

## **The Witoto controversy, or the spectres of child agency**

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In the early spring of 2023, a tragic incident involving Amerindian children in the Colombian Amazon was widely reported in the international media.

On 1 May, a light commercial aircraft (Cessna 206) and its seven passengers, including four siblings, crashed deep in the Caqueta and Guaviare jungles of southern Colombia. The passengers were on their way San José del Guaviare, and its passengers hailed from the Witoto community of Aracuara, some 350 kilometres further south.<sup>1</sup> The search, coordinated by the local authorities and carried out by dozens of Amerindians, ended on 22 May with the discovery of the plane and some of its passengers, all dead. The news that the children were not among the victims was greeted with great optimism, and the Colombian army launched a vast search operation called 'Hope'. The army sent 160 men and scores of sniffer dogs to scour an area over 300 km<sup>2</sup>. Helicopters and several planes crisscrossed the region. A number of clues seemed to indicate that the children had survived the crash: the rescue team came across a pair of scissors, then a discarded nappy. One of the sniffer dogs, a 6-year-old Belgian shepherd called Wilson found the bottle belonging to the youngest sister before he too got lost.<sup>2</sup> The search party also found footprints, partially eaten fruit and even shelters made from branches held together with elastic hair ties. Thousands of leaflets and about a hundred survival kits were dropped into the jungle. Hopes of finding the children alive seemed to wax and wane as the days and nights passed. The voice of the children's grandmother was broadcast over loudspeakers in the Witoto language urging them to stay put and trust in God.<sup>3</sup>

On 9 June, Lesly (age 13), Soleiny (9), Tien Noriel (5) and Cristin (just 1) were found alive, more than 40 days after the crash. Their rescue, filmed on a mobile phone by the Indigenous Guard, was seen around the world.<sup>4</sup> The children were evacuated by helicopter to the military hospital in Bogotá, where they were treated for "numerous nutritional deficiencies", but were out of danger a few weeks after their hospitalisation.

## Worldwide media coverage

From 9 June onwards, the media were in a frenzy, unleashing a wave of highly emotional coverage around the world (see indicative bibliography below). We learn that the mother of the children survived the crash but died in the plane a few days after the accident; we discover that the children first used up the plane's few reserves of water and manioc flour, before "wandering" in the "green hell"; we are "left speechless" by the children's courage in overcoming the countless "dangers inherent in the jungle": Isn't the jungle "infested" with aggressive predators (jaguars, vultures, etc.), poisonous substances (plants, mushrooms, fruit, etc.) and poisonous creatures (spiders, snakes, mosquitoes, etc.). Not to mention the torrential seasonal rains, which cause landslides and quagmires... all insurmountable traps for children left to their own devices, i.e. at the height of their "vulnerability". Amidst the proliferation of videos, reports, special programmes and articles, one and the same question was asked over and over again: how did these children survive a plane crash and 40 days of "wandering" in the jungle?

## What can the survival of the Witoto children tell us about agency?

This extraordinary event has generated a plethora of analyses, commentaries, opinions, speculations and assertions from a range of actors suddenly thrust into the spotlight: rescuers, members of the Witoto community, NGO staff, government officials, the military, ordinary citizens, evangelical

churches, members of the Catholic clergy and others. From what we can see, hear and read in the media, it is clear that there are different and sometimes overlapping interpretations of the reasons why the children survived, such as divine intervention, the moral fibre of the children or the “Witoto culture”. These different interpretations are bound to appeal to the anthropologists of children and childhood, not least because they implicitly invoke the notion of agency.

Before proceeding, it may be useful to offer a brief, general definition of the term. For the purposes of this *Controversy* essay, I will use the definition proposed by James & James (2008: 9):

*“The idea that children can be seen as independent social actors is core to the development of the new paradigm for the study of children and young people that emerged in the 1970s. It underscores children and young people’s capacities to make choices about the things they do and to express their own ideas.”*

It is also important to add that agency designates the capacity of social actors, in this case children, to act intentionally on their own existence, on others and/or on the environment, and to have a transformative effect on them.

## **Between miracle survivors, role models, child prodigies and “militant agency”**

Having clarified this, we might well ask what the case of the Witoto children can tell us about agency.

The first key facet of this controversy concerns divine intercession in the rescue of the children. During this period, the word “miracle” was often used in the media.<sup>5</sup> In the same vein, prayer intentions abounded in religious celebrations, regardless of the denomination (personal communications). From this point of view, only a miracle, or a series of small miracles, can explain the unlikely but happy outcome of this story. In a way, is this kind of interpretation, which refers to the inexplicable, not tantamount to depriving the children of their agency? Does divine intervention, which is both unexpected and providential, not reinforce the idea that these children, because of their purported consubstantial vulnerability, in the absence of adult guidance, lack agency?

In this context, it is noteworthy that the French Catholic daily *La Croix* gave the floor to an anthropologist to address the issue and bring some nuance to the debate:

*“Our understanding of what constitutes a miracle can vary [explains Oscar Garcia, a researcher at the EHESS and an expert on the Witoto people]. Not everyone is capable of surviving in the jungle, but to speak of miracles here is to deny the knowledge of these children. The technique of ‘education of attention’ teaches them how to move in the jungle, how to find food, how to protect themselves and how to look after themselves.”<sup>6</sup>*

Writing in *Philosophie Magazine*, the same anthropologist offered further insights into this process:

*“From a very early age, children are able to distinguish between edible fruits and other items that should not be touched. They have a broad visual knowledge of what is dangerous. They can identify what is edible by the age of 3 or 4.”<sup>7</sup>*

This reference to the concept of “education of attention”, also known as “informal education”,

“popular education” or “education through listening and empathy”, leads us to the second aspect of the controversy. It deserves a brief introduction. This paradigm is inspired by the anthropological project advocated by Tim Ingold (2018). In essence it refers to a novel mode of education based on attention and the establishment of a communication link that articulates, on the one hand, positive attitudes (such as trust, indulgence, and empathy) and, on the other, knowledge and experiences from a wide variety of places. In Ingold’s view, this includes the environment in the broadest sense, extending beyond the traditional places of learning (such as schools).<sup>8</sup> In this case, in this paradigm, the terms education and attention are considered to “ultimately merge with life” (De Meyer 2018: 6). This implies that children are part of an educational project that is open to others and the environment. Insofar as children are active participants in this mode of education, the concept of agency as defined above emerges, despite the fact that the general framework was originally devised by adults for the (supposed and desired) benefit of children.

Another controversial aspect of this case is the enumeration of qualities such as “genius” and “courage”, as evidenced by the words of the Colombian president. In other words, only exceptional physical and moral qualities can be invoked to explain the inexplicable. In this case, it is the eldest of the siblings who possesses these rare qualities: “It’s thanks to [Lesly, the eldest sister] and her leadership that the other three were able to survive, thanks to her care and her knowledge of the jungle,” said the Minister of Defence. Or: “This little girl is wonderful, calm with the nurses. She’s a very strong girl”, said the director of the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare.<sup>9</sup> On a more general level, in survival situations, the “natural” qualities of children may seem more effective than the “ideas” of adults:

*“‘Their tender age was certainly an advantage,’ according to Robin Boclet-Weller, founder of the Compagnie des Aventuriers: ‘It’s very impressive. But children use their instincts and don’t spend their energy unnecessarily, unlike adults who tend to be swarming with ideas in these situations.’”<sup>10</sup>*

In this view, children’s “natural”, “spontaneous” qualities, reinforced by “extraordinary” character traits, are the “real” reasons for their survival. Implicitly, the question of the importance of educating children seems to be underestimated here. After all, what would the knowledge of the jungle be without the eldest sister’s vitality, drive, determination and ability to get things done? It is almost as if her immense maturity and her almost adult qualities enabled her to “manage” the situation like a *leader* – in other words, in the same way that the president or minister using these words would have done...

The position of the Amerindian organisations is based on a slightly different interpretation of events, which does not however exclude the others. For them, the children’s survival was due to their “indigenous condition”, that is to their knowledge and experience of the forest since their existence in utero. As the National Organisation of Indigenous Peoples of Colombia (OPIAC) states<sup>11</sup>: “The survival of these children is an example of the knowledge of the natural environment which is taught from the mother’s womb.” Subsequently, through daily learning summarised under the terms “culture” or “Indigenous education”, children would develop a concrete mastery of their environment.<sup>12</sup> Leading figures in Amerindian organisations explain the concept as follows:

*“These children were raised in the jungle, their father and mother have a lot of experience, because peasants give their children a traditional education. They go to school and learn at home how to deal with the forest, how to walk, which fruits are edible and everything*

*that has to do with survival.” (Gilberto, Indigenous Guard)<sup>13</sup>*

The members of the children’s milieu (grandparents and various aunts and uncles, without the kinship ties ever being specified) all support this view and contribute to this education. Damarys Mucutuy, the children’s aunt, claimed: “Lesly knew which fruits she could not eat. Because many of them are poisonous, in the forest.”<sup>14</sup> Lesly therefore protected her younger brothers and sisters, in keeping with the principle of “coeducation”, that is central to indigenous education. The same sources provided specific logistical details to support their perspective. For example, the children had wrapped their feet in strips of cloth to avoid injuries; they followed and observed the monkeys to see what they ate; they walked in zigzags, making circles around the plane, in a radius of less than 5 km, and did not “wander” as has been inaccurately and disparagingly reported in the media.

However, this “indigenous condition”, which is evident in the children’s education and which is claimed by the Amerindian organisations and the children’s milieu, does not entirely exclude the possibility of a “miraculous” dimension. In the recorded message that she addresses from the helicopters in the hope of reaching her grandchildren (see note 3 above), does not their grandmother, Fatima, commend the children to God, who alone “knows” their pain.? Quoting a verse from the Gospel of Saint Matthew (24, 36), she seems to commend the children to God, who alone knows the hearts and the time or the end of events.<sup>15</sup> For other members of the Witoto community, if this event were to be defined as a miracle, then it would not be ascribed to divine intervention, but rather to the intercession of a red-footed tortoise (*Chelonoidis carbonaria*). This species of tortoise has been widely domesticated in the region (Paramo & Galvis 2010) and is thus accustomed to the presence of humans, particularly children. The incident was picked up by both the French *Journal du Dimanche* and the *El Universo*,<sup>16</sup> one of Colombia’s most widely read newspapers:

*“Another member of the team, visibly moved, recounted having seen a sign from nature before they found the miracle survivors: ‘Half an hour earlier, we had found a tortoise on the path. In the beliefs of our elders, if you find a tortoise you can make a wish, and that wish will come true. I told it “find these children”, even if we wanted to eat it afterwards. When we found the children, we threw it away, we were only thinking of the little ones.’ “The elders used to tell us that if you make a wish [on a tortoise] it would come true. And we found this morrocoy [local name for the tortoise] on our way (...), I picked it up (...) and told it ‘you’re going to find these children for me’ (...) It took no more than half an hour. We covered about 400 metres and the goal was achieved.”*

These two micro-events, which refer to different religious and symbolic universes, show a certain degree of overlap between the interpretive registers mobilised by the Amerindian organisations and the children’s parents to explain their survival. Far from being radically opposed, they complement and reinforce each other. An excerpt from a report in *Géo* magazine highlights this complementarity:

*“While many Catholic leaders marvel at such a miracle, Alex Rufino, an indigenous expert interviewed by BBC Mundo, claimed that, in his opinion, this happy ending was due above all to the ‘spiritual connection’ that the Witoto people have with nature. ‘There are ancient energies in the jungle that the indigenous peoples refer to. It is difficult to understand, but it is a good opportunity to learn about different worldviews.’”<sup>17</sup>*

A fellow anthropologist, Eliran Arazi, has collected the account of one of the children’s close

relatives of how these different worldviews are closely intertwined with local education.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it appears that the elements of Christian and Amerindian religiosity involved in the children's rescue are not mutually exclusive: "On the contrary, they are mutually reinforcing as an integral part of the broader process of mastering 'useful' knowledge in the forest, just as they are in learning about edible plants or other dangers. In this respect, their knowledge of more 'spiritual' elements (in the Western perspective), such as prayer, recourse to myths and sacred beings, is undoubtedly constitutive of their agency" (comment by Raphaël Coliaux, a postdoctoral researcher in anthropology who kindly read and commented on this text).

## **By way of conclusion: the 'militant agency' of the Witoto children**

It is worth noting that, to my knowledge, the concept of agency is never mentioned in the extensive media coverage of this event. Its use, after all, remains confined to the academic field and does not permeate everyday language like, for example, terms such as "vulnerability" (Brodiez-Dolino 2016)<sup>19</sup> or "resilience". Strictly speaking, agency is not (yet ?) a buzz word, that is a fashionable word or phrase that attracts significant media attention.

Consequently, there is no definitive opposition between formally constructed interpretive registers that seek to defend one position over the other, but rather a confrontation or "controversy" in the sense of Cyril Lemieux (2007). These are "disputing processes" that can occur at all levels of society, including within the context of public debate. They combine elements drawn from belief, imagination, scientific knowledge, current affairs and communication imperatives. By definition composite and evolving, controversies bring to light deeper divisions, "power struggles", "institutional positions" or "social networks" that are not immediately apparent from observation.

In this respect, the documentary on the event, released in November 2024 on the international streaming platform Netflix pulls out all the stops.<sup>20</sup>

Nevertheless, what can we learn from the so-called "Witoto controversy"?

It is evident that the Witoto children have experienced a situation of extreme vulnerability, and that they demonstrated extraordinary endurance, resilience, initiative and creativity to survive a plane crash and then forty days in the Amazon rainforest. This feat is all the more remarkable given the pervasiveness of the negative image of the jungle in the collective imagination. For believers, God's intercession lies behind the miracle of survival; for politicians and the military, the feat lies in the children's natural "moral qualities" and fighting spirit. For anthropologists and NGOs, the children's ability to survive is largely explained by the education of attention. Finally, for Amerindian organisations and the Witoto community, the children's survival is consubstantial with values, symbolic and divine intersessions, and to an educational model based on learning how to live in the forest.

From a more theoretical standpoint, these different interpretive registers illustrate the controversies surrounding the concept of child agency. It has been criticised for its sometimes "context-free" applications, particularly within the more Western-centric areas of childhood studies (Lancy 2012; Delalande 2014). However, insofar as children's abilities are necessarily situated in time, space, culture and, more broadly, the social field, it seems more pertinent, as proposed by Élodie Razy (2019), differentiate between the analytical category of agency and its diverse emic definitions. This approach avoids confusion and recognises the existence of "local cultures of agency" that

intersect, conflict or coexist, and which may not always be aware of each other. Far from the idyllic and misleading image of the quasi-autonomous child, liberated from adult supervision and master of their own choices, the Witoto example offers an opportunity to add depth and nuance to the arguments presented in the media. It would be reductive and unfair to attribute the children's survival exclusively to external actions; it would be equally simplistic to suggest that they relied solely on their "skills", "values" or "natural" qualities to cope.

As one of these "local cultures of agency", the Witoto understanding of agency appears to occupy a position between these two otherwise permeable poles. This vision, in turn, points to what I would call a form of "militant agency", a local variant of agency in which the underlying political, cultural and social connotations are more pronounced than they might be in other models of agency. As Julie Delalande (2014) notes in her analysis of agency and children as actors: "A child becomes an actor when an adult (citizen and/or researcher) recognises their capacity to act and authorises them to exercise their power to act on their environment." In this context, the concept of militant agency can be understood as the acknowledgement by adults of the agency exercised by the Witoto children over the cultural universe on which it is based. Beyond the recognition of the educational model that makes children's agency possible, it would also encompass the deeper, less visible expression of the quest for recognition of a way of life and the struggles of adults to defend it. In other words, militant agency can be seen as an alternative means of advocating for the rights of indigenous peoples, as well as the conservation and protection of biodiversity, land, and culture. The political efficacy of this approach may be even the greater given that children, who can be considered the "flesh-and-blood future generations" (Suremain & Razy 2022), are its primary agents.

In a television programme entitled '*Operación Milagro*' (Operation Miracle), one of the leaders of the Indigenous Guard who found the children extended the debate by drawing a parallel between the rescue of the "mountain children" (*niños de la montaña*) and that of the "street children" (*niños que andan en la calle*), which is still to come. By focusing on the latter, who have lost all their bearings and are reduced to begging, the guard implicitly acknowledges that, unlike the Witoto children, they are deprived of agency. In doing so, to the leader reminds the entire nation of the expectations, hopes, and demands of Amerindian communities and organisations in the face of political, social and cultural challenges that are at once structural, urgent and violent.

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## Notes

1 According to the ONIC (*Organización nacional indígena de Colombia*), the Witoto community numbers around 6,000 spread across Colombia and Peru (<https://www.onic.org.co/pueblos/1125-muinane>). The Witoto are subdivided into different clans, including the group to which the children belong (Chukiki: “*acronym formed by the initial syllables of the names of the three confederated clans: Chuumójo (Worm), Killéllimijo (Pineapple), and Kiimijo (Drum)*” (Echeverri 1997: 113). See Gashé (1972) for self-denominations within the ‘Witoto’ group.

2 Wilson was posthumously awarded a medal. He is immortalised on the façade of the headquarters of the Combined Special Operations Unit (*Comando Conjunto de Operaciones Especiales*, CCOES): <https://lesjours.fr/obsessions/enfants-perdus-colombie-amazonie/ep7-que-deviennent-les-enfants/>

3 The wording of the message (in Spanish) was: ‘*Les pido un favor, que yo soy su abuelita Fátima, ustedes me entienden. Tienen que estar quietos. Los están buscando. Escuchen el micrófono, estén parados, para que ellos los traigan. Si se sienten angustiados, solo mi Dios lo sabe.*’ (<https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-65852541>)

4 I have not been able to find the original videos filmed by the local Indigenous Guard (*Guardia Indígena*), which includes representatives of various communities. Extracts of the rescue footage appear in several subsequently edited videos. For example: <https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&q=vid%C3%A9o+saueutage+enfants+uitoto#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:0880d35b,vid:2VXgyF7boXw,st:0>

5 See for example Vatican News: <https://www.vaticannews.va/es/iglesia/news/2023-06/un-milagro-y-un-signo-para-que-colombia-piense-en-la-vida.html>. It is known that the community to which the children belong is predominantly evangelical: [www.bfmtv.com/international/amerique-latine/colombie/enfants-rescapes-en-colombie-une-proche-raconte-comment-ils-ont-survecu-dans-la-jungle\\_AN-202306130359.html](http://www.bfmtv.com/international/amerique-latine/colombie/enfants-rescapes-en-colombie-une-proche-raconte-comment-ils-ont-survecu-dans-la-jungle_AN-202306130359.html)

6 Cf. <https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Colombie-enfants-miracles-grace-leur-connaissance-jungle-2023-06-12-1201271197>

7 See <https://www.philomag.com/articles/les-enfants-sauvages-de-colombie-un-aveu-sur-la-nature-humaine>

8 See <https://theialab.fr/savoir-faire/leducation-par-lattention/>

9 <https://www.ouest-france.fr/monde/colombie/cette-petite-est-merveilleuse-les-enfants-perdus-en-colombie-ont-survecu-grace-a-lesly-lainee-f2baf876-07c3-11ee-a19e-ac1a552ea695>

10 <https://www.leparisien.fr/faits-divers/un-veritable-miracle-en-colombie-comment-les-quatre-enfants-ont-ils-survecu-dans-la-jungle-pendant-40-jours-10-06-2023-BKMALMZSCZANNDP7YUR5G2D3PY.php>

11 ‘La supervivencia de los niños es una muestra del conocimiento relacionado con el medio natural de vida, el cual se enseña desde el mismo vientre de la madre’: <https://www.epe.es/es/internacional/20230611/sabiduria-indigena-ayudo-sobrevivir-ninos-88560152>

12 This principle ties in with the analyses of historian Lucienne Strivay on the adaptive capacities of “feral children”: “While these children might not be representative of Man in his natural

state, what they do reveal is the remarkable capacity of young humans to adapt, to get by in a hostile environment and to adopt certain animal behaviours all while developing non-verbal communication skills.” (<https://www.philomag.com/articles/les-enfants-sauvages-de-colombie-un-aveu-sur-la-nature-humaine>).

13 <https://www.elespectador.com/colombia/mas-regiones/a-los-cuatro-ninos-desaparecidos-los-salvo-su-crianza-indigena/>

14 Cf. <https://www.geo.fr/environnement/enfants-sauves-en-colombie-comment-la-culture-indigene-uitoto-les-a-aides-a-survivre-amazone-chasse-peche-cueillette-215176>

15 “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only.” (King James Bible Version)

16 Cf. <https://www.lejdd.fr/international/colombie-les-premiers-mots-des-quatre-enfants-retrouves-apres-40-jours-derrance-dans-la-jungle-136722> ; and <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/internacional/una-tortuga-le-cumple-el-deseo-a-los-rescatistas-y-de-inmediato-aparecieron-los-ninos-perdidos-por-40-dias-en-la-selva-colombiana-nota/>

17 See <https://www.geo.fr/environnement/enfants-sauves-en-colombie-comment-la-culture-indigene-uitoto-les-a-aides-a-survivre-amazone-chasse-peche-cueillette-215176> and BBC News Mundo: <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-65869230>

18 See <https://theconversation.com/how-traditional-indigenous-education-helped-four-lost-children-survive-40-days-in-the-amazon-jungle-207762>

19 According to a survey carried out by this author, “the term ‘vulnerability’ continues to spread, slowly but surely, across society, to the point – and this is surely a positive outcome – that an increasing number of actors are engaging with the concept. Vulnerability has become omnipresent in the media, in institutional reports and academic publications, as evidenced by the growing number of occurrences recorded by Google Scholar” (Brodiez-Dolino 2016).

20 Entitled *Los niños perdidos*, this documentary places great emphasis on the successful collaboration between the armed forces and the indigenous search teams, which was not a foregone conclusion on account of their history of conflict. It is also interesting to note that the tortoise episode is overlooked in favour of shamanic knowledge which the search teams used to follow the children’s path. The documentary dwells little on educational issues and more on the collaboration between the adults involved.