

# A Pan-Indigenous Vision of Indigenous Studies

**Martina Masaquiza (Salasaka Kechwa)  
and Pakal B'alam (Kaqchikel Mayan)**

Ethnic identity in an economically integrating world is a complicated matter. A friend told us this story: There was a gathering about a political proposal to make English the official language of a certain state. Many Spanish-speaking people came to the meeting. Most were very angry about the proposal. Many speakers stood and spoke about their Ladino or Mexicano identities and how important it was to protect their Spanish language and cultures.

One woman finally stood and said she thought that they all should learn English. “As immigrants, you should learn the language of the country you’re in.”

Another woman stood and said, “As a Latina, how can you say that? Aren’t you proud of your heritage? Aren’t you proud of your mother tongue?”

“I’m not a Latina or mestiza,” said the woman. “I’m a woman from a First Nation of this country.” Everyone was quiet for a moment.

We especially like this story because of its many ironies. As indigenous persons from Ecuador and Guatemala, our nations or *Pueblos* continue to suffer the strong racist containment and sometimes persecution from Spanish-speakers, most of who are dark-skinned like us. But as minority peoples in the United States, many Spanish-speakers feel their language and cultures are suppressed—something indigenous peoples in the whole hemisphere have long felt in their own homelands. Had the invading Europeans bothered to learn the hundreds of languages of the nations they were invading, at least it would have slowed them down. It might have educated them about the hemisphere they were invading and held up a mirror in which they could have seen themselves more clearly, had they wanted to.

Which brings us to the question: Whose identity, whose language, whose history, and whose political interests will be served by our ideal indigenous studies program? We see four interest groups and some conflicts between them:

- 1.) the students, parents, and taxpayers who pay for students to acquire skills and a livelihood;
- 2.) indigenous nations and communities which seek to improve their quality of life while protecting their unique cultures, identities and resources;
- 3.) the universities themselves, which seek to attract enough students and funding to expand their research and reputations; and
- 4.) the mass consumer societies that buy, sell, ignore, steal and borrow cultural products at whim.

We suspect the conflicts among these groups have caused the disappointing results of existing indigenous studies programs. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn in her paper *Who Stole Native American Studies?* (*Wicazo Sa Review*, Spring 1997, 12, 1) describes how the first indigenous programs were founded to do the “intellectual work of the tribal nations” but gradually fell into tokenism and marginalization. Before describing our ideal indigenous studies program, we review the conflicts within and among these four interest groups.

### *Conflicts of Interest*

Are the desires and interests of indigenous students different from other students? As long as mainstream curricula in the schools all across the Americas remain instruments of de-culturalization, they force indigenous students to choose between their indigenous identities and gaining the skills needed for individual and community prosperity. It is this devil’s compromise that makes our children leave schools more often than any other ethnic group. Until we can invent curricula that unite both the interests of indigenous communities and those of individual indigenous students, we will continue to allow dominant curricula to erase indigenous identities, or to force our young people, and our communities, to select poverty over economic and technical progress.

Thus, we believe that indigenous studies, if it is for indigenous students, should train students in practical, lucrative skills that are applied within indigenous communities. There is so much work that we need to do: we must write curricula that builds upon traditional skills in sustainable resource management, labor-intensive agriculture, sustainable small businesses, and upon our distinctive healing and artisan traditions. We need skilled legal representatives that can

protect our human, land and resource rights across the hemisphere. We need skilled translators and producers of radio, television and technical materials that are practical, educational and culturally appropriate. And we need leaders who will fashion an inspiring vision of where we as indigenous peoples hope to go.

Perhaps the greatest barrier to building a Pan-Indigenous community-oriented program would be the ancient competitions between indigenous nations. Though our languages, customs, histories, and competition with each other have long separated us, the mutual experiences of invasion, conquest, occupation, displacement, theft of resources, political exclusion, and cultural and religious persecution should unite us. We should not be divided by ancient feuds or boundaries imposed upon us by conquering nation states. Historically, these divisions have weakened us and allowed invading Europeans to pit one nation against another. Globalization and modern communications, for all their damaging effects on our languages and cultures, can also provide tools to unite our nations and help us rebuild and defend our languages and cultures. The movement toward market democracies in Latin America has finally opened a political space for indigenous *Pueblos* to organize without being attacked militarily. This opens a great opportunity for indigenous nations to unite and begin to build our own institutions.

Unfortunately, the interests of universities and those of indigenous communities seem sharply in conflict. In our countries of origin, Guatemala and Ecuador, the indigenous rights movements continue to gain strength, and our indigenous intellectuals have been at the forefront of these movements. Perhaps the most striking example is that of Waqi' Q'anil, or Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, who has been at the forefront of the Mayan Movement in Guatemala (*Waqi' Q'anil* or *Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, 1997. Ri Maya' Molojpa Iximulew* or *El Movimiento May (En Guatemala). Guatemala City: Cholsamaj*). Yet here in the United States we have often wondered why indigenous intellectuals seem so removed from popular indigenous political action, and why there seems to be so little movement toward a national indigenous movement. We suppose this may be due to several factors: the small and dispersed proportion of the United States population that is indigenous makes organizing a pan-indigenous intellectual movement especially difficult; violent suppression of indigenous movements in Guatemala and racial persecution within Ecuador are recent and have forced our intellectuals to be more politically active; and the United States offers indigenous intellectuals economic opportunities not offered to our intellectuals.

But the separation of indigenous intellectuals in the United States from popular political action is also due to the structure of American universities. Those indigenous intellectuals who have had the toughness to face the devil's compromise and the tenacity to fight their way up the subject hierarchies of the universities frequently find themselves living in forced isolation from their communities. They are rewarded for publications, not for community service. Could we create educational institutions that are built upon indigenous cultural traditions and directly serve our nations' interests? Yes. Can we do this within

mainstream universities? Not as they are currently structured.

We suspect that almost all indigenous intellectuals in Latin America have dreamt about establishing indigenous colleges and universities within their respective nations and communities. Many nations within the United States, with more resources and college graduates than our nations in southern Abya Yala, have done so. We believe that these community-based institutions are more likely to develop educational systems that better reflect each nation's traditions and better serve each nation's interests. Unfortunately, the existing institutions seem to lack the money, prestige, and opportunities to attract the most accomplished indigenous intellectuals. There appears to be no strong movement among indigenous intellectuals here to link these institutions into a more powerful network that could build prestige and opportunities for individual communities and for indigenous peoples in general.

What about the interests and influences of mass society upon indigenous affairs? With the increasing economic dominance of international corporations and international mass media, the cultural suppression of indigenous nations has accelerated. For example, in our home villages one can find young people who wear very baggy pants and imitate the young people they see on television. They sometimes banter the latest Spanish slang or integrate it into our traditional languages. At the same time, commercial interests and mass-media figures continue to press indigenous symbols and art into their service. Sometimes it seems as though the world is heading toward a monoculture sanctioned by mass media and the purchasing impulses of young people to imitate, experiment, and impress.

At the same time, mass societies need the cultural diversity they are destroying. The situation is something like that in mechanized agriculture. If the whole world grows the same variety of corn, a single blight in a single year could destroy crops around the world and result in famine. Without cultural diversity, the character flaws of mass society—for example, in the ways children are raised, elders are isolated, and natural resources wasted—will be exaggerated and much more damaging. The role of other cultures, as sources of new ideas and innovative solutions, is marginalized and pushed toward extinction. Ironically, the cultural vitality of the dominant cultures depends upon alternative ways of life offered by strong minority cultures.

### ***Proposed Remedy: A Pan-Indigenous Movement***

We believe that any indigenous studies program would be very shortsighted not to include indigenous nations from throughout the hemisphere. Indigenous peoples throughout Abya Yala face so many of the same problems. They should not have to face them in each nation alone. Big corporations and governments continue to conspire to take more of our resources and sovereign rights. For example, Texaco, Conoco and Occidental Petroleum among others, have continued to conspire with Ecuadorian elites to steal land and oil from Amazonian

peoples (Kane, Joe, 1995. *Savages*. New York: Knopf). Child malnutrition and infant mortality are higher among some of our nations than anywhere else in the hemisphere. Alcoholism and poverty and racism continue to ravage our social fabric. In the face of invading foreign television and curricula and missionaries, we are all struggling to maintain our identities as indigenous peoples. Most of us lack real control of our own institutions, of our schools, our local governments, our economies, and our religious institutions.

We propose the formation of a pan-indigenous intellectual network in which indigenous studies would play a leading role. Indigenous intellectuals are deeply involved in the indigenous rights movements in Guatemala and in Ecuador as well as in other Ladino-dominated countries with strong indigenous movements. Linked together, these intellectuals could offer new ideas and solutions to each nation. They can be the first step toward building the greater political and economic power we need to protect ourselves and prosper.

Long ago, our indigenous ancestors traded over vast distances. We suggest that we need to build a new infrastructure of political and economic exchange. For example, indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada, like those in Latin America, have always lacked political power. With less than 1 percent of the U.S. population being indigenous, indigenous peoples will never have much political voice or power in a market democracy like the United States. In Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, we have also lacked political power but this was due to authoritarian control and military violence. But we have great numbers. There are between 7 and 13 million Kechwa speakers in the Andes, and millions of Aymaras in Bolivia and millions of Mayans in Guatemala and southern Mexico. As democracy comes and human rights are strengthened, we will gain some measure of political power. If indigenous peoples of the Americas were joined in an intellectual and economic federation of some kind, for the first time, we could begin to create international political power for indigenous peoples.

In some villages Kechwa people maintain a tradition of collective work called *minga*. In some places, whole villages make rope and build suspension bridges over the fast-running rivers of the Andes. We suggest that we need to form a super-*minga* and that we begin work among our intellectuals, leaders, and students.

Rather than intellectual and social movements coming from the top down to continue colonizing and swallowing each of our nations, we could be learning in a circular fashion from our indigenous brothers and sisters. Rather than being indigenous islands isolated in European seas, we could build bridges to each other, pool our limited resources, and help each other with the challenges we all face.

Toward these ends, our ideal indigenous studies programs would be devoted to a new kind of nation-building—not the building of a new, armed nation state, but the building of pan-indigenous infrastructure that indigenous nations would direct and use as a tool to strengthen their sovereignty and their cultural integrity.

With this as our goal, we propose that:

- 1.) Indigenous studies be dedicated to building the economic, political, and social strength of indigenous communities. The students and leaders of indigenous studies should be rewarded for the contributions they made toward these ends.
- 2.) Indigenous studies build an international network of our leaders, our organizations, and our intellectuals. These networks will focus on finding common solutions to our common problems. For example, we need an international team working to create truly indigenous curricula for our communities.
- 3.) Some of our intellectuals be devoted to designing and creating our own international indigenous bank. This bank would specialize in sustainable and culturally appropriate development. A portion of the resources generated by our new economic activities would be devoted to recovery of our lands and resources. The bank would also provide international technical services for our community projects as well as for our businesses.
- 4.) An indigenous studies program devoted to serving indigenous nations should design and create a health network that would share health information among our nations. Cultural transmission takes place within extended families and communities. We must rebuild our family and community networks if our cultures are to grow strong and prosper.
- 5.) Indigenous studies programs should also be deeply involved in the creation of an international indigenous library. This library would store the voices of our elders, store our languages as our elders speak them, and act as a resource center for our films, our books and our historical materials. It would be an important contributor to the development of international indigenous radio and cable networks. This would involve teams of translators and producers of materials for distribution through native networks in native languages.

In summary, building the bridges we propose here would demand great and inspire work from indigenous intellectuals throughout Abya Yala. The first step would be to design indigenous studies programs that reward indigenous intellectuals for their contributions to indigenous communities. A second step would be to create an international indigenous network dedicated to improving the well-being of indigenous nations and to forming working groups around our common problems and needs. Finally, indigenous studies programs should also build student exchanges dedicated to building skills among our young people while building a network of capable people among our communities.