Inside the "Universidad Indígena de Venezuela": Development cultures, new ethnicities and epistemological gates

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Abstract

This article presents an ethnographic account of the Universidad Indígena de Venezuela (UIV), a pioneering initiative that allows us to apply and connect theories on ethnicity and development. We expound the historical processes and space-time structures of this organization: the UIV is analyzed as a country-wide social network, as a specific place (Caño Tauca), and as a set of rituals, symbols and discourses that build a particular institutional "culture". The ironies of development as a global industry and discourse are shown, but also the paradoxes and unavoidable tensions of a well-intended local project. The complexities of ethnicity are unfolded in order to evidence the pressure of European-rooted political molds. But Indigenous Universities – among other indigenous movements – are more than an adaptation to those globalized models: They provide a chance to open Western epistemology (and politics) to other worldviews.

KEYWORDS: ethnicity, education, development, indigenous peoples.

Introduction

This article is based on fieldwork carried out at the headquarters of the NGO Universidad Indígena de Venezuela (Indigenous University of Venezuela), as well as in indigenous communities linked to this project. Even though the very name and nature of the institution are part of the following discussion, throughout the text I shall use the terms "university" and "NGO" to refer to it, as well as its acronym "UIV".

The Universidad Indígena de Venezuela is both a social network that involves multiple indigenous ethnic groups across Venezuela and a meaningful place, Caño Tauca (Sucre

District, Bolívar State, Venezuela), where these groups already gathered before the university was actually built. It is also the outcome of a long process which started in 1969, and is presented here based on the actors' memories as well as on documentaries (de la Barra, 1985; Dickinson, 2003) and bibliography (Coppens, 1972; Frechione, 1985; Arvelo-Jiménez, 2000) portraying the different stages of this movement.

Participant observation took place during 17 months between August 2002 and August 2008. Although contact and cooperation continued afterwards, this article is devoted to a specific period, from 1969 to 2008. In the following years, events such as the death of the project leader (the Jesuit José María Korta) and the absorption of the NGO by the State, along with the worsening of the country's political and economic situation, have undoubtedly affected the object and the context of this study. The project continued growing and exists today under the official name *Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca*, but it also faced new challenges and controversies which we will briefly mention. It is therefore important to place the following descriptions within their time frame, even if the present tense is used to depict systems and behaviors. This ethnography – though set in a certain stage of a wider process– may be valuable as the record of a remarkable phenomenon, as a key to understanding later regional developments, and as a source of reflections on development, ethnicity and education.

During the fieldwork period I spent almost half of the time at two indigenous communities, Wi'pon (Santa Fe de Guaniamito) and Kei'pon (El Manteco), where several university students came from. Both communities belong to the ethnic group E'ñepa (Panare), a group belonging to the Carib linguistic family made up of 4.500 people spread in 30 communities across the Cedeño District of Bolivar State.[1]

I conducted fieldwork at the NGO Universidad Indígena de Venezuela as a volunteer for this organization, where I got involved in a wide range of tasks that included teaching anthropology and training for land claim projects. My academic project and my role as researcher were known and accepted (although the role of anthropologists, among other actors such as civil servants and missionaries, was itself the matter of long debates), and the results of my research have been shared and, as far as possible, made useful to the community.

The purpose of this article is to bring ethnographic insight into a singular phenomenon – the UIV ranks among the first Latin American indigenous university projects – during a special period – its independent formation, lead by the Jesuit Korta. Singularity has

[1] 4.207 according to the 2001 census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2003) and 4688 according to the 2011 census (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2011).

also to do with the methodological approach it demands, since it can be faced either as a development project or as an ethnic movement. Therefore, I will also try to show how ethnicity and development are intertwined, not only in this particular case but also as theoretical frameworks, placing in between new perspectives regarding "more than human politics".

In order to do so, after a theoretical introduction, I will first share a diachronic perspective of the project. Then, I will try to place the reader in the student's experience as observed during fieldwork, showing the material conditions and symbolic interactions that define the university. The following sections focus on the paradoxes, contradictions, and ambiguities that emerge in this space, intrinsic to development projects and ethnic movements, as well as unexpected answers revealing indigenous perspectives.

Figure 1

Location of Caño Tauca (UIV) and E'ñepa and other indigenous groups' territorial distribution[2]

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[2] Based on a map published by Ministerio del Poder Popular para Ciencia, Tecnología e Industrias intermedias, República Bolivariana de Venezuela.

Figure 2

UIV location and E'ñepa Territory (according to the map made by the Asamblea del Pueblo E'ñepa), and areas mapped during fieldwork in Kei'pon and Wi'pon
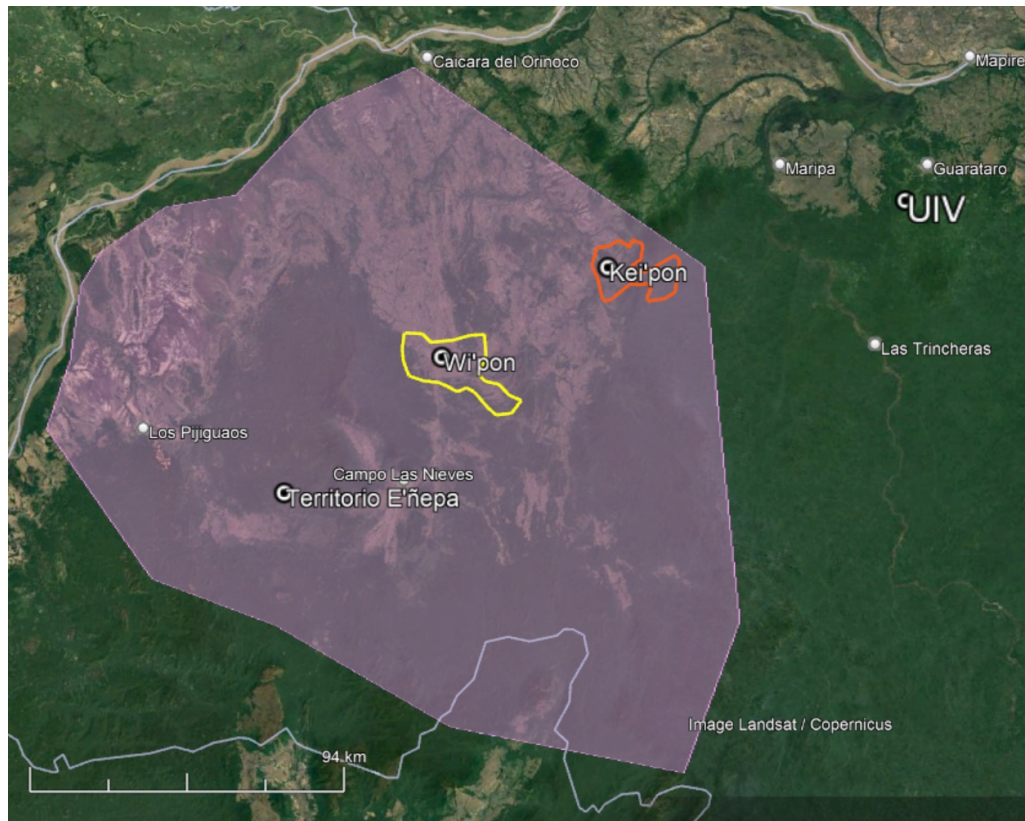
Theoretical framework

Development anthropology, on the one hand, and theories on ethnicity, on the other, provided the basic theoretical framework for the ethnographic research, though a set of approaches that include cultural economy and perspectivism have served as a counterpoint for the former perspectives. A brief summary of these influences, selected for the purposes of this article, is presented below.

Development policies filled the gap left by the colonial system after World War II (Escobar, 1995). But around the end of the century, in the context of neo-liberal globalization, a development industry is born and NGOs seem to progressively replace Nation-States as aid agents (Martínez, 1999; Gardner & Lewis, 1996, pp. 107-110). However, the word

"development" does not simply designate noticeable practices labelled with that term (projects, organizations, etc.). As Ferguson (1990, p. xiii)[3] put it:

> Like "civilization" in the nineteenth century, "development" is the name not only of a value, but also for a dominant problematic or interpretive grid through which the impoverished regions of the world are known to us.

As a discourse, development successfully defines the "underdeveloped" or the "Third world" people as those who lack knowledge, and their problems as "technical" ones to be solved by foreign specialists (Crewe & Harrison, 1998; Vitebsky, 1993, p. 107). More than material goods or specific training, Western concepts must be transferred. But the greatest success lies in the adaptability of this language, through concepts like "sustainable development", in order to legitimize the industry without changing its principles (Escobar, 1995, pp. 154-211; Sachs, 1992), and so the discourse and method consolidated in the seventies remain surprisingly prevailing nowadays (Pérez, 2012, p. 19), though increasingly sophisticated (The Familiar Strange, 2022; The Familiar Strange, 2024).

But there is a complementary view: As much as we must notice the symbolic efficacy of the development rhetoric and uncover colonial relations, an excessive emphasis on discourse can lead to a monolithic conception of development and a simplistic image of the persons and groups involved (Crewe & Harrison, 1998, pp. 17-18, 187-188; Gardner & Lewis 1996, pp. 107-110). There is a need to ethnographically approach the diversity of concrete local settings. Those contexts could be understood as a "set of local practices arising out of the interlocking of actors' strategies and intentionalities" (Long & van der Ploeg, 1989, p. 237)[4], as an "'interface' between many different groups of actors" (Crewe & Harrison, 1998, p.19) or as "communities of conversation" (Benhabib, 1995, p. 247)[5]. Another way to put it is that development projects can be approached as cultures, keeping in mind that "[w]hen we identify some set of observations or experiences as a 'culture,' we extend our idea of culture to encompass new details, and increase its possibilities as well as its ambiguity" (Wagner, 1981, p. 28).

Under this light, we perceive the Universidad Indígena de Venezuela as an interface where development concepts (mainstream and alternative) are transferred, and as a community based on shared history, symbols and rituals.

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[3] Quoted by Escobar (1997).

[4] Quoted by Crewe and Harrison (1998, p. 19).

[5] Quoted by Crewe and Harrison (1998, p. 187).

As to the anthropology of ethnicity, our starting point is Fredrick Barth's book Ethnic groups and boundaries (1969), which "marked an epochal shift" in this field (Verdery, 1994, p. 33) by letting us "regard ethnic identity as a feature of social organization, rather than a nebulous expression of culture", and by evidencing that "the cultural differences of primary significance for ethnicity are those that people use to mark the distinction" (Barth, 1994, p. 12). But are the ways to mark ethnic distinction independently invented or widely transmitted? Anderson (1994, pp. 4, 140) defines nationalism as a "modular" artifact, "capable of being transplanted" and actually "copied, adapted and improved" in a sequence that involves the first Absolutist States, creole independence movements in America, nineteenth century European nationalisms, and a last wave in the colonial territories of Asia and Africa. On the other hand, Hannerz identifies a "metaculture" of difference in the age of globalization: a modernization of the indigenous, a domestication of difference, a tendency to affirm difference within normalized lines (Hannerz, 1998, pp. 90-95). Both authors identify communication technologies as the base for these processes: national communities could be imagined thanks to print-capitalism (Anderson, 1994), and telecommunications make the "global village" possible (Hannerz, 1998, p. 195). Finally, to understand these processes we must pay attention to "the entrepreneurial role in ethnic politics: how the mobilization of ethnic groups in collective action is effected by leaders who pursue a political enterprise, and is not a direct expression of the group's cultural ideology, or the popular will" (Barth, 1994, p. 12).

These statements about ethnicity have been balanced in several ways. Eriksen (2010, p. 68) warns that the instrumentalist perspective "seems to suggest that nothing really endures" and to neglect "socialisation, the transmission of knowledge and skills from one generation to the next, the power of norms, the unconscious importance of religion and language for identity and a sense of community". Ethnicity does not work so freely: contents do matter, and ethnic entrepreneurs must adapt their discourse to a given social and historical context (Ramírez, 2023, pp. 223, 255-256). Turner (2011) rejects Anderson and Hannerz's (along with other "transnationalists") reliance on communication technologies and their focus on imagination and limitlessness; and claims, based on his own research among the Amazonian Kayapó Indians, greater attention to material bases of ethnicity, namely territory.

Though there seem to be apparently opposed perspectives on ethnicity – a closer look would show transitions between them – all of them share an interest in the selfing/othering process. Gerd Baumann's grammars of identity (2004) provide a tool to understand this process by distinguishing:

• An orientalist grammar that oscillates between a xenophobic ("we, the enlightened"; "them, the superstitious") and a xenophilic depiction of the other ("we, the materialist"; "them, the wise rainforest Amerindians") (Baumann, 2004, pp.19-21).

• A segmentary grammar that determines identities and alterities according to context (Baumann, 2004, pp. 21-24). In our study: Kei'pon E'ñepa distinguish themselves from Wi'pon E'ñepa, but before Ye'kuana Indians both communities identify as E'ñepa, and before non-Indian Venezuelans both groups identify as Indians.

• A grammar of encompassement consisting of "an act of selfing by appropriating, perhaps one should say adopting or co-opting, selected kinds of otherness" (Baumann, 2024, p. 25). Spanish colonization of the Americas through religious conversion of the Indians exemplifies this grammar (Ramírez, 2023, p. 196). In this article I will use term "criollo" to refer to non-Indians in general, as it is used in Venezuelan Spanish. But "criollo" is linked to a mestizo ideology, born in the eighteenth century and contemporarily updated, that celebrates national identity and forces Indians to fit in and dilute their specificity (Mansutti, 2006, pp. 17-18; Guss, 2000).

At the UIV we can observe an ethnic work taking place, which involves selecting cultural differences, adopting and adapting European and globalized concepts, and forging ethnic entrepreneurship. The "criollo" encompassing grammar is contested, the segmentary grammar is climbed up, and the xenophilic side of the orientalist grammar becomes at the same time a blessing and a burden for the Indians.

Finally, I bring a third set of theoretical references devoted to uncover the active —rather than passive— role of indigenous peoples (and other subaltern groups) dealing with their encounters with the modern world through their own processes and epistemologies. Numerous studies have shown how Western commodities and ideas have been "domesticated"[6] by these other groups, creating new uses and meanings and incorporating them in ritual and cosmology (Albert, 2000; Alcalá, 2023; Gudeman & Rivera, 1994; Howard, 2000; Muñoz, 2012; Orobitg, 2012; Pitarch, 2012; Pitarch & Orobitg, 2012; Pitrou, 2012; Taussig, 1977). Groups that seem to be transformed by external forces, even Indians who apparently turned indistinguishable (Magazine, 2012), may hide their own epistemological structure. Once these epistemologies are acknowledged as such, a same-level conversation with Western science and philosophy is possible (Gudeman & Rivera, 1994). While Western knowledge depends on objectifying, in Amerindian perspectivism "to know is to personify, to take on the point of view of that which must be be known"

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[6] Using Sahlins (2001) term, quouted by Muñoz (2012, p. 174).

(de Castro, 2004a, p. 231). In the indigenous epistemology "animals and other entities having a soul are not subjects because they are human, but on the contrary—they are human because they are subjects." (de Castro, 2004a, p. 237).[7] Such an epistemology has no place within modern politics, and therefore indigenous leaders are limited by a conventional political vocabulary borrowed from the left and from the common repertoire of ethnic movements (De la Cadena, 2011, pp. 414-416). But the notion that animals, plants or mountains have a soul, still underlies the political surface (De la Cadena, 2011, p. 414), not only sustaining indigenous consciousness but also spreading to, or emerging from, very different contexts (Andersen & Krøijer, 2017; Medrano & Jiménez-Escobar, 2022).

As we will see, though indigenous epistemologies are supposed to rule the Universidad Indígena de Venezuela, they in fact remain latent under conventional codes of ethnicity and development goals, but finally happen to emerge and take their place.

From Kakurí to Tauca: Social roots and historical paths

In 1969 the national agency CODESUR (Comisión para el Desarrollo del Sur de Venezuela/Commission for the Development of the South of Venezuela) was created. National sovereignty along the southern border was at stake, and so the initial strategy of this Agency was exploiting natural resources through the settlement of private initiative. Interestingly, CODESUR was also known as La Conquista del Sur, (The Conquest of the South) (Giordani & Villalón, 1995, p. 17, 31; Perozo, 1986, p. 52). This strategy brought conflicts to indigenous territories and shaped the ethnic tension and violence for the following decades. However, though indigenous peoples were initially ignored in the development enterprise, CODESUR eventually realized their usefulness as development actors, especially since there were few non-indigenous settlers available for the "conquest" (as the cities were far more attractive for the non-Indians than the remote jungles). Development projects were therefore started in indigenous communities by means of the co-operation of the State and the Catholic Church, who shared the same paternalistic view (Frechione, 1985, pp. 20-22; Henley, 1982; Perozo, 1986).

The Alto Ventuari area (Amazonas State) illustrates this process but with exceptional features. In the early 1970s the conflict between indigenous dwellers and private entrepreneurs obtained national attention through the public actions of the Ye'kuana leader Isaías Rodríguez (Coppens, 1972, pp. 7-8). The Jesuit brother and engineer José María Korta answered this cry for help and agreed with Isaías Rodríguez an ethnic resistance

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[7] See also de Castro (1996 and 2004b quoted by Quatra, 2008, p. 36), and Bird-David (1992).

plan that involved no violence: development, understood as "productive presence", was established as the way to defend the indigenous land. An unprecedented deploy of state infrastructures and resources took place at the indigenous communities, where cooperatives were created and young people trained for the new activities and technologies. Eventually, the apparent success of this strategy was perceived as a threat not only to private interests but to national sovereignty itself – regardless of the involvement of the state and the army in making it possible. Accusations of "Communism" spread, and the Catholic hierarchy finally ordered Korta to retire from the scene by 1990.

The Alto Ventuari revolution afterwards decayed, but not only due to the absence of its ideologist. In fact, in spite of its revolutionary ethnic meaning, the development project led by Korta was conventional as to its technocratic conception, and turned out as interventions in indigenous communities elsewhere did: infrastructures and state funded services changed the settlement pattern (from semi-nomadic to sedentary) and increased economic dependence, while trained youth and civil servants displaced traditional authorities.

Expelled from the Alto Ventuari, Brother Korta had time to realize this and think of a new way of working. He was officially held away from indigenous communities, so he focused on training volunteers for community projects. The Jesuit obtained the institutional support to create and start, in 1992, the *Escuela de Voluntarios de Yarikajé* (Yarikajé Volunteer Training Center) in the State of Bolívar, where young men were expected to acquire not only technical skills for development projects but also a deep social commitment. Rather than a training center, Yarikajé was a *rite de passage*. Not only many of the volunteers who were trained there ended up working in Tauca, but Yarikajé itself shaped the strategy, methods, rituals and discourses later found at the Universidad Indígena de Venezuela.

Activity in Caño Tauca started with the ethnic meetings called cursos de concientización (consciousness-raising courses). Large delegations from communities belonging to the same ethnic group stayed together for weeks at the forest and savannas surrounding the Tauca river. Such events (held successively since 1994 with the Wóthuha, Ye'kuana, E'ñepa, Pemón, Warao, Pumé and Sanumá ethnic groups) meant a turning point. Local communities, until then either distrusting or ignoring each other, had an unprecedented chance to overcome political atomism. They were able to imagine an ethnic community through a "course" program that included writing down *their* history, drawing *their* territory and analyzing their relationship with the criollos and the modern world. Entities like the *Parlamento Piaroa* (Wóthuha or Piaroa Parliament), the *Academia de la Cultura*

Yekuana (Academy of Ye'kuana Culture), the *Asamblea del Pueblo E'ñepa* (Assembly of the E'ñepa People), or the *Asamblea del Pueblo Pumé* (Assembly of the Pumé People) were created during these meetings. Though not all of them got to be officially registered or actually worked afterwards, at least the *Asamblea del Pueblo E`ñepa* held largely attended meetings during my fieldwork and played a role in intra- and inter-ethnic relations.

Table 1

Indigenous groups participating at the UIV

Ethnic group	Other ethnonyms	Linguistic family	Population (2001 Census)
E'ÑEPA	Panare	Caribe	4207
HIWI	Guajibo	Arawak/Independent	14750
KARIÑA		Carib	16686
PEMÓN		Carib	27157
PUMÉ	Yaruro		8222
SANUMÁ		Yanomami or Yanoama	3035
WÓTHUHA	Piaroa, De'aruwa	Sáliba	14494
WARAO		Independent/Chibcha	36028
YE'KUANA	Makiritare	Caribe	6523
Total			131102

Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (2003), and as to linguistic family, Metzger and Morey (2008, pp. 208-209) for Hiwi, Mansutti (1990, p. 1) for Piaroa, and Delgado (1999, p. 74) for Ye'kuana.

These *cursos de concientización* showed the need for longer and more stable activities devoted to the task of transcribing and translating cultural heritage and producing bilingual school texts. *Ateneo Índígena* (Indigenous Athenaeum), *Escuela Superior Indígena de Educación Felipe Salvador Gilij* (Filippo Salvatore Gilii Superior School of Education), *Universidad Indígena de Tauca* (Indigenous University of Tauca) and finally, in 2004, *Universi-*

dad Indígena de Venezuela (Indigenous University of Venezuela) were the names successively given to this activity. This transition of titles reflects an evolution from a project (lacking institutional personality and consisting of a set of events) to an institution (a legal entity), from a limited aim to an ambitious statement; a process parallel to the growth of participants and resources (see pp. 18-20).

Space, time, symbols and rituals

Material conditions at the UIV would never meet the standards for an official university in Venezuela. In 2002, the campus consisted of a library-classroom, a computer-room and a common house, simple mud and wood buildings precariously powered by solar panels and a gasoline generator, with a water supply but no toilets.

Students walked barefoot several miles daily in order to attend agricultural training and other activities taking place in buildings distant from the campus. One of these facilities is the *churuata Ateneo* (Atheneaum longhouse), built as a traditional indigenous communal dwelling with a circular ground plan and palm roof. The *churuata* is the space for important meetings and cyclical rituals. It contains a mural displaying the university's official symbol (also used as a stamp in every institutional document): an Indian breaking chains.

Figure 1

Inside the Churuata Ateneo

Figure 2

University's stamp

The *Churauta Ateneo* stood indeed as an architectural emblem, and students occasionally wore ritual clothing and painting, but the main institutional symbol was material austerity. Wearing but an old tee-shirt, shorts and no shoes was considered *vivir como indígenas* (living like indigenous people), something to be proud of as opposed to the material comfort and ostentation attributed to criollo lifestyle.

However, material conditions were to change progressively. Since 2008 there is a modern building with several storeys for class-rooms, grid electricity and internet access. For decades, radiocommunication had played a key role in creating and keeping the social network linked to Tauca, and it was the only means of communication at the University in 2002. All students depended on radiocommunication to send and receive news from their communities, a process that necessarily involved cooperation between students, families, communities and ethnic groups. A land line was already available by 2003, which made co-ordination with volunteers in the cities easier, but barely changed the Indians' logistics. During my last stay in 2008 the importance of cooperative communication based on radios stopped being absolute, as cellular phone coverage reached Tauca and some students were already using their own devices.[8]

So much for spatial analysis. Let us now assess time. Though schools can generally be described as liminal spaces and periods in which students are not yet what they are supposed to become (Velasco & Sama, 2019), conventional universities today do not

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[8] For an example of cooperative use of cellular phones among Amerindians listen to Hak Hepburn and Fischer (2023).

necessarily imply such an intense experience. The UIV did produce a rite of passage. Students were separated from their communities and practically secluded in Caño Tauca. Such an isolation was symbolically effective, however not completely intentional but imposed by the remoteness of their communities and the lack of means of communication and transport. Indeed, it lasted only for four months each semester. For the remaining two months university activity took place out of Tauca. Students did not just return home. They went back as ethnographic fieldworkers, ambassadors and project leaders, expected to visit different communities, be taught by their elders, and speak at the assemblies. When the student arrived in Tauca at the beginning of the following semester, his first duty was to submit a detailed report of his "fieldwork" (*trabajo de campo*). Those documents are immensely valuable, not only because of the information intentionally collected, but also for the account of accidents and situations during the stay and the adventurous trip. And so another semester begins, and after six semesters and a thesis the student is meant to become not just a graduate but a *Nuevo Piache* (New Shaman): someone skilled in Western knowledge and technology but committed to transmit his cultural heritage and to lead accordingly. The following figures represent the official four years program.

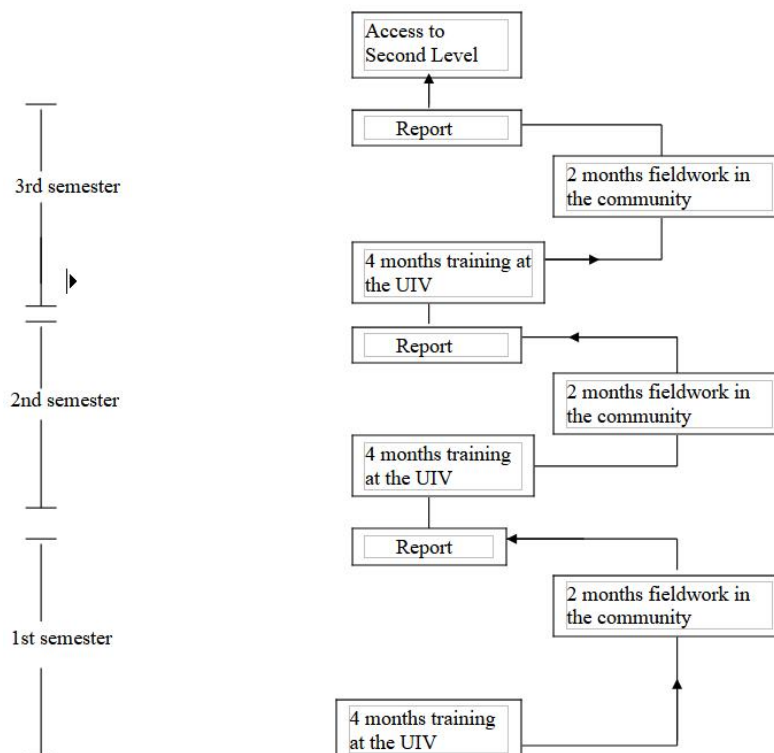**Figure 3**

Degree Program: first level
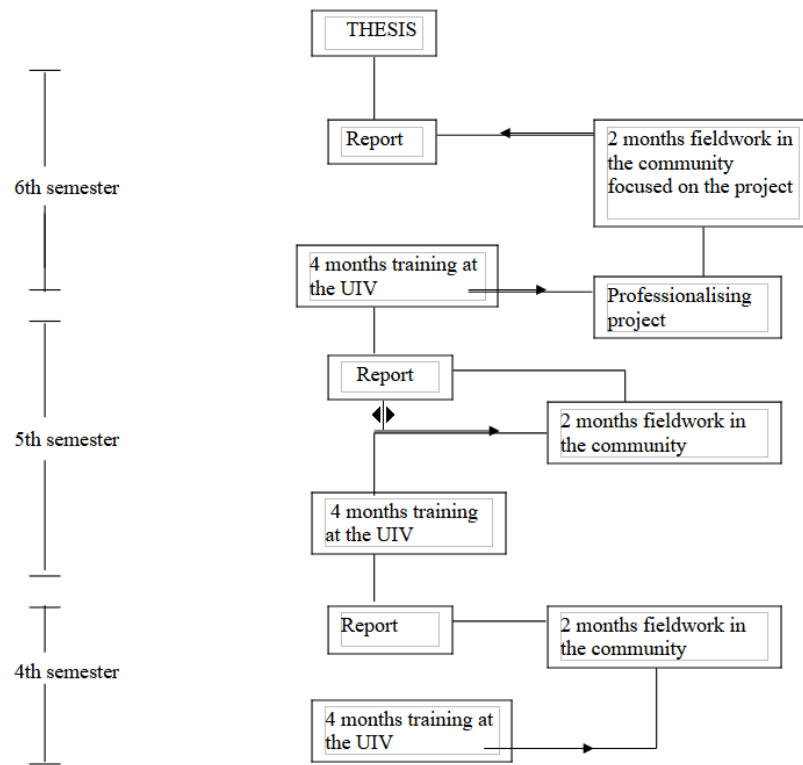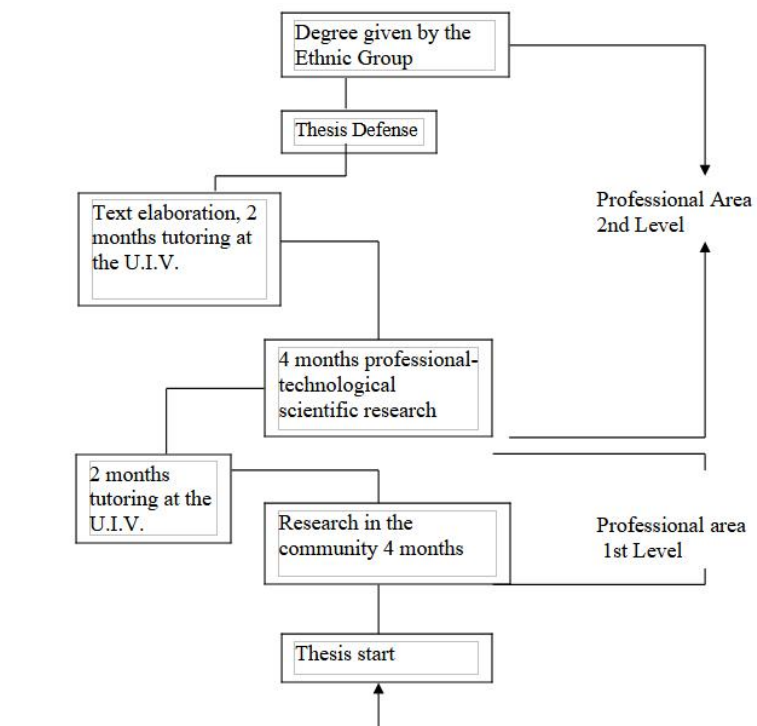
Figure 4

Degree program: second level

THESIS

Report ← 2 months fieldwork in the community focused on the project

6th semester

4 months training at the UIV → Professionalising project

Report

5th semester

◄► 2 months fieldwork in the community

4 months training at the UIV

Report — 2 months fieldwork in the community

4th semester

4 months training at the UIV →

Figure 5

Degree program: thesis

Degree given by the Ethnic Group

Thesis Defense

Professional Area 2nd Level

Text elaboration, 2 months tutoring at the U.I.V.

4 months professional-technological scientific research

2 months tutoring at the U.I.V.

Research in the community 4 months

Professional area 1st Level

Thesis start

In December 2008 two Ye'kuana students became the first graduates of the UIV, after defending their thesis, both in Spanish and in their language, before a committee made up of Ye'kuana elders and non-indigenous teachers. However, by the time I ended my fieldwork, the final level (Figure 3: thesis and graduation) remained theoretical for most of the participants in the project, mainly because they could not afford being away of their communities so long – an issue eventually acknowledged and assessed with governmental scholarships (Instituto de Estudios Interculturales, 2022). But the fact that few students graduated is as relevant as the lack of official recognition for their titles. The outcomes of the activity still stand: bilingual school texts printed and distributed throughout the communities, agricultural training and testing, an intense exchange of knowledge and political organization within and between ethnic groups, and an extraordinary archive created by and for the indigenous peoples.

Figure 6

Graduation event taking place at the churuata ateneo (picture by Emilio Guzmán published at the UIV website)

There is a sharp contrast between the communities and Tauca regarding daily life and time structures. Whereas the communities depend on daylight, and time there is rarely measured in minutes, students' routine in Tauca is scheduled from 6 am to 10 pm from Monday to Sunday. At 6 am the cook, a fellow student, blows a horn to wake up his colleagues and bring them coffee. Until breakfast is ready at 7:30 am, they are expected to read and write on their own (*estudio personal*). Lectures in the classroom (see table 2) take place from 8 to 10 am and afterwards each student heads to his own *área demostrativa* (demonstration field: agricultural training activities; see also Table 2), returning at 1 pm for lunch. After further *estudio personal* students walked the distance to the computer-room, where fieldwork reports were transcribed and school texts produced. Dinner is ready at 7 pm and followed again by reading and writing at the library, where a general assembly takes place from 8:30 pm until bedtime. Saturdays are devoted to maintenance activities and a cinema session, and Sundays to *ocio productivo* (productive leisure), with no timetable except for the meals and the night assemblies. In spite of this intensive schedule, the spare time and long trips between activities allow students to adapt individually and build inter and intra-ethnic informal relations without time structures (at the sunset soccer game, while bathing in the river, or whenever there is a chance to gather and joke around).

Table 2

Study program

STUDY PROGRAM	
Main class-room subjects	**Out-door training ("áreas demostrativas")**
"Derecho indígena" (Indigenous laws and Indigenous rights)	Garden center, permaculture, composter and worm farming
Indigenous History, History of Venezuela and Universal History	Savannah fruit trees
Ecology and indigenous subsistence	Duck, buffalo and fish farming
Ethnology	Apiculture
Languages	Maintenance
Indigenous art	

Diet brings another interesting contrast. Students used to complain about the monotonous menu at Tauca and the scarcity of meat. Meals are indeed the same week after

week, and the same meal is served at lunch and dinner every day. Though there is a different meal for each day of the week, breakfast mainly consists of porridge, and lunch and dinner of beans and vegetables. At home students may enjoy diverse and culturally appropriate foods and drinks, and more or less frequent game feasts. Nonetheless, nutrition problems exist in many communities, linked to land invasion and economic dependence, and in some cases are reflected in extraordinary child mortality (Hidalgo, 1997; Freire, 2007, pp. 14-16; Villalón, 2007). I witnessed grave situations in Wi'pon, where tuberculosis was endemic,[9] and observed that students from different ethnic groups looked healthier at the end of the semester than at their arrival. Tauca's diet was at least balanced and constant, and was somehow indigenous: cassava bread and tapioca went with every meal, and refreshing *yucuta* (water with tapioca) was drunk any time of the day. Anyway, when I asked the university staff about the cultural fitness of the campus diet the answer was: "austerity is what is indigenous".

But austerity, monotony and time and space structures are broken, altered or at least given meaning by the university rituals and cyclic events. Let us observe ritual behaviors, firstly on a daily basis and then in the course of the year.

The cook – a rotating role that all students shall be assigned – must say grace before every meal. He cannot just thank God but must name the divinities in each of the present cultures (*Wanadi* for the Ye'kuana, *Marioka* for the E'ñepa, *Poana* and Kumañí for the Pumé, and so on) one by one or simply as "the Creators". Students less competent in Spanish may say these words in their own language, and many times –especially when the Jesuit Korta was not there and hunger made them rush – the ritual was reduced to a "Enjoy, guys!" (*¡Buen provecho, muchachos!*).

There were two kinds of night assemblies: *Evaluación y planificación* (Evaluation and Planning, every day at 9 pm) and *Discernimiento* (Discerning, Wednesday and Sunday at 8:30 pm). The first one, though devoted to practical questions, followed a ritual order that, combined with rotating roles, made every student exercise public speaking, and ended with good night words involving the Creators as when saying grace. *Discernimiento* sessions on the other hand were expected to be cathartic, bringing up and solving conflicts among students or between them and the staff, as well as the time for critique, self-criticism, and reflecting on how the University went, how it should go or how it should be. A metaphor was used to define this sessions: discerning (*discernir*) is like using the manare sieve to remove residual elements and sift the manioc flour.

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9 According to a doctor at the regional Hospital in Caicara del Orinoco.

Cyclic events throughout the year are the occasions to express ethnic identity, not through discourse but by means of ritual and time-space restructuring. Just before leaving Tauca for the final part of every semester, a farewell ceremony is held at the Churuata Ateneo, where divinities are invoked and students perform their respective traditional dances accordingly dressed and painted. At the end of the dry season, another ritual event takes place: the *Semana de la Sabiduría de Indígena* (Indigenous Wisdom Week). In this occasion students are not departing to their communities: it is the communities that congregate in Tauca. Each student leaves the common house to join his own ethnic group camping at Tauca's forest. For the whole Indigenous Wisdom Week activities and meals are adapted to traditions and students intensively learn craftwork, myth and worldviews from their *ancianos* (old men and women). Though some general meetings are still scheduled, the Ye'kuana students, for instance, questioned participating in *Evaluación y Planificación*: they argued that, according to their traditions, planning should not be done at night before sleep, but in the morning after considering what the anciano has dreamt. The week ends with ritual dances performed by each ethnic group, but here the Pumé rejected performing theirs arguing that daytime dancing was not proper in their culture. Finally, we find the *Semana de la resistencia indígena* (Indigenous Resistance Week), an event similar to the above described but linked to the Twelfth of October, renamed by the Bolivarian Government *Día de la resistencia indígena*.

Whose university?

I will now assess some of the tensions, contradictions, dilemmas and paradoxes faced by the project, most of them contained in the very name of the initiative: *Universidad Indígena de Venezuela*.

We have shown how Korta evolved from a technocratic approach to a strategy based on culture and education. He and others saw in the new Bolivarian Venezuelan Constitution a chance to go further than former attempts to create an intercultural education system. Unlike previous initiatives that merely intended to adapt basic education within the existing system, their proposal was starting from the top, that is, creating an indigenous higher education body not subordinated to the criollo system. Due to the low indigenous schooling rates (Pérez de Borgo, 2004), such an indigenous university could not rely on the almost non-existent indigenous graduates from Venezuelan colleges. Actually, students joined the Universidad Indígena de Venezuela without secondary education: being 18 or older and chosen by their community were the only requirements.

This approach was quite challenging in the Venezuelan context, in spite of interesting examples already existing in neighboring countries. According to Muñoz (2006, pp. 140-143) the UIV belongs to the four pioneering Latin American *experiencias de educación propia* (self-ruled education experiences), along with the *Escuela de Medicina Kallaguaya* in Bolivia, and the Escuelas de Derecho Propio as well as Proyecto Nasa in Colombia; while, later on, Mato (2008) collects 22 *instituciones interculturales de educación superior* (higher education intercultural institutions) including those devoted to afro-descendant specificity. What draws our attention is that criticism came from two radically different perspectives. On the one hand, from a relativistic point of view, an "indigenous university" was perceived as the imposition of a Western institution replacing aboriginal knowledge systems. On the other hand, from a formal perspective, a "university" lacking the requirements for such institutions within the national frame (starting with the acceptance of unschooled students) was called a fraud.

Cultural imposition or scam, it was already happening. The number of students staying at Tauca grew every year (from 6 in 2001 to 64 in 2008). The project was supported by formal organisations (Catholic Church, Government and different NGOs and international agencies) and involved intellectuals (anthropologists, professors, artists, etc.) aware of the above mentioned debate. Interestingly, support came from opposing sides, and conflict did as well. The leader of the UIV, Brother Korta, was disliked among authorities of the Catholic church for his leftist ideas and controversial actions and because he spoke favourably of Chavez's government. On the other hand, those chavistas who were against the UIV highlighted the involvement of the Catholic Church, an institution linked to the political opposition.

But the essential paradox of the *Universidad Indígena* was the fact that it defied a status quo on which it depended. Such a defiance took place through a discourse, shared in the classrooms and documents, that invoked indigenous autonomy and a new relationship with the surrounding society, and distrusted politicians from both sides (including indigenous politicians). But resistance was also exerted practically. For instance, when the mayor, the chavista Juan Carlos Figarella, schemed to take over the land of the University, the community responded with material measures (spreading infrastructures) and public actions (headed by students). And when, during a meeting held in Tauca in 2004, the Ye'kuana politician Nicia Maldonado—later appointed Minister of Indigenous Affairs by Hugo Chávez—proposed labelling the institution Universidad Indígena Bolivariana in exchange for legalizing it, this was Korta's reply to her before the large audience attending the event:

I believe that changing (the University's) name and giving it a name from a Venezuelan perspective, in the sense that being "bolivariano" and Venezuelan are central (to its identity), would be the opposite (of what we pursue). (We would be) designing an Indigenous University from a "bolivariano" stance, (we would be) designing an Indigenous University from a Venezuelan stance. No, this isn't a Venezuelan university for indigenous peoples. No. This is an indigenous university that joins the Bolivariano country within the Venezuelan Constitution. … It's true: if we call ourselves "Universidad Bolivariana" or "Universidad Indígena Bolivariana de Venezuela" we'd be more acceptable politically, but we'd be giving up what is ours, we'd become political bit-players. No. We mustn't be political. We must be indigenous doing politics, authentic politics. But firstly indigenous, not firstly Venezuelans.

This episode shows how unique the project was, but it also leads to another issue: representativeness. A Spanish-born Jesuit uses first person plural speaking on behalf of indigenous peoples, which reminds us of what Anderson (1991, pp. 198-199) called "ventriloquism". Korta's extraordinary personal commitment, technical and social skills, and the appreciation from volunteers and indigenous communities are inseparable from the birth of the Universidad Indígena de Venezuela. Dependence on his personal leadership was, on the other hand, a weak spot of the organization as such. The immediate problem, however, was not how much volunteers depended on Korta, but rather the fact that, initially, most of the staff (teachers, administrative and technical personnel, and institutional agents) were non-Indians, euphemistically termed *aliados* ("allies"). Even though the project was designed to be led by indigenous representatives, and formal bodies eventually created actually represented the aboriginal peoples (Warao leader Librado Moraleda was the first rector of the University), day-to-day activity took years to truly be ruled by Indians.

Those who taught in or worked for the University (in Tauca and elsewhere) were referred to as *voluntarios* (volunteers). This was a wide category since it included both paid and unpaid personnel, people living at the headquarters and occasional collaborators, and all kinds of assignments at the project. An ideological rejection of hierarchies and a limited budget – meaning that a hand was always needed somewhere and newcomers were welcome to take on responsibilities – made it possible and necessary to put all *voluntarios* on the same level. With some lodging differences, material austerity involved volunteers as much as students. But, even though voluntarios hardly displayed any authority over students, they did enjoy for example wider access to transport and radio-

communication and greater freedom regarding schedules and coming in and out of Tauca. Since volunteers were in the beginning mainly non-Indians, those relative privileges underlined the ethnic boundary. Hence, the equation *voluntario=criollo*/student=Indian frequently moved students to ask "Is this really our university?".

The situation was progressively balanced and by the time of my last stay in 2008 volunteers at the headquarters were mainly indigenous. However, this achievement did not fit the ideal model. According to the original plan, at least one *anciano* of each ethnic group would be permanently present at Tauca, as a moral and intellectual figure of authority for the students belonging to the respective group. The *anciano* model did work during certain annual events such as the *Semana de la Sabiduría Indígena* above described, but the active presence of indigenous individuals other than the students was achieved differently. Instead of old wise men or women coming straight from the communities, those accompanying students throughout the year were former students turned into volunteers.

Institutional endogamy thus solved the problem of representativeness to some extent, though there were still two issues: inter-ethnic relations between indigenous groups, and gender.

The ethnic discourse developed at Tauca emphasized indigenous egalitarianism. Highlighting this feature is consistent with the ethnographic record (Rivière, 1984, pp. 12-13), but conceiving it as essential may lead to disappointment. Specifically, not only bibliography reports historical subjugation between ethnic groups among the participants in the UIV – as between the E'ñepa and Hoti (Henley, 1982, pp. 24-25) and between the Ye'kuana and Sanumá (Coppens 1981, p. 110) –, but the University itself reflected dynamics contradicting the egalitarian narrative.

Veteran *voluntarios* who had worked in Ye'kuana communities recalled the Ye'kuana overpowering the Sanumá, and linked those experiences with the situation at Tauca. Indeed, Ye'kuana students as a group were the strongest ones: they were closer to the *aliados* (that is, to power) but also those more likely to defy them, and they were also more likely to bully students from other ethnic groups than otherwise. Though at some points they have been outnumbered by other ethnic groups, the Ye'kuana group progressively became the most numerous, a fact that reflects and reinforces their position.

Therefore, the public discourse about indigenous solidarity coexisted with privately shared prejudices against the Ye'kuana. None of the essentialist portraits takes into account the contexts and processes where ethnic relationships take shape. In fact, both in

Ye'kuana-Sanumá and E'ñepa-Hoti cases, political superiority was determined by greater access to criollo wealth (Coppens, 1972, p. 5; Henley, 1982, pp. 24-25). As to the University context, the Ye'kuana position reflects a greater linguistic and cultural capital, in Bourdieu (1985) terms. Longer formal education (almost all Ye'kuana students finished high-school) meant greater competence in Spanish. Though historically other groups like the Pumé had coexisted longer with criollos, the Ye'kuana had built in the previous decades a special relationship with criollo institutions allowing them to acquire the convenient codes.

While ethnic representativeness is a subtle matter, the gender gap is fully evident. There were no female students during my fieldwork period. The integration of women was at most a matter of future projects and theoretical debates. The delay was justified alleging that girls marry very young and attend school for shorter periods. Not questioning "traditional" gender roles seems consistent with the project's ideology. But pointing out girls' lack of formal education contradicts the leitmotiv of the Indigenous University (independence from the criollo educational system). In fact, anthropological studies argue that women could play a greater role in keeping traditions due to their lower exposure to criollo influence (Arvelo-Jiménez, 2000, p. 735).

Since male students and community representatives showed reluctance to send girls to Tauca, and *aliados* used a relativistic approach to delay the matter, change required pressure from the outside. In order to be eligible for financial support, the UIV had to adapt to the latest development discourses. And it is ironic how the development industry in the first place created environmental problems and boosted gender inequalities to end up blaming the "underdeveloped" for their lack of environmental consciousness and machismo (Escobar, 1995, pp. 195-198; Sachs, 1992; Gardner & Lewis, 1996, pp. 123-124). Evidence suggests the existence of gender complementarity rather than equality for these indigenous cultures (Rivière, 1984, pp. 92-93), but modernization displaced the material and symbolic features that balanced relations between men and women (Fuller, 2005).[10] For instance, among the E'ñepa, though symbolism might express male superiority and there is a clear sexual division of labor, ritual escape valves and economic cooperation favored gender equality. But development consisting of attracting the E'ñepa to the market economy has disempowered women, since criollos traded only with men; and ritual gender balancing has been displaced by violent behaviors inducted by industrial alcohol (Alcalá, 2023).

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[10] Indigenous feminists elsewhere have nonetheless reacted against the overestimation of gender complementarity (Sciortino, 2012, p. 145)

The UIV eventually received female students, though this process could not be observed as it occurred after my last stay in 2008. It must also be mentioned that an indigenous woman from the Pemón ethnic group volunteered in Tauca as early as 2005. This last fact shows that the issues regarding who the university belongs to were never absolute. But the gender matter comprises not only parity between men and women but also other identities and sexual behavior's reported among indigenous peoples. On this subject, the UIV discourse was selective. Indigenous marriage rules and kinship systems were defended as valuable traditions essential to the aboriginal identity, openly challenging Western prejudice against "endogamy".[11] But this discourse did not include aboriginal institutions like homosexual marriage (Mosonyi, 1984, pp. 184) or transvestism (Metzger & Morey, 2008, p. 248, 276), neither acknowledged indigenous indulgence (de Barandarián, 1979, p. 216) or reverence (Dumont, 1976, pp. 114-115) towards homosexual behavior. On the other hand, though there was not an institutional discourse against homosexuality, Western heterosexism might influence indigenous students when some volunteers joked about *maricos* before them.

As Weston (2003, pp. 70-71) has observed, due to the meaning of reproduction in nationalist and ethnic discourses, gender identities and sexual behavior's thought to be "sterile" have no place in them. As far as those ethnic discourses are not endogenous but rooted in European modern history (Anderson, 1991), they can hardly adapt to sexual diversity.[12] Nonetheless, ethnogenesis is not a passive but a dialogical process as we mean to illustrate in the following section.

Finally, we must return to what started this movement led by Korta back in the 1970s. Though culture is the heart of the University, institutional documents argue that without economic autonomy the cultural project would only lead to frustration. Tauca students are expected to learn agricultural techniques and other technical skills for this purpose. Though the period studied was not long enough, we could not report important achievements but rather the failure of some funded projects led by students in their communities. On the other hand, students were supposed to complete their instruction and return to their communities in order to serve them as independent actors only committed to their folk, unlike the indigenous civil servants allegedly co-opted by the criollos and individualistically orientated. Ironically, in spite of the lack of recognition of

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[11] A similar strategy can be found in other minorities. Spanish Gypsies are stigmatized by payos (non-Gypsy majority) for allowing marriage between cousins. But the stigma of "endogamy" in fact works as a symbolic strategy enabling the Gypsy minority to hold the ethnic boundary in the absence of linguistic or religious distinctions (Gamella & Martín, 2008).

[12] For an interesting exception involving indigenous ethnicity and sexual diversity see Flores (2012).

the UIV as an educational institution, many students were hired by official bodies even before they completed their studies. It is as if the UIV was too successful as a training center. We do think that, no matter other expected results, students did develop an extraordinary "intercultural muscle" in this environment.

An epilogue could be added to this reflection. On 13th September 2008 the UIV students publicly asked President Chavez for official recognition of their university. The President's positive answer in that very public event symbolized a turning point for the project and worked as the first step in a process that lead to the Presidential Decree signed on 29th November 2011 declaring the university official though under a new name: "Universidad Nacional Experimental Indígena del Tauca". This new name was unilaterally imposed (Anciutti 2015, p. 132) and took away the meaning of Universidad Indígena de Venezuela above analyzed. But official recognition also meant changing the structure and methods of the university, and displacing the indigenous leadership that had hardly been achieved, specially after giving up financial independence in 2018 (Anciutti, 2015, p. 132; Instituto de Estudios Interculturales, 2022). Furthermore, in this new frame students lacking secondary education but trained in the indigenous university are still denied the right to officially become graduates. On the other hand, the formal involvement of anthropologist Esteban Emilio Mosonyi, a long-term ally as well as well as an extraordinary linguist, has been highlighted as an improvement, and the worrying transformations in the last years are, at least, being publicly discussed (Anciutti, 2015, 132; Instituto de Estudios Interculturales, 2022).

Producing ethnicity

Cultural and historical backgrounds: name, land, history and destiny

In order to appreciate the ethno-genetic process happening at the UIV, we must first explain some common features among indigenous traditional ethnicities. The "traditional" label is always relative and in this case the adaptive nature of worldviews becomes evident.[13]

Ethnonyms present the first complexity. Criollos and anthropologists have most of the time referred to these groups using exonyms (Panare, Yaruro, Makiritare, etc.), names not used by the group itself. The names these groups use for themselves (E'ñepa, Pumé, and Ye'kuana respectively) have remained broadly unknown or unrecognized by others (see Table 1). These endonyms are also peculiar because of their unspecificity. The words

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[13] For an accurate reflection on how to define modernity and tradition regarding American Indians see Pitarch and Orobitg (2012).

e'ñepa, pumé, tuha, or *yanomami* mean in their respective languages "human beings", "people", or "indigenous people" as opposed to "non-indigenous people" (Orobitg, 1998, p. 4; Wilbert, 1990, p. 1; Metzger & Morey, 2008, pp. 206-207; Kaplan, 1975, pp. 17-18, Herzog-Schröder, 2000, pp. 34-35), while *ye'kuana* and *warao* mean "canoe people" (de Barandarián, 1979, p. 16; Heinen 1988, p. 592). In a conversation in their language, the word *e'ñepa* appears constantly without political meaning, because it makes up the most common sentences: "there is no one" (*ejke e'ñepa*), "people are working" (*amo'kaityëpë' e'ñepa*). This ambiguity, a common trait of Amazonian peoples (Meliá, 1979, p. 12), clashes with the logic of European languages possessing a specialized word to designate the nation and their members.

Anthroponyms among the E'ñepa are specially linked to traditional ethnicity, since the puberty rite where personal names are given also celebrates political unity over local and kinship divisions (Henley, 1982, p. 151). But these are also particular names. As there are only six for men (Tose, Wi'ñi', Tena', Puka, Najtë and Mañën) and four for women (Mate, Entyo, Atun and Achim), these names hardly specify (as "John", "Michael" or "Susan" would do) and mainly identify individuals as members of the group (Dumont, 1977). Among the other indigenous groups participating at the UIV, another peculiarity is found: anthroponyms are so meaningful that they must not be pronounced, and thus kinship terms or technonyms are used in their place (De Barandarián, 1979, p. 121; Coppens, 1981, p. 194; Ramos, 1995; Lizot, 1984; Kaplan, 1975; Heinen, 1988, p. 635). All these traditional anthroponyms did not in any case get to be used by non-Indians. It happened the other way round: criollos in many different ways – from peasant godfatherhood to missionary strategy – imposed Spanish names on the Indians.

Territorial identity, through oral history and toponymy, may play an important role. However, ethnonymic confusion, migrations and group merging throughout the last centuries make territorial definition a complex task (Mansutti, 1990; Villalón, 1992). In any case, Indians think of territory in ways not fitting the Western cartographic mind: it is events linked to places rather than boundaries that matter. Among the E'ñepa, toponyms are usually place descriptions, and Spanish toponyms are easily adopted since they allow greater specificity (Henley, 1982, p. 18).

Finally, it is remarkable that in diverse Amazonian oral histories (including those of the groups at UIV) Indians and criollos appeared in the world almost at the same time, but the aborigines became overpowered due to their laziness, their mistakes... Even though the demiurges did prefer the Indians over the criollos, they were not to change their fatal destiny (Perera, 2000, pp. 157-158; Petrullo, 1969; Gragson 1990; de Barandarián, 1979,

pp. 20-21). Oral histories collected by UIV students in their own communities share these traits, like this transcription made by the Pumé student Hachava Arbilio García (2004):

> The Creator Goddess established a rule saying "the person who rides that horse is going to be rich in this world, and the one who does not is going to be poor while he lives in this world and when he dies he will go to change the richness and it is going be never-ending." The criollo rode the horse and the Yaruro was afraid to ride it. For this reason, the Yaruro remained economically poor in this earth.

However, this historical resignation does not imply self-denial. There is indeed a reaction, and oral histories also include episodes of resistance corresponding to historiography, but expressed in particular codes (de Civrieux, 1980, pp. 157-158; de Barandarián, 1979, pp. 42-44; Escalante & Moraleda, 1992, pp. 189-199). These are transcribed by UIV students, such as Emjayumi's epic account of the defeat of the *Jañudu*—"Spanish" anthropophagous invaders killed by the Ye'kuana's supernatural traps (Torres, 2004). And even when few or no episodes like such are remembered, moral superiority compensates material inferiority. Thus, E'ñepa oral history identifies the Indian with the howler monkey (*koota, alouatta sp.*), an admirable music performer, and the criollo with the "silly" (*tanchikejke*) capuchin monkey (*arkon, cevus nigrivittatus*).

New political languages

Upon arriving at Tauca students are expected to publicly call their group by its vernacular name. Pumé students must refer to themselves as "Pumé", and not by the exonym "Yaruro", E'ñepa as "E'ñepa" and not "Panare", and so on. Many students are not used to employing their endonym when speaking in Spanish to the criollos or other indigenous groups. Thus, they may occasionally use the exonym, but the self-designation always stands as preferable. Rather than a matter of linguistic accuracy, this is about telling others how they must call you, a reaction against the epistemological domination exerted when the powerful name the powerless. When referring – in Spanish – to the indigenous groups as a pan-ethnic whole, the technical expression *indígena* prevails over the term *indio*, potentially pejorative (criollos living among the E'ñepa call them *panare* or simply *indios*, and identify themselves as racionales, thus implying that the aborigines lack rationality).[14]

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[14] Interestingly, some political actors elsewhere reject *Indígena* as an euphemism and prefer the raw *Indio* term (Ramos, 1988, p. 215; Cardoso de Oliveira, 1990; Palomino et al., 1992, p. 133; Ontiveros 1992, p. 116).

But the newcomer student might find even harder the request to use an indigenous personal name instead of the Spanish anthroponym. Since, due to the tiny name repertory, many E'ñepa students would bear the same name, the solution lies in combining both the Indigenous and the Spanish name, though always subordinating the latter (for example "Tose Pedro"). Students belonging to groups in which personal names are not revealed may break the secrecy or use an alias; those coming from groups where indigenous names where largely replaced by Spanish ones may – in some way – rescue a traditional name. Again, as observed in other ethnic building processes, linguistic fidelity is not as important as creatively deploying a name repertoire that enables group distinction.[15]

Similarly, places must be called by a native name. Territorial identities promoted at the Universidad Indígena require adopting the way in which national territories have historically been established and contested: by projecting maps and placing as many names as possible on them. To this end, the E'ñepa translate criollo toponyms into their language, or turn into toponyms their knowledge about places (places that were not meant to be toponyms in a map).

Besides these sociolinguistic and symbolic strategies, the UIV holds a radical transformation of the narratives explaining the past and inspiring the future. Instead of the traditional self-blaming resignation to a criollo hegemony distantly consented by the demiurge, the student learns that he has been "called by the Creator" to change the fate of his people, original dwellers of the land. The criollos are not pictured any more as mythological monkeys but as Westerners and Capitalists. The same student that transcribed a mythical explanation of the criollos' superiority and his people's condemnation to poverty, above quoted, also wrote (García, 2003, 2001) :

> Before the arrival of the colonizers we lived happ(il)y in our territory. After they arrived our life started to be transformed … Our elders were killed because they confronted the Spanish in order to defend our territory from the invasion … Some Yaruros survived and we are the tiny branches left over by the European assassins….

> My destiny is to keep forward fighting for my culture because I find that I am a Yaruro Indian leader of this land. I shall not be convinced by the criollo politicians, either let my land be taken, because the first ones to arrive to this land of America were the indigenous peoples. We must fight and get stronger based on

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[15] From Basque nationalism (Ramírez, 2011: 302-303) to African American identity (Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Lieberson & Mikelson, 1995)

the original right we have on the territory we occupy in our habitat. We must organize ourselves, so that our culture is not lost, so that our culture works again as in former times, working.

Epistemological gates

We have highlighted the peculiarity of indigenous ethnonyms. E'ñepa means "person/people" as opposed to "animal/wild" (*në'na*), and "indigenous" as opposed to "non-indigenous" (*tato*). But basic categories are not necessarily subject to binary logic. The E'ñepa point out that all animals are "E'ñepa kin" (*E'ñepa a'pieke*), which is consistent with the metamorphoses contained in their oral history. And certain species, such as the boa constrictor, are defined as *e'ñepa*, as they are perceived as authorities linked to natural resources or sacred sites.

This fluid classification is reflected in practice. I have observed an E'ñepa student delicately removing – but not killing – a boa constrictor from the duck breeder at Tauca, and a similar behavior with tarantulas at Kei'pon. Consistently, georeferencing expeditions in Kei'pon turned to be the scenario of a knowledge transmission ritual – especially in sites under the influence of distinguished animals, where the elders explained why the place is sacred, and the young university students summarized, one by one, the sage's words. Making maps in order to achieve legal protection does not imply an absolute replacement of the indigenous meaning of land. As a young E'ñepa leader particularly involved with the UIV expressed to a government commission visiting Wi'pon (after the killing of three Indians by criollo ranchers in a neighboring community): "It's the cattle that's theirs, not the land; the land was born on its own, like the moriche palm grove, like the little turtle..." (*lo que es de ellos es su ganado, la tierra no, la tierra nació ella misma, y el morichal, y el morrocoicito…*).

The depth of this worldview challenges the influence of Western scientific knowledge. For instance, an E'ñepa student equates the notion of a common past of humans and animals in his tradition with our theory of Evolution "The *koota* (howler monkey) is the father of all that lived, all the human beings. (That is why) we are just like the Westerners' History". Koota in fact designates the eminent human being that became the first howler monkey, as the E'ñepa metamorphoses run in the opposite direction to which our evolutionary theory claims. But this ambiguity human/non-human, key to the indigenous tradition, allows an apparent reconciliation with Darwin's legacy.

These ontologies do not fit the moulds of nationalism, and global environmentalism has hardly comprehended them (De la Cadena, 2011). As observed above regarding gender, the development discourse, reborn as "sustainable development", has managed to picture the "underdeveloped" as environmentally ignorant. The environmentalist idealization of indigenous groups becomes a burden whenever they do not fulfil expectations (Brysk, 1996; Perera, 1997). The E'ñepa, as other indigenous groups, have indeed introduced activities, such as selling game, which degrade their own environment, endangering their very subsistence. Their criollo neighbours' discourse, which traditionally considered the E`ñepa "irrational", now includes a reproval of the Indians' environmental behavior. The irony again lies in the fact that these harmful activities are in the first place the consequence of development policies forcing the E'ñepa to change their settlement pattern and join the market economy.

But the point here is that all these other perspectives – which the UIV students belonging to different ethnic groups have carefully studied with the wise men and women at their communities – have been shared, written and translated at Caño Tauca. Though ethnicity is the propeller of this educational project, there is not a mere imposition of a globalized ethnic mould. The UIV instead provided the space for an epistemological exchange, an intercultural conversation where the knowledge of each of the participants is equally ranked, using De la Cadena (2011) and Gudeman and Riviera (1994) terms.

Conclusions

Across this article we have tried to address development taking into account the critical perspectives concerning this phenomenon but at the same time exploring a concrete local diachronic process that has forged a community provided with a specific symbolic system and discourse.

We have focused on the contradictions and paradoxes evidenced at Caño Tauca. This analysis is meant to be helpful for the anthropologist conducting fieldwork and/or working in/for an NGO, a position where dilemmas are inevitable and ideals are challenged by complex realities, though the knowledge of similar situations may at least be encouraging. We have seen the clash between the endogenous/civil society principles and the dependence on national and international institutions for subsistence. But this tension is multiplied when ethnicity is at stake, as the question about who leads and who is represented becomes definitely meaningful, to which gender complexities must be added.

Finally, we have explored the encounter of different ethnicity codes, the endogenous (though evidently not pre-Columbian) one and the one historically rooted in Europe. Rather than observing a simple imposition, we recognize the UIV as the space where an epistemological dialogue did take place. Such a conversation is not only possible but necessary.

Going back to our initial question, how development and ethnicity theories are connected in this experience, we arrive to the following conclusions. One of them accentuates the material connection, where the actors perceive development as a means to ensure their territory and achieve economic independence from the *criollos*. The second reveals that as development projects claim to promote local entrepreneurship, ethnic entrepreneurs are the – not always acknowledged – key of ethnic movements. But wherever leadership and representation is needed, paradoxes and contradictions also flourish. The third conclusion shows that while infrastructures and goods are necessarily involved, development consists of the transference of globalized concepts regarding "growth" and "sustainability". Similarly, ethnic work is propelled by the transference of concepts forged elsewhere. Learning agricultural techniques is as important at the UIV as learning the conventional vocabulary of ethnicity. The fourth conclusion points out that development discourse mirrors the encompassing grammar of ethnicity: the underdeveloped are not excluded by the developed: they in fact belong to the latter precisely because they are developing. So the Indians belong to the criollo society, as potential criollos. Alternative development discourses reflect the xenophilic side of the orientalist grammar. But this blessing becomes a burden when Indians cannot fulfil the ideal, whenever they are not as egalitarian or environmentally respectful as we want them to be. The fifth conclusion shows that received ethnicity and development concepts codify the discourse of indigenous leaders. Their non-indigenous allies support their right to keep their languages, myths and symbols, but the conversation with the other's epistemology requires compromising one's own and taking the longest path. However, indigenous epistemologies work under the conventional surface and emerge as starting points for a deep dialogue.

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Povzetek

Vsebina članka obravnava pionirsko pobudo Univerze za staroselske študije v Venezueli (Universidad Indígena de Venezuela – UIV) ter njeno uporabo in povezovanje teorij o etničnosti in razvoju staroselskih kultur. Pri tem se osredinja na zgodovinske procese in prostorsko-časovne strukture imenovane organizacije. Slednjo analizira kot družbeno omrežje znotraj države, kot poseben kraj (*Caño Tauca*) in niz ritualov, simbolov ter diskurzov, ki v Venezueli gradijo posebno institucionalno "kulturo". Vsebina izpostavlja ironije razvoja, kot tudi paradokse in neizogibne napetosti dobro zastavljenega lokalnega projekta, ki se porajajo znotraj konteksta globalne industrije in diskurza. Članek naslavlja kompleksnost etnične pripadnosti, da bi razkril pritisk v Evropi zakoreninjenih političnih kalupov. Pri tem trdi, da se staroselske univerze, poleg drugih staroselskih gibanj, ne prilagajajo toliko globaliziranim modelom, ampak raje izkazujejo in tvorijo priložnost, da se zahodna epistemologija (in politika) odpreta drugim nazorom in pogledom na svet.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: etničnost, izobraževanje, razvoj, staroselska ljudstva

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