as mine, but the strongest bond those three had in common seemed to be that they were political exiles, without being particularly political in my view. Carlos, for example, is the sort of man who speaks his mind and I assumed that that was getting dangerous when he left Colombia in the early 1980's.

In the case of Juan Carlos and Karina, it had to do with their having been in the middle of the armed seizure for three days of the small jungle city of Mitú by a column of 500 members of the FARC guerrilla (with another 1000 surrounding the town) which was one of the most violent incidents of that period, with a death toll of more than 50 inhabitants (mostly policemen), the kidnapping of another 60 (some of whom remained in captivity for years) and the WWII-type destruction, by bombs and artillery, of most of the downtown area.

As the Secretary of Education of the Department of Vaupés, headquartered in Mitú, Juan Carlos was particularly vulnerable and while he and Karina luckily survived, it was understandable that they were traumatized (and more so, because they might have become targets of the guerrilla if they had remained). If so, it didn't show: Juan Carlos' account of the assault, though graphic enough, was filtered through his characteristic coolness and sense of humor. From the way Juan Carlos had learned to be fairly objective about

that (and the dark side of Colombia in general), I guess that moving to Brazil was not only a matter of security, but also owed to his adventurous spirit, though another reason for choosing Brazil was that it was nearby and liberal about granting the status of political refugees to victims of the violence in Colombia (then at least).

Only recently, however, did I learn that both Carlos and Juan Carlos had indeed been militants of the left, with the further complication that in addition to potential threats from the ultra-right, Juan Carlos, for ideological reasons, had split from the left-wing faction he originally joined and so was a potential target for them as well, a sadly typical occurrence in the country in that period.

In any case, Juan Carlos had been granted a student's visa and first studied for a Masters in education at the Universidad Federal de Manaus and later for a Ph.D. at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas in São Paulo. By the time I met him, he was fully at home in the country, partly thanks to his remarkable talent for languages. In contrast with Carlos Rojas, who, despite his Brazilian wife, hadn't advanced beyond *Portunhol* in a more than a decade (but made himself fully understood nevertheless), Juan Carlos practically spoke like a native after a much shorter spell there and was just as familiar with the idiosyncrasies of the country, including Manaus: its bus routes, malls, pizza parlors and not least, discos, because, no stuffy egghead, he had a rare combination of intellect, dedication to his profession and . . . an unabashed relish for the good things of life (backed by street smarts).

Just as Carlos lent us a roof, invited us to great meals at his home and acted as our kindly godfather, Juan Carlos (who was less busy) was our guide to the intricacies of local life, high and low. Almost by osmosis, he'd quickly absorbed the details of its history, architecture and economy, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dirty dealings of its politicians and underworld. The music of Brazil, especially, -- from the top of the pops down, in practice and theory -- because his talent for singing and playing the *cuatro* was allied with his talent for languages.

Fluidity is another word for fluency, and that was a quality of his which, I sensed, underlay all and was integral to his persona: his slender build, graceful movements, effortless shift between gaiety and seriousness. Insofar as I can picture him now, it is as a boyish figure, slender, alert, with curly hair and roundish cheeks always about to break out in an infectious (and toothy) laughter.

While Juan Carlos never joined in the Daimé ceremonies, he was interested in hearing our account of them and as anthropologist who was versed in the indigenous use of ayahuasca in Colombia and a generalist soaked in the syncretism of Brazil, his comments were enlightening.

Returning to Bogotá after only a few weeks in Manaus, I lost sight of him in the following years but Juan Alvaro remained our link, and I knew in a general way that he was still in Brazil, and as I noted above, studying and teaching at one or another university, specifically, as I later learned, the UFAM in Benjamin Constant and later, the Universidade Estadual de Amazonas in Tabatinga, both near Leticia.

Meanwhile, as an aficionado of the Amazonian cultures myself, I'd heard about *kampo*, the powerful shamanic medicine extracted from a venomous frog, but my first two experiences of it were disappointing – first, at the headquarters of Santo Daime, near the Río Purus in the Brazilian State of Amazonas and later, at a specious ayahuasca conference in Iquitos. During the same period, and thanks to the hospitality of Juan Alvaro, I would spend some time in Leticia now and again and it was he who told me that Juan Carlos was now not only living in Benjamin Constant, the little Brazilian town about forty minutes downriver from Leticia by launch, but also friendly with a Marubo community in the same area who practiced *kampo*.

Just to be sure, I contacted Juan Carlos by e-mail from Bogotá, but less on my behalf than a companion on the trip, a doctor who combined Western allopathic and indigenous plant medicine and was also eager to try the frog remedy. Once in Leticia, however, it was impossible to confirm with Juan Carlos either by e-mail or by cell phone and since the doctor didn't have the time to wait around (or the inclination to risk a trip to Juan Carlos, only to find that he wasn't there), he passed up the chance, an anecdote whose only importance is to remind us of the near impossibility of forward planning and rigid timetables in the jungle and by extension, contrast the anxiety it caused me with the relaxed, philosophical approach to its hazards of Juan Carlos, Juan Álvaro and others (with the same background as myself) who adjust to and thrive in the Amazon.

And more so in the case of Juan Carlos because compared to Leticia (with its university, supermarkets, foreign tourists and so forth), Benjamin Constant was a disappointment, not truly urban, but not a charming village nestled into its jungle setting like Puerto Nariño either. Thus, the house where he and Tatiana, his Brazilian wife lived (along with their two little girls and his teenage daughter from a previous marriage) was an oasis of civility in the middle of what (in my view at least) is increasingly the norm for the region and has nothing to do with size, because I'd already seen the same in peripheral neighborhoods of small cities like Leticia and Tabatinga and large parts of big ones like Iquitos and Manaus: a society which has lost its original culture and only replaced it with a third-hand version of our globalized one where everything revolves around commerce, consumption and entertainment (if that even applies to Benjamin Constant, where I couldn't even find one working internet service, decent-looking hotel or drinkable cup of coffee).

Nevertheless, jerrybuilt as it was, and judging by the ubiquity of motorbikes and mod cons, the standard of living there wasn't that bad. Like many of the houses there, the one where Juan Carlos and his family lived, built of wood and raised above the level of the street, was spacious, comfortable and suited the hot climate. In addition, they were often interspersed with empty lots thick with wild flowers and palms.

Once again, anecdote makes the more general point: here, the remarkable way in which Juan Carlos (with his family) adapted to a place that would have bored me to tears, integrated themselves into local life and found enjoyment and fulfillment where they could. First, in his ample library, computer (now connected to internet again, though the signal of his cell phone was still intermittent and only accessible on the top of a hill where a funny little futuristic church in a shape of a tent stood), the splendid meals cooked by his wife, an occasional outing in his car (once shared with us) to a ramshackle (but not bad) restaurant, overlooking a lagoon on the outskirts and a wry delight in what might be called the sociology of Amazonian adolescence, especially (if I may be indiscreet and he wasn't exaggerating) a rampant promiscuity which their parents and teachers more or less took for granted, one of many subjects we chewed over on the evenings when we lolled in hammocks in the open patio of his house which backed onto a lot that (as I noted above) was so dense with tropical vegetation it was almost like being in the rainforest. And meanwhile were treated to a concert of the music of the Llanos, a region as free-spirited as the Amazon and he himself, a native of those indomitable prairies, with a first-hand knowledge of some of the remote and still relatively unspoiled indigenous settlements in Vaupés

Nevertheless, he had a definite reason for being there which made the whole thing meaningful: a post at a new State university, the UFAM, in Benjamin Constant. Though I can't recall whether it was on our first or second visit, I do retain a fairly clear impression of the institution, which, at first sight, looked like a typical *colegio* in a small town in Colombia or Brazil: a (somewhat run-down) two-storey building with wings and external corridors connecting the classrooms. And, indeed, it had been, more or less, that is, a teachers training college for bilingual indigenous students, but the ground around (still pretty wild and jungly) was already being razed for annexes: brutally, he thought, when some might have been left as a garden.

Still, I reminded myself, Harvard or Heidelberg had started in much the same way. And that, despite some doubts, it wouldn't be fair either to judge the potential of its students by their apparent obsession with dating, soap operas, soccer, the latest in track shoes and so forth. Not when Juan Carlos fully believed in the venture and went all out to make it work in an ambit, moreover, where there was no tradition of academic rigor (and as I'd learned from a brief stint as an English teacher at the university in Leticia) achieving

the right balance between being friendly to and respected by your students was tricky. But I quickly saw that it came naturally to him.

However, immersing myself in such folkways was incidental, because, as mentioned above, I too had a definite reason for being there.

Granted, *kampo* was then on the point of following ayahuasca as a “must” for the adventurous young foreigners (of the backpacker-type) who were “doing the Amazon” on their summer vacations and usually stopped off at Leticia on their river cruise between Manaus and Iquitos (or vice versa). But, first, it was still difficult to ascertain the precise “where”, “when” and “how”, and second, my search for indigenous communities in other parts of the jungle whose ayahuasca ceremonies were open to outsiders without being adulterated had taught me, the hard way, that it was best to first sound it out with a member or friend of the community and then be accompanied by him.

As it happened, Juan Carlos was also working in the field of education with some indigenous communities in the area around Benjamin Constant, and was also knowledgeable about the situation of public health there, judging by his harrowing account of the epidemics of preventable diseases that were scourging such settlements, due to the negligence and corruption of the Brazilian government.

Hence, he was liked and respected by the Marubo community, which (oddly but conveniently) was situated alongside the highway between Benjamin Constant and Atalaia do Norte, the little port where you embark upriver on the Río Javari, a tributary of the Amazon.

In all, my family and I went there three times, the first two with Juan Carlos and his family, the last on our own, and I believe that the following excerpts of a short story I wrote corresponds to what happened on the first, barring some poetic license. Despite the danger of my hogging the stage, I nevertheless make it clear that we wouldn't have got there without him and it thus serves, I hope, as a retrospective expression of our gratitude, especially in the light of what happened the last time, when some chancer who had no relation to or authorization from our host, the medicine man and leader of the community, tried to charge us an entrance fee to the community. As we ignored him and the same elder (who always left payment up to us), was outraged, it came to nothing, but for me, it was definitely an omen of things to come, correctly, I believe, considering the pricey tourist lodges on the Javari which have now turned some of the same indigenous (and innocent) experts on *kampó* into ill-paid employees:

The bizarreness of gliding in a late-model sedan to a mysterious tribal ritual didn't occur to me as the day dawned over the Javari, but it wasn't because I was too

preoccupied to take in the surroundings of a highway which, like others in the Amazonas, was new, well made and lethal in accelerating the conversion of the ownerless indigenous forest into the white man's cattle ranches.

Twenty minutes along, we parked on the verge and soon reached a clearing where basic houses semi-circled a *maloca*. From without, it was a small, squat cone that fell to the ground in a mop of uncombed hair. Within, it was an irregular oval marred by holes and pretty dark, but, judging from the domestic activity in its depths, closer to the original way of life than the ones with neat plaits and giant pillars I'd seen in Leticia, which are mostly for tourists nowadays.

For the first quarter hour, I and my friend, Jhonny [Juan Carlos], the anthropologist who'd set it up, peered at the *payé* and his two sons sitting on the opposite log in the midst of awkward silences. René was in his fifties, with chunky features, offset by a boyish short back and sides with quiff: a slow man of few words and incurious about strangers.

René summoned the boys to fetch the brown-green snuff made of toasted and pulverized tobacco leaves. He then inserted the hollowed-out bird's bone into one of my nostrils, gave me a strong blast, and, after a minute, did the other. It was like a frigid nail driven straight into the brain, which after a brief dizziness, woke me up and cleared my breathing.

The conversation which followed was aimless, twenty minutes passed but just when it looked like I was getting nowhere, René took down a *mochila*, removed a stick whose flattened side was smeared with dry snot, meditated over it for a while, and told me about another gringo, who, joining one of their nocturnal expeditions, took hold of a frog they'd caught, and impatient with sacramental rigmarole, licked its back and dropped dead!

Oddly, this was the first sign that I'd be in safe hands. From his mischievous expression, the story was doubtless as apocryphal to him as to me and its true purpose to make me complicit with his own malice and thus laugh at my fear.

With the end of a heated stick with the roundness of a pencil, he now made two punctures on each of my upper arms: it singed but didn't hurt, the idea being to open a miniscule layer of skin and leave the ones underneath as a protective filter.

I was encircled by Jhonny, René's sons and mine, watched him liquefy the glue, dab it on a forefinger and in an instant, each impress began to burn, and the heat quickly spread through my body with a rising intensity.

I lurched across the clearing, with my son protectively alongside, leftwards to a thin grove of trees overlooking a lake. I wanted to be out of sight and close to the calming water and it became a race between a dwindling self-control and a swelling bestiality that had me grabbing trunks for support until it drove me to my knees halfway along.

And to the full realization that I'd landed in a multi-sensorial hell of nausea, asphyxiation, muscle loss and blurred sight.

“Dad, your face is as red as a tomato!” my son exclaimed, and René sent someone to splash water on me.

I placed my forehead on the soil, arched my back, forced deep breaths and silently reminded myself that it wouldn't last long. I'd reached the make-or-break point where survival is uncertain and your only defense is prayer.

I heard the laughter of some kids who'd edged into the grove to observe the crazy gringo. It was an insult to the pride of he who'd learnt a lesson or two from ayahwasca and that spurred me to focus on the pebbly feel of the soil on my brow, opposing the immediacy of that to the immediacy of pain.

When the dagger signaled a transcendental vomit, I squatted, put a fist to the ground, heaved hard several times without result, stood up to loosen my trunks, tripped, fought a desperate struggle with the knot and nearly shat myself.

The pain dulled but still woozy, I took that for the prelude and tensed for a greater flow. Then, as if gradually awakening from a nightmare, I came back to where I literally was: calves cramped, arse bare and itchy, son worried and slightly disgusted. In line with the traditional finale, I bathed in the lake and it was like floating through liquid reflections of sky, field and forest: rapture.

Back at the *maloca*, René listened to my impressions with a benign neutrality, pleased but not excited, as I was. I'd sensed his vigilance all along but it was only now that I appreciated how lucky I'd been to have such a skilled and kindly guide and how I owed it all to Jhonny. (Adapted from Weiskopf, 2002, 216-219)

It was also to Juan Carlos that I owe my knowledge of the only thing it is worth visiting Benjamin Constant for. It happened like this: One afternoon, on his way to tank up his car, Juan Carlos saluted a man laying some cables in a ditch who happened to be indigenous, and seeing a foreigner, urged him to show me the museum on the same block, probably the only one in the world exclusively devoted to the Tikunas, the dominant tribe of that region in former times.

While “museum” was an exaggeration for a bungalow with a ragbag collection of artifacts, it was certainly an accomplishment for the small, amateur and presumably unfunded Tikuna community there, a point understood by Juan Carlos when, once there, he entered into an intense conversation with its two de facto curators: one the director, who lived in the back, and the other an elder of the Tikuna community.

I was again impressed by his empathy. It was clear that he'd previously won their respect and trust, due to his sympathy for their society and interest in their customs, and despite the presence of an intruder (and gringo, what's more), they spoke frankly about the problems of their community, including the difficulties of maintaining the museum, though in no way did that lessen their conviction that it was their duty to conserve their culture, especially for the sake of the younger, now pretty acculturated, generation of Tikunas.

I confess that the pots, spears, blowguns, baskets, replica of a menstruation hut and the like struck me as being rather crude compared to the arts and crafts of cultures in other places in Colombia. However, when Juan Carlos exclaimed that no, the museum was great, I regretted my superficial judgment, because, I, as an apprentice at the ayahwasca and *mambe* ceremonies in Leticia, should have understood that the magic of the cultures of the Amazon lay (and still lies) in a more intangible realm of sacred plants, music, cosmology, mythology, social codes and so forth. As a quaint hand-painted map showed, their settlements had stretched to Manaus and in Leticia at least, the conglomerate indigenous culture of today was still permeated by their influence in the way of names, factions, customs, technologies and especially the face-painting, bark hula skirts and masks seen in the traditional dances and the pop version of the same at the festivals of so-called Amazonian culture the municipality put on from time to time.

I also felt stupid after Juan Carlos called my attention to some posters on their language, with some of the common phrases alongside the translation into Portuguese and the phonetics. I already knew that, in addition to his command of Portuguese, he had a smattering of a few indigenous languages, but this time his facility amazed me. With the help of the two men, he had a stab at speaking Tikuna, which, to my ear, was as impenetrable for a Westerner as Chinese, due to the practically imperceptible intonations that might give one word six different meanings but he mastered their phrases straightaway!

On a lesser plane, he displayed the same talent for discovering hidden treasures and getting along with people from all walks of life when we went to the marketplace -- situated in the run-down (and somewhat smelly) sector of stores alongside the river, which were mostly run by Peruvians -- and steered us to the only purveyors of fresh cheese and garden produce (like carrots and lettuce) and free-range eggs in the town, members of a religious sect known as the "*Israelitas*" because of their Old Testament doctrine and Biblical clothing, who have established small agricultural communes on the outskirts of Benjamin, Leticia and Iquitos, and are involved in angry disputes with their neighbors about the ownership and use of the lands they farm. Whoever is in the right, however, they are generally an object of suspicion for the locals and keep their distance from them, in turn, but not in the case of Juan Carlos, with whom they were chatty and relaxed.

After that second visit to his home, I lost sight of him once more. However, Juan Álvaro continued to keep me posted and I vaguely knew he was still in Brazil, studying for his doctorate, as mentioned above, and at one point lived for a time in the home town of his wife, Belem do Pará. The upshot is that several years passed and the next I heard, he'd returned to Benjamin and had also rented a house in Leticia, where I too was from time to time, but for one

reason or another we never met up, a reminder of one of the bitterest ironies of the early death of a friend, namely, the idea that there's no particular rush to see him because he'll always be around, and then you discover, too late, that he's gone.

Not entirely, however, thank God, for we not only met again but, looking back now, I believe that the manner in which we did was symbolic of my profound admiration for him. To understand that, I must first explain that I am an arch-neurotic when it comes to catching a flight and always arrive at the airport hours before take-off. As I apparently was one day in Leticia, when bags packed and temporarily parked at the university, we went for a quick lunch downtown, ran into Juan Carlos, invited him to join us and got so enmeshed in a conversation about everything which had happened since we last saw each other that I lost all track of the time and only caught the flight at the last second, after hectoring, then pleading with the employee at the gate, the which only makes me feel more stupid now, when I could have easily waited a day and fully enjoyed his company at leisure. But, as I just said, death is a cruel jester and I wasn't to know that that grim reaper would never give me another chance.

While it may sound surprising, because he couldn't have been more than 10 or 11 when we stayed with Juan Carlos, my son was just as distressed when he learned of his death as my wife and I were, or maybe even more so. But it really shouldn't, because children are more sensitive than adults, and if I remember more of the details, he caught and has retained the essence of a man blessed with an exceptional generosity, intelligence, magnetism and zest for life.

Requiescat in pace, Juan Carlos. We and all of your friends will miss you.

Reference

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