

# TIGRE ELÉCTRICO

A STORY OF RESISTANCE AND REDEMPTION IN THE AMAZON

A FILM BY TOM LAFFAY



ANDREW BERENDS  
FILM FELLOWSHIP

# LOGLINE

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On the edge of the Colombian Amazon, the indigenous Siona People live between two sacred plants: ayahuasca, which guides them spiritually in the defense of their territory and coca which has brought war.



# SYNOPSIS

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August is a dangerous month as the spirits of dead shamans hang low and the veil between this world and the next is thin. On the edge of the Colombian Amazon the Siona indigenous reservation's fate hangs in the balance between armed conflict over the narco trade and a resurgence of identity to redefine Siona culture in the 21st century.

Beginning in 2019, *Tigre Eléctrico* follows Taita Pablo, a master of the plant medicine *ayahuasca*, as he mediates the wellbeing of his community. The invasion of coca production has brought a brutal capitalism and war to the Siona's territory leaving them categorized by the Colombian state as "at risk of physical and cultural extinction." Living amongst the devastation of their history in a contaminated landscape, Taita Pablo struggles to navigate the spirit world like his grandfathers once did. Mario, a leader once fallen from grace, is now determined to navigate the perils of narco trafficking conflict and defend his territory. The unexpected return of an anthropologist who lived with the Siona in the 1970's offers a window into the Siona's past and challenges audiences to consider the West's complex and exploitative relationship with indigenous peoples of the Amazon. The predicted demise

of Siona culture never happened and we bear witness to the resurgence of identity and a process of resistance that has blossomed in past decades as a response to a litany of threats Siona communities face.

Granted unprecedented access by invitation to the Buenavista Reservation and the private lives of Taita Pablo and Mario, the film attempts to translate Siona identity and spirituality. It is an unfiltered look inside a modern indigenous community locked into a dichotomous reality of dependence on *ayahuasca* spiritually and coca economically, territorial defense and guerilla warfare, a resurgence of culture and the trauma of the past. Scenes play out in atmospheric observational vignettes that immerse viewers in the Siona's world and cut to evocative moments breaking the fourth wall, adding urgency to the Siona's message. Nighttime ceremonies, family fishing trips, gun battles, coca processing, jungle harvesting, contentious community elections, a trip to NYC for the climate march to name a few. And a rich, historical photo and audio narrative archive adds Siona elders' voices from the past to offer wisdom to today's generations.

# LOCATION

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Siona territory sits on the Putumayo River, a major Amazon tributary, and extends across a swath of southern Colombia and northern Ecuador.

Here, the jungle is alive with sound. Whooping birds, howler monkeys, cicadas and falling branches, torrential downpours and the surrounding flow of incalculable quantities of water. Each evening, flocks of *mochilero* birds fly past communities, just before the nightly spectacle of stars in the sky. The heat and humidity both drain and replenish you.


The largest Siona reservation, Buenavista, is in Colombian territory, and numbers only 400 people. It is home to Taita Pablo, Mario and their families. Only accessible by river, Buenavista backs onto miles of rainforest, where the Siona hunt, raise crops and harvest medicinal plants, including the sacred Yagé, central to the community's spiritual and political life.

The Putumayo River is also a key cocaine trafficking route in the narco conflict. Farms growing coca leaf, the main natural ingredient for cocaine, have flourished throughout the Putumayo region, where economic alternatives are scarce. This dynamic affects Siona territory, where many young people have found work harvesting coca and families cultivate it on a small-scale. New cartels are taking control of the coca trade, and those who oppose them face violent reprisals.

The film nurtures this tension at the heart of a community dependent on two plants – yagé spiritually and coca economically – and in which the cultivation of the latter often destabilizes the ability to practice the former.

# CHARACTERS

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Taita Pablo Maniguaje comes from a traditional Siona family and long line of *taitas*, or shamans. As traditional authorities who live solitary lives with their families, they travel to the depths of consciousness through *ayahuasca*, transforming into jaguars (or, *tigres*) to negotiate with the spirit world, defending their people. If Taita Pablo cannot pass his knowledge of the sacred plant medicine on to the next generation, he may be the end of his line. Drinking *ayahuasca* weekly ensures that his forefathers' traditional practices go on, but Taita Pablo is also a small-time cattle rancher, coca grower and expert in cultivating the jungle around his home. He works from daylight to dusk, rarely taking a break, often muttering “the day is getting away from us.” He knows his time is running out. A family man and an example to his followers, he punctuates his sentences with a wry chuckle.

But this hard life is taking a toll and he has increasingly become ill, first with Covid, then a prostate infection, leaving him weakened and frustrated that he cannot drink Yagé for months at a time. Taita Pablo is a descendant of the *Curacas*, the “big taitas” of the past who lived hermetically and dealt exclusively with the spirit world. But the jungle is disappearing now, and the narco cartels operating around Siona territory are clouding Taita Pablo's vision with a dark energy.

Taita Pablo's responsibilities now lie largely in the physical world in the passing on of Siona culture. He is one of the few who still speaks the Siona's language *Mai'cocá* and during recent elections took the stage and declared “we will pray the Our Father in *Mai'cocá*, because we are Siona and this is our language.” Through ancestral songs, Taita Pablo chants throughout the night, negotiating with the spirits asking them to bless the young Siona. Taita Pablo believes in Mario as a leader with great potential, but knows his demons and that his redemption is not yet secured.

TAITA PABLO  
MANIGUAJE

# CHARACTERS

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MARIO  
YAIGUAJE

Mario Erazo Yaiguaje is a Siona leader who has fallen from grace among his people and seeks to reclaim his post as governor to protect his ancestral territory. Born to a *mestizo* coca farmer and a Siona mother, Mario's indigenous roots were denied by his father out of shame.

In a revival of indigenous identity in the early 2000s, Mario began his own spiritual journey. As he rose to influence and leadership amongst his community, forming the unarmed Indigenous Guard to protect their territory, he succumbed to his demons. Intoxicated by power and the attention it won him, he cheated on his long term partner unabashedly, drank himself into a hole and mishandled community funds. For his behavior he was punished by the community: forced to drink alcohol mixed with tobacco as a purge which nearly killed him and repeated *ayahuasca* ceremonies under the guidance of Taita Pablo. He was finally stripped of his political post with a sanction lasting three years.

Mario recently started his own family. A disciple of Taita Pablo and widely considered the Siona's most adept leader, Mario is determined to prove that he is a responsible father and husband and vows to once again become governor of his reservation. Mario is stoic and pensive. Scars on his arms and a skull and dagger tattoo paint him as a hardened native of Putumayo, a historically conflict-ridden region in Southern Colombia where indigenous peoples have endured violence at the hands of colonizers for centuries. But his shell cracks when holding his baby daughter in his arms and his new mission is clear: he will fight for his ancestral territory as Siona under Taita Pablo's guidance, so his daughter will have her home.

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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At a moment of deep personal loss, I received an invitation from my friend Nancy Payaguaje (now producer and co-writer on this film) to drink *ayahuasca*, or *yagé* as it is known to the Siona. Months later, this led to a meeting with Taita Pablo to discuss the merits of collaborating with the Siona. Having covered violence against indigenous leaders in Colombia for years, this was somewhat familiar territory. But I was moved by the Siona's sense of identity and fierce defense of their collective spirituality through their mastery of *ayahuasca*. I was searching for clarity after feeling my own roots to my ancestors cut off by the loss of my parents, and in the relationship between Taita Pablo and Mario, I found a timeless story of legacy and what it's worth.

The pact I made with the Siona is to tell their story together, and off camera conversations between Nancy, Taita Pablo, Mario and I shape the narrative of the film. Our diverse team in experience, gender and nationality allows us to carry out the production of this film in a sensitive way and at the same time connect with allies, both hyper locally and internationally that can support the Siona in the defense of their territory.

This film with the Siona aims to provide another tool in their collective struggle for self determination and preservation of their culture. Throughout the process we have contributed visual evidence to their proceedings with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission as well as having documented witness testimony for the JEP, or Special Jurisdiction of the Peace Process as part of legal proceedings resulting from the peace accords ending Colombia's 52 year internal armed conflict.

The fight for the Siona's survival is urgent. Their story is relevant to us all. Aiming to translate a non-romanticized, immersive indigenous perspective, this film will not fit neatly into a Western narrative of environmental stewardship. At a crucial moment for the Amazon, Tigre Electrico aims to spur conversation on the profound challenges indigenous communities face in defending their territory from threats emerging both externally and internally.

“The tiger slowly peeled back his skin to reveal his entrails, where a black stain was within him.”

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Taita Pablo translates the vision, “My people are in danger”







Taita Pablo Harvesting Ayahuasca

# CREATIVE APPROACH

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*Tigre Eléctrico* is an immersive film that deploys a sensory approach aiming to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange, while breaking stereotypes of what a modern indigenous community is. The audience comes to know Taita Pablo and Mario's world through a lyrical, magical-realist intimacy. Through observational verité scenes we become immersed in their daily lives and feel the textures of cultural resistance in their complex and layered reality. We listen to Taita Pablo speak about the spirits while collecting the Yagé vine; Mario leads the Indigenous Guard to patrol their territory for cartel activity; Taita Pablo tends to his coca harvest, both a curse and an economic necessity; Mario bashfully hands out invitations to his daughter's baptism, aware that the gesture doesn't quite match his macho persona.



# CREATIVE APPROACH

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We will use the storytelling device of a semi-scripted, stylized conversation between Taita Pablo and Mario. This conversational space, threaded throughout the film, represents the spiritual dimension accessed by drinking Yagé. Shot in chiaroscuro style, this nighttime journey of memories passed from the individual to the collective takes on the tone of both a poetic fable and an urgent call to action through Taita Pablo's words of advice. The conversation blends the storytelling tradition of the Siona with Taita Pablo's visions and reveries, true to the Siona's use of drinking Yagé. This conversation will be developed with Taita Pablo and Mario, who will be credited as co-writers.

The audience is taken on the journey of making the film with the director, who has become an active participant in translating the Siona's message. Scenes play out in cinematic vérité, at moments breaking the fourth wall through Taita Pablo's asides to the filmmaker.

Crucial to the Siona is their concept of territory: a rich and vibrant landscape that encompasses the Putumayo River, the Amazon jungle and small clearings where their communities reside. We explore the tension caused by the Siona's reliance on two plants; Yagé, offering clarity and healing; and coca, bringing money and violence. Through landscape tableaux and wide shots the audience is anchored in Siona territory, and asked to walk in the footsteps of our characters. The landscape bears witness to the traumas they have survived, and by visualizing the spirituality of the same territory, we're reminded of what the Siona are fighting for.

Nighttime Conversation



# VISUAL SAMPLE

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▶ (3:37)

<https://www.tomlaffay.com/tigre>

This teaser gives a sense of the film's characters Mario and Taita Pablo, the tone, immersive approach, verité chiaroscuro scenes, and the presence of the filmmaker in the film. The teaser is in keeping with the director's vision and intention to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. Included is the nighttime conversation device between Taita Pablo and Mario, which will deliver elements of the film's exposition.





Putumayo River - Siona Territory

# TOPIC SUMMARY

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The Siona live at the entrance to the Northwestern Amazon on the border of Colombia and Ecuador. Their true name, *Xio Bain*, in their own language Mai'Cocá, means “people of Yagé”, the plant medicine commonly known by its Kichwa language name *Ayahuasca*, meaning *vine of the dead*. *ayahuasca* is the guiding force for the Siona and is drunk in ceremony by the Taitas, or spiritual leaders, like Taita Pablo, as they determine a path forward for their people. It's a conduit, a window into the world of the spirits and a teacher instructing them how to live well. *Ayahuasca* is at the core of their ancient culture and current resistance. The Siona successfully guarded their *ayahuasca* traditions throughout the Spanish invasion and their subsequent forced conversion into Christianity. They protected it during the slavery and brutality of the rubber trade of the late 19th and early 20th centuries when their population was reduced to only 250, and then again under a wave of missionaries in the 1960s, which arrived intent on destroying the “devil's brew” at the center of Siona culture. Beginning in the 1980s, the Colombian three-sided conflict between the state, right-wing paramilitaries, and left-wing guerillas brought peril to daily life in the region. *Ayahuasca* ceremonies were often interrupted by nearby gunfire or explosions. In 2009 the Xio'Bain (Siona) Nation was declared as “at risk of physical and cultural extinction due to armed conflict” by the Colombian Constitutional Court. Their mastery of *ayahuasca* culture is, in part, an ethnopolitical strategy for survival in the face of extreme violence that has flooded their territory since coca began to dominate the regional economy in the 1980s.



# TOPIC SUMMARY

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Despite a 2016 accord between the FARC rebels and the Colombian government, the country is not at peace. Armed confrontations between narco trafficking cartels often play out in Siona territory, leaving houses riddled with bullet holes, landmines scarring their trails, livestock slaughtered and Siona killed. Despite the odds, the Siona won a legal case against the government in 2020, expanding their territory in the Buenavista Reservation by another 52,000 hectares giving them control of a large swath of ancestral territory. Now, they are engaged in a bold strategy for territorial defense in part through the formation of an Indigenous Guard: an unarmed defense force protecting their territory. As leader of the Indigenous Guard, Mario has received death threats from cartels and has state assigned bodyguards. They are setting a precedent for other indigenous nations in the Amazon who are learning from their organizing techniques and engagement with the Inter-American Human Rights Commission. Across the Amazon, indigenous cultures are dwindling. The Siona's struggle is one of the examples of a resurgence of indigenous identity and philosophy of territorial defense. *Tigre Eléctrico*, produced as a collaboration between the filmmaker and the Siona, seeks to advance the Siona's cause by bringing awareness to their spirituality and struggle to a global audience.





AGUA  
DIE  
CRISTO

Mario's Daughter's Baptism

# PROJECT STAGE AND TIMELINE

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Laffay has been filming with the Siona since August 2019 and was awarded the Andrew Berends Film Fellowship for development of *Tigre Eléctrico*. Seed and development funding has been secured through IUCN NL and Open Society Foundations - Colombia.

Current Status: Advanced Production

2019 - 2021 - Research and development / preliminary filming

2021 - May 2023 - Production on location in Buenavista, Putumayo, Colombia

March - November 2023 - Assembly cut in parallel to final filming

August - September 2023 - Final pick-up filming on location

February 2024 - Rough Cut

May 2024 - Fine Cut

July 2024 - Online; Post Sound / Color

September 2024 - Film Festival Submissions

Improvised Explosive Devices Left by Guerrillas



# IMPACT

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Our planetary crisis is being fought in the most valuable and biodiverse geographic areas for humanity. 80% of the world's remaining biodiversity is in the hands of indigenous peoples, who in turn represent only 5% of the world's population. This project has been articulated with the Siona communities and their leadership, which ensures that it will be used by them and their allies for the defense of their territory and the safeguarding of their knowledge. Attention is also paid to the work with Siona youth to involve future generations. With the support of the Siona communities and our international allies Alianza Ceibo, Amazon Frontlines, Amazon Watch and IUCN National Committee of the Netherlands (IUCN NL) we aim to:

1. Convert the documentary into an instrument that serves as a source of information for the formulation of public policies of the countries of the Amazon Basin and the Siona people.
2. Support Siona territorial defense initiatives, such as strengthening the Indigenous Guard.
3. Increase the influence of Siona knowledge through a dissemination campaign in national and international political spaces.
4. Support the implementation of Precautionary Measure 395-18 adopted through Resolution 53-2018 of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights - IACHR that seeks to protect the life and integrity of the Siona as Indigenous people who have been declared at risk of physical and cultural extermination by the Constitutional Court of Colombia according to Order 004/09.
5. Promote traditional Siona knowledge within the Siona communities by creating a media library accessible to the community that will bring together the visual archive of anthropologists who have been visiting the community since 1970 and all the audiovisual material recorded for this project since 2019.
6. Design a campaign of national and international impact for the projection of the documentary with emphasis on Amazonian countries, the USA and Europe in universities, political communities, social movements and think tanks.



Barrels of Gasoline for Cocaine Production

# KEY TEAM

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## TOM LAFFAY

DIRECTOR / CINEMATOGRAPHER / CO-WRITER

Tom Laffay is a filmmaker and visual journalist specializing in long term documentary investigations in Latin America. He has produced films for *The New Yorker*, *TIME Magazine*, *ARTE*, *National Geographic*, *International Crisis Group*, *VICE World News*, *El Espectador*, *InfoAmazonia*, among others. He is a member of RISC combat medical training class XVII and a three time recipient of a Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting grant. He was awarded a 2021 Online Journalism Award for Best Medium Format Documentary for his work covering the Siona Indigenous nation clearing landmines from their ancestral territory. His 2018 film *Nos Están Matando (They're Killing Us)* was screened to the US Congress, The United Nations in Geneva, Cinema Política in Montreal, as well as in community and grassroots settings after a viral open source release. Tom studied political science and Latin American Studies at the College of Charleston where he worked as a translator at a rural clinic serving the migrant community. Since 2011 he has lived in Central America and Colombia where his work as a filmmaker and journalist aims to bridge impact with underreported and complex issues of social and geopolitical significance in our Americas. He's a recipient of the inaugural 2020 Andrew Berends Fellowship. *Tigre Eléctrico* is his first feature film.



# KEY TEAM

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## NANCY CORREA PAYAGUAJE

PRODUCER / CO-WRITER

Nancy Correa Payaguaje is a Siona woman and staunch defender of the knowledge and wisdom of indigenous peoples. In 2019, she was appointed spokesperson for the four Siona communities of Cuyabeno after successfully leading the eviction of several illegal settlements within her territory. She is currently the Secretary of Communications for the Sëoquëya community and Leader of Territories, Ecology and Tourism (Yeja Toyacaique) for the Organization of Indigenous Siona Nationality of Ecuador - ONISE. As an indigenous peoples and human rights defender she works for the inclusion of vulnerable sectors of society, such as women and LGBTQI+ groups. She lives in the Ecuadorian Amazon with her children.

## LILIANA JAUREGUI

PRODUCER

Liliana Jauregui is a Chilean economist active as senior Environmental Justice expert at the IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) The Netherlands. Based in Amsterdam, with more than 18 years of experience working in international programs with international and national civil society organizations with focus on nature conservation, human rights and environmental justice with special focus on indigenous and local communities. She has designed and implemented programs on Environmental Human Rights Defenders and different countries of the world. She also coordinates actions dedicated to combating environmental crime specifically in Latin America. Previously she worked with the teams of the documentaries Arica (Chile / Sweden, 2020) and Tigre Gente (USA / Bolivia, 2021).

# KEY TEAM

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## DANIEL BUSTOS ECHEVERRY

IMPACT PRODUCER

Daniel Bustos Echeverry is a Colombian researcher and cultural producer, working across academic, music, documentary, curatorial fields, and visual arts, often combining these within a single project. His projects have won a Grammy Award, a Latin Grammy, and an Independent Music Award, have been published by the Colombian state and have toured the United States, Canada, Bolivia and Senegal. Daniel has been active in the academic, public and private sectors. He holds an MA in Visual Anthropology from the University of Manchester, a Specialization in Southern Epistemologies, and a BA in Philosophy.

## CARLOS SEGOVIA

SOUND MIXER

Carlos Segovia is a sound engineer from Pasto, Colombia member of the Association of Sound Engineers of Colombia (ADSC) having studied Film and TV in Buenos Aires, Argentina. His work includes “EN CENIZAS” by Camila Rodríguez (2019, Doclisboa), “ZARZAL” by Sebastián Valencia (2022, Festival Biarritz Amérique Latine), environment editor and effects for “PANQUIACO” by Ana Elena Tejera (2020, International Film Festival Rotterdam IFFR, Hot Docs Canada). Since 2019, he has run the street radio collective “Radio Caresolazo”, which generates sound documentaries and experimental radio on topics of social mobilization in Southwest Colombia where he lives with his family.



# THANK YOU FOR READING

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