

CRITICAL COMMUNITY PEDAGOGY: ETHICAL AND MORAL REFERENCES IN TWO INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF CHIAPAS

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ABSTRACT

This chapter address the hermeneutic analysis of ethical and moral references present in multiple Indigenous peoples of Mexico, Latin America, and the world. However, we will focus on the experience of two peoples of Mayan ancestry from the southern state of Chiapas. The Tseltal and Tjolabal peoples have historically marked key patterns in the conformation of what we can currently call the socio-historical development of these peoples.

In this way, education from the community perspective:

It is linked to the cognoscitive and social transformation needs of the people as subject. This process leads to a continuous encounter with the “other,” which formal schooling does not provide, and which man-people redeem in the need to act in society...Life becomes the setting to learn how to solve in everyday life, the diversity of challenges that arise. The experience of the collective is an intersubjective link that transforms into a force to think about reality (Pérez and Sánchez, 2005, p. 319) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish]

Education among Indigenous peoples cannot be confined to the imposed officially hegemonic model, but rather, educational processes are constructed from within the communities themselves, forming individuals as carriers of historical and collective memory. Therefore, in the Chiapas context, the community as a cultural construct includes key elements that define it and turn it into a space for socialization and construction of knowledge since it highlights “the association of a collective with its territory; the historicity and permanence of the community over time, its own institutions and governance; the principles, values, and norms that govern collective life; the identity of belonging; and the shared culture” (Pérez, 2005, p.90). That is, the community plays a crucial role in the construction of the individual.

The spaces shaping the community allow for the articulation of educational processes in the formation of individuals. From this, we understand that

The countryside and the mountains are arsenals of didactic resources where one learns to walk, to find edible, medicinal, and useful wild plants; woods for various uses; stones of multiple shapes, colors, and sizes; the diverse flowers that change with the months of the year; the changes of

the seasons, the influence of the stars on the germination and growth of the plants; the types of soil (some facilitate the germination and growth of certain types of plants, while others are not suitable for these same species); springs of water, streams, and rivers still teeming with fauna today: fishes, shrimps, prawns, snails, and acociles. Each discovery is a moment of experience and learning (Paoli, 2003, p. 88) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish]

That is, the community environment as a basic unit for social life has allowed it to be not only a space for negotiation or belonging to the territory from which bonds and feelings are generated that become relevant in kinship relationships, loyalties, and characteristic ways of life, but it also becomes a pedagogical and didactic reality that is part of the educational and training process of individuals. Because from the community, social, political, productive, ritual, recreational, and collaborative activities are used pedagogically for the construction of cultural knowledge “through the realization of specific activities in specific territorial spaces as the knowledge, skills, and values associated with each activity are generated, reproduced and developed” (Claudio, 2016, p. 128) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish].

Thus, community work or *komon a'tel* from the Tojolabal perspective is a concept that refers to “work in the cornfield and other work in and for the communities. In other words, ‘a’tel is conducted for life... for the common good, meaning that each and every one has life” (Lenkersdorf, 2006, p. 19-20) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish]. In other words, work is an epistemological, ethical, and moral reference in the construction of community pedagogies, whose emergence is the construction of individuals with a sense of belonging and attachment to their territory.

In this way, multiple concepts specific to Indigenous peoples can be named, whose links between education and daily life are interrelated. Thus, they constitute pedagogies, typical of Latin American peoples, that are now becoming emancipatory critical references that allow them to be conceived as alternatives to the hegemonic, totalizing, and universalizing pedagogical models.

METHODOLOGY USED

The methodological process used was qualitative-hermeneutic based on ethnographic work conducted with speakers of the Tseltal and Tjol-ab'al¹⁰ languages, both Mayan languages of the state of Chiapas. The systematization of the main concepts addressed in the chapter led to the analysis of ethical and moral references used in daily life as cultural knowledge of both peoples in the field of education. Ethnographic data recovered from older people's experiences through semi-structured interviews in both Indigenous languages were systematized and translated that allowed for a better interpretation of the ontology of being in terms of learning and educating notions within the community.

TWO CONTEMPORARY MAYA PEOPLES UNITED BY THEIR CULTURAL MATRIX

Although long before the arrival of the Spaniards in pre-Columbian Mexico, there was significant cultural unity among the diverse existing peoples. So much so that Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas in his work *Apologética Historia Sumaria* (1986) notes the connections he observes between the Guatemalan and Mexican peoples, stating that "all this land, which is properly called New Spain, must have had a religion and a manner of gods, more or less, and extended to the provinces of Nicaragua and Honduras, and returning to the province of Xalisco, and reached, as I believe, to the province of Colima and Culiacán" [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish].

Indigenous peoples clearly formed a unity understood as a macro-area, later named as Mesoamerica, a term proposed by Paul Kirchhoff. This cultural matrix mainly focused on sharing religion, dietary practices, and political systems among the peoples, a triad that would become the primary historical-cultural heritage for contemporary Indigenous peoples.

After this historical legacy, in the case of the Tojolabal people, we can currently find their population centers in the municipalities of Las Margaritas, Altamirano, Comitán de Domínguez, La Independencia, La Trinitaria, and recently in Maravilla Tenejapa.

10 Regarding the way of writing tojolabal, this text will use tojol-ab'al when addressing topics related to the language, and tojolabal when referring to the people.

However, they are also found in other municipalities of the state of Chiapas due to migratory processes. What is interesting is that it is possible to distinguish three ecological areas in the Tojolabal territory such as “the region of the valleys –which covers from the center to the southeast end of the municipality of Las Margaritas– the region of the cold lands of Altamirano– bordered by the tributary of the Tzaconejá river to the north– and, finally, the region of Las Cañadas de la Selva Lacandona, bordered , in its lowest portion, by the Santo Domingo river to the south” (Cuadriello, 2006, p.5) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish].

In the case of the Tseltal people, their origins in Chiapas date back to between 500 and 700 B.C. when they began to settle in the Chiapas Highlands. The Tseltales defined themselves as those of the original word whose concept “evokes a memory of the origin of the Mayan man whose (oral) heritage is recreated in the customs and practices of knowledge” (Gómez, 2004, p.6) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish], particularly the Tseltales inhabit the region of the highlands of Chiapas.

In this way, for the Tseltal people:

The first signs of identity are acquired, and archaic memory is brought from before birth, from when the spirit or *ch’ulel* enters the fetus’s body, in the mother’s womb. Their spiritual entity will shape the individual’s way of being and character and determine their future personal history. The act of incorporation traverses their two main centers of memory and identity: their spirit or soul (*ch’ulel*) and their heart (*yotan*) (Gómez, 2004, p. 9) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

In this regard, in both peoples, from their mythical memory, “the ethical sense remains that constitutes the faithful individuals on the reason for their origin, whose image emerges from the creative word: truthful. It manifests in a being of recognition, of offering, who shares their fruits with the deities and Mother Earth” (Gómez, 2004, p. 6) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish].

CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE AND COMMUNITY PEDAGOGIES FOR EMANCIPATION

Community pedagogies as emancipatory processes start from the construction of knowledge relevant to the daily life of the individuals. Hence, the importance of the cultural knowledge of the peoples, not as mere accumulated and *banking* knowledge, but as knowledge “compelled to understand and analyze its actuality within its own field of forces as resistance and power . . . as a power, encouraging and subverting from within people their social possibilities” (Limón, 2010, p. 37) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish].

In other words, cultural knowledge marks a characteristic way of living that involves addressing culture as a sample of the historical circumstances and tensions of each territory since

the attention to the cultural character of knowledge distinguishes and shows the processes, conflicts, struggles, and resistances of the peoples; the denials and negotiations, verifications, and hidings; the historical oppression suffered, and the colonization exercised from the hegemonic and spaces of power” (Limón, 2010, p. 32) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

It is a category whose ethical and moral implications find possibilities in the context of intercultural dialogue and interculturality in its broad and human sense. Therefore, the cultural sense of knowledge and the relationship established with the community in the construction of pedagogical forms of individual formation find significant roots in the cluster of knowledge inherited in a time and space. In this way, community pedagogies imply that:

sharing with other individuals and the community is a fundamental value affecting the domestic economy. For example, the products of the land, among others, are shared, generating a redistribution system that influences the satisfaction of needs: security and the feeling of community, as well as respect for the environment, which has to do with the K’anel of life (Bolom, 2010, p. 109) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish]

It is therefore concerning the construction of new epistemologies not centered on the idea of individuality and the Cartesian separation of human-nature, but on collectivity and intersubjectivity. It is about the pedagogies that aim to make visible the concept of communalism, as Jaime Martínez Luna proposes:

We are communalism, the opposite of individuality; we are communal territory, not private property; we are *compart-ence*, not competition; we are polytheism, not monotheism. We are trade, not business; diversity not equality, even though in the name of equality, we are also oppressed. We are interdependence, not freedom. We have authorities, not monarchs (2010, p. 17) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish]

Therefore, cultural knowledge highlights the importance of life in individuals. Hence “in Chuj knowledge, the criterion of respect for the *pixan* (heart-soul-spirit) is lived according to a principle: everything that exists has life and from its own and particular quality and realization is constituent and integrant of *masanil yib’anh k’inal* (the totality of existence, of what exists; everything that is, has been, and will be)” (Limón and Pérez, 2018, p. 54) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish].

That is to say, the plane of existence of daily life fosters the construction of pedagogies that turn knowledge into critical mechanisms of community emancipation since “the community has a sense of mutual help and responsibility insofar as the relationship between people is not sterile, but is built towards common well-being, that is, all individuals recognize and enrich themselves through their connections” (Ramírez, 2017, p. 81) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish]. Thus, the socialization of cultural knowledge as critical liberating references promotes the transformation of the conditions in which the individuals put their knowledge into practice, which have also been maintained for centuries in the face of processes of oppression and domination suffered by Indigenous peoples.

THE TSELTAL AND TOJOL-AB’AL EXPERIENCE OF EDUCATING OURSELVES FROM AND WITH THE COMMUNITY

From López Austin’s perspective, the worldview is understood as “the articulated set of ideological systems and their interrelations in a relatively congruent form, with which an individual or social group, at a historical moment, intends to comprehend

the universe” (2012, p.20) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish]; that is, it is a cultural product that has been built collectively.

In the last decade, reflections on epistemological, ethical, and moral references from the worldview of the Indigenous peoples of the Abya Yala have become more widely discussed and, in some cases, materialized into movements of social, cultural, economic, and political advocacy.

Such as *Sumak Kawsay*, in Quechua, from Ecuador, the *Suma qamaña* in Bolivian Aymara, ñandareko in Guaraní, or *lekil kuxlejal* Tsotsil-Tseltal from Chiapas. All these approaches to the idea of Good Living go beyond the concept of conventional development. In this way, “the Bolivian concept of good living sets the standard for understanding what a good life means in terms of Indigenous peoples compared to predominant Western conceptions linked to the idea of development” (Nájera, 2017, p. 24) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish]. This reference to good living achieved formal recognition in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador as life alternatives in the face of the questioned dominant modernity.

Modernity and, therefore, development have justified the conditions of poverty in which a large number of populations live worldwide, where their intervention in terms of capital and ideologies from centers of power have deeply marked the historical evolution of hundreds of populations. Therefore, to speak of development is also “to speak about commercial relationships in which Indigenous peoples are often forced to integrate themselves, a situation that breaks the traditional systems of exchange of goods” (Huanacuni, 2010, p. 27) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish], to mention an aspect in economic matters. For example, in the case of the Tojolabal where the *b’ol-manel* (Tojolabal barter) has “transitioned from being a traditional exchange system mediated by the products produced by the same individuals with a sense of reciprocity, to a process of exchange that is increasingly mediated by money” (Nájera, 2018, p. 80) [Translated quoted from its original in Spanish].

From the perspective of the Tseltal people, we can find an endless number of concepts specific to the people that allow us to understand other epistemologies and make visible other pedagogies contained in the daily practices of contemporary Indigenous peoples. Thus, from the Tseltales perspective, the concept of education approaches the translation of *p’ijtesel*, which

“is addressed as a key concept in community education and is particularly linked to the wisdom contained in the elders. It involves a whole formative

process in which knowledge is transmitted to young people from within their own cultural environment, which will allow them to build a life vision with relevance to a specific space” (Nájera and Gómez, 2020, p. 90) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish]

In this endeavor, the *p'ijtesel* also allows articulating a whole system of knowledge specific to Tseltal culture, enabling individuals to acquire wisdom in their language and culture. In other words, it allows individuals to build their own ideological and cosmogonic system from the space and time they live their daily lives. Thus, the *p'ijtesel* (pedagogical approach) focuses on the link with the social sphere. Therefore, the role of elders (men and women) is crucial, as they will be the ones who pass on the knowledge through long talks, particularly at night, illuminated by the firelight, which serves as a central space and focal point for family gatherings.

Another important space in constructing the *p'ijtesel* is the field or workspace, particularly the *milpa*, which plays a relevant role as a didactic resource where knowledge is taught in multiple fields of knowledge. It encompasses mathematical, meteorological, biological, chemical, physical, geographical, symbolic, and zoological knowledge, a diversity of knowledge acquired holistically, where interrelation and intersubjectivity permeate each activity, the learner acquires. Hence, understanding education from other epistemological forms, such as that of the Tseltal people, shows us that to individuals, “are not taught, but rather they learn... and it implies full activity by individuals, who actively approaches with their senses the environment that surrounds them, in order to know it. They observe in detail the plants, animals, inanimate beings, the actions of adults” (Maurer, 1977, p. 94) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

On the other hand, from the worldview of the Tojolabales people, the concept of education is visualized from the idea of *chol*, which denotes a goal towards which an action or practice is oriented. In terms of formation of the individual, this would imply the concept of *chol*, whose sociolinguistic approach focuses on coming to an agreement and lining up. Therefore, Lenkersdorf argues that

the term *cholo* explains quite well the way of educating in Tojolabal communities, that is, the traditional education that occurs in informal spaces and allows a human become part of a collectivity or community... education creates a community in which pupils and educators participate and form a US, the *chol* that encompasses them all (2010, p. 208) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

The Tojolabal perspective on education from the community is not explained as an isolated or individual fact but rather is understood as a process that is collectively built from the community and among individuals. Intersubjectivity is manifested as a transforming power since it “is the presence of two individuals and the exclusion or absence of objects, a peculiar characteristic of Tojolabal” (Lenkersdorf, 2005, p. 28) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

Therefore, it is crucial to consider that the way of naming and conceiving the world mediated by language is manifested in the worldview of the people, in particular the Tojolabal, where dialogue,

expressed by the intersubjective structure of two actor-subjects, occurs among equals in the sense that mutual respect is maintained. In other words, in spoken communication, the dignity that each of the dialogue partners recognizes in the other by respecting them is manifested. All communication represents, in the Tojolabal context, the dialogue among equals. To have a conversation involves many modes of exchange: informal conversations, public discourse, children’s stories, speaking to animals and cornfiel, and any form of communication we can imagine (Lenkersdorf, 2005, p. 36) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

In this case, for the Tojolabales, conversation and especially listening becomes a vital reference to promote educational processes from the community experiences given that

in this language, there are two concepts for the term language or word: *‘ab’al* and *k’umal*. The first corresponds to the language or word heard, and the second refers to the language or word spoken... the Tojolabales have, therefore, a particular conception of languages because they understand them to be composed of two elements, to listen and to speak (Lenkersdorf, 2011, p. 13) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

Therefore, the Tojolabal community pedagogical process has as its primary reference conversation and listening, not from the perspective of the Indo-European languages but from the positioning of this Mayan people, where listening is not confine to the social level, but also involves hearing what nature tells us. There is no Cartesian breakdown, but rather, it is attentive listening to everything else that cohabits and coexists with the individuals since

if we listened, we would not be in the climate crisis we are experiencing. Nature speaks to us: polar and other glaciers are melting; the temperature is rising; hurricanes are multiplying and becoming more destructive; soils, water, and air are polluted; lucrative and fun tourism is promoted, but rural areas are depopulating. All this is not being heard because what matters are business, competitiveness, macroeconomics...To listen reveals realities never perceived and moves us from the I to the us (Lenkersdorf, 2011, p. 19) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

In both the Tseltal and Tojolabal cases, the NOSOTRICA (us-centric in English) conception in community life is another moral and ethical reference, but above all, they manifest their critical capacity not to exclude or despise any individual but to encourage each person to contribute more thoughtfully. Thus, the 'we' finally becomes a social and community organizational principle.

Finally, the Tseltal reference raises the need to continue investigating the power of community pedagogies as decolonizing pedagogies that break the logic of modern/colonial power, as Quijano (2003) proposes. Delving into concepts or ethical and moral references of contemporary Indigenous peoples allows us to analyze practices that can restore the power of education as a transformative and humanizing life experience, where posing a critical and emancipatory community pedagogy highlights the "critical understanding of history (neither neutral nor aseptic), the recovery and repositioning of the legacies of emancipatory pedagogical practices and knowledge, and the questioning of decontextualized hegemonic epistemic approaches" (Guelman and Palumbo, 2018, p. 193) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

FINAL REFLECTIONS

In closing, it is essential to highlight the importance of the knowledge present among contemporary Indigenous peoples, linked to the idea of education that is built from families and consequently with and from the community. We refer to community education as an agent of transformation of the individual based on ethical and moral community references.

In the case of the Tseltales and Tojolabales peoples, based on the approach we have made throughout this text, we can identify two ethical-moral references in the peda-

gological processes: the first one is about *p'ijtesel*, where it is sought that the individuals become intelligent, wise, learners, or that they are instructed in daily life activities. This must be achieved primarily through the guidance of the elders who become the central figures to share values, practices, and knowledge. On the other hand, there is the observation and practice. Tseltal education highlights the importance of observing and practicing from different individual, social, and community perspectives. As a result, the maturation of the *ch'ulel* as an entity of consciousness has to gradually develop among individuals, fostering the ability to become *true* people with consciousness and thought. Hence, observation should allow one to see, hear, and name the world as a means of self-awareness.

Community practices have become another crucial element in the development of community pedagogies. Among these is the ritual that guides individuals' formation, through which they acquire norms and rules of conduct that they will build throughout their lives to achieve *legal kuxlejal*, the good life.

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good living aims to dissociate quality of life from economic growth and the planet's destruction. In this regard, this paradigm constitutes a reaction to the conventional development model. It also corresponds to a way of life favourable for preserving a viable land for all whose resources are equitably distributed...This poses a double challenge that implies the union of human beings between them and with the environment in which they live. Good living implies a good coexistence, based on unity, exchange, solidarity, reciprocity, and respect as fundamental values" (Ortelli and Gómez, 2015, p. 144) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

Furthermore, in the case of the Tojolabales, "the ways of naming and relating to everything present in the natural environment correspond to knowledge that is the product of the history of a people in their own ancestral territory" (Limón and Pérez, 2018, p. 42) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish]. That is, the worldview allows individuals the cognitive and sensitive appropriation of cultural knowledge. From these people, community pedagogy approaches what we have mentioned as *cholo*, in which individuals assume responsibility, and in this case, it is the learning of knowledge for daily life.

From the senses, individuals can know, recognize, and apprehend what is observed, heard, felt, tasted, or smelled in daily life; these are the primary means used by individuals to build knowledge. Thus, community pedagogy becomes “an emancipatory hope recorded in a different ontology from the act of educating oneself in experiential contexts ... Hope is projected as far as individuals take possession of their living spaces to learn about reality and to consider transforming it (Pérez and Sánchez, 2005, p. 318) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

Therefore, critical community pedagogy from the perspective of contemporary Indigenous peoples privileges the role of learning with a sense of solidarity among individuals in the public space in which they develop. It is thus a hopeful ontology where the social and the communal imply the reflection of “being in itself” and “being for what.” That is, what is the pedagogical function of the individuals’ education from ethical and moral community references, facing the current society marked by mechanisms of domination and asymmetric relations that lead to despair in the formation processes as Freire states when mentioning that despair “is hope, which, having lost its direction becomes a distortion of the ontological need” (1993, p.1).

Both the Tseltal and the Tojolabal people, from the critical community pedagogy, seek to harmonize a whole philosophical, ontological, and epistemological system based on ethical and moral references where their attention do not focus on an educational project mediated by norms and criteria designed from other cultural patterns, but whose fundamental interest is centered on the development of a historical consciousness that allows to form and transform individuals aware of their present reality, with its successes and its multiple tensions.

The sense of community pedagogy from the ethical and moral references presented in this text is a motivation to discover the wide world of community education that contemporary Indigenous peoples of Chiapas sustain. It allows us to reflect hermeneutically on other epistemic ways of approaching knowledge whose premise is to understand the world that surrounds individuals and not remain only at the level of knowing and intellect, i.e., to understand implies to interpret,

to exist and co-exist, knowing others to be in others with me. Individuals are neither alone nor alien to the community. They live, take, process, observe, and co-exist individually and collectively. It is holomovement because individuals are born and simultaneously are in a state of not being born, since they are in a constant state of becoming in both self and

community. They have the ability to define their future (Velasco, 2012, p. 89) [Translated quote from its original in Spanish].

In this way, when we understand community references from the world, we see the triad that consolidates the cultural knowledge of individuals; that is, family, community, and territory allow consolidation of the social construction of educational knowledge. The implications of community education also include socializing values among individuals since this will enable them to develop objective and subjective relations within their territory.

Finally, the contribution of the experience of these two Indigenous peoples from Chiapas in terms of community education is the formation of their own pedagogical methods for the education of individuals. Methods that have been denied by the monoculture and monoepistemology created in school education, which focus on the individual's formation as a unique person without interrelation with the territory. Therefore, thinking critically about education will imply conceiving other possible ethical, political, ontological, and epistemic projects from and with the view and hearing of other peoples, other cultures, and other forms of life.

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