

CULTURAL PRACTICES AS ANTAGONISTS OR ALLIES TO SUCCESS: *JUEGA VIVO* IN PANAMA¹

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ABSTRACT

As we approach the concept of *Juega vivo*, we quickly associate it with cunning, especially if we were born in Panama and if by practicing it we have obtained achievements or other benefits. The objective of this article is to reflect on some social realities that surround Panamanian society. The fundamental idea illustrated on this occasion is the *juega vivo* since its manifestation day by day, its beginning and its similarities with other countries of the continent (Colombia, Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil) as documented in literature. The article also considers the incidence of *juega vivo* as a system of general corruption, its transformation from ideas to practices and finally raised to the category of culture, and is related to lack of values and detriment of education at all levels. All these aspects help us to understand the extension of *juega vivo* as a phenomenon that, according to the perception of the individual, can be negative or, on the contrary, used as a concept that can result in positive practices to generate change and human development of the country.

KEY WORDS

Juega vivo, cultural practices, corruption, values

RESUMEN

Al aproximarnos al concepto de “Juega vivo”, rápidamente lo asociamos a la astucia, y más aún si hemos nacido en Panamá; sobre todo si al practicarlo hemos obtenido logros u otros beneficios. El objetivo de este artículo es reflexionar sobre algunas realidades sociales que envuelven a la sociedad panameña. La idea fundamental ilustrada en esta ocasión es el “juega vivo” desde su manifestación en el día a día, sus inicios y sus similitudes con otros países del continente (Colombia, Venezuela, Perú, Argentina, Uruguay y Brasil) documentados en la literatura. Se considera también la incidencia del “juega vivo” como sistema de corrupción general, su transformación de ideas a prácticas y finalmente elevado a la categoría de cultura, y se relaciona con la falta de valores y el detrimento de la educación en todos los niveles. Todos estos aspectos nos ayudan a comprender la extensión del “juega vivo” como fenómeno que, según la percepción del individuo, puede ser negativo o, por lo contrario, puede ser utilizado como un concepto que derive en prácticas positivas para generar el cambio y desarrollo humano del país.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Juega vivo, prácticas culturales, corrupción, valores

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Introduction

This paper is within the scope of my previous work, which focused on sociocultural factors and community practices connected to university dropouts in Panama and further personal development, and tries to articulate, among other aspects, culture and perceptions on personal development. Concerning the Panamanian case, the data refers to the analysis of socio-cultural factors and practices performed by university students that not only drove them to drop out but also consequences in their personal development. As the analysis of such data makes it possible to confirm the incidence of the *juega vivo*² culture in Panamanians' life, I found of great importance of further explaining the reality of this practice and explore how it is perceived in order to take action and use it in our favor.

Although every person has its own mindset, the general goal of social interaction is to cope with society standards and ways of thinking. Thus, social interactions act as a tool to meet and nourish our individual needs. Even social goals can become more important than performance goals depending on the achievement of aspirations of a person. Each country and its people has its dynamic idiosyncrasy as it transforms through time and history. Changes to this idiosyncrasy come upon questioning ideas, practices and its consequences. This process may be forced by the need of those changes and may take a long time to consummate.

Panamanian's idiosyncrasy is not easy to define. It differs from region to region, from ethnies to ethnies. It involves perception, class and identity. But, there is a conduct that has carved on each one in this country. A lot in some and a little less in others; but every Panamanian has been exposed to it at some point in their life. It is the "*juega vivo*". Perez (2017) claims that "Panama is a transactional society." The author characterizes Panama as the deal reign where it is normal to take advantage of things.

Nowadays we live in societies that celebrate this practice. "*Juega vivo* has been historically embraced as a cultural practice of most of the population to the point that foreigners find it prominent and even government agencies cannot deny." (Barsallo, 2020, p. 145) This implies that values (civic, moral) have no more value while looking after our individual interests, leaving the common interests aside.

Juega vivo is an expression that denotes opportunism and corruption, with or without a political connotation. *Juega vivo* is a way of understanding the world in which the tendency of taking advantage of circumstances regardless of any consequences to others prevails. It is pure opportunism. It is supported by disobedience of laws and institutional rules and even disagreement with community norms. It is a *modus vivendi* commonly associated to poverty mindset and social conformism; thus, it is ascribed to poor people. This behavior has also a strong bond with corruption and therefore, it is also associated to how the government rules (or break the rules). As

² *Juega vivo* is a pattern of attitudes and corrupt behaviors, whose main motivation is to obtain immediate benefits at any cost, provided the opportunity to win something with the least physical or intellectual effort.

Antonio Saad (2014) says: “[...it is music to the ears of the corrupted, but most of all, the perfect recipe for failure as a society]”³

Although in Panama this practice is celebrated by some, it has had a great impact in education. Starting from politician with false promises to the everyday-practice of dishonesty. The idea of progressing while avoiding rules has greatly impacted education in all its levels. Yet, only a few recognize the importance of acknowledging and redirecting it in a way that we all can benefit from practicing *juega vivo*.

The genesis of *juega vivo*?

Opportunistic behaviors have been observed in human relations since biblical times. Thus, the *Juega vivo* behavior has been present in Panama for centuries. Turpana (2018), explains how the practice of *juega vivo* was born in Panama during its colonization. He refers to how Vasco Nunez de Balboa⁴ claimed and described, before the Catholic Kings, how he had discovered the other sea. This fact has been thoroughly discussed arguing that the Pacific Ocean may have been seen for the first time by Europeans. But it is a fact that it was certainly not the first time to be seen by aboriginals. The misleading and almost theatrical message sent to the Catholic Kings as to having discovered “El Mar del Sur”⁵ can surely be taken as an opportunistic move.

Espino Lopez (2004) validates this fact and affirms that the *juega vivo* behavior rooted its proceedings in the region when Latin-American countries became independent from the European conquerors. A behavior that was politically imposed without giving any advantage on understanding what is at stake every time this behavior is impersonated. The law of the strongest was then established, but the strongest was no other than whomever harvested from the European empires. In this sense, the author portrays how the caudillismo⁶ that followed the colonization and the last century’s dictatorships was an example of *juega vivo*.

As Panama is a wealthy country within the region with an ongoing growing economy despite constant socio-political struggles. Among foreigners, there is a perception of Panamanians as lazy, not hard working and not liking to work even for the money, short sighted because of not identifying opportunities, both for professional or personal growth. Arrarás, Bitencourt, Cruz, Lantis, Maingot, Martín & Uribe (2017) allege that Panama has a culture of transaction, which serves as fertile ground to corrupt deal-making with the premise of justifying cheating for things that need to be done. In this sense, the authors refers to this practice as applying *juega vivo*.

At present, migrants attempt moving to Panama with the hope of getting a better life situation, and many see it through. It is then when these foreigners analyze the pathways and risks they are willing to take in order to get to their goals and compare it to how some Panamanians are not so convinced about this. They see how Panamanians opt for the most comfortable option that will get

³ Original in Spanish: “...es música para los oídos del corrupto, pero sobre todo, la receta perfecta para el fracaso como sociedad.”

⁴ A Spanish explorer, governor, and conqueror. He is best known for claiming to be the first European to cross the Isthmus of Panama and discovering the Pacific Ocean in 1513.

⁵ Mar del Sur or Mar de Balboa was the name given to the Pacific Ocean in the 16th Century.

⁶ Military strongmen that lead with private armies and used their military might to achieve power.

them similar remuneration and benefits without the struggle others assume. All this without measuring moral and ethical values and/or criminal consequences that subsequently will take its social toll on individuals.

Juega vivo through the international mirror

Albeit in Latin America, there are different names to “*juega vivo*”, each one of them with their own and different connotations with regards to the name and the behavior itself. According to Fuenmayor (2020), this behavior has become a cultural pattern among Latin American countries regardless the distances between them. The author claims that having a shared colonial history, it has served as conduit to a common phenomenon which consequences could be undesirable and destructive and are difficult to measure beforehand.

Wilson (2007) tries to portray the way of living in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He uses the term “*viveza criolla*” to denote what we know as *juega vivo* and explains that it is a desirable behavior of been street-wise and having the ability of replying with quick and smart retorts. Fuenmayor (2020), characterizes it as individualism in the most elementary sense which hinders collective organization. This means a person with this behavior will always think about personal gain at any situation despite any damage that can be caused to others. Mafud (1973) sees this behavior as a shared logic of which Argentineans proudly conform to. This behavior becomes the depiction of an Argentinean citizen and how he is supposed to act.

In the eyes of Figueira (1967), *viveza criolla* in Uruguay denotes immorality and unwillingness to work, to which some people boast about. Achugar, Dominzain, Radakovich & Rapetti (2002), study the usefulness of the *viveza criolla* as perceived by young Uruguayans. In Uruguay, *viveza criolla* is also associated with the uneducated and lower income sectors. The authors explain that this perception of usefulness decreases with aging. In Peru, *viveza criolla* is seen as a shortcut to rules and laws and it is associated with intelligence. Similarly, Velarde De la Rosa (2001) mentions the culture of “Pepe el Vivo”. The author refers to the practices of *viveza criolla* as a product of the anomie that exists in the country, but at the same time she also refers to *viveza* as the cause of anomie itself. To this, she adds that Peruvian society suffers from a moral, legal and social imbalance that in turn encourages the practice of *viveza*.

In Colombia we find another term with similar connotation. It is “*malicia indigena*”. Alvarado Castaneda (1995) affirms, “El latinoamericano es inteligente por naturaleza (*malicia indigena*), es espontáneo, creativo, visionario y expresivo...”. (Morales, 1998, p.111) brands it as national value and patrimony. To Morales, *malicia indigena* is an ethnic concept which is inherited and not transferable to foreigners. It is perceived as a national distinctive that involves calculated creativity and hypocrisy in order to cope with faulty ways of living caused by faulty governments. He also agrees that it has its roots in the colony times as a way used by the oppressed indigenous to overcome the struggle and resist. *Malicia indigena* is considered a national stereotype; however, Morales compares it to “*viveza*”⁷. This is now seen as an ideal conduct in our modern capitalist society, which relates to social conformism in the way.

The “vivo” is the person who applies this cunning attitude to almost every situation to achieve practical ends. The level of inventive and resourcefulness of this person determines the merit along

⁷ *Viveza* is a social construct, an intrinsic characteristic of those who incorporate the *malicia indigena* into their way of living, which is not seen as indiscipline but desirable.

with the admiration of many. This attractive attitude, has a great power and sees no limitations as it is commonly found among political strata. And, because the ineffectiveness of authority institutions, it has certain disrespect for established guidelines until it reaches to criminal behavior. Teran (2018) tells us about *viveza criolla* practices in the Venezuelan daily life. She describes it as a negative and harmful behavior that is full of disrespect and egoism; an unacceptable conduct full of insensitivity and belligerence, which is product of economic, social and political crises that predominate in the world today.

Conchacala Gil (2018) compares *malicia indigena* and *viveza* as equal and states that it has a positive connotation while it is associated with intelligence and the ability to achieve. On the other hand, the author states that among indigenous, it has a negative connotation as to take advantage of others in order to obtain a personal benefit regardless of the harm it could cause. According to Conchacala Gil, to indigenous people, these behaviors are associated to western colonizers and the disrespect that still remains towards them and their idiosyncrasy.

In Brazil exists the “*Jeitinho brasileiro*” which means “the Barzilian Way”. The expression refers to the way Brazilians try to resolve everyday situations, using unplanned tactics and informal approaches. As this expression has several different connotations and uses, it lacks a proper and unified translation into English. According to Drummond (1995), the closest rephrasing that can somehow help make sense of the expression are ‘to find a way around’, ‘to pull some strings’, and ‘to give (somebody) a break’.”

But this behavior is not always seen as positive. It has its negative connotation associated with lack of education and civism, and also political corruption. Contrastingly, it is also seen as a great quality and pride of all Brazilians. The *Jeitinho* also suggests that there is a more jovial, relaxed and uncomplicated way to solve situations. This way refers also to an optimistic way of living with an always cordial, very creative and flexible attitude while somehow acknowledging social norms. McCann (2014) on Buarque de Holanda (1936) elaborates on the concept of the Brazilian cordial man. A cordial man is associated with being an emotional and gracious man that takes his decisions counting with the voice of his heart which surpasses any political, religious or moral principles. Moreover, this cordiality is also seen as a way of liberation against society.

Rodrigues, Milfont, Ferreira, Porto & Fischer (2011) explain the *Jeitinho* as an indigenous psychological construct and identified it as a cultural practice that has become part of the Brazilian identity. In their study, they found that the *Jeitinho* behavior was strongly related to *malandragem*⁸, creativity, harm to others, and disregard for social rules. Duarte (2006) conveys that this behavior has historical antecedents leading to a peculiar way to deal with society’s formalism and bureaucracy, and how to deal with social tensions and impersonal rules. Rodrigues Neto (2020) compares the *Jeitinho Brasileiro* to corruption on its initial process and claims: “[the *Jeitinho Brasileiro* is a wolf in sheep's skin, an embryo of corruption, the school of wickedness. To talk about *Jeitinho Brasileiro* from the perspective of politics is a way of conjecturing reasons why Brazil is still a corrupt country.]”⁹

⁸ According to Rodrigues, et al (2011), *Malandragem* is a set of “strategies that make use of personal skills combined with cunning and deceptive devices in order to achieve a goal.”

⁹ Original in Portuguese: “*O Jeitinho Brasileiro e lobo em pele de cordeiro, e o embrião da corrupção, e a escola da safadeza. Falar sobre o Jeitinho Brasileiro sob a ótica da política e uma forma de conjecturar motivos para que o Brasil ainda seja um país corrupto.*”

However, from another point of view, Almeida (2007) affirms that the unnecessary bureaucracy and inconsistent laws in Brazil make this strategy the first option for solving faulty basic needs used by the majority of the population, which thus makes *jeitinho* socially justifiable.

Corruption and poverty related to our mindset

Behaviors as the above-mentioned are studied under the name of Normative Transgression. These behaviors found in Latin American countries share the predominant belief that opportunistic behaviors, rebellious attitudes and disobedience of laws and rules are not a serious matter. These opportunistic behaviors depend on the perception that the person has of any particular situation and not on the class, gender or age. Ironically, the problem is not presented as lack of morality anymore but as an institutional problem.

The lack of public trust that can only be accessed by a few people marks the division between the public and the private. It is precisely this lack of trust and exclusivity that causes society to be daring to break the rules by making it the common “modus opernadi”. It is then that people vulnerable to these practices find, in their own reasoning, the only way to emerge. After all, even if the government is corrupt, it is those skilled who will promote corruption with their actions. Moreover, it is this same type of thinking and acting that promotes socio-cultural, political and even economic dysfunction.

According to Sautú, Bonolio, & Perugorria (2004) there is a need among people from some Latin American countries with regards to this topic. The authors claim that there is indulgence related to the tolerance of several types of wrongdoings (micro-corruption and macro-corruption). The first, considered to be minor and not so trivial, unavoidable and part of regular daily practices; and the second, as the need to identify and take advantage of loopholes within rules and therefore use dishonest tactics to gain advantage over others and avoid further problems.

On another thought, having a poverty mindset leads to learning to live like poor with its limitations and frustrations. In this case, poverty is not an economic struggle situation, but a total income scarcity condition. Scarce situations will always be related to negative experiences. It is poverty that catapults people to seek for alternatives to survive, and there it is, *juega vivo* like a biblical snake offering the way out of their problems; but not from poverty. In this sense, lower standards and lack of viable alternatives to succeed can lead to finding our way into achievement regardless of legality. It is the corrupt conduct that now take control and can, for example, manifest as a system of traffic of influences or favor bartering.

Poverty mindset also manifests in low self-esteem, changing the way people see themselves towards achievement. To illustrate this, in the case of education, a person with poverty mindset will consider that elementary school would be more than enough for a person in their condition and high school and academy are not meant for them. This example of thoughts illustrate how poverty mindset make people set own imaginary limitations without even trying to achieve existing goals if any.

It is also worth mentioning that there is a misconception of the use of the word “humilde”, which translates to humble, and the word poor. Poor, is a person that lacks possessions and economic resources. This word is often taken as an insult or used in an attempt to diminish a person. *Humilde* is a commonly used euphemism to try to soften, in a decorously way, a word that can sound rude or harsh as poor. Thus, it is common to hear people mistakenly refer to others as humble, when what they really want to say is poor.

On the other hand, the *juega vivo* mindset can also trigger positive practices as argued by Joseph Garzon (2018) which says: [“ *Juega vivo* is an expression that applies popular wisdom with accurate precision, I assume that we must take it as a value, it is an impulse to the pro-activity of humble, poor, in short, dispossessed people.”]¹⁰ To illustrate this, think about the poor that conforms to its situation and is kept from succeeding and the one that perceives poverty as motivation to succeed in any particular situation.

In any of these cases, practicing *juega vivo* may be seen as normal among Panamanian society. For it is now embedded in our idiosyncrasy; our culture. Although we may see this practice as isolated truths, its repercussions in the whole society are of great impact. It is a cultural way of bending that has forged corruption, with its rewards to performance and punishment of honesty.

Education and Lack of Values

Teran (2018) affirms that the global crisis has brought out some people’s indolence, selfishness and corruption that separates them from genuine and positive features of their demonym. This crisis has separated them from the ethics and morals necessary to fight its difficulties.

The *juega vivo* behavior, having taken over our citizenship, has become a serious cultural and moral flaw. The predominance of *juega vivo* may be in fact the cause of repetitive crises through the years, fading of social justice and the emergence of economic dependence. It is also a fact that in Panama there is a connection between low academic performance and social interactions where people assume that other people’s action reflect a correct behavior towards a particular situation, at the same time that these actions project a doubtful sense of morality. Precisely, Pulido Ritter (2005) comments on this claiming that *juega vivo* denotes nonexistent principles and relates *juega vivo* to the absence of principles and having a set of unclear values, which have no relation with common sense and is predominant in those who are not properly educated.

Young people’s education should initially start with the family nucleus, then at school and residing community where they grow up. But when they enter a system that has been forged in corruption, they soon get immersed in *juega vivo* and perceive it as a well-accepted normal behavior. These youngsters will try to defy any authority figure by applying what they have learned, which is rewarded with acceptance and celebration. From this point on, this *habitus*, practices in the form of a vicious circle of detrimental values and lack respect for authorities and rules (parents-home, teachers-school) start. It worsens when these authorities do not have the means for disrupt the unending circle.

¹⁰ Original in Spanish: “*El juega vivo es una expresión que con atinada precisión aplica la sabiduría popular, asumo que debemos tomarlo como un valor, es un impulso a la pro actividad de las personas humildes, pobres, en fin, desposeídas.*”

Besides, when opportunistic and corrupt practices like these are rewarded, it becomes a social problem because these practices are now given a social value and cunning a status of moral behavior, which is an antithesis of morality. Thus, seeing the immoral as moral is the perfect recipe for a broken society.

It is important to consider that the church or religion also play an important role in the practice and promulgation of positive values and appropriate and accepted norms before society. Because religion brings together beliefs, cultural structure systems and shapes world views, it also possesses the dynamism to influence the negative and turn it into the positive while also influencing people's interaction and their vision of the future.

According to Espino (2004), in Panama, churches are entrusted the duty of promoting values. The authors wishes that this task helps the *juega vivo* practice to disappear and make using ethics and honesty the new *modus vivendi*. As pillars of society, these institutions that hold our society together (Family, school, church and government), should engage in researching their community in order to understand the impact of *juega vivo* practice have had on socio-cultural structure of our society. The use of contrasting education techniques may be another approach to encourage people to reflect and engage into changing the way *juega vivo* is perceived and practices.

Conclusion

Juega vivo is nothing more that the skillful dishonesty that as days go by, acquires the face of virtue. It is a systemic form in which the strongest survives. It is a culturally learned practice that goes against supporting others. It has become a disproportionately growing norm and later a culture, approved by the majority. But, the root of the problem, as it involves a set of ideas and practices, is not only cultural. It also has economic and/or political causes.

Juega vivo, as well as *viveza criolla*, *malicia indigena* and *Jeitinho brasileiro* are practices that have become a culture in their respective countries, constructed out of conformism and political and social struggles. These have definitely reduced our societies' sense of responsibility and consideration for others and do not distinguish social class, gender or age.

Juega vivo not only has had a strong social impact in the Panamanian society but an impact on education too. Its practice may have a negative connotation but it also can encourage the actions of not only the poor, but everyone regardless of class gender and age. Yet, it is a cultural phenomenon that has not been thoroughly researched as it may happen that there is a tendency to avoid its political connotation.

The role played by values (cultural and moral in our contemporary society raises the problem of an unstructured cultural structure and the strong relationship it has with the development of the country. It is a matter of perception and the influence that it has in our mindset that should be redirected in order to successfully overcome eventualities in life. This way of perceiving *juega vivo* can also be taught. *Juega vivo* can be switched from negative practices into a wake-up call for achievement and success with hard work and perseverance that any Panamanian could be proud.

There is an opportunity for an intervention of academics, government and ONGs to demonstrate that there are viable alternatives and approaches to challenge *juega vivo* or even give a twist to its

practice. To make it possible, it is necessary that the government take action and implements programs directed strictly to the acknowledgement and eradication of the *juega vivo* practice in the population. But first, the ones at high stakes, from the president and his legislators to ministers, have to acknowledge the problem. Community engagement and academic evaluation should also be included while walking the path of transformation. The implementation of corrective mechanisms is imperative. The evidence exists, nobody can deny whether this people have performed or experienced *juega vivo*. It is a great opportunity for changing the *juega vivo* culture and thus, our country's development. By promoting stricter and more controlled regulations, we will be able to see a progressive improvement until live gambling becomes an undesirable practice in all social strata.

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Doctoral thesis

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