



Taking Care of Their Roots: Youth Leadership in the Church and Society from the Indigenous Ngäbe Perspective

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Abstract

This reflection explores the particular vision Catholic Indigenous Ngäbe youth of Panama maintain regarding leadership, the Ngäbe leaders they believe have embodied that ideal, the obstacles they currently encounter in exercising leadership at various levels, and the hope they have found through rediscovering and deepening their faith and ancestral roots. Due to the historical and current oppression and discrimination, Indigenous youth face particular challenges in encountering opportunities to serve in ecclesial and communal leadership. They struggle to maintain ancestral values, practices, and communal identity while also experiencing the pressure to assimilate into an individualistic, consumption-driven, broader society. This reflection also draws inspiration from the World Indigenous Youth Gathering or Encuentro Mundial de la Juventud Indígena (EMJI) that was held at the Vincentian mission in Soloy, Panamá, in 2019 on the days before World Youth Day (WYD). The research process incorporates semi-structured interviews, focus groups of Ngäbe youth, literature review, and relevant declarations of Pope Francis. The vision presented through the reflection and experience of the Ngäbe youth confirms their commitment to being the main actors and protagonists in promoting a more just and inclusive society and Church.

Cette réflexion explore la vision particulière que les jeunes Ngäbe catholiques autochtones du Panama ont du leadership, les leaders Ngäbe qui, selon eux, incarnent cet idéal, les obstacles qu'ils rencontrent actuellement dans l'exercice de leur leadership à différents niveaux, et l'espoir qu'ils ont trouvé en redécouvrant et en approfondissant leur foi et leurs racines ancestrales. En raison de l'oppression et de la discrimination historiques et actuelles, les jeunes autochtones sont confrontés à des défis particuliers pour trouver des occasions d'exercer un leadership ecclésial et communautaire. Ils luttent pour préserver leurs valeurs ancestrales, leurs pratiques et leur identité communautaire, tout en subissant la pression de s'assimiler à une société plus large, individualiste et axée sur la consommation. Cette réflexion s'inspire également de la Rencontre mondiale de la jeunesse autochtone ou Encuentro Mundial de la Juventud Indígena (EMJI) qui s'est tenue à la mission vincentienne de Soloy, au Panama, en 2019, quelques jours avant les Journées mondiales de la jeunesse (JMJ). Le processus de recherche comprend des entretiens semi-structurés, des groupes de discussion avec des jeunes Ngäbe, une analyse documentaire et des déclarations pertinentes du pape François. La vision présentée à travers la réflexion et l'expérience des jeunes Ngäbe confirme leur engagement à être les principaux acteurs et protagonistes de la promotion d'une société et d'une Église plus justes et plus inclusives.



Esta reflexión explora la visión particular que los jóvenes católicos indígenas ngäbe de Panamá mantienen sobre el liderazgo, los líderes ngäbe que, en su opinión, han encarnado ese ideal, los obstáculos que encuentran actualmente en el ejercicio del liderazgo a diversos niveles y la esperanza que han encontrado al redescubrir y profundizar en su fe y sus raíces ancestrales. Debido a la opresión y la discriminación histórica y actual, los jóvenes indígenas se enfrentan a retos particulares a la hora de encontrar oportunidades para servir en el liderazgo eclesial y comunitario. Luchan por mantener los valores ancestrales, las prácticas y la identidad comunitaria, al tiempo que experimentan la presión de asimilarse a una sociedad más amplia, individualista y consumista. Esta reflexión también se inspira en el Encuentro Mundial de la Juventud Indígena (EMJI) que se celebró en la misión vicenciana de Soloy, Panamá, en 2019, en los días previos a la Jornada Mundial de la Juventud (JMJ). El proceso de investigación incluye entrevistas semiestructuradas, grupos focales de jóvenes ngäbe, revisión bibliográfica y declaraciones relevantes del papa Francisco. La visión presentada a través de la reflexión y la experiencia de los jóvenes ngäbe confirma su compromiso de ser los principales actores y protagonistas en la promoción de una sociedad y una Iglesia más justas e inclusivas.

Keywords: indigenous, youth, leadership, Latin America.

Introduction

Eight days after the birth of an indigenous Ngäbe child, the umbilical cord is planted along with the seed of a strong tree, such as the mango. The child forms part of the roots of this tree as the two grow together. When the tree sprouts and gains strength, the parents and grandparents draw the child's focus to it. "There, that tree, growing strong. You, too, will grow and gain strength. And you will always know where you are from because you are part of this land."

The contemporary vision of a synodal Church, where historically marginalized populations are recognized as protagonists and journeying together becomes normative, is frequently undermined by persistent colonial attitudes and structures prevalent in Latin America. Indigenous youth face particular challenges in encountering opportunities to serve in leadership as they struggle to maintain ancestral values, practices, and communal identity. They simultaneously experience the pressure to assimilate into an individualistic, consumption-driven, broader society.

In this presentation,¹ we explore the particular vision indigenous Ngäbe youth of Panama maintain regarding leadership, Ngäbe leaders they believe have embodied that ideal, the obstacles they currently encounter in exercising leadership at various levels, and the hope they have found through rediscovering and deepening their ancestral roots.²

Before we address the theme of indigenous youth leadership in the Church and society, there is value in taking a very brief look at the history of indigenous peoples in the context of conquest, colonialism, and assimilation in Latin America. In doing so, it

¹ This article is fruit of research and presentation of the same name for the World Catholicism Week 2022, organized by the Center for World Catholicism & Intercultural Theology of DePaul University, Chicago. The general theme of the conference was "The Church of Now: Young People and Global Catholicism Today."

² I begin this discussion by stating that I am not indigenous but a nonindigenous missionary blessed to live and serve among the Ngäbe of Panama. It is to their credit if I can soundly convey what the Ngäbe youth communicated throughout this field study. If I misrepresent any aspect of Ngäbe life or values, that is solely my error.

becomes apparent that the Ngäbe youth vision of leadership is connected to this somber history and its enduring effects.

Indigenous peoples in Church and society

The belief of indigenous peoples being *nonpersons* and their lands as *unoccupied* on the part of European conquerors and colonialists facilitated the genocide of indigenous peoples throughout Abya Yala.³ The subsequent colonial period forcibly assimilated indigenous into the European model through “civilizing” initiatives. Indigenous peoples were uprooted not only geographically but also culturally, epistemologically, and spiritually.

The movement toward independence in the “new world” did not improve the plight of indigenous peoples. The countries of Central America have recently celebrated two hundred years of independence from Spain. Since the founding of these states, indigenous peoples have not had a dignified place at the decision-making table; indeed, they have generally not been part of the socio-cultural and socio-political processes that have dominated these territories. Indigenous peoples have primarily been viewed as “obstacles” to the processes that attempted to build unique identities of nationality based on European models. With a few exceptions, native peoples passed from subjugation under the Spanish colony model to subjugation under the new national political and social structures.

The root of the problem is that the countries of Central America were not founded under the concept of the diversity of peoples or nations in their territories. Indigenous peoples were not participants in the organization of the states and did not approve of the model. They were—and continue to be—victims trampled by systems and policies alien to their values of social organization. Lu’K’at Pedro Us Soc, Guatemalan educator and theologian of the Maya-K’iche’ people, explains that the Ladino-mestizo nation-state in the hands of an elite has institutionalized a set of legal, political, economic, and social mechanisms to systematically keep indigenous peoples on the margins of state political decisions, maintaining their status as third-class citizens or noncitizens.⁴

Today, when indigenous peoples reject projects proposed by governments or corporations, such as open-pit mining in the Ngäbe context, the authorities and the general populace question their authenticity as citizens. Part of this erroneous thinking comes from confusing unity with *uniformity* and considering that indigenous peoples should think, act, and live like nonindigenous citizens, promoting a homogeneousness that manifests fear of the *different other*. This deficient understanding of national unity has forced assimilation processes of indigenous peoples, erasing their particular identities and, consequently, the great wisdom and practices that they have to offer to the world today. In the face of this reality, in his visit to Amazonian peoples in Puerto Maldonado, Peru, Pope Francis affirmed that “special care is demanded of us, lest we allow ourselves to be ensnared by ideological forms of colonialism, disguised as progress, that slowly but

³ *Abya Yala* is a Guna term used throughout Latin America indigenous populations to refer to the American Continents.

⁴ Pedro Us Soc, *La conmemoración*

surely dissipate cultural identities and establish a uniform, single... and weak way of thinking.”⁵ In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christus Vivit*, he states:

Today, in fact, we see a tendency to “homogenize” young people, blurring what is distinctive about their origins and backgrounds, and turning them into a new line of malleable goods. This produces a cultural devastation that is just as serious as the disappearance of species of animals and plants.⁶

In the Church, we cannot deny our participation in the grave errors and sins committed against the dignity of indigenous peoples. At her best, the Church “constantly reshapes her identity through listening and dialogue with the people, the realities and the history of the lands in which she finds herself.”⁷ However, a reflection on the presence of the Church among indigenous peoples shows the historical failure to humbly live this ideal. It reveals a general history of cultural and spiritual suppression rather than respectful dialogue. Although we can cite significant advances in contextualized theological and pastoral processes, especially in the last half-century, the tendency to devalue the indigenous peoples’ faith experiences, cosmovisions, and modes of living continues to manifest in overt and subtle forms.

Eleazar López Hernández, an Oaxacan theologian from Mexico, speaks of the “mask” that indigenous people have been forced to put on in ecclesial environments, hiding their millenary cultural and religious richness to be accepted as “true Christians.” They have not encountered an appropriate space in the Church as indigenous Christians, who are recognized for their significant contributions to popular religiosity and Christian theology.⁸

In *Querida Amazonia*, Francis recognizes the devastating effect of forced assimilation, particularly on youth. He cites the globalized economy with its “consumerist vision of human beings” as responsible for diminishing the immense diversity of the human family and its cultures. Youth particularly suffer because these realities “blur what is distinctive about their origins and backgrounds.” The antidote is to “care lovingly for our roots” as a “fixed point from which we can grow and meet new challenges.”⁹ In light of all this, we now address the vision of leadership maintained by Ngäbe youth.

A Ngäbe vision of youth leadership

Models of good leadership are subjective and strongly influenced by historical and cultural realities. With this in mind, we approach a vision of indigenous Ngäbe leadership constructed primarily through a field study involving semi-structured interviews and focus groups with Ngäbe youth.¹⁰ The study focused on characteristics and values a Ngäbe leader should possess, examples of preminent Ngäbe leaders, and

⁵ Francis, *Maldonado*

⁶ Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 186.

⁷ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 66

⁸ López, *Caminar de pastoral indígena*

⁹ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 33

¹⁰ Twenty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted in addition to several focus groups in the context of the Ngäbe youth lay formation at the Saint Vincent de Paul indigenous mission parish in Soloy, Panama. The results from the World Indigenous Youth Gathering reflection process have also been incorporated as strengthening indigenous youth leadership was one of the principal objectives of the process.

challenges for Ngäbe youth in exercising leadership at the local, societal, and ecclesial levels.¹¹

Characteristics of indigenous leadership today

A summarized response of the participants regarding the characteristics and values that a Ngäbe leader should possess reflects the belief that Ngäbe leaders should be rooted in their own culture, journeying together with the people, and demonstrating firmness and integrity in their relationship with entities outside of their own, such as with government and corporations.

Regarding their identity and cultural knowledge, the participants stated¹² that a leader should “be guided by the wisdom of our ancestors, who fought for our land and people,”¹³ “they should value their identity as Ngäbe,”¹⁴ and “know and love their roots, traditions, culture, and language.”¹⁵ The leader should “fight for the good of the people, without destroying identity, respecting our traditions, cultures, rituals, and myths that make us unique.”¹⁶ Connected to the expectation that leaders hold deep knowledge of Ngäbe culture, they should also be part of the people’s journey. They must “be with the community and be able to listen to the opinions of others.”¹⁷ “They cannot represent the community if they are not listening to the people.”¹⁸

The history of colonialism and ongoing neocolonialist attitudes and structures place the “defender” image of the indigenous leader as essential. Projects based strictly on Western concepts of progress and development do not consider the local community’s social, spiritual, and ecological organization; instead, they impose a uniform mode of life to achieve cultural homogenization. Therefore, the indigenous leader is called to stand in defense of the people, of the land and rivers, and of the language and culture. With an evident *rootedness* in a particular territory, they “need to know and love what they are defending”¹⁹ and should possess a solid ability to resist the temptation of personal gain when pressured. Thus, indigenous leadership is not equated with having *authority* or being elected but rather the ability to solve problems, promote unity, generate consensus, and promote *Buen Vivir*, becoming a figure of reference for collective interests and acting to defend the community.²⁰

As the term *Buen Vivir* will be mentioned several times, it is worth explaining here. The term *Buen Vivir* comes from the indigenous expressions of several peoples, mainly from Andean countries. The English translation, such as “good life,” does not adequately capture the richness of the expressions in the original languages and easily evokes images contrary to the concept of *Buen Vivir*, such as material well-being and luxury based on consumerism, competition, accumulation of goods, and the

¹¹ Synonyms are used throughout to allow the participants to speak freely.

¹² Translations from Spanish are my own.

¹³ Nicho, personal communication, February 12, 2022.

¹⁴ Mechi, personal communication, January 29, 2022.

¹⁵ Irochi, personal communication, February 12, 2022.

¹⁶ Mesi, personal communication, February 8, 2022.

¹⁷ Krati, personal communication, February 8, 2022.

¹⁸ Chago, personal communication, February 12, 2022.

¹⁹ Menye, personal communication, February 8, 2022.

²⁰ Vega Romá, *De joven a joven líder*, 119

commodifying of nature. On the other hand, *Buen Vivir* is founded on harmonious relationships with all of creation, the human family, and God.²¹

Connected to the leader's image as a defender and one who can resist the temptation of personal gain is the ability of the leader to *suffer* for the good of the community, even to the point of martyrdom.

Walking for days, standing defiantly in the hot sun, being tear-gassed, or even being killed is expected of the leader. The leader should be "coherent, with conviction and decision to die for the causes."²²

A Ngäbe leader's steadfast standing in defense of the community's interests should not be mistaken for intransigence when dealing with entities such as the national government or corporations. The study participants expressed the need for today's leaders to have the flexibility to function in various contexts. They "should be knowledgeable in themes of politics, environment, culture"²³ and "be in a constant learning process, because times change and realities also."²⁴

It becomes evident that straddling indigenous and nonindigenous worlds calls the leader to hold a broad set of skills. In an analysis of indigenous leadership in postwar Guatemala, Andrea Freddi speaks of the ambiguity of *modernity* and *tradition*, neither of which are intrinsically good nor bad. The indigenous leader is called to maintain a delicate balance marked by duties of a seemingly opposite nature: achieve projects yet ensure they are for collective benefit; understand the logic of the neoliberal economic-political system yet advocate from a local vision of *Buen Vivir*; transform reality for the good of the community yet preserve it at the same time.²⁵

Historical examples of Ngäbe leadership

Before presenting the historical figures defined by the Ngäbe youth as good examples of leadership, we will look to the image of leadership from the Ngäbe myth tradition:

Long ago, a *sukia*²⁶ named Kena lived with the people on this land. Then the people lived in community, close to each other, in scattered places. He commissioned four people. He said to them, "Go to all the villages, tell the people, 'From today in four months, there will be an eclipse. The sun will be extinguished. As soon as you hear this news, gather in four places. Only in this place can you be when the sun goes out. Be accompanied, when you go from one place to another, only by very white animals: chickens, rabbits, monkeys, parrots, tigers, only very white animals, and when you go to look for firewood and to look for water, or whatever you do. In this way, no enemies will come upon you.'" This is what the *sukia* Kena commanded us to tell them.²⁷

²¹ Fitzgerald, *Danzar en la casa de Ngöbö*, 42

²² Uraba, personal communication, January 29, 2022.

²³ Tichi, personal communication, March 12, 2022.

²⁴ Bechi, personal communication, March 12, 2022.

²⁵ Freddi, *Comunidad*, 107.

²⁶ *Sukia* is the Ngäbere word for a semidivine figure or "seer."

²⁷ Quesada and Vejerano, *Kukwe Ngäbere*, 11.

The myth explains how humans and animals worked together to prepare for the four days and nights when the sun was eclipsed. The water in the clouds froze on the hills, and when the sun rose again, the ice filled the sea with a great flood. However, those who listened to Kena and worked together survived the disaster.

Many Ngäbe myths speak of the people's ability to unite under a leader figure and work together in the face of a threat to the people's survival. Although the interpretation and teaching of the *sukia* Kena myth is broad, going over the renewal of creation and struggle between good and evil, the focus group participants concluded that the central point of the story is how the *salvation* of the people came through their ability to obey the divinely anointed one and how they all could work together. Even the animals play their part. As with many others, this myth shows the leader's ability to mobilize the whole community for the good of all in the face of dire threats.

Aside from the many mythical leadership figures in the Ngäbe tradition, the participants in the study were asked to name someone who has been a good model of Ngäbe leadership and explain why they consider them to be examples. Although there were some deviations in the responses, the majority of the participants focused on two relatively recent figures, Besiko and José Mónico Cruz.

Long before Besiko was born, the Spanish conquest and consequent reduction of territory forced the Ngäbe population to the rugged highlands of the Talamanca Mountain Range to subsist on tropical farming, hunting, gathering, and fishing. The mid-twentieth century, a half-century after the formation of Panama as an independent country, would see the regular encounter of the Ngäbe with the general nonindigenous population, mainly through the labor migration to the banana plantations on both the Pacific Ocean and the Caribbean Sea coasts. An identity and cultural crisis arose as the dominant culture's influence rapidly affected the Ngäbe communities when workers returned with different modes of thinking and acting. In this context, in 1962, the twenty-one-year-old Besiko claims to have had a vision of Mary (Mama) and Jesus (Tata) at the mouth of the Balsa River. The message that Besiko reported called for cultural isolation for religious reasons. Her message developed into the *Mama Tata* faith, incorporating aspects of Catholicism and ancestral Ngäbe spiritual beliefs and practices.

An essential part of the *Mama Tata* belief is that God had selected the Ngäbe to complete his will for the end times and that the outside culture was corrupting this plan. The Ngäbe were to stop speaking Spanish and reject formal education and Western medicine. They were also to halt traditional Ngäbe customs that were seen as divisive and practices that used the fermented corn drink.²⁸ Although this is not the place for an in-depth review of the *Mama Tata*²⁹ faith and its impact, what is noteworthy is the profound influence of the *Mama Tata* faith and its social movement in encouraging the Ngäbe to identify as a people and understand their culture as something worth defending.

Growing from the *Mama Tata* movement was the increasing desire of the Ngäbe to form a governance and leadership system beyond the traditional extended family model. A central part of this process would be the movement for a Ngäbe Comarca or indigenous reservation. A series of large gatherings in the early 1970s developed into a model of congresses and chiefs. José Mónico Cruz was elected as the first general chief of the Ngäbe at around 35 years old. Along with several other key figures, Cruz would focus his time and energy on pressuring the Panamanian government throughout several

²⁸ Guionneau-Sinclair, *Movimiento profético*

²⁹ Although statistics are challenging to find, an estimated 25% of the Ngäbe population claim they adhere to the *Mama Tata* faith.

administrations to demarcate a Ngäbe Comarca. With no recognized authority by the government, Cruz chose to *protest* as a preferred strategy. Camping outside the presidential palace, organizing a highly publicized walk across the country, and being jailed on several occasions, Cruz eventually pressured the government to sign the Ngäbe Comarca into law in 1997. Seen as a humble man yet firm in his conviction, one of Cruz's most known quotes is, "We are all congress. If we die, we die together. If we live, we live together."

The importance and accomplishments of the two leaders cited by the youth participants can be summarized by saying that Besiko helped the Ngäbe identify as a distinct people and value their culture as something sacred to be protected, and Cruz, realizing that isolation would ultimately not be beneficial, understood his role as the first general chief to be one of mediating on behalf of the interests and well-being of the Ngäbe people in a pluricultural context.

Challenges for indigenous youth leadership

In light of the characteristics of good leadership and examples of those who have embodied them in the perception of the Ngäbe youth, some of the challenges the Ngäbe youth face in exercising leadership in the local community, broader society, and ecclesial settings are identified.

The intense feeling of the youth participants that they are not adequately "connected to their roots" is the consequence of various sociocultural realities, especially over the last half-century. For example, the positive advance of formal education in rural areas has had a negative effect of removing children and youth from the traditional contexts of *Ngäbe education*. The oral traditions, rituals, rites of passage, and previously universal Ngäbe practical knowledge, such as cultivating the land and using natural medicines, are no longer transmitted to the new generations through traditional means.

Addressing the challenges of exercising leadership at the level of the *local Ngäbe community*, the youth cited "a lack of knowledge of our own culture,"³⁰ "the loss of identity as principal strength,"³¹ "giving more value to other cultures,"³² and "not knowing the language."³³ Another important observation of the participants expressed in various ways was the movement from a "we" mentality to an "I" mentality or identity. They could observe a lack of communal identity and commitment, which has historically defined the Ngäbe leader. A consequence of this was cited as "the lack of ability to resolve internal group conflicts."³⁴

When asked about the challenges in leadership in the *broader society*, the principal challenge was the pressure to assimilate or deny their indigenous identity where the nonindigenous culture dominates and indigenous culture is not understood. There is a collective perception that the wider society "depreciates indigenous cultures and does

³⁰ Marsa, personal communication, February 8, 2022.

³¹ Meti, personal communication, February 8, 2022.

³² Nechi, personal communication, January 29, 2022.

³³ Echigon, personal communication, March 12, 2022.

³⁴ Mersa, personal communication, January 29, 2022.

not value us.”³⁵ The youth mentioned a decrease in confidence in the move from exercising leadership within the local group to a pluricultural context.

Another challenge stated was that the image of *success*, particularly fostered through formal education, has almost exclusively been presented as the ability to suppress indigenous identity, values, and ways, to assume those of the dominant culture. There are few contexts where maintaining indigenous identity is considered a vital part of the formation process. From an institutional standpoint, “There do not exist entities or organizations that form and create indigenous youth leaders that can participate in the society in general,”³⁶ and “There is no school of leadership from the indigenous perspective.”³⁷

When speaking of Ngäbe youth leadership in the *ecclesial context*, the participants’ responses focus heavily on a lack of self-confidence. In some instances, the religious plurality in contemporary Ngäbe society has sadly fermented division. In light of this, being a visible faith leader can be perceived as practicing exclusivity. Additionally, the youth expressed fear of “criticism from other churches”³⁸ or “being mocked.”³⁹ This reality prevents some youth from holding a solid Catholic identity or expressing their faith affiliation in plural-faith contexts. In the broader Church context, the Ngäbe youth mentioned many of the obstacles faced in broader society, such as discrimination or not feeling well understood. The youth also felt that their authenticity as Catholics is sometimes held suspect by nonindigenous Catholics. This awareness diminishes their confidence in assuming ecclesial leadership roles outside the indigenous context, such as in diocesan committees.

Examples of Ngäbe youth leadership

Despite the many challenges expressed by the Ngäbe youth in exercising leadership in the Church and society, there are many sound examples of them doing so; these are instances when *caring for their roots* has become a prominent part of the leadership model for Ngäbe youth. The social contexts of land protection and higher education, followed by the ecclesial example of the World Indigenous Youth Gathering, are presented.

Indigenous youth leadership in society

Jeiki is the traditional ritual dance of the Ngäbe people. It begins with four sacred songs sung by a ritual singer to “open the road.” The dancing then begins with the leader, who indicates the steps with a maraca. This person is called the “head of the road” or “house post.” Their task is to guide the group through repetitive movements for long periods of time, in long lines connecting arms to shoulders, until the participants are lost in the experience, moving as one body. The various steps are abstract representations of animal movements like the monkey and snail. *Jeiki* is essential in the traditional naming ritual, adolescent rites of passage, and other sacred moments. It is also convoked in moments of danger or threat, such as when lightning falls close to a homestead,

³⁵ Oli, personal communication, February 8, 2022.

³⁶ Meti, personal communication, March 12, 2022.

³⁷ Tuchi, personal communication, January 29, 2022.

³⁸ Niti, personal communication, February 8, 2022.

³⁹ Uraba, personal communication, February 12, 2022.

demonstrating to the lightning that “he”⁴⁰ is not welcome where humans live. More profound than folklore or cultural expression, *jeiki* is ceremonial, a sacred dance that manifests the strong Ngäbe value of journeying together.

In recent years, the *jeiki* dance, with its traditional dress and face paint, has become synonymous with Ngäbe youth leadership. In my observation, this occurred largely because of the central role *jeiki* played in the Ngäbe antimining protests of 2012. The more than forty-year struggle of the Ngäbe to prevent open-pit mineral mining on their land came to a climax when the national government again announced its intentions to mine. The Ngäbe coordinated roadblocks at several points along the Interamerican Highway for five days, essentially shutting down the movement of people and goods across the country. The days were spent meeting and chanting on the highway, and the nights were spent dancing *jeiki* under the summer moon. Through this unity and effort, the Ngäbe were able to force the signing of a special environmental protection law for their territory, which includes the complete prohibition of mineral mining. In the protests, two Ngäbe youth were shot and killed by Panamanian militarized police forces, the popular martyrs Jeronimo Tugri and Mauricio Mendez.

The resistance movement and protest themselves proved to be a formative experience for the Ngäbe youth who, in the process of defending the territory, recommitted to their ethnic identity. There has been an ongoing process of cultural rejuvenation and modification, where the youth are not taking a rigid traditionalist stance but instead attempting to understand what it means to be Ngäbe in their contemporary context. One of the decisive spaces for this process is in higher education.

The past decade has seen the first generation of Ngäbe graduate high school and enter universities in significant numbers. The current number of Ngäbe students in universities has provided confidence for the youth to wear native dress, to open spaces for cultural expression, and to bring their concerns to the academic context where investigating ancestral knowledge and practice has become more commonplace. In the aftermath of the mining protests, university “cultural groups” began to form, primarily around the *jeiki* dance. These groups have become opportunities for leadership development as they decide on the leaders and form structures that attempt to model Ngäbe values of consensus building and equity.

This new reality of Ngäbe identity pride and confidence in the context of higher education has moved toward a push for systemic change, recognizing the deficiencies and embedded racism within the education system. The Ngäbe youth stand against the educational processes that continue to be primarily assimilation mechanisms rejecting indigenous identity, knowledge, and learning models. Ocoró and Mazabel affirm that formal education has been one of the primary mechanisms for the reproduction of racism toward indigenous peoples and afro-decedents.⁴¹ Formal education in Panama, where a strong emphasis is on uniformity, affirms Eurocentric and racist positions that silence the epistemologies and history of indigenous peoples. For most Ngäbe, the formal schooling process was a cruel experience; they were deprived of speaking the only language they knew and were humiliated by educators who understood their mission as erasing local identity and “civilizing” the students according to a national model.⁴²

⁴⁰ In the Ngäbe cosmovision, lightning is personified as a brother whose twin sister becomes the sea dragon Magatä. He should not fall near family homesteads.

⁴¹ Ocoró and Mazabel, *Racismo en la educación*, 26

⁴² Fitzgerald, *Danzar en la casa de Ngöbö*, 180.

Growing from the discontentment of Euro-based educational models, new educational models that consider the diversity of indigenous peoples' wisdom and methodologies have emerged. An initiative of indigenous peoples in Panama, based on the experiences of indigenous peoples in places such as Mexico and Peru, has been to establish a distinctly *indigenous* model of higher education. This project advanced when the law establishing the Autonomous University of Indigenous Peoples was ratified in March of 2022, with its construction planned in the Ngäbe Comarca capital, Llano Tugri. The decree establishing the university states that, as part of indigenous peoples' cultural, socioeconomic, political, and moral evolution, they have rejected monoculturalism to give way to interculturalism and multilingualism, with the basis for healthy social interaction and *Buen Vivir* in a culturally diverse society such as Panama.⁴³ The indigenous youth of Panama hope that this vital step will come to fruition as a possible advancement in the decolonization of education and integral formation of indigenous youth from the richness of their cultures and ancestral wisdom.

Indigenous youth leadership in the Church

A fitting example of indigenous youth leadership in an ecclesial context is the World Indigenous Youth Gathering or *Encuentro Mundial de la Juventud Indígena* (EMJI) that was held at the Vincentian mission in Soloy, Panamá, in 2019 on the days before World Youth Day (WYD). The EMJI was organized as a two-year project with three main objectives: social and ecclesial inclusion, promotion of indigenous youth leadership, and raising the consciousness in the general population concerning the gifts of indigenous youth.

The indigenous youth of Panama, particularly the Ngäbe as local hosts for the event, were responsible for the decisions throughout the process: locality, themes, agenda, and image. They also formed several committees and workgroups in the Soloy area to address themes, including the availability of clean water, health, road access, and security, successfully pressuring government entities to respond to the basic necessities of the community.

Youth delegations made several journeys to Panama City to coincide with the visit of Vatican officials to give updates regarding the organization of the EMJI and stress its importance. These interventions brought the Pope's attention to the gathering, who, in turn, emphasized its importance when meeting with the Panamanian bishops in Rome the year prior to the event. The youth gave countless radio, TV, and print interviews, expressing how they live their Catholic faith from the indigenous cosmovision and particular vision of justice based on ancestral concepts and practices of *Buen Vivir*. The pastoral and theological reflection that also accompanied the process, which was redacted by the youth, focused on indigenous identity, the protection of Mother Earth, and commitment to the *other possible world*,⁴⁴ one more just and human. The process allowed the youth to deepen their Christian identity from the richness of their various cultural traditions.

After two years of preparation, the World Indigenous Youth Gathering began with an opening prayer centered on the Ngäbe purification ritual. Following the prayer, and to

⁴³ Asamblea Nacional, *Que crea la universidad*, 5

⁴⁴ The "other possible world" or *otro mundo posible* in Spanish is a term used by many indigenous communities in Latin America to express the ideal society and the achievement of *Buen Vivir*.

the surprise of the participants, Pope Francis appeared to them in a video message.⁴⁵ In his message, the Pope said to the youth, “Reflect and celebrate your faith in Jesus Christ starting from the millennial richness of your original cultures ... to be grateful for the history of your peoples and courageous in the face of the challenges that surround you, to move forward full of hope in building another possible world.” Recognizing the prophetic nature of the gathering, he insisted that it “must also be a way of showing the indigenous face of our Church in the context of WYD and of affirming our commitment to protect the Common House and to collaborate in building another possible world, that is more just and more human.” With a phrase that would summarize his message, he encouraged them to “take care of the roots, because from the roots comes the strength that will make you grow, prosper and bear fruit.”⁴⁶

The following days would be a mix of inculturated prayer experiences, testimonies bearing witness to the difficulties and triumphs of the various peoples represented, and significant time for the pilgrims to come to know each other as indigenous youth spread across Latin America. Although a lived joy was palpable in the youth being together, they dealt with weighty issues throughout the gathering.

We addressed themes such as the living memory of our peoples, the importance of living in harmony with Mother Earth, and being protagonists in the construction of the “other possible world.” In an atmosphere of dance, music, and prayer, we also shared powerful testimonies that are born from the realities of our peoples, such as their struggles, longings, dreams, hopes and pains, from which springs a cry of Mother Earth and her oppressed children.⁴⁷

The enthusiasm of the EMJI would overflow to World Youth Day in Panama City, where the youth set up an “Indigenous Village,” allowing them to share their cultures, faith, challenges, and hopes with thousands of nonindigenous pilgrims. “We want to share with other young people from the world who are at World Youth Day the richness and diversity of indigenous peoples in Panama, how these indigenous peoples bring together their cultures and traditions to their faith in Christ, and how we live this faith from our own indigenous perspectives.”⁴⁸

Although the indigenous youth demonstrated *root-based leadership* through the whole two-year process, the EMJI and WYD contexts allowed them to confront particular situations and test their ability to fruitfully lead while rooted in ancestral values and practices.

Organization from below: After the Pope’s video message to the indigenous youth became public, the EMJI gained the attention of national and international media. The then president of Panama decided to make a surprise appearance for the closing Mass on the last day of the gathering. Although this information was not public, the growing presence of presidential security made evident what was to occur. While the topic was not addressed openly, the youth, who were in the midst of the profound experience of building courage in the face of injustices, felt the president’s visit was little more than

⁴⁵ The Pope’s video message to the World Indigenous Youth Gathering would later be cited in the postsynodal apostolic exhortations *Christus Vivit* and *Querida Amazonia*.

⁴⁶ Francis, *Message to World Indigenous Youth Gathering*

⁴⁷ Encuentro Mundial de la Juventud Indígena, *Mensaje Final*

⁴⁸ Catholic News Service, *WYD: Panama’s young indigenous*

political opportunism. They decided that the best response would be a silent protest, simply not recognizing or responding to the president once he arrived. Although the precise reason why silence was the preferred strategy was not explained, it stayed in line with the thought that indigenous youth and students use silence “as a resistance strategy to shield themselves, their identities, and their family and community knowledges from dominant, monocultural knowledges (and powers) with which they did not agree.”⁴⁹

In an ambiance adorned with banners calling for justice in various forms, they would follow any discourse of the president with a solemn reading of the final press communication they had prepared, which denounced the actions of several government and called Panama to recognize indigenous *Naso Tjër* lands: “We call on governments and society in general to recognize and demarcate indigenous territories, and to provide an education that respects the cultures of our peoples as distinct, with their own richness and wisdom.”⁵⁰ The final message was the voice of consensus of the over four hundred youth from over forty peoples and languages gathering in Soloy. In the end, the presidential helicopter never landed in Soloy; a city-wide blackout in Panama City prevented him from making the trip. Nonetheless, the organized consensus from below demonstrated the capability of the youth to discern together and take the lead where needed.

One united voice: When the indigenous youth arrived in Panama City, the WDY communication committee invited them to speak at the daily press conference given at a large conference center. The two-youth designated to speak, Enith Sanchez of the Ngäbe people and Edigibali López of the Guna people, decided that reading the EMJI Final Message was the best way to communicate the collective voice of all the indigenous youth. The WYD communication committee became hesitant after reviewing the message because it made direct reference to injustices toward indigenous peoples by several governments, including Panama. The committee insinuated editing or leaving out some of the message’s stronger, more direct declarations. Enith and Edigibali responded by affirming that these words were the concerns and voice of all the indigenous youth gathered, and they had no right to modify it out of the context of the group; they would read all of it or none of it. They consequently read the entire EMJI Final Message and then spent significant time in interviews with the international press regarding the issues presented. The importance of consensus and ability of the leaders Enith and Edigibali to maintain the position of the collective was evident, even when confronted with a somewhat disorienting and high-pressure context.

Identity as message: The night before World Youth Day began, Emilda Santos Montezuma, a Ngäbe youth who had served as the full-time coordinator of the EMJI for two years, received a letter from the WDY central committee inviting her to represent the youth of Latin America and indigenous youth of the world at a lunch with Pope Francis in Panama City. The committee and Vatican officials had solicited her biography several months earlier, but she was not given the reason until now. A few days later, in the midst of the WYD, Emilda arrived for lunch with Pope Francis in native dress, seed jewelry, and a traditionally painted face.

⁴⁹ San Pedro, *Silence as Shields*, 132

⁵⁰ Encuentro Mundial de la Juventud Indígena, *Mensaje Final*

Seated around a large table, each of the ten invited youth had the opportunity to address the Pope. When it was Emilia's turn, in light of all that had been shared in EMJI and the historical role of indigenous peoples as guardians of the forests and rivers, she forcefully spoke of the urgent need to care for our Common Home, Mother Earth. She apparently left a strong impression on the Pope, who spoke of her at a Jesuit gathering later that same day. He mentioned the lunch he had with youth from various parts of the world, among them a Central American indigenous in native dress and painted face. He said some might look down at that, the "little Indian girl" in traditional dress. However, when she spoke, said Francis,

She gave a good thrashing to those who do not respect Mother Earth. That young woman spoke from her culture with such intellectual capacity that at the end, when the Press Office asked me who they could take for the interviews, I answered them: whoever you want, but take her, yes or yes, because she will say things that no one else will say. This young woman, militant, Catholic, I think she is a teacher, she had not lost her culture, she had made it grow! This is, then, what I want to say: we must inculturate ourselves to the end.⁵¹

Emilda realized *identity* was integral to her message and that leadership in this pluricultural context meant holding that identity up proudly. Her ancestral traditions were sewn into the designs of the *nauwa* dress she wore and the designs on her face tied her to a specific land, rivers, and people. Speaking passionately about what her people have lived and died for and their respect for and search for harmony in our Common Home, Emilda gave the opportunity for Francis to reaffirm a repeated expression of his pontificate, that indigenous peoples "have much to teach us."⁵²

Since the indigenous youth gathering in 2019, many of the members of the coordinating team have assumed leadership roles in the Church and society. Regarding the three women mentioned in this article, Enith Sanchez finished a degree in biology and is a bilingual teacher in the indigenous region. She represented the Congregation of the Mission's NGO to the UN at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York in 2024. Edigilabi Lopez also finished a degree in biology, assists the indigenous Guna congress on ecological issues, and is a member of the committee for indigenous peoples of the Mesoamerican Ecclesial Environmental Network. She represented the indigenous peoples of Latin America at a gathering on integral ecology at the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development in Rome in 2023. Emilda Santos Montezuma finished a degree in physical education and has been a key figure in promoting dialogue on climate change between the Panamanian government, indigenous peoples, and community organizations.

Conclusion

This reflection began by recognizing the palpable remains of colonialism and its effects on indigenous youth leadership today. As Pope Francis has stated, colonization has not ended because "in many places, it has been changed, disguised and concealed, while losing none of its contempt for the life of the poor and the fragility of the environment."⁵³ It would be an error to view neocolonialism as an indigenous problem to

⁵¹ Spadaro, *Jugarse la vida*

⁵² Francis, *Chiapas*

⁵³ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 16.

which indigenous peoples can encounter a solution in a vacuum. Our reflection has shown that as indigenous youth deepen their cultural roots, there must also be movement on the part of societies, institutions, governments, and the Church to open dignified spaces of genuine participation that would have ideally always existed. As stated by the indigenous gathered in Soloy, “We, the indigenous youth, united in one voice, demand respect for our diversity, our cosmovisions and our ways of living, manifested in the practices of *Buen Vivir*.”⁵⁴

A movement toward true *interculturalism* promotes the processes that value all cultures in an environment of mutual respect. It seeks ways to eradicate the historical positioning of dominant and subordinate cultures and appreciates the human family’s diversity as a gift from the Creator to be celebrated. In the intercultural context, the goal is to fully integrate populations and cultures from their own identities, not assimilate them into a dominant cultural or national identity. As stated by the Latin American bishops in Aparecida, we are called to promote “intercultural relations where diversity does not mean threat, and does not justify hierarchies of power of some over others, but dialogue between different cultural visions, of celebration, of interrelationship, and of revival of hope.”⁵⁵ Indigenous youth leaders are carrying that hope forward as they affirm, “We have great challenges ahead of us and we cannot refuse to face them, because we have the capacity to overcome them.”⁵⁶

Calling for new decolonized intercultural social and political models also necessitates individual and communal conversion as Church. The Latin America bishops affirmed that the current “rising up” of indigenous peoples in society and the Church is a sacred moment, “a *kairos* for deepening the Church’s encounter with these sectors of society who are demanding the full recognition of their individual and collective rights.” Indigenous peoples should be respected in their particular manner of living their Catholic faith, “with their cosmos vision, their values and their particular identities, so as to live a new ecclesial Pentecost.”⁵⁷

In today’s ecclesial contexts—and very much in accord with the contemporary language of synodality—our indigenous brothers and sisters insist that they not be reduced to “the poor to be served” but recognized as the main actors, the protagonists responsible for their own development and evangelization. As stated in *Querida Amazonia*, “They are our principal dialogue partners, those from whom we have the most to learn, to whom we need to listen out of a duty of justice, and from whom we must ask permission before presenting our proposals.”⁵⁸ It is up to the communities of faith to open spaces in a spirit of interculturality and recognize that the fruits of the Gospel understood and lived from a particular culture can be harvested with joy by the whole community of faith. As Francis affirms, “We need the riches that each people has to offer, and we must abandon the notion that there are superior or inferior cultures.”⁵⁹ We are called to recognize that “each culture and each worldview that receives the Gospel enriches the Church by showing a new aspect of Christ’s face.”⁶⁰

We conclude in a spirit of synodality, listening to the words of the indigenous Catholic youth leaders from across the Latin American continent gathered for the first

⁵⁴ Encuentro Mundial de la Juventud Indígena, *Mensaje Final*

⁵⁵ CELAM, *Aparecida*, 97.

⁵⁶ Coordinadora Nacional de Pastoral Indígena, *La Juventud Indígena*

⁵⁷ CELAM, *Aparecida*, 91

⁵⁸ Francis, *Querida Amazonia*, 26

⁵⁹ Francis, *Temuco*

⁶⁰ Francis, *Maldonado*

time in one voice in Panama. May we heed their prophetic cry and mirror their courage as we take action toward a just and inclusive society and Church:

To our beloved Church, we ask for the appropriate spaces to live our spiritualities, from our cosmovisions, the inheritance of our grandmothers and grandfathers, and respect for the particular theologies of our peoples, fruits of the synthesis between our ancestral faith and the fullness of our hope in the person of Jesus Christ. The time has come to live with joy the indigenous face of the Church!⁶¹

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⁶¹ Encuentro Mundial de la Juventud Indígena, *Mensaje Final*

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