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Strengthening Zenú narratives and lyrics through digitization in school and community contexts

Fortalecimiento de narrativas y líricas Zenú mediante la digitalización en contextos escolares y comunitarios

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Abstract

Oral tradition is fundamental to the cultural identity of the Zenú people; however, the progressive loss of this knowledge has been evident in school settings, which, according to consulted background information and diagnostic evidence, originates from the poor articulation between school and community, resulting in: students distanced from their roots, from ancestral knowledge that has given meaning to the territory and their worldview. Therefore, the objective was to safeguard the Zenú oral tradition through the digitization of narratives and lyrics in cultural encounters between elders and 5th-grade students at the Alianza Educational Institution. The study was developed using a qualitative approach, employing Participatory Action Research (PAR), allowing for the active participation of students and elders. Interviews, workshops, and digital portfolios in podcast format on the SoundCloud platform were used to record traditional narratives and lyrics. The results show a greater recognition of Zenú culture among students, strengthening their sense of belonging and fostering dialogue among different forms of knowledge. The use of digital tools facilitated interest in and understanding of cultural content, leading to the conclusion that integrating ancestral knowledge and digital technologies promotes the preservation of Zenú intangible heritage and contributes to a relevant, inclusive, and intercultural education.

Keywords: Oral tradition, Zenú culture, Intercultural pedagogy, Educational podcast, Cultural identity.

Resumen

La tradición oral es fundamental en la identidad cultural del pueblo Zenú; pero, se ha evidenciado en contextos escolares la pérdida progresiva de estos saberes, que según antecedentes consultados y evidencia diagnóstica se origina por la escasa articulación entre escuela y comunidad obteniendo como resultado: estudiantes alejados de sus raíces, de saberes ancestrales que han dado sentido al territorio y su cosmovisión. Por eso, el objetivo fue salvaguardar la tradición oral Zenú a través de la digitalización de narrativas y líricas en encuentros culturales entre sabedores y educandos de 5° de la I.E. Alianza. El estudio se desarrolló en enfoque cualitativo, utilizando la Investigación Acción Participativa (IAP), permitiendo la participación activa de estudiantes y sabedores. Se aplicaron entrevistas, talleres y portafolios digitales en formato podcast en la plataforma SoundCloud registrando narrativas y líricas tradicionales. Los resultados evidencian un mayor reconocimiento de la cultura Zenú por parte de los estudiantes, fortaleciendo su sentido de pertenencia y el diálogo de saberes. El uso de herramientas digitales facilitó el interés y la apropiación de los contenidos culturales; concluyendo que la integración de saberes ancestrales y tecnologías digitales favorece la preservación del patrimonio inmaterial Zenú y aporta a una educación intercultural, pertinente e inclusiva.

Palabras clave: Tradición oral, Cultura Zenú, Pedagogía intercultural, Podcast educativo, Identidad cultural.

Introduction

The cultural identity of indigenous peoples has historically been a central pillar in shaping their worldview and ensuring the survival of their practices, knowledge, customs, traditions, and collective memory. Oral tradition is deeply embedded within this identity. In the case of the Zenú people, this includes narratives such as myths, legends, folktales, and lyrical expressions—including pastoral songs, calls of the forest, décimas, and poetry—which have been regarded by elders and traditional knowledge holders as the primary vehicles for transmitting knowledge, ethical and moral values, norms of coexistence, collective memories, and ways of relating to the land.

However, a set of interrelated social, cultural, educational, and technological causes and situations are currently emerging that have led to the progressive loss of ancestral oral tradition. Among these, globalization and the influence of external cultural models through mass media and digital platforms stand out, as they tend to standardize cultural practices and displace local knowledge.

Similarly, the breakdown of intergenerational bonds essential for the transmission of oral tradition, due to changes in family, educational, and community dynamics; since gatherings in family courtyards, around campfires, at community work parties (mingas), and during festivities have become limited—events that young people rarely attend due to a lack of interest—and have allowed the influx of new cultural references foreign to their sociocultural context, territorial and symbolic disconnection, and educational models facing a progressive process of weakening that threatens their continuity.

This situation is particularly evident in the educational context of fifth-grade students at the Alianza Educational Institution, located in the Cabildo Menor Urbano of the Zenú People, in the municipality of San Andrés de Sotavento, where limited knowledge of the narratives and lyrics characteristic of the Zenú oral tradition has been observed, posing a significant risk to the survival of these cultural expressions. The absence of indigenous cultural references within the school curriculum not only jeopardizes the survival of ancestral knowledge but also negatively impacts the development of a strong cultural identity among the children who are part of the Zenú indigenous community.

This issue calls into question certain traditional teaching methods rooted in homogeneous and decontextualized models that disregard the indigenous peoples' own knowledge. It is worth noting that the gradual loss of the Zenú oral tradition not only weakens cultural heritage but also poses a challenge for the field of education and so-called "indigenous-led education" in indigenous contexts, given the difficulty of integrating ancestral knowledge into educational institutions.

In many cases, schools have replicated decontextualized educational models that do not engage effectively with the knowledge of the local territory. Mercado and Guerra (2025) assert that there is a marked lack of educational and community strategies to effectively safeguard this knowledge by integrating it into the school context in a meaningful, participatory manner that respects its cultural value. The disconnect between schools and the community has led to fragmentation in the teaching and learning processes of ancestral oral traditions, limiting opportunities for intergenerational knowledge exchange.

This concern has been repeatedly expressed by various members of this community, including traditional knowledge holders, community leaders, indigenous authorities, and elders of the Zenú people, who acknowledge the deterioration of educational dynamics associated with traditional oral traditions. Therefore, it is necessary to

innovate in pedagogical strategies that enable the strengthening of the Zenú oral tradition within the educational sphere.

For this reason, the research group has organized cultural encounters between traditional knowledge holders and students as a methodological alternative to foster the intergenerational exchange of narratives and poetry from the oral tradition and the collective construction of contextualized learning, redefining the classroom as a space for intercultural dialogue and experiential learning.

The intervention focuses on a pedagogical innovation based on experiential learning, which, according to Gutiérrez (2024), aims for students to analyze their context, explore their reality, identify problems, and construct relevant solutions based on their prior knowledge, empirical insights, and theoretical foundations. In this case, this innovation is aimed at strengthening the Zenú oral tradition through the digitization of narratives and lyrics.

Research such as that conducted by Wiysahnyuy and Ngalim (2023) in the Nso community of Cameroon demonstrates the pedagogical potential of the oral tradition when it is consciously integrated into school settings. Through the use of folk tales as an educational tool, the authors demonstrate that students not only strengthen their textual comprehension but also develop communicative, argumentative, and participatory skills. These results support the relevance of using Zenú narratives and lyrics as mediators of learning, while simultaneously strengthening students' cultural identity.

Although elders, wise people, and leaders gather in the malocas for various purposes, intergenerational gatherings have been limited by a lack of time and a lack of interest among children and young people. This has led to an emotional and affective distancing from Zenú culture, the perception that their knowledge is not valued, and a fear of being forgotten and met with indifference. As a result, there is a progressive loss of ancestral oral tradition, which may contribute in part to the loss of the Zenú people's cultural identity.

The situation described demonstrates that the Zenú oral tradition is facing a process of progressive decline that directly affects the continuity of the Zenú people's collective memory. Hence the urgent need to implement educational initiatives that strengthen the oral tradition and intergenerational bonds as an essential component of the educational process and community life. This research is justified as a significant

contribution to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and to the development of an intercultural, contextualized, and culturally relevant education.

Recent studies have consistently highlighted the role that educational institutions must play in strengthening intangible cultural heritage, particularly with regard to the oral traditions of indigenous peoples. Hernández (2025), in his study on the strengthening of intangible cultural heritage in Mexico, demonstrates that, despite the existence of regulatory frameworks aimed at protecting intangible heritage, the actions implemented by educational institutions remain insufficient. His findings underscore the need to effectively integrate this knowledge into educational programs, which is especially relevant in contexts such as that of the Zenú people.

This contribution prompts reflection on the urgency of designing pedagogical strategies contextualized from the earliest levels of education. Therefore, this research aims to address this concern by applying it to the context of elementary education, specifically with fifth-grade students, where limitations in the knowledge and appreciation of the narratives and lyrics characteristic of the Zenú oral tradition are evident. The inclusion of cultural encounters between traditional knowledge holders and students, as well as the digitization of the collected material, are proposed as concrete actions to strengthen this tradition by incorporating them into the educational process.

The study by Torres-Toukoumidis and Hermosa (2021) highlights the importance of incorporating up-to-date communicative methodologies for the dissemination and appropriation of ancestral knowledge among indigenous peoples. They assert that the digitization of ancestral knowledge, accompanied by an interpretive approach to cultural codes and local linguistics, promotes the understanding and reinterpretation of the past in contemporary educational contexts. This perspective aligns with the research proposal, which suggests the digitization of Zenú narratives and lyrics as a pedagogical strategy to strengthen intergenerational communication and cultural transmission.

In developing these strategies, it is essential to take into account the willingness of traditional knowledge holders and elders to recount or sing the knowledge of the oral tradition and, above all, to respect—from an ethical and moral standpoint—their rights as bearers of knowledge. In this regard, Guzmán, Rincón, and Sánchez (2022), in their study with students from the Pijao ethnic group, highlight the shared responsibility of educational institutions in preserving ancestral knowledge,

emphasizing the need to respect and value the specific spaces and moments dedicated to the transmission of oral tradition.

Furthermore, Ospina and Robelto (2021) analyze the challenges faced by the digitization of cultural narratives in the processes of social appropriation of intangible cultural heritage. They point out that one of the main challenges is transforming the compilation of ancestral knowledge into educational experiences with social impact. This approach reinforces the importance of ensuring that the digitization of the Zenú oral tradition becomes a meaningful pedagogical process that promotes reflection, intercultural dialogue, and appreciation of intangible cultural heritage within the educational community.

Methodology

This research was conducted using a qualitative approach, as it examines and describes the implementation of an intercultural pedagogical strategy aimed at strengthening the oral tradition of the Zenú people, based on the voices, experiences, and meanings expressed by the participants involved: elders, traditional knowledge holders, and students. This approach allows for the collection of participants' perceptions, assessments, and experiences, recognizing the interpretive richness of their narratives and cultural practices (Bonifaz, 2024).

The qualitative nature of the study is relevant because it enables an exploration of the expressions of the oral tradition—narratives and lyrics comprising stories, myths, legends, pastoral songs, and forest calls—as they have been transmitted within the community from generation to generation. Each expression of oral tradition contains elements of the Zenú worldview, related to historical memory, the territory, and the Zenú way of understanding the world.

From this perspective, the research emphasizes cultural significance as conveyed by the words of the traditional knowledge holders, elders, and students participating in the educational sessions. The qualitative approach was chosen due to the need to understand the Zenú oral tradition, which is rich in meaning, emotions, and collective memories. The selected methodological design was Participatory Action Research (PAR), as it fosters the active participation of the research subjects.

For this reason, fifth-grade students are involved in identifying who the keepers of the oral tradition are and assist in the collection, analysis, and digitization of oral narratives alongside the keepers and elders of the Zenú community. PARI promotes critical reflection on cultural and educational realities, as well as the collective construction of knowledge through action and dialogue (Altamirano, 2020).

Furthermore, the study population consists of 150 fifth-grade students from the Alianza School and five tradition bearers and/or elders belonging to the Urban Minor Council of the Zenú People in the municipality of San Andrés de Sotavento. Selection criteria included students with strong oral and written communication skills, active listening abilities, an interest in Zenú culture, voluntary participation, and commitment. A purposive sample of 30 students was selected, following the approach proposed by Hernández and Carpio (2019), who note that this type of sampling allows researchers to work with participants who meet conditions relevant to achieving the research objectives.

The intentional selection of participants ensured cultural relevance and commitment to the study's general and specific objectives, while digitization through podcasts was defined as a methodological and pedagogical strategy that bridges tradition and technology, fostering cultural appropriation through contemporary forms of expression.

Data collection techniques included semistructured interviews, audio recordings of narratives and lyrics, participant observation, and data triangulation. The interviews facilitated dialogue with the traditional knowledge holders. (Salamanca et al., 2024) state that the semi-structured interview "allows for interaction with the context and social actors, fostering dialogue through a series of open-ended questions, taking into account that the interviewee narrates and describes their daily life" (p. 104).

Figure 1 Research Process



Source: Research team

Meanwhile, the narratives provided insight into the Zenú community's worldview. In this regard, (Nieto et al., 2022) consider that narratives, as a research technique, "reveal the social representations, imaginaries, conceptions, beliefs, understandings, and worldview regarding the lived experience of those who tell them" (p. 223).

For its part, triangulation strengthened the credibility of the analysis by comparing various sources and perspectives, as it "helps the researcher visualize the results in a more reliable manner by obtaining two or three points of view on the subjects under study and expressing their ideas as accurately as possible while approaching the proposed objective." Jiménez, (2020; p. 79).

Methodologically, the process unfolded in the four phases proposed by Rodríguez et al. (2014): preparation, fieldwork, analysis, and dissemination. Furthermore, compliance with ethical considerations was ensured through the use of informed consent, the confidentiality of information, and respect for ancestral knowledge, in accordance with Resolution 8430 of 1993.

The digitization of the narratives culminated in a portfolio of podcasts, serving as a strategy for cultural appropriation and educational outreach. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Screenshot of the SoundCloud Platform <https://soundcloud.com/silvia-fernandez-guerra/>



Source: Research Group

Results

The results of this study stem from the implementation of an innovative intercultural pedagogical strategy aimed at strengthening the Zenú people's oral tradition within the school setting, carried out specifically with 5th-grade students at I.E. Alianza. The results are presented sequentially, in line with the stated objectives, and highlight both the cultural findings and the pedagogical and technological outcomes achieved during the process.

As an initial phase of the study, a process of exploration and awareness-raising was carried out within the educational community, with the aim of identifying the most representative manifestations of the Zenú oral tradition currently practiced in the region. To this end, semi-structured interviews were conducted with traditional knowledge holders and elders of the Cabildo Menor Urbano del Pueblo Zenú in the municipality of San Andrés de Sotavento, along with participant observation and intercultural workshops that fostered dialogue among traditional knowledge holders, teachers, and students.

Based on this process, the main forms of oral expression that form part of the Zenú cultural heritage were identified. Among the narratives, mythical tales and legends associated with the creation of the world, the origin of the Zenú people, and the presence of magical beings linked to the territory were identified. In addition to

serving a symbolic and explanatory function regarding the natural and spiritual environment, these narratives convey norms, values, and principles that guide community life. Meanwhile, among the lyrical forms, the following stand out: décimas, pastoral songs, and the “gritos de monte” (shouts of the forest)—which emerged and were performed during agricultural and livestock work such as herding cattle on foot or on horseback, milking, and “espale” or “macaneo” (clearing land or crops)—as well as during cultural events, community gatherings, and collective work parties (mingas), among others.

These expressions of the oral tradition demonstrate the close relationship between work and oral tradition, serving as educational methods through which practical knowledge is taught and a sense of cultural belonging is reinforced. Despite the passage of time, they remain relevant today through transmission by elders and traditional knowledge bearers and are valued as part of the intangible cultural heritage.

Five educational cultural gatherings were organized and held with the active participation of elders and traditional knowledge bearers from the Zenú people, along with fifth-grade students. These gatherings were designed as spaces for the exchange of knowledge, where oral tradition served as a central tool for teaching and learning. During these gatherings, the following narratives and songs were shared. See Table 1

Table 1 *Narratives and Songs*

Narrativas		Líricas	
Títulos	Tipología	Títulos	Tipología
Los chimpines	Leyenda	La vida mía	Canto de vaquería
El conjuelo	Leyenda	El gallo	Canto de vaquería
Los niños en cruz	Leyenda	Mañana por la mañana	Grito de monte
El caimán de oro	Leyenda	Cuando estaba chiquito	Grito de monte
Tío conejo y tío tigre	Relato	El negro	Grito de monte
Mexión y Manexka	Mito	La playa blanca	Canto de pesca
		Los versos preferidos	Décima
		Mi mochila	Décima
		Mañana me voy	Décima
		Mujer divina	Décima

The cultural encounters helped strengthen communication skills—such as listening, oral expression, and argumentation—as well as social skills related to collaborative work and respect for cultural diversity. This process revealed a high level of interest, curiosity, and participation on the part of the students, who expressed respect for their elders and recognized their role as bearers of ancestral knowledge; this helped redefine oral tradition as a valid and relevant form of knowledge within the school curriculum.

As a result of the intercultural interaction process, various oral works were compiled, recorded in audio format, and subsequently organized on a free, community-accessible digital platform—specifically SoundCloud <https://soundcloud.com/silvia-fernandez-guerra/>. This phase addressed the study's third specific objective and focused on the preservation, dissemination, and reinterpretation of the Zenú oral legacy within the school context.

Digital organization made it possible to store the narratives and lyrics and to actively involve students in the processes of recording, editing, and organizing content. They developed technological and digital skills, linking ICTs to the strengthening of their cultural identity. Thus, digitization is an effective strategy for ensuring the continuity of this heritage and its appropriation by new generations. The students assumed a leading role as cultural mediators, recognizing themselves as transmitters of knowledge through contemporary media.

In this regard, it was possible to reflect on the empirical findings and the theoretical frameworks reviewed, which made it possible to reinterpret the experience from pedagogical, cultural, and technological perspectives. The stories, songs, and lyrics shared by the traditional knowledge bearers revealed a symbolic and educational richness that remains alive in the community, aligning with theories that recognize oral tradition as the cornerstone of collective memory and cultural identity.

The encounters between students, elders, and traditional knowledge bearers became an experience of situated learning, where knowledge was mediated by significant cultural actors, strengthening the appropriation of knowledge through experience and context. In this regard, the Alianza Educational Institution established itself as an active space for the preservation of intangible cultural heritage, acting as a bridge between the school and the local community.

Furthermore, the incorporation of the podcast as an innovative pedagogical resource made it possible to link oral tradition with the digital environment, promoting

participation, creativity, and critical reflection. This approach demonstrated that technology, when used with cultural and educational purpose, strengthens teaching-and-learning processes and contributes to the construction of collective memory within the school.

These findings demonstrate that oral tradition, when incorporated through an intercultural pedagogical approach, contributes to the preservation of cultural heritage and, from a didactic perspective, strengthens communicative, socio-emotional, and technological learning. In line with social and constructivist approaches, the involvement of traditional knowledge holders enabled learning situated within the Zenú cultural context, thereby strengthening cultural identity.

The integration of the Zenú people's oral tradition into the school setting, through cultural encounters and digitization processes, constitutes a relevant pedagogical strategy for strengthening intangible cultural heritage and reinforcing students' cultural identity. These results align directly with theoretical postulates that recognize orality as the central axis of collective memory and as a pedagogical tool with high educational value, as it serves as a form of intergenerational teaching. (Calderón, 2022)

The identification and compilation of narratives and poetry confirm Pardo's (2022) observation regarding the continued relevance of narrative and poetic genres within the indigenous oral tradition. The oral tradition is classified into two forms: "the narrative genre transmitted in prose and the poetic genre, which refers to those elements transmitted in verse." (p. 32) This research, however, made it possible to reframe this knowledge as legitimate content within the school curriculum, moving beyond a homogenizing and top-down approach to education toward a formal and inclusive education that reaffirms educational and cultural potential.

From the perspective of intangible cultural heritage, the results align with the findings of Maussa and Montes (2023), demonstrating that the oral practices of the Zenú people remain alive when spaces for intergenerational transmission exist. The living heritage of a culture includes all the practices, expressions, and traditions through which peoples express their worldview—that is, how they perceive the world and the meaning of their existence from ancient times to future generations—as well as the ethical and moral principles they uphold to ensure the survival of their land and the care that Mother Nature deserves. In this regard, the school took on an active role as a venue for cultural preservation, serving as a bridge between the community, the territory, traditional knowledge holders, elders, and younger generations, thereby

reinforcing institutional shared responsibility in strengthening intangible cultural heritage.

An added benefit relates to the strengthening of students' communicative, social, and socio-emotional skills, grounded in Lev Vygotsky's socioconstructivist theory, which conceives of learning as a social process mediated by interaction with others. The encounters with traditional knowledge holders served as situated learning experiences, where knowledge was constructed through dialogue, active listening, and the mediation of significant cultural actors, all taking place within the students' zone of proximal development.

The students' active participation in the production of podcasts validates the findings of Ponsoda, Moreno, and Ponce (2023), who highlight the potential of Information and Communication Technologies to facilitate access to, dissemination of, and educational appropriation of cultural heritage. In line with Jiménez and Luque (2022), the podcast established itself as an innovative teaching resource that promotes meaningful, participatory, and contextualized learning by linking ancestral knowledge with digital languages familiar to the students.

These findings also align with the culturally relevant pedagogy proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995), demonstrating that recognizing one's own culture in the classroom strengthens a sense of belonging, motivation, and community participation. The Zenú oral tradition ceased to be an isolated and purely ancestral form of knowledge to become a central element of the educational process, promoting an intercultural education that values diversity and legitimizes contextualized knowledge. In other words, the research project transformed pedagogical practices, positioning orality and technology as complementary tools for the construction of collective memory, cultural empowerment, and meaningful learning within the school setting.

Unlike other studies that address the documentation of oral heritage, this study offers an innovative pedagogical experience because it integrates oral tradition into the school curriculum through active methodologies and digital resources, demonstrating that schools can become active agents of cultural preservation. This finding broadens the debate on intercultural education by showing that technology can strengthen it when used from an ethical and contextualized perspective.

Conclusions

Upon completion of the research, it can be concluded that the implementation of cultural gatherings among traditional knowledge holders, elders, leaders, students, and parents enabled the digitization of narratives and lyrics, thereby serving as a means to safeguard the main expressions of the Zenú oral tradition. The students' active participation in the processes of listening to, recording, and digitizing stories fostered an emotional and cognitive connection to their culture, promoting respect for elders and valuing ancestral practices.

The mediation of traditional knowledge bearers and technology facilitated meaningful, context-rich learning conducive to the acquisition of knowledge and cultural values; meanwhile, the use of podcasts and digital platforms enabled the preservation and dissemination of narratives and lyrics, as well as the development of technological and communication skills among students, demonstrating that technology can serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity. This highlights the need to integrate the school's learning process with the community, recognizing the role of traditional knowledge holders as key figures in the transmission and revitalization of ancestral knowledge.

The research demonstrates that integrating traditional knowledge holders, elders, and students in intergenerational encounters, along with the digitization of narratives and lyrics, constitutes an effective pedagogical strategy for strengthening the Zenú oral tradition within the school context. Similarly, it can serve as a teaching resource for strengthening communication, digital, and socio-emotional skills among elementary school students.

One of the study's main contributions to the field of education lies in demonstrating that the integration of oral tradition, intercultural education, and digital technologies contributes to the strengthening of intangible cultural heritage and enhances the development of communication, digital, and socio-emotional skills among students. The incorporation of the podcast as a pedagogical resource gave new meaning to Zenú oral tradition, positioning the participants as cultural mediators.

The oral tradition of the Zenú people, when intentionally integrated into the school context through pedagogical strategies, transcends its communicative function to become a central educational pillar that strengthens cultural identity and meaningful learning in elementary education. Intergenerational cultural encounters demonstrated that ancestral oral tradition constitutes a living pedagogical resource,

capable of mediating teaching and learning processes through the dialogue of knowledge and situated experience.

Finally, the study opens avenues for future research aimed at further exploring the impact of these strategies on cultural identity in school settings and the implementation of educational policies that effectively recognize intangible cultural heritage as an integral part of the curriculum. In this regard, there is a need to continue strengthening the bond between school and community as the foundation for a cultural, relevant, social, and transformative education.

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