



Pluriversity, the Anthropocene and Relations With the Non-Human Actors of the 'Spiral of Life'. The Case of Indigenous Universities in the Cauca Region of Colombia
Pluriwersytet wobec antropocenu i relacji z pozaludzkimi aktorami „spirali życia” na przykładzie uczelni rdzennej ludności regionu Cauca w Kolumbii

ABSTRACT

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The research objectives concern relationship of the pluriversity with the Anthropocen and non-human actors of reality, and its role in the lives of indigenous communities.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The chosen methods are literature analysis and narrative interviews with members of Misak Universidad and Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: Argumentation evolves around how the concepts of epistemological mosaics, feeling – thinking with the Earth, reasoning with the heart, educational autonomy, emancipatory methodologies, harmonious, moral, concentrated, autonomous, diverse, indigenous economy, and the plan for long-term existence, are realized in analyzed institutions.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The results shows that education at the discussed pluriversities is going beyond the Anthropocene and towards the non-human actors of reality, and thus supports the survival of local, indigenous cultures.

CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH: Described educational activities aim to develop and preserve the identity of indigenous communities, but they can also inspire Western universities in the matter of inercultural and environmental education.

→ **KEYWORDS:** **NON-HUMAN ASPECTS OF REALITY, PLURIVERSITY, AUTONOMOUS EDUCATION, EMANCIPATORY METHODOLOGIES, INDIGENOUS PEDAGOGIES**

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STRESZCZENIE

CEL NAUKOWY: Cele naukowe dotyczą stosunku pluriwersytetu do antropocenu i pozaludzkich aktorów rzeczywistości oraz jego roli w życiu rdzennych społeczności.

PROBLEM I METODY BADAWCZE: Wybrano metody analizy literatury oraz wywiadów narracyjnych z członkami Misak Universidad oraz Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural.

PROCES WYWODU: Argumentacja pokazuje, jak w omawianych instytucjach urzeczywistniają się koncepcje mozaik epistemologicznych, odczuwania – myślenia z Ziemią, rozumowania sercem, autonomii edukacyjnej, metodologii emancypacyjnych, harmonijnej, moralnej, skoncentrowanej, autonomicznej, zróżnicowanej, rdzennej gospodarki, planu długotrwałego istnienia.

WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ: Wyniki wskazują, że edukacja w omawianych uczelniach sprzyja wychodzeniu poza antropocentryzm i ku pozaludzkim aktorom otaczającego świata, a tym samym wspiera przetrwanie miejscowych, rdzennych kultur.

WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ: Opisane działania edukacyjne zmierzają do rozwoju i zachowania tożsamości społeczności rdzennych, ale mogą również inspirować zachodnie uniwersytety w kwestii edukacji międzykulturowej i ekologicznej.

→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** POZALUDZKIE ASPEKTY RZECZYWISTOŚCI,
PLURIWERSYTET, EDUKACJA AUTONOMICZNA,
METODOLOGIE EMANCYPACYJNE, PEDAGOGIKI RDZENNE

Introduction

From its inception, the university has been structurally Eurocentric, and its principal phases of consolidation and expansion – the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and modernity – coincided with the zenith of European imperial domination. Consequently, academia became an instrument of the epistemological colonisation of the ‘Global South’ (Mignolo, 2018; Reiter, 2018; Mbembe, 2024; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021). It endowed European anthropocentrism – and the academic formations grounded in it – with a putatively universal status. This, in turn, generated forms of epistemological racism in which Africans were associated primarily with ‘experience’, Native Americans with ‘wisdom,’ and the inhabitants of the ‘Third World’ with ‘culture,’ while philosophy and science were reserved for Europeans, Euro-Americans and ‘First World’ citizens (Mignolo, 2010). Such hierarchisation was frequently accompanied by epistemic genocide: the systematic destruction of local traditions of knowledge production and transmission, often coupled with the physical annihilation or displacement of Indigenous communities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2021; Rojas-Zambrano & Katz, 2023).

The collapse of colonial empires did not immediately translate into a recognition of the need to decolonise university. From the 1990s onwards, however, efforts emerged in North and Latin America and in Africa to place Indigenous traditions of knowledge production and transmission in critical dialogue with the frameworks of Western academia. It is within this context that the notion of the pluriversity arose, understood as:

A process of knowledge production that is open to epistemic diversity. It is a process that does not necessarily abandon the notion of universal knowledge for humanity, but which embraces it via a *horizontal strategy of openness to dialogue among different epistemic traditions*. To decolonize the university is therefore to reform it with the aim of creating a less provincial and more open critical cosmopolitan pluriversalism – a task that involves the radical *re-founding* of our ways of thinking and a transcendence of our disciplinary divisions (Mbembe, 2024, p. 19).

One of the constitutive pillars of the pluriversity is the recognition of non-human actors within the ecology of knowledge. Most Indigenous cultures of the Global South move away from the entrenched division between *culture* and *nature*, in which the latter is construed primarily as an object of human exploitation. This orientation underpins claims for nature conservation and climate change mitigation (Mbembe, 2024).

The article presents the results of research on the pluriversity-oriented stance towards the Anthropocene and non-human actors in the more-than-human world of universities in the Cauca region of Colombia: Misak Universidad (Misak University) and the Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural (Autonomous Indigenous Intercultural University). The analysis addresses the following research questions: What are the theoretical responses of the pluriversity to the Anthropocene and to non-human actors? How pluriversity modifies anthropocentric and Eurocentric methodologies? How it shapes attitudes of responsibility towards the natural environment? What role pluriversity plays in the lives of Indigenous communities in the context of the Anthropocene?

Literature Review, Research Methods and Tools, Study Area, and Research Organisation

To address the above objectives, I draw on an analysis of scholarly literature on concepts concerned with the role of non-human actors in pluriversity. The analysis engages with notions such as epistemological mosaics (Connell, 2018); *see-able (vide-cible)*; *thinking-feeling with Earth (sentipensar)* and *reasoning with the heart (corazonar)* (Velasco & Gruber, 2022; Escobar, 2011; Albarrán González, 2020); educational autonomy (*educación propia*) (Rojas-Zambrano & Katz, 2023); encounter epistemologies and emancipatory methodologies of knowledge creation (Velasco & Gruber, 2022; Adésina, 2002); harmonious economy (*economía harmonica*), moral economy, concentrated economy, non-monetised forms of exchange, economic autonomy (*economía propia*), indigenous

and diverse economies (Padilla, 2017); and the *plan of persistent existence (plan de pervivencia)* (Velasco & Gruber, 2022).

The empirical component of the analysis draws on problem-focused narrative interviews. Adoption of a qualitative research strategy, and narrative interviewing, reflects its suitability for investigating complex phenomena demanding cultural sensitivity (Kubinowski, 2011). The data are twofold: interviews that I conducted during my stay in the territory of the Indigenous Misak group, involving a study visit to Misak Universidad, plus interview material generated in interview with the founder of Misak Universidad, Gerardo Tunubala Velasco, conducted by Patricia Rojas-Zambrano and Susan Roberta Katz (2023), and interviews carried out by Nicholas L. Padilla (2017) with representatives of Misak Universidad and the Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural. All studies were conducted in the Andean part of the Cauca region, where around 80 per cent of the population is Indigenous (DANE, 2012) and belong to a range of ethnic groups, including the Nasa, Paez Misak, Yanacona, Coconuco Totoro, Eperara, Ambalo and Inga (Padilla, 2017). The region has been pivotal in the history of the emancipation of Colombia's Indigenous population. It was here that, in 1971, the Regional Council of Indigenous People of Cauca (*Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca*) was established, with the aims of reclaiming expropriated land, securing autonomy and safeguarding cultural identity (Aviedes, 2002). These demands catalysed the expansion of the Indigenous autonomy movement across the country. Consequently, the 1991 Constitution of Colombia granted all Indigenous inhabitants the rights for which the Regional Council of Indigenous People of Cauca had campaigned (Padilla, 2017). The first Indigenous language into which the Constitution was translated was Misak, or Namuy Wam. The translation was undertaken by Professor Barbara Muelas – a linguist, the first Indigenous woman to be admitted to the Colombian Academy of Language, and patron of Misak Universidad (Velasco Muelas, 2025).

Main Body

One of the defining features of the modern Western worldview is anthropocentrism, which entails the objectification of non-human elements of the world. In this context, the 'rehumanisation of the world' (Maldonado-Torres, 2016) has been identified as a crucial dimension of the decolonisation of academic knowledge. It involves elaborating new understandings of ontology, epistemology and ethics by moving beyond anthropocentrism and humanism; by transcending the entrenched divisions between nature, culture and science (Mbembe, 2024); and by recognising non-human forms of life through the conceptual and methodological tools of the social sciences (*the see-able/vidé-cible*). This also requires reconnecting nature, culture and science through practices of *thinking–feeling with Earth (sentipensar)* (Magos-Carrillo & Loredo-Cansino, 2022) and through practices grounded in ancestral knowledge, such as *reasoning with the heart (corazonar)* (Albarrán González, 2020).

In a conversation with the Dean of Misak Universidad, Emanuello Cuchillo, I learned that although the Misak have succeeded in safeguarding their own language, Namuy Wam, they have lost the languages their ancestors once used to communicate with animals, plants, and spirits. As a consequence, they now communicate with these beings primarily through dreams, in which they seek guidance for addressing problems faced by the community. In this process, a particular role is played by Kalim Pishimisak, the ancestral Misak spirit guide. The dynamics of these relationships can be difficult to apprehend for scholars trained exclusively within Western academia. The founder of Misak Universidad, Gerardo Tunubala Velasco, has acknowledged that after returning from studies at the Autonomous University of Madrid he initially found it very difficult to reconcile a rationalist orientation to the world with the traditions of his people:

It was challenging to face Taita Avelino speaking in such terms, searching for our Misak sensibilities. And not just Taita Avelino, but many Mamas as well. For us, as Misak people, the spinal cord of our education – our identity – is to be able to dream with these beings, to dream with the Land, and to be in the Land, which is why it is so crucial for us to continue fighting to recover our Land (Rojas-Zambrano & Katz, 2023, p. 12).

[...] to be Misak is to have a deep relationship with the Land. If the Land suffers, we feel it, and think with the Land. This is what we mean by *sentipensar con el territorio* – to sense, feel, and think with the Land. We sense the beating of the Land and can feel its waters, its animals, all of its flora and fauna. Having contact with the Land and with all of nature is essential for us (Rojas-Zambrano & Katz, 2023, p. 6).

Similarly, his openness to the non-human dimensions of Indigenous Andean cosmology – the *see-able/visible* – and his ability to weave rational thought together with its characteristic modes of experiencing nature, namely *thinking–feeling with Earth (sentipensar)* and *reasoning with the heart (corazonar)*, has been characterised by Professor Walter D. Mignolo:

I learned from Indigenous cosmology what I could not learn from Hegel and Western cosmology. However, I was trained (in body and mind) in the latter. Learning from what Western modernity had disavowed, and not observing and describing what modernity disavowed, opened up new dimensions of the border to me. Sensing that border is not a mental or rational experience, I sensed it, and sensing is something that invades your emotions, and your body responds to it, dictating to the mind what mind must start thinking, changing its direction, shifting the geography of reasoning (Mignolo, 2018, p. xiii).

The holistic combination of rationality, as cultivated in Western academia, with Indigenous practices of the *see-able (visible)*, *thinking–feeling with Earth (sentipensar)* and *reasoning with the heart (corazonar)* gives rise to encounter methodologies, or epistemological mosaics, which Raewyn Connell describes as follows:

Separate systems of knowledge sitting side by side like tiles in a mosaic, each based on a different culture or historical experience, and each with its own claims to validity.

Epistemological mosaics offer a clear alternative to Global North hegemony and global inequalities, replacing the privileging of a single knowledge system with respectful relationships between multiple systems. (Connell, 2018, p. 30).

This is precisely how the Dean and the Secretary of Misak Universidad, characterise its teaching methodology:

We want to prepare our students to participate fully in the contemporary world while preserving their Indigenous identity. Misak Universidad offers law, medicine, economics, and linguistics studies. The programme lasts five years, during which they learn both the Misak code and Colombian and international law, traditional and academic medicine, indigenous forms of natural resource management and the latest trends in the global economy. For preventive healthcare and less serious illnesses we draw on our traditional medicine. We have lived in the Andes for thousands of years and know best how to care for the human body in this climate and how to prepare remedies from nature's gifts to treat it. However, if someone requires cancer treatment or a limb amputation, we refer them to a state hospital. A medical graduate of Misak Universidad should be able to distinguish between these two situations (interview with Emanuelo Cuchilo, conducted by the author, March 2025).

The Secretary of Misak Universidad, Henry Velasco, further adds:

We collaborate with scholars from across the world, our students undertake research supervised by researchers based at other universities. Among others, we have worked with the World Bank and the Colombian Ministry of Education. However, any collaboration must be conditional on respect for our culture. Recently, we declined a grant proposal from the Spanish government because its implementation would have entailed significant changes in land management within Misak territory. The project required us to accept funding for the reorganisation of farms, replacing biodiverse, small-scale individual holdings with large monoculture plantations. We regarded this as harmful to the natural environment. We want to maintain a just and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world (interview with Henry Velasco, conducted by the author, March 2025).

These include emancipatory methodologies that combine local Indigenous modes of knowledge creation and transmission with methodologies established within Western academia (Velasco & Gruber, 2022). Among these are the specifically Misak spiral conception of time and the *Lata-Lata* and *Pachikwa* methodologies. Gertrudis Morales Tunubala, a guide in the Misak Autonomous Region, describes this as follows:

Our ancestors believed that time takes the form of a spiral of life, composed of people, plants, animals, rocks, water, earth, and spirits. A person is born, passes through the twists and turns of life, dies and is reborn in the spiritual world, where they meet their ancestors and the protective female spirit, Kalim, and the male spirit, Pishimisak. In the past, even the Misk'a'yim's farmlands were spiral in form (interview with Gertrudis Morales Tunubala, conducted by the author, March 2025).

Figure 1. The Spiral of Life in Misak Cosmology



The photograph was taken on the campus of Misak Universidad in March 2025 by the author. It shows Gertrudis Morales Tunubala, explaining the role of the spiral of life in Misak cosmology.

Therefore, the *Lata-Lata* and *Pachikwa* methodologies are grounded in traditional spiral discussion circles that bring together community members, elements of the natural world and ancestors, each situated at a different point on the spiral, yet remaining in communication with one another through rituals and dreams. The knowledge generated within the circles is then combined with participatory research (Ávila & Ayala 2017; Velasco & Gruber, 2022).

Another example of an emancipatory methodology is the course in harmonious economics (*economía harmonica*) offered at the Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural (UIAI). During the Colombian civil war and narco-capitalism, land was seized from farmers by various parties to the conflict, and biodiversity was destroyed in order to establish highly profitable coca plantations. This resulted in ecological crisis in many parts of Colombia. Today, these problems are further exacerbated by a neoliberal economy that seeks to maximise profit at the expense of biodiversity and sustainable development. Harmonious economics seeks to restore the biodiversity characteristic of traditional farms and to foster forms of economic cooperation among Indigenous communities in the Cauca region that are both sustainable and mutually supportive. It is premised on a concentrated economy (rather than importing goods from distant markets, people purchase familiar products from known producers), economic autonomy (agricultural production is directed primarily towards meeting the needs of one's own household, and those goods that cannot be produced locally are obtained from other farmers in the region, with a marked preference for barter-based exchanges), moral economy (the value is assessed not solely in terms of monetary profit, but also in terms of harmony and cooperation with human and non-human actors in the environment). These principles do not amount to an escapist project aimed at recreating an idealised version of

a precolonial past. As one activist, cited by Nicholas L. Padilla in his work *Thinking with the Global South and Decolonizing Indigeneity: Indigenous and Peasant Struggles to Reclaim Spaces, Identities, and Futures in Cauca, Colombia*, puts it:

When one speaks of harmony with nature, it signifies that one is constantly searching for it as life purpose, even though it is not always fully achieved. Speaking of harmony before the Spanish invasion does not mean that we lived in a paradise, rather we sought equilibrium – or a middle point – between different demands as a livelihood. It is something that one did not always achieve, but there was the intentional practice of concepts such as consensus, reciprocity, complementarity, and comprehensiveness. We were definitely not *noble savages* or the opposite...we were people in search of equilibrium and harmony (Padilla, 2017, p. 115).

Harmonious economics is informed by an alter-globalist orientation: a critical stance towards key elements of the global liberal economy which, under the rubric of *think globally, act locally*, places particular emphasis on supporting local producers and enterprises committed to the sustainable development. This entails teaching in accordance with the principles set out in Western economics textbooks, while simultaneously foregrounding the significance of diverse, local, Indigenous economies. Such education provides the foundation for the elaboration of the *plan de pervivencia* (*plan of persistent existence*) of Cauca Indigenous communities – a strategy for their development within contemporary Colombian society (Velasco & Gruber, 2022). These practices are made possible by the educational autonomy (*educación propia*) granted to Colombia's Indigenous population in the 1991 Constitution (Rojas-Zambrano & Katz, 2023). However, the degrees awarded by the universities discussed here are not formally recognised beyond the structures of Indigenous autonomy.

Results

This article has sought to address a series of research questions. In relation to the question 'What is theoretical response of the pluriversity to the Anthropocene and to the non-human actors of the surrounding world?', it should be emphasised that, despite the relative novelty and multi-stranded character of the pluriversity, its proponents have succeeded in elaborating a conceptual apparatus that enables to move beyond the anthropocentrism characteristic of Western academia and to effect an epistemic reorientation towards non-human actors. The same is true of the pluriversity-related reworking of anthropocentric and Eurocentric methodologies of knowledge transmission within the framework of educational autonomy (*educación propia*). Here we can speak of genuine innovation and of the emergence of new epistemic configurations grounded in a sustained dialogue between the traditions of Western academia and Indigenous traditions of knowledge creation and transmission. The pluriversity thus exemplifies intercultural integration and a substantive, rather than merely rhetorical, form of internationalisation within higher education.

At the same time, the question arises as to the extent to which pluriversity practices are accessible to researchers socialised exclusively within Western academic frameworks. Participation in certain classes and research activities at Misak Universidad and at the Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural, for instance, requires undergoing a purification ritual (Padilla, 2017). It is far from evident that every researcher from outside the Indigenous community would be able to participate in such a ritual in an ethically and experientially meaningful way, or to inhabit, even provisionally, the affective and epistemic registers associated with practices of *thinking–feeling with Earth* (*senti-pensar*) and *reasoning with the heart* (*corazonar*). Of course, the pluriversity does not claim universal validity. Nonetheless, both of the institutions discussed in this article have the word ‘university’ in their names and are seeking formal recognition from the Colombian Ministry of Education, which would mean that their diplomas were also recognised beyond the autonomous region. Padilla notes that these efforts are directed towards the creation of educational institutions that are taken seriously and recognised by external bodies, and that thereby influence the way in which the Indigenous population of the Cauca region is treated. He terms this strategy *strategic universalisation* (Padilla, 2017, p. 49). The key question, therefore, becomes: *what role does the pluriversity play in the lives of Indigenous communities in the Anthropocene?* For the Indigenous inhabitants of the Cauca region, the natural environment and their relationship with its non-human actors lie at the core of their identity. Incorporating these dimensions into education is thus a precondition for the cultural survival of these groups. The same applies to the task of shaping ethics, educational practices and attitudes of responsibility towards the natural environment and its non-human actors: these are at the heart of pluriversity education and, at the same time, a prerequisite for preserving the cultural identity of the inhabitants of the Cauca region. Formally, the Indigenous population constitutes 3 per cent of Colombia’s citizens and is organised into 115 tribal communities. In practice, however, sixty years of civil war have led to the cultural and physical destruction of a large part of this population (Rojas-Zambrano & Katz, 2023). At that time the Indigenous inhabitants of the Cauca region decided that education would be their weapon. Today the existence of the pluriversity remains one of the factors that underpins their cultural survival.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study is subject to certain limitations. A more exhaustive examination of the topic would have required sustained participation in courses and research conducted at Misak Universidad and at the Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural, and, ideally, the acquisition of the Namuy Wam language and a period of residence within the local community. For reasons of time and funding, such immersion was not possible.

Nevertheless, the value of the research presented here lies in its introduction of the concept of the pluriversity not only at a theoretical level, but also through an analysis of specific educational practices embedded in the particular cultural context of

these universities. The experiences of these institutions, as well as the pluriversity as a conceptual framework, can provide an important source of inspiration for western universities.

They are better equipped than Western academia to respond to the increasingly pluralistic distribution of global power, and they offer concrete responses to issues related to the climate crisis, because, as Achille Mbembe notes,

At the heart of the efforts at reframing the human is the growing realization of our precariousness as a species in the face of ecological threats [...]. To reopen future of our planet to all who inhabit it, we will have to learn how to share it again amongst humans, but also between the humans and non-humans (Mbembe, 2024, pp. 27, 30).

This, then, is what pluriversities can impart to us.

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