

Mennonites and Theological Education among Indigenous Churches in Ecuador:

A Perspective from the Last Two Decades

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Introduction

One of the ministries supported by the Mennonite Partnership for Ecuador — which includes Mennonite Mission Network (MMN), Iglesia Menonita de Colombia, and Central Plains Mennonite Conference — involves supporting theological education among indigenous evangelical churches. This article presents a historical sketch of theological education supported by Mennonites among indigenous evangelicals in Ecuador from 1991 to 2010.

In this article I will describe how paradigm changes were carried out, moving from an evangelical approach imposed from the outside, to one more informed by indigenous ways of thinking and acting, shaped also by the challenges of liberation theology. Coincidentally, these paradigm changes took place when Anabaptist theological perspectives were taught through several courses and workshops, in alliances between Mennonites and other institutions that share a common goal of supporting theological training for evangelical indigenous churches.

I present here more personal reflections of what I noticed through my experiences in theological education with my wife, Patricia, as well as my thoughts upon reading a few written sources. My reflections are pulled from courses and conversations with pastors, leaders, students, teachers, and indigenous communities from 1995 to 2010. I will begin with a few antecedents, and then will

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briefly present the methodology, dimensions, characteristics, and the results of theological education among indigenous groups, concluding with some of the challenges before us. I recognize every aspect of this article deserves further development in future work.

I hope this article generates a profitable dialogue between Mennonites and indigenous people about the *Missio Dei* (the mission of God), especially among those who serve in the field of theological education.

Antecedents

The arrival of evangelical missions

The establishment of formal theological education in Ecuador coincides with the arrival of evangelical and Protestant mission initiative towards the end of the 19th century. Once mission groups settled themselves and had followers, they began to create biblical institutes in order to train the first local pastors and church leaders. It was not until the the middle of the 20th century that a more organized and systematized method of theological education emerged.

The majority of indigenous evangelical churches were established by the Gospel Missionary Union with the support of other mission agencies such as HCJB (“The Voice of the Andes,” a Christian missionary radio station in Ecuador) and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. These established churches — the majority of them evangelical but not belonging legally or administratively to any missionary organization — influenced indigenous communities in their lifestyle habits, particularly in the lives of the men. So, abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, for example, improved the quality of family life. Indigenous communities also, however, assimilated Fundamentalist Christianity that was brought by North American missionaries of different denominational backgrounds, resulting in isolation from political life.²

2 Fundamentalism is a complex phenomenon that merits further explanation. For the sake of this article, I refer only to the movement that originated inside North American Protestantism, and existed in evangelical settings in the 20th and 21st centuries. Its name is derived from five “fundamental” assessments that its founders promulgated in a meeting in Niágara in 1895: 1) the inerrancy of the Bible; 2) the virgin birth of Jesus Christ; 3) the doctrine of substitutionary atonement; 4) the bodily resurrection of Jesus; and 5) the imminent personal return of Jesus Christ. See Justo González, *Diccionario Manual Teológico* (Barcelona: CLIE, 2010), 129–30. Fundamentalism is part of evangelical Protestantism that influenced Latin American churches, resulting in divisions both in the traditional churches and the Pentecostal churches, as well as starting new conferences. See José Míguez Bonino, *Rostros del Protestantismo Latinoamericano* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Creación, 1995), 35–56.

Doctrinal instruction and its diffusion

Evangelical faith spread through biblical institutes, initiated in 1953 with the objectives of reproducing dogmas and doctrines in the mission churches, as well as teaching church administration. Presently, the institutes are in Quichua hands, but under the mentoring of North American missionaries.

In the 1970s, stories and teaching material on the life of Jesus, evangelical hymns, Bible course modules by extension, and materials on evangelical doctrine were published in indigenous languages. Music institutes were also created to teach people how to play instruments, sing, and compose hymns. In 1985 an institute was opened to train religious teachers in the transmission of evangelical doctrine to children in congregations.

Until the end of the 1980s, the content of doctrinal instruction generally included:

- Bible studies with emphasis on memorization and literal interpretation;
- Dogmatic emphases with eschatological and messianic content;
- Moralistic evangelical ethics;
- Procedures for liturgical celebrations;
- Program divisions according to gender — some for men and the others for women;
- Affirmation and defense of pastoral ministry exclusively for men — a teaching sustained in an androcentric and patriarchal interpretation of the Bible; and
- No academic requirements to enter the programs — just a calling from God.

Despite these perspectives, many indigenous evangelicals were instructed and became pastors with strong Christian commitments.

Yet how was it possible to reproduce such doctrinal instruction in a region characterized by high mountains, cold weather, and lack of good roads, as was the case of the Chimborazo province? Few things would have been possible without the Colta Radio Station, created in 1931, and the Voice of the AIIECH (Association of Evangelical Indigenous Churches of Chimborazo), whose wavelengths were transmitted to evangelical indigenous communities within its reach.

The Journey towards Change

We have seen how the theological education among indigenous churches followed models that reproduced dogmas and doctrines, some of them influenced

by fundamentalist movements. But, beginning the 1990s, other paradigms appeared in theological education through two institutions: the Ecuadorian Federation of Indigenous Evangelicals (FEINE), with its headquarters in Quito, and the Indigenous Foundation for Development (FUIDE), with its headquarters in Riobamba. These organizations, both in relationships with Mennonite agencies, initiated a gradual breakdown of the traditional theological paradigms, which had prioritized doctrine over life and dogmatism over the community hermeneutic.

FEINE arose in the early 1980s with indigenous evangelical church associations from different regions of the country, with social as well as religious purposes, and in a time of fervour for agrarian reforms. Many of these associations were headed by Monsignor Leonidas Proaño, the principal promoter at the time of liberation theology among the indigenous communities of Chimborazo.

In the early 1990s, more than half of the 2,800 indigenous churches in the country did not have either trained pastors or church leaders. During this time, FEINE entered the national political scene and invited Mennonite Board of Missions (MBM, the predecessor agency of MMN) to support them in biblical and theological training. Over the last fifty years, Mennonites had successfully supported the development of unique theological training methodologies in indigenous churches in both Ivory Coast and Argentine Chaco.³

A result of this invitation was the establishment of an agreement in 1993 between AIIECH with the MBM and the Latin American Biblical Seminary (which today is the Latin American Biblical University, or UBL) in Costa Rica. This partnership resulted in the birth of the Indigenous Center of Theological Studies, with headquarters in Riobamba. This center was charged with developing programs of theology and ministry, and inspired by liberation theology. In the first year it enrolled nearly two hundred students. Particularly from 1993 to 1997, and afterwards, various indigenous evangelicals in Chimborazo were able to advance in their theological training in Ecuador, while others went to Costa Rica with a scholarship.

As a result of this theological training, some students created various programs with FUIDE: one for theological training (which became a satellite

3 The experience in the Chaco in Argentina is told by Willis Horst, Ute Mueller-Eckhardt, and Frank Paul in *Misión sin conquista: Acompañamiento de comunidades indígenas autóctonas como práctica misionera alternativa* (Buenos Aires: KAYROS, 2009). Several reflections about the experiences in Ivory Cost are told by James R. Krabill in *Is it Insensitive to Share your Faith? Hard Questions about Christian Mission in a Plural World* (Intercourse, PA: Good, 2005).

of the Latin American Biblical University), a scholarship program, and later, a project assessment program. Indigenous evangelicals who graduated from the UBL immediately became resources for teaching in the university-level theological education program.⁴ However, in 1997 the new board of AIIECH stopped calling for the academic formation of religious leaders and the development of an indigenous theology, labelling the contents of courses as liberation theology. In spite of everything, UBL and MMN maintained their support of Indigenous Center of Theological Studies (CIET).

Later, theological education continued through the Pastors' Council of FEINE, which, along with FUIDE, received the support of the Latin American Council of Churches (CLAI), MMN, and the UBL, in order to train in a direct way at an intermediate level more than one hundred pastors and leaders, both men and women. Sixty graduated from 2001 to 2005. At the same time, a new university-level extension of the UBL in Quito was opened. It was based in the Methodist Church and had twenty students from different denominations,⁵ including five indigenous students,⁶ one of whom finished her bachelor's degree in theology in Costa Rica.⁷ This effort generated confidence among these institutions that signed an agreement in order to support more than 140 pastors and indigenous leaders during the period 2007 to 2009. Most of them graduated from the intermediate and beginner levels in November 2009.

As we can see, paradigm changes in theological education were carried out through the efforts of several entities — some of whose perspectives were liberal, and others liberationist, and along with FEINE and FUIDE — whose leaders had the openness to change their theological perspective.

Developed methodology

During the last two decades, indigenous theological education developed methodologies through trial and error. There has not been one single pedagogical method, rather, methods have evolved and adapted to changing situations. While the implementation of theological education awakened great interest in the university program in the early 1990s, indigenous students were not at high enough education level to make use of formal theological education. Because

4 These were Julián Guamán, Gerónimo Yantalema, and Margarita de la Torre.

5 The students belonged to the Lutheran, Baptist, Mennonite, and Methodist Churches, the Salvation Army, and various indigenous churches.

6 Two of which are leaders in FEINE — Willian and Rafael Chela.

7 This student was Blanca Viracocha, a youth leader with the Methodist Church in the Pastocalle Township, in Cotopaxi province, and who belonged to the Romerillos community.

of this greater attention has been given to beginner and intermediate levels.

The intermediate level has followed the 24 modules of CEPA (the Pastoral Education Course) of the UBL, whose methodology follows the “see, judge, act” method.⁸ In spite of the practicality of these modules, after several years of use it was recognized among the same indigenous peoples that this was not the most appropriate method for them, given their levels of education and how they processed concepts. In spite of that, intermediate-level teachers continue to use the modules as a guide, making adaptations in their classes to help facilitate interactive learning.

Given that indigenous recognized the modules of CEPA had a higher academic level for them, in 2007 the Pastors’ Council of FEINE found it necessary to begin developing a biblical, theological, and pastoral training program at the beginner level, making use of a methodology and content that call for indigenous evangelical peoples to move from being *objects of* to *subjects engaged in* theology. The program consists twelve courses, made up of four workshops per year, with three courses per workshop. This curriculum was developed over the course of six events and from a Latin American theological perspective.

In the first event a series of workshops was held with twenty pastors and leaders who had completed FEINE’s program in previous years. These workshops touched on the Ecuadorian context, transforming education, indigenous worldviews, and the creation of popular-level contextual curricula. In the second event, a set of criteria was developed to determine topics for the curriculum, define its content, and define recurring themes, among them nonviolence, justice, gender equity, ecology, and ethnic diversity. At the third event, appropriate content and pedagogical methods were defined for each topic. In the fourth, biblical, theological, and pastoral starting points were proposed. During the fifth event, booklets were created for each one of the twelve topics chosen as urgent and necessary. And the final event was the evaluation after the first year, which produced feedback in some of the content and applied methodologies.

The twelve booklets that were created were on the following topics:

1. Conflict resolution from a biblical perspective;
2. Church administration for the 21st century;

⁸ This method was initiated by the Second Vatican Council and has been used by the Base Ecclesial Communities. It means: starting from the historical reality of our world (see), illuminate this reality with God’s word (judge) in order to begin a new practice (act). See Victor Codina, *¿Qué es la Teología de la Liberación?* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1988), 15–20.

3. Financial administration in the church;
4. Community pastoral accompaniment;
5. Celebrate a service to the God of Life;
6. Communication of the word of God in the community;
7. Announcing the kingdom of God;
8. Contextualized Christian education;
9. The reasons for our faith;
10. Reading the Bible with different eyes;
11. Jesus as the model for leadership; and
12. The church and social development.⁹

There are other booklets currently being created on topics suggested by the same churches and communities, including for example church and polity, church and state, gender equality, the Ecuadorian context, and indigenous worldviews.

During the creation of these booklets and the implementation of the program, indigenous pastors and leaders from different provinces on the national level have played an active and decisive role in each stage. They have developed criteria taking into account the needs of the churches and communities; they have chosen the most urgent and necessary topics, identified learning techniques from their own culture, chosen pertinent biblical texts to illuminate particular situations from their reality, shared their own experiences from their rural and/or urban contexts, identified an appropriate learning process for the students in each one of the topics, and they have been facilitators in the majority of the courses. My role in the process consisted of assessing pedagogy and theology.

The workshop participants have expressed their appreciation for how the program has helped them read the Bible with different eyes, challenging them to think about how to engage in pastoral ministry that addresses contexts of poverty, exclusion, and marginalization. The program has encouraged them to be instruments of transformation and liberation in their situations of oppression.

Dimensions of Indigenous Theological Education

When I refer to ‘dimensions’, I mean the relational areas of the human being in which an indigenous theological education aims to work. Thus, when reviewing the last two decades of theological education among indigenous evangelicals in

⁹ See FEINE, CLAI, MMN, *Programa Pastoral Indígena: Cartillas de formación bíblica, teológica y pastoral* (Quito: CLAI, 2010).

Ecuador, which has operated with non-traditional paradigms, one can identify the dimensions illustrated in Figure 1.¹⁰

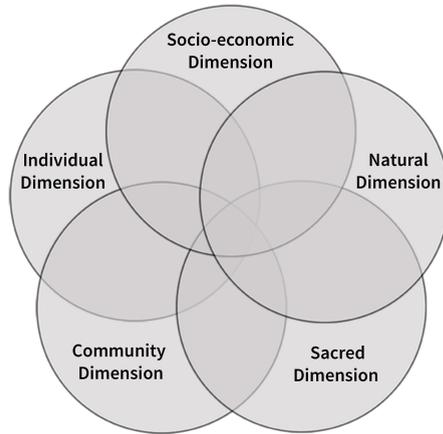


Figure 1. *Dimensions of Indigenous Theological Education*

The sacred dimension

The sacred dimension is the area of theological education that is articulated in relationship with the Creator. It is evidenced in the conception of God, the Creator, as revealed through the Bible, human beings, Christ, the church, nature, and the events of everyday life. Indigenous communities are profoundly religious, and this aspect circulates in all areas of life, from the individual to the social-political, the present and the future, life here and that which is beyond. All that happens around them is explained with reference to the supernatural. However, even though everything is integrated in the spiritual, a separation between the sacred and the profane is observed.

The social-political dimension

The social-political dimension is the relational area where indigenous communities intersect with the social and political transformation of the nation, region, or community where they live. They understand political life to be tightly related to all of life, and it is seen as the will and revelation of God for history.

¹⁰ This proposal is inspired by the correlation method of Paul Tillich in *Systematic Theology*. I, II, III (New York and Evanston: University of Chicago and Harper & Row, 1967).

The natural dimension

The natural dimension is reflected in two principal ways. First, native peoples have profound respect and care for creation, reflected in their methods of cultivation and their affectionate treatment of animals. This dimension conceives of Earth as Mother, as *Pachamama*, “because she is who gives live, food, drink, and clothes. She is part of my life, and my life is part of her. There is a link; from her we came, we are part of her, and to her we will return, as it says Gen. 3:19.”¹¹ And second, the natural dimension is evidenced in the human relationship with the rest of the environment, including water (which is like *Pachamama*’s blood), vegetation, mountains, sun, moon, and stars — all are part of the cycle of each human being.

The individual dimension

The individual dimension pertains to practices (both moral and ethical) that help determine an appropriate lifestyle. Here enters the triple prohibition: *Ama shua* (do not steal), *Ama quilla* (do not be lazy), and *Ama llulla* (do not lie). When an individual must be admonished, it means the community has failed. However, this individual dimension also demonstrates how well the individual communicates with nature and with God, and how he or she understands the message forwarded by them. This dimension shows the relationship of each individual with their Creator. Because of this *shamanes* or *yachais* (wise men and women) are recognized in the community as people with special qualities of relating deeply with God and spiritual forces.

The community dimension

The community dimension is evidenced in each person’s generosity and concern for neighbor, companion, sibling, and friend. This includes the community of faith as well as the community or town of origin. The community is the extension of the family. Mother earth exists in the functioning of the community, and the community is fulfilled in relation to the earth. On behalf of the earth, *mingas* — community work days — are organized around planting and harvest. Additionally, a worldview of reciprocity exists that is connected to the future, more than to the present, a person, or a specific community, and is characterized by giving from what one has with joy, and not from what is leftover.

The dimensions listed above are integral to indigenous worldviews and spiritualities. As noted, the individual is tightly interrelated with the sacred, social-political, nature, and the community (ecclesial or otherwise) to which he or she belongs. As such, theological education should be carried out recog-

11 This is the interpretation of Willian Chela.

nizing this interrelatedness. In other words, theological education must be a holistic process. The teacher or facilitator thus becomes very important, because they must live out all the previous dimensions in order not just to be accepted by the students or communities, but also to be models worthy of imitation. The teacher should not just have academic knowledge, but should actually integrate the five dimensions in their life. Because of this, it is difficult for Westerners to serve as the best people for this process. It is better for teachers from the same indigenous groups to serve in their communities, as they will operate from similar worldviews.

Characteristics of Theological Education in Ecuador

The new paradigms of theological education that were implemented in Ecuador during the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century (a period of Mennonite involvement) have specific characteristics, as outlined below.

Strategic alliances

Theological education has been developed with new paradigms thanks to strategic alliances between indigenous evangelical associations, biblical and theological educational institutions (such as the UBL), and ecclesial institutions such as CLAI and MMN. In these alliances a *minga* — community work group — of students, teaching resources, economic resources, administrative resources, and academic resources has been created. Indigenous ways of working are respected in these alliances, considering indigenous peoples as subjects rather than objects.

Priority of Scripture in doctrine

An indigenous friend once said, “If through the Bible slavery and fundamentalism entered into our communities, it is with the same Bible that we will achieve liberation.”¹² Many good indigenous customs were abandoned because of prohibitions taught to them, and due to misinterpretations of Scripture. For example, some communities were prohibited from playing indigenous instruments. Another harmful teaching was that indigenous peoples were taught to be silent, even when experiencing grave injustices, like when their women were abused by the landowners. Some instances of Scripture being misinterpreted came about, in part, because of the biblical translations being used. Despite having Bible translations in different local languages, such as Tsáchila, Quichua, Shuar, and Cofán, among others, the Bible that is most used is the

¹² Quoted from Gerónimo Yantalema in a meeting in what was previously known as Indigenous Center of Theological Studies.

Spanish Version Reina-Valera, with the *Nueva Versión Internacional* being second. These translations are often preferred, if only because Spanish is the most common shared language, even though, with some exceptions, principally in the Amazon, interpreters with at least three languages are required.

Oral methods

The best teaching methods, in spite of the different didactic techniques learned in various courses, continue to be oral. Facilitators can spend hours speaking without losing the attention of their audience. This methodology should be filled with anecdotes and life stories for illustration.

Recurring topics

Theological education has tried to recover appreciation for indigenous world-views, and, given cultural patriarchy, it has been important to insert topics of gender equality, nonviolence, and ethnicity.

New paradigms

The rupture of traditional paradigms has occurred. The former evangelical paradigm is being replaced by ecumenical and interreligious paradigms, deliverance from spirits by holistic liberation, exclusivity by inclusivity, inequality by equality, anthropocentrism by ecological care, and that of androcentrism by gender equality. These new paradigms were inspired in Latin American theologies and other liberal theologies.

Latin American facilitators

In contrast to the other programs of theological education, the new theological training programs have been facilitated by Latin American personnel, the majority of them indigenous, especially at the beginner and intermediate levels.¹³ This has helped indigenous peoples have their theology grow out of their contexts.

Intergenerational

Theological education is for people of all ages and generations. There are youth, young adults, and older adults all in the same class. There is no age limit to participate in courses provided. This creates trust and dialogue between the present and the past. This differs from the Western conception where there are

13 The teaching personnel supported initially by MBM and later by MMN have been Latin American, with formation and appreciation for Anabaptist and Latin American theology. The first were Mauricio Chenlo and Sara Padilla between 1992 and 1995, followed by César Moya and Patricia Uruña from 2000 to the present.

requirements linked, many of them, to age.

Intercultural

These programs of theological education have included persons of different Ecuadorian cultures, such as Quichuas, Otavalos, Shuars, Ashuars, Salasacas, Cañaris, and Saraguros, among others. This diversity is enriched with the participation of *mestizos* — people of mixed ancestry.

Inclusive

In addition to the various cultures, the educational process has included individuals with certain physical challenges such as blindness, speech impediments, and physical problems. This provides different perspectives in the classroom, and challenges the creativity of the instructors.

Minimal logistical structure

This educational process has used the resources which are available in each community where the courses and workshops are held. Fields, a potato crop, or the shade of a tree provide settings for instruction.

Results

Some results of this theological education developed among indigenous evangelicals in the last two decades are apparent and include:

- The promotion and raising up of social and educational projects, which are presumed to be part of the mission of the church.¹⁴ Examples include FUIDE, in Riobamba, and *Nuchanchic Yachai* (“our wisdom”) school, in Cebadas.
- The raising up of leaders with political and administrative capabilities. We emphasize the presence of several former students in decisive political posts, as well as those serving as leaders of institutions who encouraged the process of theological education.¹⁵

¹⁴ We want to emphasize the creation of FUIDE as well as the bilingual intercultural school “Yucanchic Yachai” in the Cebadas Township, Guamote County, province of Chimborazo.

¹⁵ It is important to mention Julián Guamán, who won the Citizens’ Participation Commission’s contest, a regular representative of the State, having presided during an assigned time, as well as Marco Murillo, President of FEINE, and Gerónimo Yantalema, ex-director of FUIDE, members of the National Assembly elected by popular vote in the elections of 2010. It is equally worth emphasizing the nomination, among other councilors, of Humberto Toapanta, youth leader of the indigenous church in Saquisilí, province of Cotopaxi.

- Capability of dialogue at a national level. It is worth highlighting the recognition of FEINE as a political interlocutor through different governments.
- The participation of women in theological education, in the same programs as men, and the openness of some churches to accepting women in pastoral ministry.¹⁶
- The bi-vocationalism of certain leaders, in which the study of theology encouraged them to thoughtfully engage in other professions.
- Social and political activism of indigenous evangelicals, who were once considered in other social sectors and political movements as illiterate and ignorant.
- Openness to ecumenical dialogue due to the participation of indigenous Baptist, Lutheran, and independent churches, as well as teachers from mainline Protestant churches.
- Involvement in political movements, where the people have been able to offer the voice of their communities. Theological training offered tools to indigenous evangelicals to become involved in the struggles for recognition and the promotion of the rights of their peoples.
- Social mobility as an expression of being attentive to what is happening in Ecuador. This has become a priority reflected in worship services and evangelistic activities.

Conclusions and Challenges

Theological education among indigenous evangelicals in Ecuador in the past two decades (supported by Mennonites, among others), broke the traditional paradigms which prioritized doctrine over life and dogmatism over the community hermeneutic. This effort began with the participation of people linked to associations of indigenous evangelicals from certain regions, especially in Chimborazo, with the participation of FUIDE and FEINE. These efforts have been accompanied by the UBL, MMN, and, in the last six years, CLAI, having left certain significant results for the indigenous evangelicals. Even though there are still several traditional Bible institutes, most of them are convinced by this theological education perspective since they were under FEINE's struc-

¹⁶ Manuela Gualán, in Chimborazo, and María Otavalo, in Imbabura, were recognized as pastors less than a year ago, according to information obtained by Pastor Pedro Sisa, interim president of FEINE and president of the National Council of Pastors, as well as Willian Chela, youth coordinator of FEINE.

ture.

Even though the development of indigenous theological education has taken nearly twenty years, it still needs to mature. Persistence and indigenous evangelical leadership convinced of the value of these efforts for their communities, churches, and the country are required. The formation of indigenous theologians who from their own contextual experience and worldview are able to make biblical rereadings appropriate to their situation must be encouraged. Additionally, persistence and patience are needed in those who accompany these educational processes through the ups and downs that occur along the way, in financial as well as organizational issues.

Even though many indigenous evangelicals have been changed by this new, Latin American theological perspective, those who aim for management positions in the organizations are those who have been most resistant to a Latin American perspective. This creates uncertainty concerning the continuity of the program.

The tension that exists between the need for leadership training and autonomy of the indigenous ecclesial communities constitutes a challenge for educational processes. Even though these partnering institutions wish to respect indigenous ways of thinking, there exists an outside influence, whether in methods or content. Because of this, accompaniment should be carried out with careful judgment and sensitivity so that the errors of the past are not repeated.

Additionally, there is need for the recovery of indigenous ancestral values and traditions which have been and are being lost from generation to generation, primarily due to urban migration.

The tension that exists between educating theologically with methods and contents which do, and those which do not, exist in their culture should be recognized. The latter are conducive to a loss of rootedness and the longing for more training, as well as the desire to live like mestizos. This tension increases alongside the technological globalization that has arrived even in the most hidden corners of indigenous communities.