

24<sup>e</sup> conférence  
internationale



International Association for  
Languages and  
Intercultural Communication

# Decolonial Gestures and Agency in Indigenous Research: Reshaping Research and Redefining Intercultural Dialogue



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Políticas y Prácticas  
Lingüísticas y Educativas  
para la Diversidad  
y la Interculturalidad





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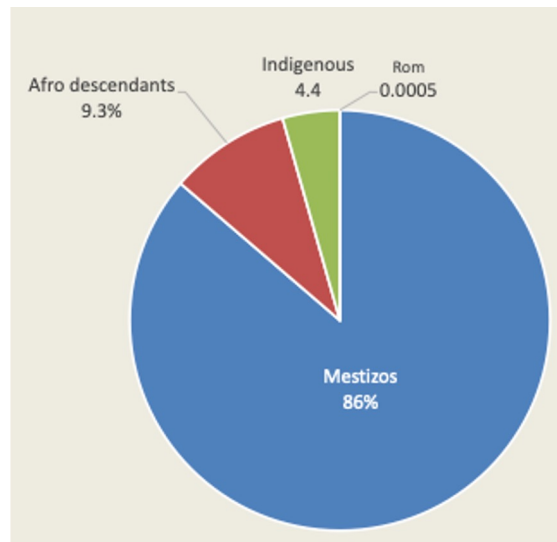
# Introduction



- 115 Indigenous pueblos (DANE, 2019)
- 63 indigenous languages (Arango & Sánchez, 2004).

.Our guiding question:

How did indigenous participants' *decolonial gestures* challenge existing power structures and contribute to the development of intercultural dialogue?





# Central concepts (1)

**Coloniality:** enduring structures of power, knowledge, and social hierarchies rooted in colonialism: former colonies (Quijano, 1992).

**Colonial matrix** (Walsh, 2009; Mignolo, 2012):

- *Coloniality of being:* individuals as cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually inferior (Maldonado-Torres, 2007).
- *Coloniality of knowledge:* individuals' knowledge and forms of knowledge production as inferior (Mignolo, 2012).
- *Coloniality of power:* maintains and legitimates racial, political, and social hierarchies (Quijano, 1992).
- *Coloniality of nature:* regimes of natural exploitation, consumption, and accumulation (Walsh, 2009).

## Decolonial gestures:

“a decolonial gesture refers to an action–thought, body, language, imagery– in favor of a semiotic subversion against the totalizing principle of colonial domination” (Rivera-Cusicanqui, 2014, p. 2).



Tul: space allocation to establish a harvest and garden area on university campus



## Central concepts (2)

- ***Co-theorizing*** is a collaborative and deeply respectful process where researchers and participants work side by side to shape theories that genuinely reflect the community's worldview. This method democratizes knowledge and strengthens the relevance and authenticity of the research, aligning it with the community's collective values and goals for a transformative educational framework rooted in indigenous sovereignty and intercultural respect (Denscombe, 2024).
- ***Ethics of reciprocity and empowerment:*** Ethical practices go beyond traditional informed consent, focusing on reciprocity, long-term collaboration, and empowerment of the community. Ensuring that research outcomes benefit the community reinforces participants' agency and respects their cultural autonomy. (Emerging concept of Beatriz's study)
- ***Intercultural dialogue*** (Intercultural conversations, Walsh, 2020) is a reciprocal, inter-epistemic exchange(s) of knowledge, values, and cultural practices between diverse groups, fostering mutual respect and understanding. This dialogue challenges dominant narratives in educational settings to develop frameworks that are culturally relevant, inclusive, and capable of promoting genuine intercultural understanding and sensitivity.

## Study 1. Background: A sociolinguistic & Academic profile of IS

**Objective:** Describe the sociolinguistic and academic profile of Indigenous Students (IS): linguistic repertoires, language acquisition trajectories, academic trajectory.

**Research Design:** mixed methods approach (sociolinguistic survey (N=125), institutional documents, ethnographic records, interviews (N=10), and a Talking Circle–Círculo de Palabra)

**Results:** (Álvarez Valencia & Miranda, 2023; Álvarez Valencia and Valencia, 2024)



How decolonial was the study?

What does conducting decolonial intercultural research look like?

**Participants:** researchers (N=4), research assistant (N=3), officials of CIU (N=3)



At the Talking Circle with IS

# 1. Roles: Access and participation at Univalle (Study 1)

...we see that a lot of students drop out of the university, so [we thought] “we are going to tell [the university indigenous council] that we are going to do an investigation to try to improve the retention of indigenous students; and well, anyone who is told that is going to say yes!” And we arrived [at the council] and as if with distrust toward us, they said, “well yes, teacher, well yes, but present it”. We presented it to the council the first time and then, “well teacher, well, present it again.” And one week later we did it again and we started to feel like “ok, supposedly this is easy, because it is something beneficial for them...” Then, later they asked us to go to the Indigenous student residency to present the project, and we said, “gee, again”. So, we said, “but what's going on? we are supposedly proposing something for the benefit of the community...”

So, all of this...**questioned my role as a researcher**, that I supposedly have power because I was a university researcher. Later they said, “we are going to negotiate how this is going to be” and we sat down a whole afternoon to negotiate the rules of the study...they made their rules very clear; in other words, they horizontalized the research process...at the end I said, what is decolonial research? Well, they teach you what decolonial research is. (Joséa; Talking Circle with Indigenous students, May 23, 2024)

Colonial myth of *helping the Western Other* (Barker, 2010; Held, 2019)

*Demands:*

- Construction of a code of ethics
- Limitations of access
- Hiring of IS as research assistants
- Co-authorship
- Constant monitoring of the research process



Picture taken at the signing of the code of ethics

## 2. Decolonizing the research plan: Data collection procedures and instruments (Study 1)



Working with the IS on the survey

I also remember something that happened with the survey...it talked about gender, sex; there were about four or five points that talked about gender, so you are binary, you are trans and we thought, no! We could hardly ask it is a man or a woman, because with the rest of the things [gender categories], the people will stop answering. (Indigenous Governor, Jennifer)

...we included a *Círculo de Palabra* and we even decolonized...I believe, the study at different levels, because an instrument as typical and Westernized as the survey was decolonized in its design to the extent that we sat down with the IS and we negotiated it...its administration was also negotiated with them. They say, "well let's apply it but then on our terms, ... we call (by phone), we help them fill out the survey." All the procedure was the way they thought they could do it. (Prof. José A., Talking Circle)



### 3. Co-theorización: Co-constructing the idea of decolonizing research vs decolonial research (Study 1)

When I started doing the research with the indigenous students, I did not feel that I was doing decolonial research, nor did I feel that I was doing decolonial research at the end. What I felt was that... I was getting to know from the theory what decoloniality was. ... It was transformed with the participation of the indigenous students. (Prof. Norbella; Círculo de Palabra)

There was a moment in the process of also **decolonizing the mind** in line with the project and examining the possibility that it was a space for advocacy as well. The advocacy went beyond blocking the administration building or sending a statement; it also required demonstrating it within the framework of a research project. (IS Manuel, Talking Circle)

### 3. Co-theorización: Co-constructing the idea of decolonial research



#### Indigenous research models:

- Kaupapa Maori research approach (Smith T., 2021),
- Indigenist research paradigm for Australian-Indigenous Peoples (Rigney, 1999),
- North American Indigenous research frameworks (Wilson, 2008)
- African postcolonial Indigenous research (Chilisa, 2019)
- Research Guide of the NASA community (CECIDIC, 2015)

Theme	Teachers	Indigenous Students
<b>Epistemological Decentering</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Encompasses other practices of knowledge production and representation</li> <li>Repositions forms of knowing 'otherwise' of marginalized communities</li> <li>Recognizes culture-specific data collection methods</li> <li>Introduces ritualistic practices of the community</li> <li>Decolonizes researchers</li> <li>Increases sensitivity to epistemological and ontological diversity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decenters research from Anglo-European epistemologies</li> <li>Gives voice to 'the Other'</li> <li>Recognizes indigenous knowledge as equal to Western knowledge</li> <li>Implies an act of mutual sharing: being able to talk with 'the Other'</li> <li>"Redraws IS, not as objects of study but as one more actor with their own voice"</li> <li>Increases sensitivity to epistemological and ontological diversity.</li> </ul>
<b>Ethical and Methodological Integrity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Draws on an ethical code established by the participating community</li> <li>Prioritizes listening to participants' voices</li> <li>Validates research methods with participants</li> <li>Embraces novel data collection instruments or techniques emerging from community collaboration</li> <li>Is useful: contributes to community development</li> <li>Requires political commitment beyond a research project</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is not deceiving</li> <li>Strengthens indigenous self-determination</li> <li>Allows delinking from established research standards</li> <li>Requires collaborative work</li> <li>"Promotes the emergence of historically marginalized knowledge"</li> <li>Focuses on the participants' context, knowledge, and 'sentir' (feeling)</li> <li>Enables a "dialogo entre autoridad y autoridad" (dialogue between authorities)</li> </ul>
<b>Relational and Community Engagement</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"It changes you as a human"</li> <li>Involves relationality: mutual learning and transformation</li> <li>Fosters horizontal dialogue between researchers and participants</li> <li>Nurtures a trusting relationship</li> <li>Recognizes participants as subjects rather than objects</li> <li>Emphasizes communitarism (with and for the community)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Connects concepts, activities, and 'sentir' (feeling) from the territory with the academic space</li> <li>Involves mutual learning and unlearning of cultural and research practices</li> <li>Responds to the needs of the community</li> <li>Facilitates reflection about practices of internal coloniality within the community</li> <li>Implicates trust building</li> </ul>

## Study 2

### Indigenous female leadership: Embracing participatory action in Intercultural Education

- **Objectives:** The primary goal is to examine how Sikuaní women's leadership within their community confronts power structures, helping develop an intercultural educational framework rooted in the Global South's cultural and linguistic diversity. This study aims to showcase how their community female leadership drives a culturally grounded educational proposal that respects Sikuaní knowledge and practices while integrating plurilingualism to challenge Eurocentric paradigms.
- **Research Design:** The study uses qualitative methods, specifically **collaborative ethnography** and **Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR)**, involving Sikuaní women as co-researchers. These methods emphasize co-construction, where participants actively shape the research direction, integrating their cultural perspectives and knowledge into the process.
- **Results:** Findings reveal that:
  - Sikuaní women redefine leadership through collective, community-oriented values.
  - They emphasize plurilingualism as essential for cultural identity, bridging their native Sikuaní language with Spanish and showing a growing interest in English for socioeconomic mobility.
  - The research highlights their role in promoting intercultural dialogue, creating "Third Spaces" where Sikuaní and non-indigenous knowledge can interact, thus fostering an inclusive educational framework.
  - This intercultural education supports both cultural preservation and practical skills for navigating contemporary societies.



Decolonial Gestures in this research	Description
<b>Plurilingual intercultural pedagogy</b>	Integrates indigenous languages with Spanish and explores the role of English and other foreign languages, challenging linguistic dominance and affirming linguistic diversity.
<b>Inter-epistemic dialogue</b>	Centers indigenous knowledge systems, resisting dominant Western epistemologies, and validates Sikvani cultural insights as equally valuable.
<b>Collaborative Ethnography and Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) Methodology</b>	Employs Sikvani versions of CBPR and collaborative ethnography to include Sikvani women as co-creators of knowledge, challenging traditional research hierarchies.
<b>Creating Third Spaces</b>	Develops Third Spaces bridging indigenous and mainstream education, fostering mutual understanding in a hybrid cultural model.
<b>Emphasis on cultural identity and agency</b>	Reclaims indigenous women's roles in leadership, subverting colonial narratives, and validating unique expressions of identity and leadership.



## Sikvani co-researchers' agentive actions through decolonial gestures

Each gesture in the acts to decolonize research practices, validates indigenous voices, and fosters culturally inclusive educational spaces.

- **Sikuani co-researchers' roles:**

"In our journey, we, Sikuani women, are not observers but shapers of the path forward. Our voices, our language, and our traditions are the roots that anchor us as we bridge our world with others. We are here to lead with courage, with unity, and with the wisdom our ancestors entrusted to us, not just for today but to inspire and protect the generations to come."

"Pajanü raja pa sikuaninü, ka ponaenajü a rajua ta matabokota pa li waisi" —  
"We are Sikuani indigenous women, take that in your mind!" (Capitana Uvaldina)

- **Decolonizing the research plan:**

"Engaging in this research, I realized how the principles of collaborative ethnography and Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) transformed beyond their conventional frameworks. The Sikuani women's approach redefined our methods, grounding them in indigenous values of reciprocity, respect, and communal knowledge-sharing. Their leadership reshaped our roles from facilitators to learners, guiding us through a process that honored their worldview and prioritized indigenous epistemologies over Western academic paradigms. This shift not only deepened my understanding of CBPR but also underscored the power of indigenous female leadership in shaping authentic, context-rooted research methodologies." (Co-researcher, Prof. Lorena).

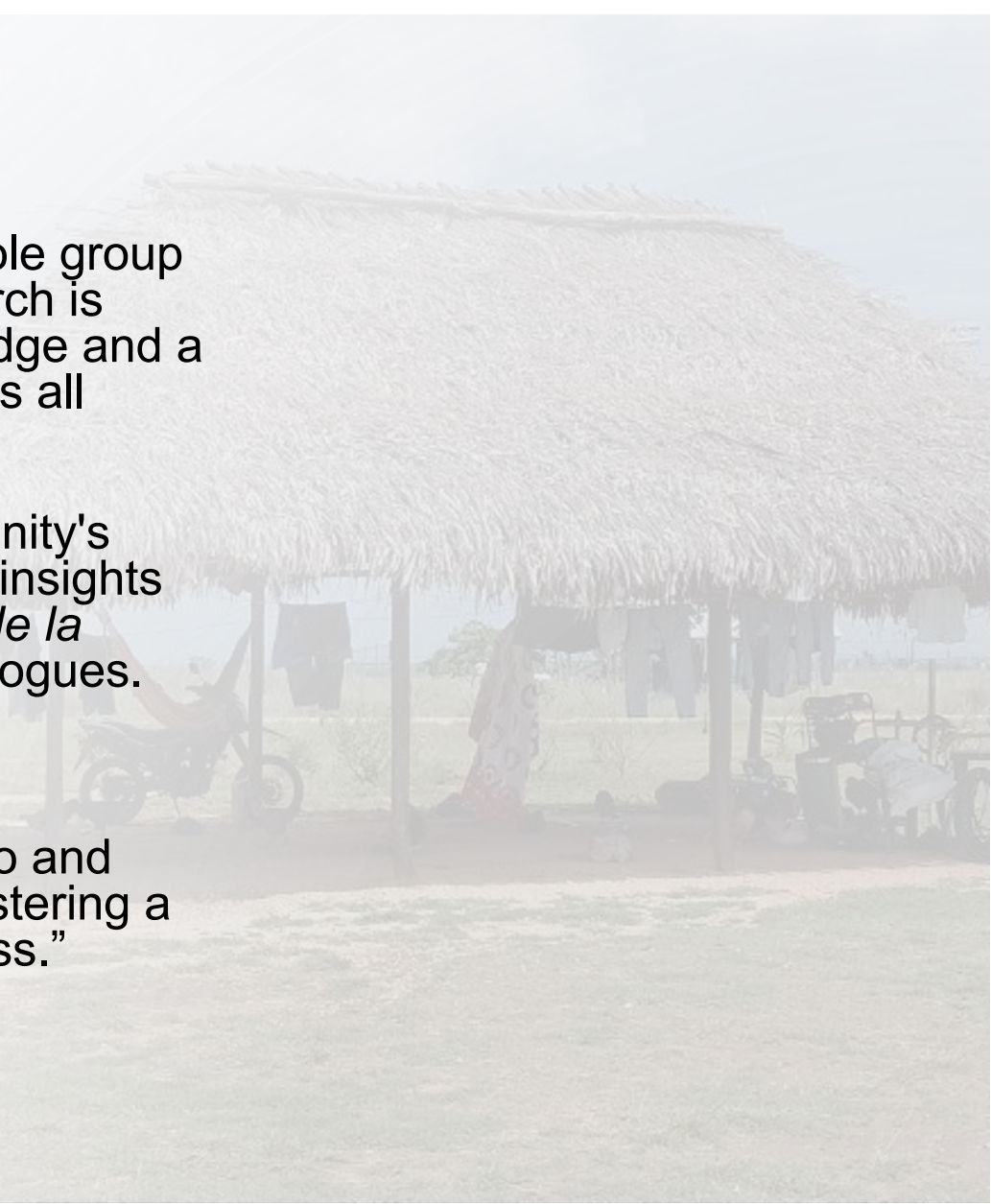
- **Ethics of reciprocity**

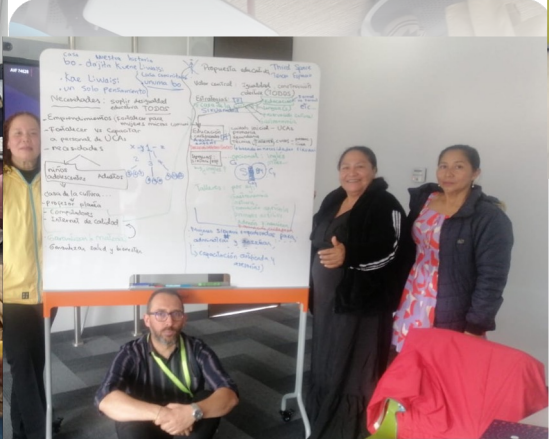
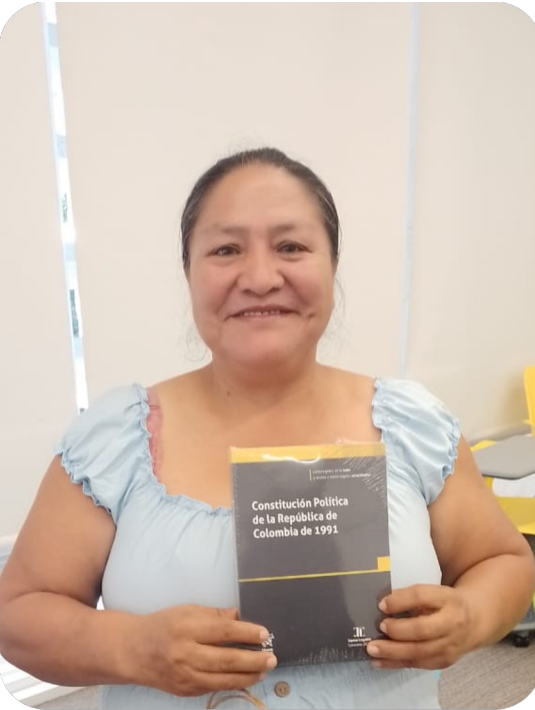
"Building trust within the Sikuani community taught me the true essence of reciprocity. Sharing yukuta, or grating yuca, I found that sitting together over a drink became a bridge, a simple yet profound gesture of mutual respect. The ethics of reciprocity emerged as we exchanged stories—theirs rich with lived experience. The act of listening became sacred, a promise of understanding and respect. While dancing together, we let go any formality, moving as one to rhythms that expressed our common humanity. [...] These moments transformed our research into a genuine partnership, where trust was not just built but lived." (Co-researcher, Prof. Beatriz)



- **Co-theorizing**

“Research is giving wisdom words to the whole group [referring to all co-researchers]. Doing research is engaging in dialogue that represents knowledge and a collective, co-constructed process that honors all participants’ cultural knowledge and lived experiences. It is more about building mutual understanding and strengthening the community's social fabric [...] Sikuni voices, stories, and insights lead the way, through practices like *Círculo de la Palabra* (Word Circles) and collaborative dialogues. Research becomes a means of addressing community needs and reclaiming Indigenous knowledge. It is a tool for empowerment and solidarity, with each participant contributing to and benefiting from the knowledge generated, fostering a sense of ownership and agency in the process.”  
(Capitana Luz Elena, also ethno-educator)







# Conclusions

- It is marginalized communities that are best positioned to help us grasp the meaning of decolonization: Extended interculturality (Puentes, 2014). Actitud decolonial/feeling decolonial vs thinking decolonial.
- Researcher's reflexivity, positionality and metareflection are critical in fostering a deeper awareness of how personal and institutional biases shape the research process. If we identify these influences, we can actively work towards more inclusive, context-sensitive approaches that honor and integrate diverse knowledge systems.
- One important challenge? Institutional limitations often reinforce traditional legitimized frameworks, constraining research methodologies and administration within narrow paradigms. Addressing these constraints is essential for fostering research environments that value and incorporate diverse cultural perspectives and practices, leading to more inclusive and contextually relevant findings.
- Moving from *thinking decolonial* to *feeling decolonial*: "the colonial wound is not understood in all its magnitude if it is not known from the corpo-biographical, from the corpo-experiential, from a body that feels and speaks it" (Frischknecht and Borsani, 2019, p. 7).



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# Thank you!

If questions or comments, please contact us:

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