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Restor(y)ing the Past to Envision an 'Other' Future: A Decolonial Environmental Restorative Justice Perspective

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1 Introduction

In Latin America, Indigenous peoples, along with other marginalised groups such as Afro-descent communities and women, have been at the forefront of contemporary environmental justice struggles for more than two decades (Escobar, 2016; Leff, 2015). This is not fortuitous. In this, the new direction that capitalism has taken upon entering a new economic phase, coined by the British geographer David Harvey (2004) as *accumulation by dispossession*, has been decisive. As pointed out by Harvey, a significant percentage of the world's capital is currently being used to deprive people of their natural wealth (waters, forests, minerals, fauna) and their ancestral knowledge—associated with use of the commons—as part of processes of globalisation and the commodification and privatisation of land and natural resources. We are in the presence of, according to Harvey, a new colonialism, more rapacious than the one suffered by

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the Indigenous peoples of Latin America between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. Indigenous people know this, and that is why they are trying to free themselves from it (Escobar, 2011; Leff, 2001).

The struggles for greater environmental justice of the Indigenous peoples of Latin America have given rise to a regional movement that has taken up a stance against the economic rationality driving the dominant model of development and the global project of modernity. This has involved, amongst other things, fighting for new culturally differentiated forms of decision-making in nation-state models to acknowledge their rights to their own forms of development, self-determination and political autonomy, the property of their territories and, most significantly, the preservation of their cultural integrity.

However, the project of modernity is a pervasive one. In Latin America, modern nation-state building has historically been premised on narratives of national identity and modernity that have sought to 'assimilate' Indigenous peoples into the wider society rather acknowledging their 'difference'. This trend has continued even within emerging pluri-cultural nation-state models, such as those currently favoured in Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador, where the economic rationality of development and the imperative for economic growth has remained as intact as it is in the rest of the region. Thus, environmental conflicts continue to rise.

In many cases, the lack of success in achieving greater justice and restoring environmental wrongs is linked to complex processes of cultural and social erosion created by coloniality and the ongoing project of modernity. In many Indigenous communities and territories, Indigenous youth are experiencing increasing disconnection from nature and the local environment because of rapid processes of cultural change and decades of assimilation policies (Pilgrim & Pretty, 2010). This gives rise to intra-community and intergenerational tensions and conflicts over the use of the environment, which, more often than not, limit the clarity, consistency and cohesive response with which Indigenous peoples respond to external threats and pressures to their culture and territories.

Thus, to do environmental restorative justice, in many parts of the world, endogenous processes of cultural revitalisation are needed to strengthen Indigenous peoples' own knowledge systems and cultural identities. In other words, actions are also needed to overcome a more invisible form of violence experienced by Indigenous people, which is seldom talked about in environmental justice literature: *cognitive or epistemic violence*.

Such processes of cultural revitalisation are what, in 1997, Shiv Visvanathan coined as *cognitive justice* and others refer to as *epistemic justice*. Epistemic justice, as Catherine Walsh (2005) argues, entails creating new knowledge in a way that confronts existing relations of domination in hegemonic paradigms and also helps to strengthen what the people themselves understand and reconstruct as 'theirs', in relation to identities, differences and knowledge. This emphasis on reconstructing, recovering and revaluing local knowledge is central in Latin American decolonial environmental justice theory and key to achieving justice in environmental struggles.

In some parts of the world, local revitalisation projects are well underway in areas such as traditional foods, economies, education, language, cultural practices and rights (Pilgrim & Pretty, 2010), but these are not necessarily conceptualised as environmental restorative justice processes, nor follow a decolonial knowledge production paradigm. I argue that an environmental restorative justice approach can be enriched by getting in touch with Latin American decolonial thinking and praxis and incorporating it into its disciplinary practice.

To do so, I first discuss some main propositions of Latin American decolonial environmental justice theory, which ground my approach to restorative justice. Secondly, drawing on John Paul Lederach's (2008) long-term peacebuilding perspective, I define how I understand a restorative environmental approach from a cultural revitalisation perspective. Thirdly, to exemplify what such an approach looks like in practice, I discuss two case studies: one in Canaima National Park, Venezuela, and another in the Indigenous Territory of Lomerio, in Bolivia, in which I have been involved in environmental restorative justice process using participatory action research for cultural revitalisation with Indigenous peoples in contexts of prolonged environmental conflicts. Fourth and finally, I discuss some key lessons from the two key studies with the hope that they can guide the efforts at conceptualising and doing environmental restorative justice in Latin America and beyond.

2 Main Propositions of Latin American Decolonial Environmental Justice Theory

In Latin America, in contrast to other parts of the world, environmental justice thinking has largely developed alongside decolonial thought, which explains social and environmental injustices as arising from modernity and the ongoing expansion of European cultural values and worldviews. The decolonisation of knowledge and social relations is highlighted as one of the key challenges to overcoming the history of violent oppression and marginalisation in development and conservation practice in the region. Arturo Escobar (2003, 2008, 2011, 2018) and Enrique Leff (2001, 2004) have been pioneers in positioning an environmental justice theory in the region with a 'decolonial turn'[1] (Castro-Gómez and Grosfoguel 2007). More recent additions to this body of knowledge from an environmental justice perspective include Alberto Acosta (2013), Eduardo Gudynas (2010, 2011) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2008), who, although not strictly Latin American, collaborates closely with Latin American decolonial scholars.

Indigenous peoples' contemporary struggles for social and environmental justice have laid important empirical and conceptual foundations for the emergence of decolonial theory in Latin America (Lander, 2000; Quijano, 2000; Escobar, 2003; Walsh, 2007; Mignolo, 2009). Decolonial thought is distinct from other post-colonial critical theory through its focus on the Global South and for identifying mechanisms of subordination and marginalisation in the project of modernity and the continual reproduction of European cultural values. Proponents of this school of thought are largely from Latin America (Quijano, 2000; Lander, 2000; Leff, 2001; Castro-Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007; Escobar, 2003; Walsh, 2007; Mignolo, 2009), but important contributions have also come from India (Visvanathan, 1997), Portugal (Santos et al., 2008; Santos, 2010) and New Zealand (Smith, 1999), amongst others.

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[1] A 'decolonial turn' refers to the task of decolonising or freeing oneself and society from the legacy of colonialism and *coloniality* in its different forms and manifestations. Section 3 explains this in detail.

Building on Indigenous peoples' own anti-modernity agenda, Latin American environmental justice thinkers have developed a series of core ideas that are central to how environmental justice is currently approached and perceived in the region.

2.1 Justice Beyond Recognition: The Need for the Construction of 'Otherness'

According to decolonial theory, 'colonialism' ended with political independence in the Global South, but coloniality persists through dominant Eurocentric colonial/modern values and worldviews that are institutionalised and disseminated through education, the media, state-sanctioned languages and behavioural norms. Thus, coloniality is a form of power that creates structural oppression over marginalised sectors of society, such as Indigenous peoples, whose alternative worldviews become devalued, sidelined and stigmatised in development and environmental management practice. From this perspective, coloniality is a particular mechanism and form of misrecognition that must be confronted in order to achieve emancipation and social/environmental justice.

Decolonial scholars argue that modernity leads to profound psychological harm for Indigenous peoples and other subaltern sectors of society because it erodes vital conditions for their wellbeing, including their cultural identity, freedom of choice and self-respect. It also has tangible impacts on the status and participation of Indigenous peoples in development and environmental management by disregarding local notions of authority and territory, frequently resulting in displacement or enforced changes to livelihoods. Structural oppression is perpetuated through a matrix operating at three levels: (a) power (political and economic); (b) knowledge (epistemic, philosophical and scientific) and (c) the self or ways of being (subjective, individual and collective identities).

The *coloniality of power* is exercised through two primary mechanisms: first is the codification of racial difference between Europeans and non-Europeans aimed at making the latter appear naturally inferior. This finds expression in normative rules such as definitions of development/progress. The second is the use of Western/modern institutional forms of power (like the nation-state) in non-Western societies to organise and control labour, its resources and products (Quijano, 2000). Hence, although coloniality continues to be intrinsically linked to global capitalism, it cannot be reduced to economics, as it also involves other invisible cultural mechanisms of domination.

The cultural and normative dimension of the coloniality of power also finds expression in the *coloniality of knowledge* (explained below), through the dominance of European knowledge and symbolic systems over non-European ones. Furthermore, the coloniality of power and knowledge impacts on the individual through the *coloniality of the being*, via mechanisms of subjectivation on the life, body, and mind of the 'colonised' or marginalised people, to the point of stripping them of their very essence and soul.

Thus, responses to coloniality necessarily involve decolonising power, knowledge and the being.[2] This involves moving away from unitary models of citizenship and civilisation to one that respects different local economies, politics, cultures, epistemologies and forms of knowledge, while also forging new categories of thought, constructing new subjectivities and creating new modes of being and becoming that can lead to emancipation.

This focus on the decolonisation of power, knowledge and the being marks an important divergence in environmental thinking from that of the Global North. From a Latin American decolonial perspective, environmental justice entails developing a politics of difference that is not simply based on the search for recognition or inclusion in dominant structures, such as the liberal nation-state or global economic systems, but focused rather on the construction of 'otherness':

> an "other" process of knowledge construction, an "other" political practice, an "other" social (and State) power and an "other" society; an "other" way to think and act in relation to, and against, modernity and colonialism. (Walsh, 2007, p. 57)

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[2] Broadly speaking 'the being' is defined as the soul and essence of a person.

Bolivia and Ecuador serve as good examples of the construction of such 'otherness', through their recent shift towards becoming plurinational nation-states, their acknowledgement of differentiated cultural rights for Indigenous peoples and the institutionalisation of alternative concepts of development such as *Buen Vivir* in their national constitutions. In both cases, such changes represented an important 'decolonial turn' and a moment of epistemic rupture with modernity, which was greatly inspired and influenced by Indigenous peoples' life projects. However, as mentioned above, they also serve as good examples of the forces at play in the project of modernity that resist the 'decolonial turn'. Decolonising of power cannot be achieved solely by producing changes in the political or social spheres, while maintaining the dominant economic rationality. Ultimately, a shift in values systems (knowledge) and ways of being is needed.

2.2 There Is No Global Justice Without Cognitive Justice

A significant contribution of the decolonial environmental justice perspective is its focus on the epistemological dimension of oppression and domination. It highlights the need to engage with the invisible and extremely subtle ways in which violence is meted out in environmental justice struggles: through the imposition of particular ways of knowing the world at the expense of oppressing others, in other words, through *epistemic violence*, which refers to 'the different ways in which violence is exercised in relation to the production, circulation and recognition of knowledge: the denial of epistemic agency for certain subjects, the unacknowledged exploitation of their epistemic resources, their objectification, among many others' (Perez, 2019).

As Latin American environmental justice thinkers argue, the battle of Indigenous peoples and other socio-environmental movements in Latin America is not for the re-distribution of harms and benefits in the use of the environment, as stressed in environmental justice movements in other parts of the world. Rather, their struggle is for the right to live well, in accordance with their own identities, cultural imaginings and ways of knowing the world (Leff, 2015). Therefore, as suggested by Walsh (2005) and Santos (2008), the biggest challenge for emancipation from a decolonial perspective is to move towards a situation of greater *cognitive justice* in the world, learning from, and making visible, alternative forms of knowledge and being. Cognitive justice, as Visvanathan (2009) says,

> demands recognition of knowledges, not only as methods but as ways of life. This presupposes that knowledge is embedded in an ecology of knowledges, where each knowledge has its place, its claim to a cosmology, its sense as a form of life. In this sense knowledge is not something to be abstracted from a culture as a life form; it is connected to a livelihood, a life cycle, a lifestyle; it determines life chances.

According to this perspective, greater recognition of alternative knowledges in development requires changing the conditions of dialogue between knowledge systems to achieve a situation in which traditionally excluded actors, such as Indigenous peoples, do not have to fit in with the structures and standards of Western knowledge or worldviews. Far from it: research and development must be able to respond to the social, cultural, political, economic and environmental imperatives of the agendas of local and Indigenous peoples (Smith, 1999).

2.3 The Academic–Activist Nexus

As can be inferred from the above, from a decolonial perspective, academia has an important role to play in the making of the intercultural dialogues needed for emancipation and environmental justice. In fact, one of the distinctive features of Latin American environmental justice thinkers has been their commitment to understanding reality in order to transform it. In contrast to many environmental justice thinkers from the Global North, who largely engage with environmental conflicts and injustices as objects of study, Latin American environmental justice scholars have been conspicuous for taking a positive stand and active role against environmental injustices. They do so by unpacking the dominant rationality of modernisation, by entering into dialogue with local movements exploring their discursive techniques and strategies of struggle and, most significantly, by using research as a vehicle to transform power asymmetries in the dominant paradigms of knowledge production and development (Escobar, 2008; Gudynas & Acosta, 2011; Alimonda, 2011). Thus, behind decolonial environmental justice thinking, there is a political intention as much as an academic one. The long tradition of participatory action research in Latin America has been an important source of inspiration and influence in this trend (Fals Borda, 1986; Fals Borda & Brandao, 1986).

Another important aspect of the positionality of Latin American decolonial environmental justice theory is the growing acceptance of the theoretic production that takes place outside academia, specifically in activist circles and as a result of the interaction between academics and activists. Concepts such as *Buen Vivir*, which have been incorporated into the decolonial agenda and discourse, are an expression of this academic–activist interface, as is the theoretical and historical commitment of environmental justice academics to the construction of sustainable futures and other possible 'worlds' (Leff, 2015).

2.4 The Intercultural Challenge: The Core of a Decolonial Praxis

Decolonial thinkers propose the ecology of knowledge (Santos, 2008), also termed dialogues of knowledge/wisdoms (Leff, 2004) or the construction of interculturality (Walsh, 2005), as the core of a decolonial praxis.

But interculturality here is radically different from other more widely used functional definitions. Decolonial thinkers approach interculturality from a *critical perspective* (Tubino, 2005; Walsh, 2005, 2007; Santos, 2010). The term 'interculturality' should not be understood as a simple contact, but as an exchange that takes place in conditions of equality, mutual legitimacy, equity and symmetry. This encounter of cultures is a permanent and dynamic vehicle for communication and mutual learning. It is not just an exchange between individuals, but also a meeting of knowledge, wisdoms and practices that develop a new sense of co-existence in their difference.

As suggested by Viaña (2009), to achieve this, it is necessary to change the conditions of intercultural dialogue, to ensure that the conversation is not about the right of inclusion in the dominant culture, but about the historical and structural factors that limit a real exchange between cultures in each country. Only this can help create the conditions for more symmetrical conversations about the model of development needed for *Buen Vivir*, the type of solidary economy needed for life and the participatory political system needed for the consolidation of autonomies, territories and regions that seek different forms of government and self-governance.

Thus, the 'inter' space becomes an arena of negotiation where social, economic and political inequalities are not kept hidden but are made visible and confronted. Therefore, a starting point for such intercultural practice is to develop a politics of knowledge that helps strengthen Indigenous peoples' own initiatives and agendas of cultural revitalisation and knowledge production.

3 The Role of Cultural Revitalisation in Environmental Restorative Justice

Repeatedly, in my work with Indigenous peoples in Latin America over the last 20 years, I have heard my Indigenous colleagues and collaborators saying: 'We have to unearth our own history', 'We have to rescue/revitalise our traditional rules and norms of governing nature' and 'We want to teach public officials who we are: Our history, Our ways of life, Our forms of government'. These desires are an expression of the deeper and more invisible layers of environmental conflicts. Most of the Indigenous peoples I have worked with know they must produce changes in the dominant structures and social relations that reproduce social exclusion and marginalisation in development and environmental conservation. But they are very much aware too that domination is also expressed through processes of cultural violence that erase knowledge and displace identities. Thus, resisting such processes through cultural reaffirmation is key.

Furthermore, they know that the possibilities of developing symmetrical intercultural dialogues of knowledge with other actors in conflicts, to teach them about who they are and thus repair any harms that have been done to them, is dependent on them developing first their own internal dialogues: their own processes of knowledge revitalisation to reconstitute their identities, reconnect with their sense of place and restore their place in history.

In his book *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, John Paul Lederach (2005 original, 2008 Spanish translation) captured very well the key role of re-stor(y)ing in restorative justice. Contemporary environmental conflict analysis and interventions have a strong present time bias, which can contribute to erasing collective identities. A much longer term timeframe that gives a voice to history and counter-narratives is essential for preventing and reverting this process (see Fig. 21.1):

> From the perspective of indigenous peoples, original violence can be better understood by viewing it as the disintegration, and on too many occa-

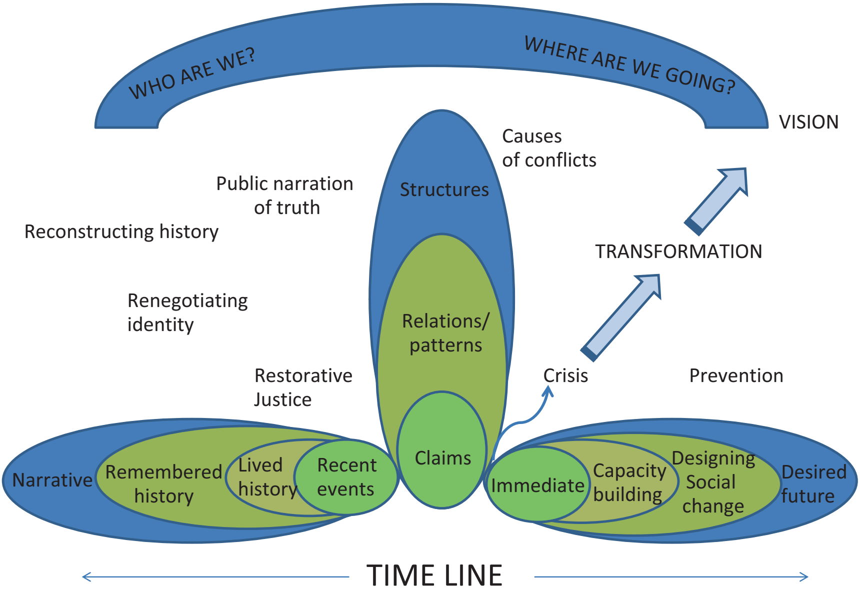
WHO ARE WE?
WHERE ARE WE GOING?
VISION
Causes of conflicts
Public narration of truth
Structures
Reconstructing history
TRANSFORMATION
Renegotiating identity
Relations/ patterns
Restorative Justice
Crisis
Prevention
Claims
Narrative
Remembered history
Lived history
Recent events
Immediate
Capacity building
Designing Social change
Desired future
TIME LINE

Fig. 21.1 Peacebuilding timeframe. (Adapted from Lederach (2008))

> sions—the direct destruction, of the history of a people. These patterns are found on all continents and in the history of all aboriginal groups … You cannot go back and redo history. But that does not mean that history is static and dead. History is alive and requires recognition and attention. The challenge is how today can the people re-history … The narrative has the capacity to create, even to heal, but its voice has been frustrated. Narrative needs to be given a place and a voice again. (Lederach, 2008, p. 214)

As also pointed out by Lederach in an older text, 'identity shapes and moves the manifestation of conflicts. At the deepest level, identity is housed in narratives that describe how people see themselves, who they are, where they come from, and what they fear to be' (Lederach, 2003, p. 6). Thus, it is not possible for Indigenous people to think of an 'other' future where the *culture of life* and *many worlds are possible*, without reconnecting with their identity. This requires going beyond recent events as experienced in conflict episodes or crisis, where claims are generally made, and digging into deeper layers of the past, which involve touching upon the lived history, remembered history and even the wider past narrative, such as the myth of origin of Indigenous peoples. As said to me by an Indigenous leader in Venezuela once: 'we can't know where are going if we don't even have clarity of who we are'.

Such a longer peacebuilding timeframe involves paying attention to not only to the restorative process that can be put in place to undo wrongs caused to individuals and groups in environmental conflicts (such as compensations, new laws, institutional arrangements, programmes) but also to processes of historical reconstruction and public narration of the truth that are key for renegotiation of the identity of a social group and which can give it a stronger footing for imaging and crafting a more just future. Such a process requires a long-term commitment

> to create multiple access points and a repetitive examination in order to address the issue of identity … Working with identity is not an immediate or instantaneous decision-making process, but a process of continuous learning about oneself and the other. This requires an insistent platform to detect and address identity concerns, within a broader framework of constructive change. (Lederach, 2003, p. 6)

In Latin America, there are valuable experiences in recovering the historical memory of Indigenous peoples, made by the protagonists themselves, as part of strategies aimed at confronting the dominant development model and its tendency to erode and erase the identity of entire peoples. A case in point was the project to recover the historical memory of the Talamaqueño people in Costa Rica, led by the American historian Paula Palmer in the 1980s (Palmer, 1994). The project sought to document the socio-economic changes experienced by the people in the region as well as conflicts with the state as lived and experienced by the Talamaqueño peoples themselves (Quezada, 1990). Recently in Colombia, the Muinane Indigenous People underwent a similar process, which culminated in a self-authored history book (Ancianos del Pueblo Fééneminaa, 2017).

Many Indigenous peoples in Latin America are making links between their past, present and future through the definition of their Life Plans (Planes de Vida), helping them to look ahead by reconnecting first with their past and their identity (Cabildo de Guambia, 1994; Jansasoy & Perez-Vera, 2006; COINPA, 2008; Espinosa, 2014), a perspective that holds great similarities with John Paul Lederach's long-term framework for conflict transformation (Box 21.1).

Box 21.1 Life Plan Definition

The 'plan de vida' is a plan made by Indigenous organisations and communities in an effort to survive and to maintain traditions, customs and the hope of having a society with its own identity based on the traditional knowledge of its people. It is a means of guaranteeing better conditions and a better quality of life for Indigenous communities. However, it is also a document to be used in negotiations with both the regional and national government. It includes the issues of health, education, territory, the environment, natural resources, the economy and production, government, justice, youth and women's and gender issues, amongst others (Perez, 2009).

In the case of socio-environmental conflicts, reconstruction of local stories is also key in helping clarify disputes over environmental and landscape changes, which are often and simplistically attributed to local practices (see, e.g. Rodriguez et al., 2014). Thus, affirming history from the local perspective can play an important role in developing environmental counter-narratives and counter-histories, which, in turn, by helping to change the collective way of thinking and seeing the environment, can help revalue and revitalise local knowledge and identities more broadly.

4 Doing Environmental Restorative Justice with a 'Decolonial Turn': Two Examples

My work with Indigenous peoples in Latin America on environmental justice and conflict transformation over the past 30 years has been largely driven by the imperative of my Indigenous colleagues to help revitalise the culture of their people. I share two examples in which we have used collaborative action research to respond to this need as part of a long-term collaboration framework.

4.1 Who Are We, Where Do We Come From and Where Are We Going? Developing a Pemon Life Plan

The first example is set in Canaima National Park (CNP) and UNESCO Natural World Heritage site, located in the south-eastern Venezuela. An area of 30,000 km of exceptional natural beauty, home to the Pemon Indigenous people, CNP has a long history of socio-environmental conflicts, which spring from the fact the park was originally created without prior consultation with the Pemon, thus disregarding their authority, historical presence and knowledge systems.

I started working in CNP in 1995, coordinating a conflict resolution project for a national non-governmental organisation (NGO). My frustration at seeing only minor progress in fostering dialogue between the Pemon and the park managers forced me to take a step back in 1997 and try to understand conflicts better before attempting to engage with them. Later, in 1999, I went back to CNP to carry out my PhD fieldwork.

When I approached the village chief of Kumarakapay, Juvencio Gomez, to seek permission to base myself in his village to study and analyse conflicts in the National Park, his response was:

> You can stay as long as you help me and my village reflect about who we are and who we want to be in the future. We—the Pemon—don't know where we are going because of all the projects that are being imposed on our territory; we are totally disoriented. We need to be clear about who we are and who we want to be as a People.

I accepted the challenge of working together to design and develop this process of self-reflection, alongside my wider research objectives.

As an Indigenous leader, Juvencio Gomez had participated in several international Indigenous rights forums and heard that Indigenous peoples in Colombia were conceptualising development in their own terms through the construction of Life Plans (Planes de Vida). Thus, the Colombian experience became an inspiration and a path to follow in the search for a self-defined society and future. It was Juvencio Gomez's view that the starting point for conceptualising this local development pathway was to confront themselves with their identity, reconnecting with their past and analysing their current situation. Promoting and constructing this process of personal and collective confrontation with cultural identity became our joint endeavour.

The result was a year-long participatory process of self-reflection which we conducted in conjunction with a group of approximately 30 people (about half elders and half youth). We focused on discussing and researching the following topics:

- Who are we? The origin of the Pemon according to mythological beliefs.
- Where do we come from? Historical and ancestral settlement areas.
- Community history: important historical figures, events, foundation processes of the village.
- How has our community and territory changed over time? Discussion of social and environmental change.
- Things that we need to solve to improve our living conditions and environment.
- Views of development.
- Good and bad things of the past and of the present.
- Vision of a desired future.

Community meetings and workshops were used to adapt the process of reflexivity and enquiry to the deliberative, oral-based decision-making structure of Pemon society (Thomas, 1980). Different participatory tools were used in these meetings and workshops, including oral testimonies, timelines, territory and community mapping, matrices, brainstorming, group and plenary discussions. When necessary, assemblies were held to validate information and have the community's consent to continue carrying out the process of self-enquiry.

Reflexivity about the origin, past, identity, changes and current situation of the Pemon was crucial for grounding a view of the desired future. The discussion about the future addressed three main questions: (a) How should the Pemon from Kumarakapay be in the future?; (b) What has to change to achieve this? and (c) What can we count on in order to achieve this change? These three questions were then used as a base to collectively construct a vision of the ideal type of society that the Pemon from Kumarakapay wanted to have. The result of this discussion can be found in Box 21.2.

Box 21.2 The Type of Society That the Pemon of Kumarakapay Want to Have (Source: Roroimökok-Damük (2010))

- A Pemon society with awareness of who we are and with a sense of identity and of belonging.
- Knowledgeable about our history, culture, tradition and language.
- Owners of our land—territory, knowledge, culture and destiny.
- A society educated with ancestral and modern knowledge.
- A society that values its wise people (parents and grandparents).
- A respectful, hard-working, obedient, kind, courteous, cheerful, generous, harmonious, understanding society where there is love.
- A productive, autonomous society.
- A society that defends its rights and is ready to confront pressures from Venezuelan society.

The varied reflexive processes carried out had different types of impacts. First, reconstruction of Pemon historical roots (in terms of both mythological and factual history) made both elders and youth revalue the importance of their cultural heritage. Important aspects of their past that were starting to be erased from the community's oral memory were discussed and made visible through this process. As a result, the elders issued a request to the younger generations to put this history into writing in order to make it known to the younger Pemon and wider Venezuelan society. This request effectively materialised in 2010 (see below). Secondly, reflections on their situation and socio-environmental changes led the Pemon from Kumarakapay to consider their livelihood potential and options for the future. A critical issue they face is food security. The shift in the settlement pattern experienced since 1950, from semi-nomadic to a permanent village, is depleting their farming land. Taking this situation into consideration, in 2000 the Pemon of Kumarakapay decided to focus on becoming a tourist community. Since then, they have been training more actively in this activity.

Under their own initiative, the inhabitants of Kumarakapay started undertaking a series of activities to revalue their identity, such as reconstructing the Pemon calendar, carrying out educational workshops, cultural activities, fairs of the Pemon culinary culture and native sports competitions.

With further external assistance between 2000 and 2004, they implemented a project for self-demarcation of the Pemon territory in the eastern part of the CNP (Sletto, 2009). This has now been issued as part of a formal claim for territorial property rights, which is still pending. Following the request of the elders made back in 1999, in 2008 we started work updating the material compiled in 1999 and 2010, the life plan team published a book entitled 'The History of the Pemon of Kumarakapay' (see Image 21.1), which is used in schools and other communities of the *Gran Sabana* as a guide for developing Life Plans (Roroimökok-Damük, 2010). This book expresses the need to reconstruct the past and revalue the Pemon identity to be able to visualise a desired future.

By putting their history in writing, the Pemon of Kumarakapay became more visible, showing the wider society that they exist as a People, with their own knowledge, language, culture and traditions, and developed local commitment to collectively start building their desired future. As a result of this publication, the community began a new series of cultural reassertion activities, such as workshops and seminars on community philosophy, with the guidance of elders (grandmothers and grandfathers), in order to orient their development, education and organisational-building.

Image 21.1 The *History of the Pemon from Kumarakapay* book launch December 2010, Kumarakapay village, Canaima Nationa Park. (Photo © Iokiñe Rodriguez)

The Pemon performed a Chiuka ritual when launching their book in Kumarakapay in 2010 in a gathering with community members, national authorities and friends. The Chiuka ritual is performed to protect the newborn babies, ideas, projects or objects from evil spirits and to ensure their mission in life is fulfilled.

With a stronger and clearer vision of development and the future, in the years that followed, the Pemon from Kumarakapay became more assertive in their relations with national authorities and in negotiating projects for the area and enhanced their capacity for public deliberation with environmental managers regarding pressing issues of CNP management, such as the use of fire, a highly contested local practice (Rodriguez et al., 2013).

The process of cultural reaffirmation experienced in Kumarakapay was also key in reasserting Pemon cultural identity at a wider level, particularly with regard to the need to advance the construction of a Pemon Life Plan. Between the years 2000 and 2015, the Life Plan gradually came to be acknowledged as a platform for intercultural dialogue with external actors about the current and future wellbeing of the Pemon, as well as for articulating different institutional agendas (Rodriguez, 2016).

More recently, however, tensions with the national authorities have escalated as an important faction of Kumarakapay started to distance itself from national government and mark its opposition and resistance to national projects and plans that pose great threats to their physical and cultural survival (these include expansion of mining in southern Venezuela, but also other time- and context-specific policies, such as blocking the entrance of humanitarian aid to Venezuela in 2018–2019 during a period of great food and medicine scarcity). This has led to recent wave of physical violence and criminalisation against the Pemon, the most violent of which was a military attack by the National Guard in February 2019 against a group of Pemon who were protesting the blocking of humanitarian aid by the national government at the Brazilian border. The attack led to the death and injury of 6 and 13 village members, respectively. This attack, along with subsequent acts of violence and repression, ended up displacing 900 Pemon to Brazil, many of whom were the authors of the *History of the Pemon from Kumarakapay*, including Chief Juvencio Gomez and his family.

Chief Juvencio and his team, however, have not given up in their effort to keep their culture, sense of place and identity alive. In exile, Juvencio Gomez and his wife, Yraida Fernandez, are now working on a revised, second edition of the *History of the Pemon of Kumarakapay* in collaboration with the INDIS (Indigenous Interactions for Sustainable Development: https://indisproject.org/) Project from the School of International Development at the University of East Anglia, UK (where I now work), which is being written as a reminder to the Pemon youth, to always keep fighting to defend their right to their culture and territory. They are also part of a video production called *Pemon*, led by Apropos Productions Ltd[3] with Funding from Doc Society[4] and as a part of a collaboration with DEV/UEA, which seeks to help raise international awareness of the destruction of the Pemon culture. Furthermore, a year after of having been displaced to Brazil, a portion of the Pemon from Kumarakapay living in exile established the Association of Indigenous Migrants of Roraima, which aims to promote, preserve and celebrate the Pemon Indigenous culture, no matter the country in case, by producing and selling their traditional crafts.

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[3] See https://www.aproposltd.net/ (last accessed 22 January 2022).

[4] See https://docsociety.org/ (last accessed 22 January 2022).

4.2 'For the First Time We Are the Protagonists of Our Own History': Using Cameras to Re-reconstruct the Monkoxi History

The second example is that of the Monkoxi people of the Indigenous Territory of Lomerio, Bolivia, with whom my Bolivian colleague (Mirna Inturias) and I have an ongoing collaboration since 2013.

The communal Indigenous territory (TCO) of Lomerio is an area of 256,000 hectares located in the department of Santa Cruz, in the lowlands of Bolivia, legally owned and managed by the Monkoxi Indigenous peoples since 2006.[5] Despite the success in obtaining territorial property rights, the collective management of this vast territory is complex due to the diversity of actors and public policies pressuring for access and use of its rich natural resources.

For the last decade, the Indigenous Organisation of the Native Communities of Lomerio (CICOL), the legal authority over the territory, has been experiencing great difficulty in regulating natural resource management in the area. Despite the recent shift to a Pluricultural National State, public policies in Bolivia to support community environmental management models are still weak. Some communities enter into very unfavourable negotiations with timber companies for forestry activities without following CICOL's recommendations. The government on its side is promoting mining and incentivising cattle grazing without undergoing free, prior and informed consent procedures or involving CICOL in local territorial planning. What is perhaps more worrying to the Monkoxi leaders and elders is that, despite the success in obtaining legal rights over their territories and forests, the younger Monkox generations are oblivious of how the conquest of the land took place and know very little about their own history. The Monkoxi elders and leaders feel an urgent need to help remember the past, in order to revitalise their identity, and have a clear view of a desired future amongst the younger generations.

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[5] In 2009, Bolivia changed its national constitution to become a 'Plurinational Nation-State' that acknowledges differentiated rights for Indigenous peoples (Article 2). TCOs are legally owned Indigenous territories that resulted from this intense period of mobilisations. There are currently 190 TCOs in Bolivia, covering 20.7 million hectares.

In 2013, the Universidad NUR from Santa Cruz, Bolivia, and the School of International Development (DEV) from the University of East Anglia (UEA) started a collaboration with CICOL to assess and initiate a community-wide reflectivity process about community tensions over the management of their territory.

Participatory videos were used in conjunction with other ethnographic methods, such as interviews, participant observation and secondary data collection, as a tool to examine local notions of environmental (in)justice in community forestry and to help give public visibility to environmental justice concerns. CICOL chose four of its members (three young women and a member of the council of elders) to work as community researchers in the project for a year, hand-in-hand with two external researchers/facilitators (the authors of this paper).

Participatory videos were made entirely by village members through a process that involved:

- Learning by practising: overcoming the fear of cameras through games.
- Participatory analysis (through the use of a variety of participatory assessment tools used to help creating the story, e.g. time lines, community mapping, problem trees, Venn diagrams, thematic pictures).
- Creating a storyline.
- Filming, screening and editing.

Three participatory videos were made. The first one, titled 'On the road to freedom: the History of the Monkox People', focuses on reconstructing the long struggle of the Monkox people of Lomerio to obtain territorial rights over their lands. It was carried out by a team of ten people from CICOL. The remaining two videos, titled 'The forest is our life, our home' and 'Our forest, our development', were carried out by community members from two small villages (Todos Santos and Santo Rosario, respectively) and focus on experiences of (in)justice in community forest management.[6]

The making of the history video in particular revealed significant concerns with regard to the loss of identity amongst the Monkoxi youth. As mentioned before, one of the biggest concerns of many Monkox leaders and elders is that current young generations do not value the heritage they have received from those who fought for a very long time to obtain legal rights over their territories and natural resources. They perceive that younger generations are responsible for a generalised lack of local governance in community forest management and, worse of all, that they are being left out of benefit sharing from community forestry.

It is with this concern in mind that the research team, in conjunction with CICOL's Board of Directors, decided to devote the participatory video to reconstructing the long struggle for liberation and territorial rights in Lomerio. The first half of this video captures, through the living testimonies of the elders, the long history of oppression experienced by the Monkox ancestors since the establishment of Jesuit Missions in the Bolivian lowlands (seventeenth century), followed by the rubber boom of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when the Monkox were brutally exploited as forced labourers on plantations. Elders describe their own parents as having been slaves and subjected to exploitation by large landowners, which continued into the late twentieth century, even after they had escaped the mission towns and (re)established in their territory.

The second half of the video recounts the process of liberation experienced by the Monkox people in this last century, as initiated first through the agrarian and educational reforms in the late 1950s, and more recently since the 1990s, through new legislation and structural political reforms that acknowledge Indigenous peoples' differentiated rights, including amongst others, property rights to their collective territories through new figures like the TCOs. In this latter part of the video, attention is paid to explaining the contribution that the lowland Indigenous movements, including CICOL, had in making these political reforms possible. The video production team also devoted considerable time to reconstructing the different processes that CICOL had to undergo to obtain the territorial rights for the Lomerio TCO.

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[6] Links to the videos can be found here: 'On the Road to Freedom' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AdeWZXFqcWQ, 'Our forest, our development' (Santo Rosario Community) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tTBIgbx3wkQ, 'The forest is our life, our home' (Todos Santos Community) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuUzTfFH6fM.

Once finished, the final version of the video was shown and discussed in general and with community assemblies and is being used by CICOL as a dissemination tool in meetings with other Bolivian Indigenous peoples related to claims for territorial autonomy. It has also been posted on YouTube for wider dissemination.

Shortly after finishing the video, CICOL decided to put the history narrated in the video into writing thorough a community authored book that is now used as part of their communication strategy to advance their claim for territorial autonomy (Peña et al., 2016). In 2018, the book was translated into English and is now used as part of CICOL's international dissemination strategy.[7] In 2020, as part of a new NUR, UEA and CICOL research collaboration through the INDIS project, we initiated work to continue developing strategies to revitalise the Monkoxi identity. In 2021, the book was translated into Besiro language and is going to be used in local schools as part of a wider cultural revitalisation strategy. We also initiated activities to help the youth reconnect with their territory and identity through photography. This time, we used the Photovoice method to develop Youth Stories about autonomy, identity, health and climate change action.[8]

Thus, work in identity revitalisation with CICOL has been continual since 2013. Similar to the Pemon, the Monkoxi know that knowledge and identity revitalisation must be an ongoing endeavour. The history video and book in particular have been very valuable strengthening the self-esteem and dignity of the Monkoxi, particularly of the CICOL members, who found a way of making their story of struggle for liberation and Indigenous rights known to the younger generations and the general public. Recounting and making public the long and arduous process behind gaining territorial rights have been important for CICOL's legitimacy as territorial authority of the TCO. Most importantly, as said by the General Chief of CICOL, Anacleto Peña, 'for the first time we are the protagonist of our own history, and we have been able to tell the story ourselves, not someone from the outside. That is why "we" are the narrators and not some external person talking about "them"' (Rodriguez & Inturias, 2016, p. 44).

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[7] Retrieved from: https://indisproject.org/the-history-of-the-monkoxi-nation-in-lomerio-bolivia-book-now-available-in-english/ (last accessed 22 January 2022).

[8] A book that brings together the result of the process can be accessed at: Fotovoz_Reconexion_Monkoxi.pdf (uea.ac.uk).

On a different level, the experience of participatory video and their mobilising potential within the community has prompted CICOL to start using participatory videos as an education tool in schools and social media to revitalise and document knowledge and skills of the communities in their everyday life as present in their oral history, language, practices and relationship with nature. As the Monkoxi people are predominantly an oral culture, they require tools like the videos and cameras to document their knowledge and cultural heritage. Due to their accessibility, videos and cameras can be used by any community member regardless of his/her level of education (see Image 21.2), allowing to rescue the voices and different histories of elders, women and youth, thus decolonising knowledge (Quijano, 2000). These local experiences are being shared with other communities, Indigenous peoples, public policymakers and officials, and the 'scientific community' at different levels: local, national and global, playing a role in the construction of intercultural dialogues.

5 Final Reflections and Lessons

Four key lessons can be drawn from these case studies in terms of the role of cultural revitalisation and action research in environmental restorative justice. The first one is that an environmental justice approach that places a focus on restor(y)ing history and identity, on its own, is no panacea. Doing environmental justice under the conditions of ongoing uncertainties, continual pressure and huge power asymmetries faced by Indigenous people in their territories is a mammoth task. Indigenous peoples have the arduous challenge of having to develop, simultaneously, strategies to

Image 21.2 Members of the CICOL Council of Elders filming the History Video, Lomerio, 2015. (Photo ©Iokiñe Rodriguez)

decolonise economic and political structures, human relations, dominant narratives, values and worldviews and the self (Rodriguez & Inturias, 2018), to succeed crafting an ‘other’ future where the *culture of life* and *many worlds are possible*. The Pemon case study, in particular, shows the fragility of processes of cultural revitalisation when the structural relations of power remain unchanged.

What such a process can help with, however, is in awakening and restoring the sense of dignity that is necessary to imagine and raise aspirations about change and an ‘other’ future. In turn, this can help redefine social consensus over norms and behaviour in a social group that are necessary to reshape conditions behind decision-making, both internally and in their relationships with others. Eventually, when the conditions are right, this can lead to changes in legal and political frameworks that are necessary for restoring justice at a more structural level.

In both case studies discussed, I have been able to witness over time how the efforts to revitalise cultural identity have had clear effects at a personal level for decolonising the self, strengthening the self-esteem and dignity and increasing the deliberation and leadership capacity over controversial environmental issues of those involved in participatory research processes. At the interpersonal level, I have also seen how the deliberation and reflective processes carried out have contributed to strengthening intergenerational bonds at the community level and helped to clarify inter-community conflicts. In the relationship with external actors, they have opened important opportunities for the articulation of new knowledge networks with sectors of academia that have been key in continuing to strengthen local knowledge systems or to legitimise them. In the case of the Pemon, the later has led to the emergence of environmental counter-narratives or counter-histories, which have started to change how the Pemon are referred to, or perceived, by environmental policymakers in CNP. In the case of the Monkoxi, the increased visibility gained by unearthing and telling their history has helped to build stronger links and networks with policymakers that have been key in pushing forward structural reforms to advance their new claim for political autonomy. Thus, although the revitalisation of culture does not instantaneously restore justice at all levels, it can be an important catalyst for change at multiple levels.

The second lesson is that, despite the fact Indigenous people have great expertise developing resistance and mobilisation strategies in environmental justice struggles to impact structural power, the same cannot be said about strategies to revitalise cultural identity, particularly when intergenerational conflicts are the norm. If anything, the two case studies show that Indigenous peoples have a great need for external collaboration to help revitalise identity and knowledge. The methodological and facilitation know-how developed through the action research processes created opportunities for reflectivity, joint-learning and knowledge revitalisation amongst the Pemon and Monkoxi that would not have emerged otherwise.

The third lesson is that taking part in this process as external collaborators requires a particular positionality as researcher. On the one hand, it requires us to take a back-stage role, one in which rather than leading the research process, we help others to do their own research. On the other hand, given that, as said by Lederach (2003, p. 6), 'working with identity is not an immediate or instantaneous decision-making process, but a process of continuous learning about oneself and the other', it requires from us researchers a long-term commitment to revisit and revitalise identity over time with our Indigenous collaborators. In both cases, having a sustained collaboration with my Indigenous partners has been key not only in developing different avenues to explore the tensions around identity, but also in developing as we go, new methodological approaches or outputs that can be of local relevance, such as the production of community authored books, videos, films or photographic exhibitions.

The fourth lesson is that, beyond the contributions at the community level restoring identity, action research can also play an important part helping to build intercultural relations with others as part of a long-term agenda for transformation of conflicts. But this requires taking interculturality seriously. As Catherine Walsh (2005, p. 45) says, building intercultural relationships 'is not solely a matter of acknowledging, discovering or tolerating the other or cultural difference. It is neither about making identities static. It is about actively promoting processes of exchange that allow building spaces of encounter among different beings, knowledge, logics and practices'. This requires an openness of mind on the part of academics to critically consider the what, why and what for, of knowledge production, in order to ensure its local relevance. This involves paying much more attention to creating the conditions for dialogue than is normally acknowledged and to giving visibility to identities and knowledge that have been made invisible by ongoing processes of epistemic violence. In both cases, the commitment to producing research outputs and organising engagement activities that can help give visibility to the local history, identity and knowledge as part of the research process has been key in levelling power relations with other actors, and in some cases in producing important structural changes, such as the progress made by the Monkoxi in recent years in their claim for territorial autonomy.

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