



## Article

# Reconstruction of Historical Memory: A Methodological Approach to Uncover the Reasons of the Armed Uprising in the Montes de María, Colombia

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**Abstract:** This work aims to reconstruct the historical memory of the armed conflict in the Montes de María coastline, province of Sucre, Colombia, in a moment of military confrontations and responses of defenseless civilians to the repertoire of violence caused by armed groups—specifically against the *Unión Camilista-Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN)*, the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP)*, and the paramilitary groups present in the Gulf of Morrosquillo. The objective of this study was to determine the reasons that led the community of Libertad to rise in arms and repel the abuses of armed groups by testing two hypotheses: (1) the frequency of victimizing acts consisting of sexual violence against the women of the Libertad village provoked the community to take up arms; (2) the presence of social agents, here called provocateurs of the community response, motivated the community's social cohesion and armed uprising. The research is developed using a qualitative methodology with a narrative approach that involved a sample of 49 informants, including two focus groups. We provide empirical findings which are pivotal to understanding the reasons why defenseless civilians made the decision to defend themselves with arms against illegal armed groups that invaded their territory and harassed their communities, especially when dealing with an ethnic minority such as Afro-descendants.

**Keywords:** armed conflict; resistance mechanisms; armed uprising; historical memory



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## 1. Introduction

This article reconstructs the historical memory of the armed conflict in the Afro-descendant settlement of Libertad, located in the Montes de María coastline, north of Sucre, Colombia. This population experienced a repertoire of violence and victimizing acts—(HV), defined in Law 1448 of 2001 as crimes associated with the internal armed conflict in Colombia. These were initially caused by the insurgency of the FARC-EP and the ELN Unión Camilista (1985–1993), and by the paramilitary structures of the Morrosquillo Gulf front, attached to the Héroes Montes de María Block (1993–2005) (Andrade et al. 2019; Colón and López 2020; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2016; García et al. 2018).

The forms of armed civil resistance found among the study population are unusual in Colombia, only comparable to the indigenous insurgent group Quintín Lame, the first indigenous guerrilla group in Latin America, which rebelled against the excesses of the state, landowners, and other guerrillas (Peñaranda-Supelano 2015; González-Piñeres 2004). Without becoming an Afro-descendant insurgent group, the community of Libertad used the armed uprising as an effective way to prevent and counter the violence caused by the

armed paramilitary structures from Golfo del Morrosquillo attached to the Héroes Montes de María Block.

To demonstrate that defenseless civilians can legitimize the use of armed violence to defend themselves from violent hostiles, [Kaplan \(2020\)](#) reviewed experiences of populations that, within the framework of civil autonomy, resorted to this. Table 1 lists just a few:

**Table 1.** Compendium of experiences of armed responses of civilians.

Country	Year	Source Cited in Kaplan	Event Description
Afghanistan	2009	Gall 2009	Damages caused by foreign troops' bombing attacks triggered the armed uprising of civilians in the towns of the Helmand district.
Afghanistan	2009	Gopal and Rosenberg 2009	As a result of the armed violence and the tax demand of the Taliban, the people of Nangahar took up arms against them.
Congo–Uganda	2009	Gettleman and Schmit 2009; Bavier 2009; Gettleman 2009a	Entire populations terrorized by the then Rebel Army of Resistance of the Lord (ERS), were organized in self-defense groups armed rudimentarily with shotguns, rustic weapons, and hunting weapons.
Iraq	2006	Al-Ansary and Adeeb 2006	A group of civilians organized themselves with the support of the government in self-defense against Sunni insurgents.
Mozambique	1989–1993	Wilson 1992	Groups of Jehovah's Witnesses rose against Renamo political rebels.
Sierra Leona	The 1990s	Gettleman 2009b; Gettleman 2009c; Raghavan 2010	Communities of the Dusa Marreb, especially the Sufis, rose against the Islamic extremist movement.
Sudán	The 1970s	Snapp 2010; Heaton and Fick 2010	Local militias armed themselves against the insurgent group ERS.

Source: [Kaplan \(2020\)](#).

This study aims to determine the reasons why a defenseless civilian population, an Afro-descendant ethnic minority, took up arms against the excesses and abuses of an illegal armed group. The study reconstructs the historical memory of the armed conflict and proposes two working hypotheses to be contrasted with the stories constructed in the narrative exercise: (Hypothesis 1) The frequency of victimizing acts consisting of sexual violence against the women of the Libertad village provoked the community to take up arms; (Hypothesis 2) The presence of social agents, here called provocateurs of the community response, motivated the community's social cohesion and armed uprising.

In its structure, the manuscript will be organized as follows: First, a historical–sociological journey is presented to understand the historical trace that made possible the black settlement in this geographical location and how they were immersed in the armed conflict; then a description of the affected community and the violent groups that were part of its territory is made. It continues with the methodology. Then, results are presented and contrasted to the hypotheses to find the reasons for the rebellious response of the natives. A final section concludes.

The study is expected to contribute to the empirical debate and theoretical approaches on the new forms of resistance that arise in the context of armed conflicts. It attempts to present the reasons that led a vulnerable Afro-descendant community to take up arms against an armed group, and to identify the role of third parties in the maintenance of oppression.

### 1.1. Sociological and Historical Tour of the Black Communities in the Montes de María Subregion, Colombia

We begin the tour between the 16th and 18th centuries, a period recorded in history as one of the bloodiest and most violent against humanity of beings born free and then enslaved, marketed as animals, and stripped of their soul, and cultural, ancestral, and religious identity. The colony was the most shameful time for Western civilization, particularly the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, and British. The stories and historical records establish the arrival of enslaved Africans to Nueva Granda (initial name of the Republic of Colombia) with the first conquerors in the 16th century, legally disembarking from slave ships on the shores of Cartagena de Indias, known as the first free port in America. They also arrived illegally or smuggled through the Pacific coast: Buenaventura (Valle del Cauca), Chirambirá (Chocó), Gorgona (Island), and Barbacoas (Nariño). About 25% of the slaves either never arrived, or died or committed suicide on the transatlantic route. Regarding the Atlantic coast, the destinations were: Riohacha (Guajira), Santa Marta (Magdalena), and Tolú (Sucre) (Friedemann 1993).

This is how the Ashantí, Gelofes, Yolofof, Fantís, and other tribes arrived (Aguirre-Beltrán 1972; Escalante 2002; Herskovits 1938; Malvido 2010). These tribes, or at least a large part of them, populated and reconfigured Colombian Caribbean society in settlements of libertarian slaves called Maroons, who were strategically located in the mountains, such as the Montes de la María (formerly Sierra María) and which grouped at least a dozen palenques or rebel slaves who escaped from the colonial yoke such as El Limón, Polín, Sanaguaré, Duanga, Joyanca, Zaragocilla, Torobé, La Matuna, María Angola, Arroyo Piñuela, and Sanagual.

Others made their settlements in strategic geographies of the Colombian Caribbean such as Usiacurí (province of the Atlantic); Sierra del Luruaco with the palenques of Matudere and Betancur (between the provinces of Bolívar and Atlántico); Ciénega de la Matuna, palenque de la Matuna (near the towns of Santiago de Tolú and San Onofre) (Arrazola 1970; Navarrete 2008). Some of these towns are highlighted in Figure 1. Places affected by extreme violence caused by illegal armed groups.



**Figure 1.** Municipality of San Onofre and nearby towns inhabited by Afro-descendant communities who are victims of armed violence. In the circles are highlighted: Libertad, Rincón del Mar, Pajonal Plan Parejo, San Onofre others. The figure was taken from the Agustín Codazzi Geographical Institute of Colombia.

Maroons can be understood from two perspectives: the first, as a response to oppression and the set of facts imposed by the institution of slavery, and as the first forms of violence committed by free and enslaved Africans in the context of the transatlantic slave trade recorded by history. From other perspectives, the literature perceives the maroons and all these liberation actions as a vestige of resistance and rebellion that still prevails. The following data corroborate the above statement.

In 1530 black fugitives set fire to Santa Marta; around 1533, a good number of slaves brought by the founder of Cartagena fled to the mountains of the province; in 1556, there was a significant slave rebellion in Popayan; in 1598, there was a slave uprising in the mines of Zaragoza, killing owners and fortifying themselves in palenques.

For centuries, especially in large cities, this population did not find a space to exercise their identity, territory, and autonomy. It was not until 1991 that the recently acclaimed constitution of Colombia made them visible as persons subject to rights and recognized their ethnicity, in addition to ceding territories with collective titles initially located in the Colombian Pacific basin that made their organization and territorial management possible under a legal figure called Councils. The descendants of slaves reconstructed their blackness from a heterogeneous cultural and symbolic identity process that initially occurred in the councils.

However, the ideological and political differences in Colombian society since the 1960s saw confrontation between a dominant political and economic establishment—with a capitalist–authoritarian trend—and an insurgency with a Marxist–Leninist ideology, which plunged Colombia’s territories into an internal armed conflict that once again made black communities direct and indirect victims of a foreign war that evoked the times of slavery:

“The pain of family fragmentation, the impossibility of possessing and preserving some property, the pain and mistreatment suffered by women, the linking of men to a foreign war, the ignorance of their authorities come to the collective memory, and the impossibility of autonomy over the territory”. (Rosero 2004)

Thus, we arrive at the village of Libertad, located in the northern part of the department of Sucre, which has a population of approximately 5300 people who recognize themselves as Afro-descendants with an economic dedication focused on the artisanal planting of traditional crops. They have a territorial and communitarian administration, the consejo comunitario Nuevo Horizonte. After resisting oppression and repertoire of violence for years, this community decided to take up arms against the armed actors. According to the local Office for Attention to Victims located in the municipality of San Onofre, this community registered the following HV caused by the FARC-EP insurgency between 1985 and 1993 and from that date until 2006 by the paramilitaries of the Gulf of Morrosquillo: 30 cases of torture, 136 of crimes against sexual and reproductive freedom, and 2038 forced displacements (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2011, 2013; Defensoría del Pueblo-Colombia, 2018; Navas 2017; Pardo 2020).

### 1.2. The Expansion of the Insurgency towards the Montes de María

El Carmen de Bolívar was initially the FARC-EP’s center of operations in the Colombian Caribbean Coast. The town of Salado was the strategic area used by the guerrillas for mobilization towards the mountains of the Montes de María, the foothills called Pie de Monte, and the coastline area (Alvis 2017; Trejos 2016). The FARC-EP made this sub-region a center of military operations from which they expanded their territorial domain (Andrade et al. 2019). Some trace the active presence of this guerrilla group in the Montes de María subregion to 1985, with the persecution of the EPL and peasant leaders whom they accused of negotiating their principles with the government (Verdad Abierta 2010; Andrade et al. 2019; Trejos 2016). The most memorable actions date back to 1995 and occurred in the municipality of Ovejas, where, in an ambush, 50 guerrillas attacked an infantry patrol, and one man of the guerrillas and a marine were killed. The other happened in the El Salado village, where the FARC-EP assassinated 30 soldiers (Andrade et al. 2019). One of the most fierce and hostile fronts for the civilian population was the 37 Front, also called Benkos

Biohó, which operated in the area of influence with four armed structures: Pedro Góngora Chamorro, Che Guevara, Benkos Biohó, and Palenque, the latter with direct operations in Carmen de Bolívar and the town of Salado ([Observatorio del Programa Presidencial de Derechos Humanos y DIH 2003](#); [Trejos 2013](#); [Quiroga and Ospina-Posse 2014](#)).

Figure 2 shows some facets of the town of Libertad, such as its people, homes and ways of life.



**Figure 2.** (A) Cultural expression of the natives of Libertad in the central park of the town, where they have their own version of the statue of Liberty; (B) natives of the town of Libertad in daily jobs; (C) ancestral dwellings of the village of Libertad. All photographs were supplied for the manuscript by the Press Office of the mayor’s office of the municipality of San Onofre.

Table 2 lists the most remembered incursions and victimizing events of the FARC-EP in the Montes de María.

**Table 2.** Registry of some of the victimizing acts or armed actions of the FARC-EP in the Montes de María.

Date	Region	Guerrilla Structure	Actions
1986	Montes de María, in the municipalities of Ovejas and Carmen de Bolívar	Armed command 35, Antonio José de Sucre, attached to the Caribe Block	Persecutions of EPL strongholds and peasant leaders, whom they accused of negotiating their principles with the government. Indeterminate casualties.
1995	Municipality of Ovejas	Armed command 37, Benkos Biojó, attached to the Caribe Block	Ambush, 50 guerrillas attacked an infantry patrol. A guerrilla and a marine killed.
May 1995	Municipality of Salado	Armed command 37, Benkos Biojó, attached to the Caribe Block	Assassination in an ambush of 30 soldiers.
July 1995	Municipality of Salado	Armed command Frente 37, Benkos Biojó, attached to the Caribe Block	The murder of rancher Santander Cohen.
1996	Municipality of Chalán	Armed command 35 and 37	Attack with a “donkey bomb” against the police station.
1997	Municipality of Salado	Armed command 37, Benkos Biojó, attached to Caribe Block	Unleashed an all-out war against the Méndez clan, sponsor and shaper of paramilitary groups, and involved in the 1997 Salado massacre.
1997	Municipalities of Ovejas and Los Palmitos	Armed command 35 and 37	The assassination of several mayoral candidates.

Note: own construction based on contributions found in [Andrade et al. \(2019\)](#).

### 1.3. About the Héroes Montes de María Block (AUC)

The Tangueros, a paramilitary group under the command of Fidel Castaño and later transformed into the Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá (ACCU), began their

military operations in the department of Córdoba under the principle of privatization of violence (Zelik 2015). They attacked the insurgency and its social bases, labeling peasants, leaders, trade unionists, and left-wing politicians as friends of the guerrillas. Faced with the advance of the FARC-EP, these groups expanded their military operations and settled in the Montes de María with the Rito Antonio Ochoa front commanded by Edward Cobo Téllez, alias Diego Vecino. Over time, strategically, the front was called the Héroes Montes de María Block, with military operations in Sucre and Bolívar (González 2014; Quiroga and Ospina-Posse 2014; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2013, 2016, 2018).

One of the paramilitary incursions most remembered for the brutality and planning of the operation occurred in the heart of Montes de María. It happened at Chengue, El Salado, and Macayepo (Prada-Sanmiguel 2016; Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica 2018). Table 3 summarizes the raids mentioned.

**Table 3.** Description of some of the massacres perpetrated by the paramilitaries in the Montes de María.

Date	Region	Paramilitary Structure	Number of Victims
Between 16 and 21 February 2000	Montes de María, in the townships of Salado, Loma de las Vacas and Balguero (Carmen de Bolívar); Canutal, Canutalito and Bajo Grande (Ovejas)	Gulf of Morrosquillo and Canal del Dique fronts led by alias Cadena and Juancho Dique respectively. Commanders from other fronts also participated: alias Gallo, el Tigre, and el Negro Mosquera (the last two were deserters from the FARC), Cinco Siete, Amaury, and Pantera	60 victims (52 men and 8 women), including 3 minors under 18 years old
14 October 2000	Township of Macayepo, department of Bolívar (Montes de María)	Héroes Montes de María block, specifically the Gulf of Morrosquillo front led by alias Cadena	16 peasants
17 January 2001	Chengue department of Bolívar (Montes de María)	Héroes Montes de María block, specifically the Gulf of Morrosquillo front led by alias Cadena	27 peasants
11 March 2000	Las Brisas department of Bolívar (Montes de María)	Héroes Montes de María block, specifically the Canal del Dique front, led by alias Juancho Dique	12 peasants

Source: Own construction from the data compiled in the works of Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica (2009, 2013), Verdad Abierta (2014), reports from the Washington Post (2001) and the investigation of Romero-Acosta et al. (2017).

In the case of violence against freedom and sexual integrity, we find ourselves before one of the most aberrant punishable acts committed against the person's physical, moral, social, and psychological integrity, becoming a destructive act individually and communally. Although there are cases of sexual violence against men, the bodies of women especially have become trophies, objects to satisfy sexual desires, spoils of war, and instruments to inflict fear on the population by illegal armed groups and agents of the state (Unidad de Víctimas 2021). Along the same lines, a pronouncement of (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, Sala Segunda de Revisión 2008), women, youth, and girls who suffered sexual violence during the conflict were victimized in the following ways: rape, forced reproductive planning, forced prostitution, sexual abuse, sexual slavery by commanders and chiefs, forced pregnancy and abortion, and contagion of sexually transmitted infections.

The data is chilling. According to the unique registry of the Victims Unit of the armed conflict with a cut-off date of 31 December 2021, 34,488 crimes against sexual and reproductive freedom and integrity are registered in Colombia. On the same date and according to the same entity, in the Montes de María alone, a Colombian subregion made up of 15 municipalities that are part of the departments of Bolívar and Sucre, 1857 women were victims of sexual violence. The reality of other regions with a predominantly Afro-descendant population is just as complex. In the department of Bolívar (continuous to the department of Sucre), 2657 victims of sexual violence were registered, while in Chocó, the

figure stands at 2157, Antioquia 5044, and there are 1756 registered cases in Valle de Cauca (Unidad de Víctimas 2021).

## 2. Results

This section presents discontinuous narratives with multiple voices. These are shared without composing a single and sequential text, but instead allow the participation of different protagonists who contribute to the narrative based on their voices without losing the autonomy they have due to their knowledge of the fact or situation (Barbara and Bonet-Martí 2009). The narratives corresponding to the experiences presented are a reflection of what Escamilla and Novoa (2017) would call the complexity of social manifestations, which are assembled from their meaning, fragmented and lonely, to perceive them as a complex whole that constitutes the history of conflict in the Montes de María Coast.

The sequentiality of the narrative is presented as follows: arrival of the armed conflict in the territory, repertoire of violence and social changes resulting from the conflict, prior to the armed uprising, and consequences of the armed uprising.

### 2.1. The Arrival of the Armed Conflict in the Territory

In some areas of the influence zone of the black communities belonging to the study, and especially those located in the mountainous area of the Montes de María, people assumed the arrival of the armed conflict with conflicting and confusing visions given the presence in their territory of strangers carrying uniform and long arms, carbines or shotguns (around 1986). Far from understanding that these people belonged to the V front of the FARC-EP and came to make their territory a strategic rearguard bastion, for the natives were only people from the interior and Chinese.

(...) these FARC people sometimes went down from the village of La Palmira..., but sometimes they also went down through the village of Buenos Aires. They went out from the villages of Macayepo to Palmira and then went to Buenos Aires and from there to the El Floral hill. Then, to the village of Mesa and Carmen de Bolívar. We did not know who they were, just armed people, Chinese and cachacos, who patrolled and patrolled from one place to another... but they did not mess with the peasant. (3.12.2020.CZM1.SO)

(...) concerning the treatment from the guerrilla before the facts of violence... It was always typical for us, even cordial. They asked for permission to go through the farm and asked for animals and milk. Sometimes, they bought them, but they acted by force? No! That is why we affirm that our relative was not kidnapped by the guerrillas but by the paramilitaries. (3.12.2020.FHJ1.SO)

(...) among other things, people found the imprint of the boots, and then they already knew that the guerrilla was in the area... Around '97 or '96, as the grandparents said, my dad too... he had a cousin who was in those groups, and he says that he saw them all the time because they never stopped patrolling the area but never mistreated the civilian population. (5.12.2020.CZN1.SO)

Another case was lived by the natives who settled on the plains, away from the hills or coastal territory. Excesses and repertoires of violence accompanied the paramilitary groups from the Gulf of Morrosquillo front belonging to the Héroes Montes de María block from 1992 to 2006.

(...) regarding the first demonstrations or appearances of the armed paramilitary structures in the village of Berrugas, I heard that there was an armed confrontation when they arrived. They arrived in cars to Berrugas, people arrived... and we sensed that something was happening. That happened in the year 99. The threatening meetings began and started the social control and collective fear. (12.2.2021.LC.BE)

The FARC-EP and ELN guerrillas and the paramilitary structures of the Gulf of Morrosquillo front inflicted on the civilian population a whole repertoire of violence that resulted in innumerable crimes called victimizing acts according to Colombian Law 1448, also called the Victims and Land Restitution Law. The armed actions of these groups were oriented towards harassment, kidnapping, cattle theft, and other no-less-essential crimes against landowners and politicians, especially from the province of San Onofre.

(...) I was on a farm called “El delirio” when a guerrilla group arrived. It was one of my first scares... I took care of that farm as a day laborer. The first thing that the leader said was that they were hungry and ordered to kill a turkey. I was alone on the farm with the administrator’s wife, and she arrived frightened with two tears in her eyes, but I was more frightened than she was! She told me to kill the turkey, and we made the food for them. (4.12.2020.EXG1.SO)

(...) in reality, the guerrillas only attacked the landowners and ranchers in the area ... Sometimes we found them on the farms and, when not, on the ranch. (5.12.2020.CZN1.SO)

The actions of the paramilitary groups were directed to the people perceived as helping the guerrilla groups and have been widely registered.

(...) people could not work freely; we could not keep animals on the street because they were stolen... He entered any house without asking permission, and if he saw any little animal, a hen, or a chicken in the house, he said, “I’ll take it” and took it away. Another way of exercising violence was at the village fairs, arbitrarily charging tariffs per person and family. We had to find the money, or they would kill us. (11.2.2021.Ci.Li)

(...) one of the paramilitaries threatened the women from Rincón del Mar. Once, he severely mistreated a woman, cutting her head with a machete... she was sexually abused by a group of paramilitaries on several occasions. (10.2.2021.LC.RM)

(...) that day they moved... There were about 32 houses in the town, which were 32 families. There was no one left in the village... everyone was displaced! One part of the population arrived in San Onofre, the other in Sincelejo and Cartagena. All the people left immediately. (3.12.2020.CZM1.SO)

## 2.2. Before the Armed Uprising

In the case that concerns us, some situations contribute to the proof of the hypotheses raised. The case of the uprising occurred in the village of Libertad, a unique case in Colombia as far as we know, although as described above, [Kaplan \(2020\)](#) condenses in his study on civil autonomy how vulnerable communities resist war. These other experiences occurred in Iraq, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Congo, and others. Confluences of excesses and fatigue added to acts of bravery, among other things, motivated the uprising in the community of Libertad, a fact that did not happen in other nearby towns.

(...) when he arrives in the village of Libertad, he begins to implement a repertoire of violence, begins to impose his norms. Given the number of his armed men, he arbitrarily imposes his social norms. (11.2.2021.Ci.Li)

(...) regarding the sexual abuse of women from Libertad, the first time we learned that he sexually abused women was from a beauty contest that he invented to choose the most beautiful girls from the villages of San Onofre. He took them to a personal camp he had, and there he raped them one by one... many denounced them, but not all of them. (5.12.2020.CZN1.SO)

(...) what finally happened to him was that the community ended up lynching and murdering him ... it was going to happen to him initially. We, natives, get tired of the atrocities of these paramilitary groups. (5.12.2020.CZN1.SO)

(...) Since the week before the uprising, the Libertad community wanted to rebel. We were tired of all the abuses... so the community said that the paramilitaries were tired and defeated by the confrontations and actions of the marines. (10.2.2021.LC.RM)

(...) There was the end of oppression... it was the end of being a submissive town. We organized ourselves, we told other nearby towns that they would support us in what we wanted to do, but they were scared! We free ourselves! We liberate ourselves. (5.12.2020.CZN1.SO)

### 2.3. Consequences of the Armed Uprising

The uprising had direct consequences on the black collective. There were 5 days of anguish for the residents due to the decision made. However, the community cohesion and the courage of a leader who motivated the uprising allowed him to recover from fear and organize the strategy to follow. The residents took a census to determine the weapons knowledge of some of them and thus a large group gathered at the entrances and exits of the town to stand guard. The role of women was to protect the integrity of families by mounting guards armed with machetes, hoes, and rustic tools at the entrances of homes. Others were in charge of food, and a group made contact with a marine infantry battalion stationed in the province continuing to Sucre, who provided security. Some natives who participated in the rebellion wanted to impose a new social order led by themselves but were quickly rejected by the village.

(...) after that, there was a space of great fear. The paramilitaries threatened to take over the town. However, we were determined to repel the attack and posted guards at the entrance to the village. (11.2.2021.LC.Li)

(...) On the sixth day after killing a paramilitary, a marine commander arrived. He arrived at Libertad with 100 men in three trucks. They found a small group of paramilitaries, between 10 and 15 people, and a confrontation occurred. (5.12.2020.CZN1.SO)

(...) There was an exchange of fire between the marines and the paramilitaries... God! They were going to massacre us. However, precisely, and thank God, they encountered the marines at that moment, and there was a confrontation. The people said they were going to destroy the town, but the marine infantry killed 12 paramilitaries in the confrontation. (5.12.2020.CZN4.SO)

### 2.4. Situational Elements That Made the Difference

There were many atypical situations in the experience of Libertad village. The description of these will be used to contrast the hypotheses of the study, and they will be interpreted from theoretical approaches to determine the reasons or situations on which a community, in this case, Afro-descendant, could respond in arms against an oppressive armed group.

**Hypothesis 1.** *The frequency of victimizing acts consisting of sexual violence against women in the community of Libertad provoked the armed uprising in this community.*

According to the local office of the Unidad de Atención a Víctimas del Conflicto Armado, from the Municipality of San Onofre, there are 136 registered cases of sexual violence against Afro-descendant women in the village of Libertad. This data was contrasted in the focus groups with the representatives of the 13 communitarian councils, and they agree that the numbers could be tripled since many victims decided not to report for fear of retaliation from the armed groups or for fear of social rejection.

Table 4 shows the cases of crimes against freedom and sexual integrity registered in the most populated villages of this municipality.

**Table 4.** Registered cases of crimes against freedom and sexual integrity in the villages of the municipality of San Onofre.

Village	Registered Cases of Crimes against Freedom and Sexual Integrity
Libertad	136
Rincón del Mar	18
Berrugas	12
Pajonal	7
Palo Alto	5
Plan Parejo	3

Source: Office of Assistance to Victims of the Armed Conflict of the Municipality of San Onofre.

Neither the individual interviews nor the focus groups were direct and conclusive in determining whether the frequency of crimes against freedom and sexual integrity was decisive in the collective decision to take up arms. However, the frequency of this crime in this population compared to other neighboring towns is undeniable. On the other hand, the sexual violation against minors that occurred in social events and was only recorded in Libertad was an act that the community despised and that cannot go unnoticed.

**Hypothesis 2.** *The presence of social agents, here called provocateurs of the community response, motivated social cohesion and the armed uprising in the community of Libertad.*

This action was preceded by a triggering social event independent of the accumulation of frustrations, excesses of the armed groups, and collective fear that ended in a collective explosion. It was decisive in the uprising as an event that did not occur in other towns. A determined social agent who provoked the uprising and its support in the following days guaranteed the success of the community response.

Trigger action

(...) people reacted aggressively because a paramilitary assaulted a young man. I'm sure the community does not react that way, but he was wrong, which was the moment to unleash the community's fury. (5.12.2020.CZN1.SO)

The collective euphoria

(...) They were going to catch him. He escaped, and the people chased him for several hours until they captured him at around 5 in the morning. They attacked him with sticks and stones on the bridge located at the entrance to the town. While he was still alive, they threw a big stone at him that crushed his head... there he dies. (5.12.2020.CZN6.SO)

The agent provocateur of the community response

(...) after that event, people were terrified... I remember a woman that arrived, a great leader, someone with the power to organize people. She said that after we tried, we couldn't back down. That is not possible. She began to write a letter where we asked for support from the government and directly from the armed forces. The letter said that if something happened to the community, the responsibility lay with the State. She also organized us and gave us courage. We believe that the village would not have taken the step of rebellion without her. Without her guiding us, we would not have freed ourselves. (11.2.2021.Ci.Li)

In the village of Rincón del Mar, an action was presented that fits as a triggering action, but that did not end in rebellion.

(...) one of the paramilitaries threatened the women of Rincón del Mar. Once, he physically abused a young woman, giving her some cuts on the head. The woman, in a struggle, takes the gun from him and tries to shoot him, but not knowing how to use it, he takes it from her. Then he shaves her head with an old machete. All this happened in front of the community. It was a public act. We all saw it. He abuses her repeatedly for several days and together with several

paramilitaries. I believe that if the woman murdered him, the people would have rebelled. I think that was the trigger that Rincón del Mar needed to rebel. (10.2.2021.LC.RM)

There was no collective euphoria response, and no agent provocateur was present in this case.

(...) in this village, there was no rebellion! There was never a rebellion against the paramilitaries...! It was not like in the case of Libertad that rebelled. In Libertad, they decided to rebel, but not here, not here in Rincón del Mar. (10.2.2021.LC.RM1)

(...) About why Libertad revealed, and Rincón del Mar did not, here we lived different situations. The pressure from illegal groups was so hard, and some people were forced to join the armed structures. (15.2.2021.LC.RM5)

(...) Suddenly some people wanted to know how it feels to have the power of the armed structure. Suddenly that made people not rebel themselves as much. There were people from here who influenced the rebellion not to take place. Before the arrival of the paramilitaries, there were people who had illicit businesses, and it was convenient for them to work with the paramilitaries. They worked to avoid the rebellion taking place. (15.2.2021.LC.RM4)

The analysis of the narratives makes it possible to specify the existence of the triad Trigger Action, Collective Euphoria, Provocative Agent of the community response, only in the case of Libertad.

If we review the cases of violence exerted by the armed groups in other nearby villages and the absence of rebellion, we will notice the presence of some elements but not the confluence of the three. It is essential to distinguish between the social leader with community recognition, determined to work collectively aimed at defending the rights of their communities, and with expertise in applying the laws that protect the constitutional rights of the communities. This leader is present in all the villages, and his work is linked to community councils or organizations with a lower organizational level. That leader was never influential in provoking a rebellious response in his community; fear stopped him like the rest of the population. He did not propose a plan of rebellion to follow; he never trusted that a plan of collective action would succeed.

Otherwise, the agent provocateur of the community response that we mention here has different behavioral characteristics. We refer to an agent outside the community but with social work within it, which gives her a community status of acceptance and credibility. Someone with a certain level of academic training with another vision and understanding of the armed conflict, capable of identifying social dynamics, patterns, nonconformity feelings, as well as the right moment to rise with the community.

Table 5 shows the presence and consequences of the social agent that provokes the social response. There it is observed that the absence of him in other villages did not provoke the community response.

**Table 5.** Analysis of the presence of agents provocateurs of the social responsibility in the different villages of the municipality of San Onofre.

Village	Presence of Cases Typified as a Triggering Action	Presence of Social Leaders	Presence of People Who Provoke a Social Response	Civil Rebellion
Libertad	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rincón del Mar	Yes	Yes	No	No
Berrugas	Yes	Yes	No	No
Plan Parejo	Yes	Yes	No	No
Pajonal	Yes	Yes	No	No
Palo Alto	Yes	Yes	No	No

Source: own authorship made from the analysis of the collected narratives and the data provided by the office of assistance to victims of the municipality of San Onofre.

### 3. Materials and Methods

#### 3.1. Design

The narrative approach was used, a perspective that in qualitative research arises from the need to understand the stories told and that ultimately reveal the human behavior assumed at a historical point in the life of the informants; in this case, the natives of the villages of Rincón del Mar, Libertad, the urban center of the municipality of San Onofre and other nearby towns affected by armed violence. This perspective collects subjectivities and builds meanings (García-Huidobro 2016; Packer 2013). In research, the narrative is understood as the way to co-construct, and question lived reality, as well as an epistemological and ontological input, focused on experience, curiosity about the lived event, and the factors that intervene in the experience of the person (Ugarriza and Pabón 2017; Sparkes and Devís 2018).

#### 3.2. Shows

The sample was selected considering its relevance in terms of convenience rather than the numerical representativeness of the universe. In this regard, 16 informants who were direct victims of the armed conflict in different affectations were selected; this was a homogeneous sample combined with a typical case. Those selected have similar features representing the study's focus (Mertens 2010). Two additional focus groups were formed, the first composed of all the representatives of the community councils of the northern territory of the department of Sucre (13 in total) and the second with the community representatives with a lower level of organization (10 informants). Interviews were also conducted with two ex-guerrilla commanders, four ex-policemen, and four ex-paramilitaries, whose stories were used to structure the work. In total, the sample consisted of 49 individuals with whom the entire narrative approach was worked on for 6 months.

#### 3.3. Inclusion Criteria

The participants are inhabitants of the districts of the municipality of San Onofre and the towns of Libertad, Rincón del Mar, Plan Parejo, Berrugas, San Antonio, and Palo Alto. All adults, as well as leaders responsible for the organizational process of other community councils and foundations with a lower administrative level.

The participants were selected according to the profiles considered essential in reconstructing the historical memory of the armed conflict. The informants are victims of the internal armed conflict or its associated violent acts, with similar sociocultural and economic characteristics: small businessmen, politicians, social leaders, former members of the public force, former members of the guerrilla groups, teachers, and peasants.

#### 3.4. Technique

The study uses the phenomenological or in-depth interview as a technique, which allowed discovering, interpreting, and giving meaning to the blacks' customs, ideologies, and worldviews of Montes de María. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed in Word version 2016, and analyzed with Atlas.ti version 8.0.

#### 3.5. Process

- (a) It began with collecting data on the experiences of various participants. In a first exploratory phase, representative and recognized social leaders were contacted in several meetings to socialize the object and scope of the study. This exercise allowed the identification of the first informants (Afro-descendant peasants with experiences of interaction with the insurgency, predominantly from the FARC-EP, ELN, and the AUC). The reconstruction of their historical memory of the conflict was worked from affectations, interactions, moments, places, and situations.
- (b) Regarding the analysis of behaviors and personal narratives to have a general overview of the experiences, this step is related to and was used as a complement to the exploratory phase to corroborate the previous knowledge that was acquired about the

participants, their experiences and lives, in short, about their social realities and ways of constructing and interpreting them. Thus, in the first step, an inventory of the collection and existing documents was made; next, the documents were classified according to the demographic characteristics and content of the narratives; then a detailed review of the narratives made it possible to exclude information considering their relevance and contribution to the study (Sandoval-Casalimas 1996).

- (c) Identification of the units of meaning and generating categories, themes, and patterns, detecting citations or key units: At first, a qualitative data analysis matrix was built from a priori and conceptual categories based on the theory that supported the study. Subsequently, after an in-depth reading of the interviews or narratives compiled and their comparative analysis, new emerging categories emerged. Some categories already established are renamed, which allows extracting elements of analysis that reconstruct and represent the totality of the reality studied (Sandoval-Casalimas 1996).
- (d) The elaboration of a generic description of the experiences and their structure (conditions in which they occurred, the situations that surround them, and the context): Here, relationships are generated between the categories with which it is possible to carry out a systemic sweep of the data that ultimately manages to create the expected significance in the investigative exercise, although segmented according to the findings and partial interpretations (Sandoval-Casalimas 1996). This point is addressed regarding the definition of categories and subcategories and their relation.
- (e) Finally, the development of a narrative that combines descriptions and structure to convey the essence of the experience in terms of the phenomenon studied: The narrative designs are intended to understand the succession of events or situations told by those who lived or experienced it at different moments of the event. The research finally assembles the narrative data segments into a general story that includes chronologies, experiences, social constructs, perceptions, longings, and relevant facts.

Table 6 shows the structure of the script that was used in the narrative exercise with the affected populations:

**Table 6.** Shows the structure of the script that structured the narrative work.

Arrival of the Armed Conflict in the Territory	Repertoire of Violence and Social Changes Resulting from the Conflict	Causes of the Armed Uprising of Defenseless Civilians	Consequences of the Armed Uprising	Situational Elements that Made the Difference
Presence in the community of armed strangers.	Differences between the guerrillas and the paramilitaries.	Frequency and types of victimizing acts.	Generalized fear of the consequences of the uprising.	Community decision to rebel and overcome fear.
Places of concentration and suspicious movements.	The first victimizing acts.	Excesses of paramilitary groups.	Strengthening of social cohesion.	Leaders or social agents that motivated the uprising.
First contacts with the civilian population.	Perpetuity of the victimizing acts.	Threats to family cohesion and security.	Attempted armed reprisals by armed groups.	Little presence of armed troops belonging to illegal armed groups.
			State protection.	Frequency of sexual violations.

#### 4. Conclusions

The narratives compiled here demonstrate the sequentiality of the armed conflict in the territory of an Afro-descendant population. It was the Colombian insurgency around 1985, and especially the faction of the Camilista Union of the ELN and the FARC-EP (although a front of the Popular Liberation Army, EPL, was also present), who in the first instance made an active presence in the Litoral Montes de Maria. The Afro-descendant peasants did not know how to distinguish the armed actor except by his clothing, weapons, and accent.

Contrary to the generalized imaginary, the narratives separate peaceful coexistence, strategic control, territorial control, and indoctrination. The landowners and local politicians, already in search of flat land, suffered social depredation and the excesses of the insurgency—kidnappings, extortion, homicides, cattle theft, and land dispossession—becoming, according to the collective imagination of the peasants in the area, promoters of the emergence of paramilitary structures.

Libertad, a village of Afro-descendants, decided to take up arms against armed actors after years of oppression and violence. In this regard, two hypotheses were tested in this research: (Hypothesis 1) The frequency of victimizing acts consisting of sexual violence against the women of the Libertad village provoked the community to take up arms; (Hypothesis 2) The presence of social agents, here called provocateurs of the community response, motivated the community's social cohesion and armed uprising.

Although the number of sexual crimes in Libertad are alarming and cannot go unnoticed, even when compared to nearby villages, findings are not determinant to affirm that the frequency of crimes against freedom and sexual integrity were decisive to rebel. Otherwise, the results demonstrated that the presence of an agent provocateur was key for the community response. This agent has specific characteristics, i.e., she had academic training and was an accepted and reliable outsider due to her work within the community. This was pivotal for bringing other visions and an understanding of the armed conflict to the village.

The most consistent contribution of the study falls on the confluence of situations of the triad Trigger Action, Collective Euphoria, Provocative Agent of the community response as determinants or predictors of the rebellion against armed groups by a community of defenseless civilians.

The case of Libertad is, as far as we know, a unique case in Colombia of an Afro-descendant population's uprising against armed actors. Since what happened in Libertad was not a general constant throughout Colombia's armed conflict, further comparative studies with similar situations shall be conducted for a greater understanding of this particular phenomenon.

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