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***“Seguimos en la lucha”* [We continue the struggle]  
Indigenous peoples’ experiences in Conventional Higher  
Education in Colombia.**

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## Abstract

In Colombia, indigenous leaders and organizations claim that among the problems that indigenous youth face in relation to their participation in conventional higher education there is the potential loss of their indigenous identity and their acculturation (Muñoz 2007; ONIC, et al. 2004; Green et al. 2004).

In the light of these claims, this thesis explores how indigenous students experience their participation in university and academia and how their ethnic identity is constructed and challenged in this context. Based on a qualitative study consisting of six in-depth interviews with six indigenous students enrolled in university studies at a public university in Cali-Colombia and coming from different rural indigenous communities, this study has identified the tensions and challenges that indigenous students experience in the university context in relation to their ethnic identity and their self-identification as indigenous. In addition, it has identified how these students face these challenges and tensions as a way to negotiate their sense of belonging to a rural indigenous community and their participation in a conventional university. Consequently, this thesis challenges the idea that ethnic identity is lost. On the contrary, the findings show that the students are actively involved in the construction of their ethnic identity which is perceived as reaffirmed as they commit themselves to strengthen their communitarian values both locally and trans-ethnically. It also explores how academia still reproduces a Eurocentric view on knowledge and on the producers of knowledge (Mignolo 2011; Quijano 1992, 2000, 2014), hence underestimating indigenous knowledge and their participation in university. As a response, these indigenous students put forward an indigenous organizational process under the idea of resistance, linking their struggle for real inclusion in university to what they regard as a historical struggle for autonomy and recognition.

*Key Words:* Ethnic identity, indigeneity, indigenous youth, conventional higher education.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the UNESCO (2008:8), universities should become inclusive spaces where diversity is promoted and respected in order to address the causes and consequences of exclusion, inequality and discrimination which increase the barriers for the participation of marginal groups such as refugees, people with disabilities, rural communities and ethnic minorities in education. Therefore, it is imperative to create opportunities for minorities to access higher education sensitive to their needs. In the case of Colombia, the Constitution of 1991 declares that ethnic minorities have the right to have an education according to their identity but in reality this right has been limited to the creation of policies oriented to secure ethnic communities' entrance and access to higher education, commonly in the form of grants, scholarships, quota policies and other special admission measures (Muñoz 2007:134; Ministerio de Educación Nacional 2008:7; ONIC, et al. 2004:23).

In this context, indigenous leaders and organizations not only worry about the limited access of indigenous people to higher education but they are also concerned about what they perceive as a potential loss of identity and acculturation within the indigenous youth who have to migrate to the urban centers to enroll in university, a space that they claim is not culturally pertinent to their worldviews and their livelihoods (ONIC, et al. 2004:19,96; Green, et al. 2004:21). They argue that knowledge produced in universities and academia negates and renders invisible indigenous ways to relate to knowledge and education (Muñoz 2007:131).

Some indigenous leaders claim that some of these young indigenous students who leave their communities to study forget “what in essence makes them indigenous”(Diego Yatacué, personal communication, 29 November 2014) and that this loss of identity is expressed in the refusal to return to their communities after their studies, the lack of interest in community values and practices, and the rejection to identify themselves as indigenous (ONIC, et al. 2004:19,96; Sanchez and Ruiz 1998 in Green et al 2004:20 ).

In this context, indigenous youth are defined as being in a vulnerable situation which is accentuated by migration to cities in order to look for employment or education opportunities, thus endangering the survival of future indigenous generations. As a result of being separated from their communities, their self-worth and cultural identity is threatened which might lead to potential health and social problems, “such as depression and substance abuse” (UN Youth Unit n.d:1). It also leads to poor academic performance in university and high levels of desertion.

Despite their vulnerability, indigenous youth are given the responsibility to preserve their cultural heritage and vindicate their indigenesness. They are also given the duty to protect their territory and resources and return to their communities after their studies to give continuity to their organizational processes (UN Youth Unit, n.d:1).

As a result, indigenous organizations such as the *Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca* (CRIC) (Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca) demand from the state the creation of policies to ensure the permanence of these students in universities and the creation of curricula that are sensitive to their needs and their worldviews and they also work to put forward proposals for autonomous higher education (ONIC, et al. 2004: 92).

In the light of the above, this thesis aims at understanding indigenous youth participation in conventional universities from the perspective of the indigenous students and how their ethnic identity is challenged, negotiated and constructed in this setting. In addition, I explore how indigenous students navigate conventional higher education in relation to their experience as students and young indigenous subjects.

The leading research questions are as follows:

- *What are the challenges that the indigenous students experience to their identity as indigenous in the light of their participation as university students?*

- *How do they cope with these challenges that university and academia bring to their identity?*

Six in depth- interviews were conducted with six indigenous students coming from *Nasa*, *Pasto* and *Pisamira* communities between February and March of 2015. These interviews took place in Cali, Colombia where they are completing or have completed university studies at *Universidad del Valle*. The students interviewed are also members of the *Cabildo Indigena Universitario* (CIU henceforth) (University Indigenous Council) which claims to be an ethnic-based organization that vindicates indigenous identity and experiences in a conventional university context.

In the process of exploring the tensions experienced by indigenous students in relation to their ethnic identity, my findings suggest that their self-identification as indigenous is strongly linked to their participation in communal organizational processes both in their home communities and in university. For these students, to fail to negotiate between their personal aspirations about their own improvement and these communal processes represent a loss of their indigenous identity. In this sense, my findings demonstrate that these processes are a primary source of sense of belonging and criteria of membership for rural indigenous communities.

In addition, the stigmatization and the stereotypes that still exist in conventional universities which regard indigenous subjects as intellectually incapable of producing scientific knowledge, are seen as challenges to their self-identification as indigenous. However, the indigenous students develop coping strategies which are regarded as a conscious effort to put forward the idea of an ‘indigenous community’ in which struggles for recognition and continuity echoes the political claims of the indigenous movement and are regarded as efforts to make of university an inclusive space.

Additionally, by illustrating these students’ coping strategies the claims of acculturation and loss of identity which involves the idea that the identity of these indigenous students is a “thing” that is possessed and is susceptible to loss is challenged.



### *Thesis Structure*

Followed by this introduction, chapter two, summarizes and evaluates the analytical potential of empirical studies carried out on indigenous peoples and higher education. In addition, I establish my intended contribution. Then I provide a definition of ethnic identity and higher education. In chapter three, I place ethnic identity in the historical construction of what it means to be indigenous in Colombia and the different meanings and practices that indigenous organizations pushed forward when they were consolidated as the authorized and legitimate speakers of indigenous peoples. In addition, I show how these meanings are framed under the multicultural discourse and legal framework developed in the 90s. I also illustrate how higher education has been understood in Colombia. In chapter four, I present the methodology used in the study and I reflect on the ethical considerations and on my participants' engagement. Chapters five and six interpret and discuss the findings. There, I illustrate the tensions and challenges that these indigenous students experience and their coping strategies to face them. By this illustration, I intend to suggest how meanings and practices about what it means to be indigenous are constructed and contested in a conventional university setting. Finally, chapter seven presents the conclusions and suggestions for future research.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Literature Review**

In 2004, UNESCO and the ONIC published a diagnostic study on the coverage of higher education among 15 indigenous groups which represent 52.3% of the total indigenous population in Colombia. The study found that in 2004, if there were 84,207 indigenous people at age to attend higher education, only 3,92% of them were attending university (ONIC, et al. 2004:67-68). Three main factors have been identified as limiting the access of indigenous people to university.

The first limiting factor is geographical. Higher education institutions are mostly located in urban centers while indigenous communities are mostly located in rural

areas (Muñoz 2007:133; ONIC et al. 2004:89,91). Moreover, the quality of the elementary and secondary education provided to indigenous and other rural communities is low compared to the education provided in urban centers. Moreover, the quality of public education is low compared to the quality provided by private institutions. Consequently, indigenous students do not meet the quality standards required from higher education institutions and when they do, they have to leave their communities and migrate to the cities in order to attend university. Therefore, in most cases, they have to adapt to a different cultural context and have to find ways to support themselves economically while being away (ibid.; ibid.).

The second factor is financial. Colombia does not have a tuition free university schema. Although the national government and higher education institutions have implemented grants and loans as alternatives, the coverage is limited, thus making it hard for them to afford the tuition fees and their expenses. Similarly, not all of those who want to attend perform well on the national exams<sup>1</sup> that certify their academic skills and therefore are not eligible for this financial support (Gutierrez 2010:14-15).

The third factor is the content of the education provided in university. The curriculum is not always pertinent to the community life and values of these communities and the education provided in university is abstract and do not teach specific abilities useful for their home communities leading to desertion and acculturation (Cortés Lombana 2007:118; Muñoz 2007:132; Green et al. 2004; Valencia 2009:11). Therefore, these authors state that inclusive policies centered only in access does not guarantee the permanence of these students in university and that they receive a pertinent education to their realities.

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<sup>1</sup>Colombia has developed a standardized exam called ICFES to evaluate the academic skills of the students after they have completed secondary level education. ICFES is thought to be an instrument to decide whether a student after his/her elementary and secondary education is prepared enough to attend to university. The results of the test are seen as well as indicators of the quality of the education institutions.

Other research carried out in the Latin America has shown that indigenous students face similar difficulties and limited access in higher education (Ortelli and Sartorello 2011; Arancibia et al. 2014; Mato 2011).

In addition, indigenous students have expressed that they lose contact with their home communities, and that they fear to lose their sense of belonging to their ethnic communities, as expressed in the change of cultural patterns such as changes in their eating habits, the way they dress and behave and how willing they are to go back to their home communities (Bustamante et al. 2004:95, 121-123).

This feeling is also shared by indigenous students in other Latin American contexts. For instance, *Aymara* and *Mapuche* students claim that they often fear “they might forget who they are” as indigenous as they participate in a university context in which they “could get lost”. One of the ways in which they feel their identity is being thrown to oblivion is to fail to support the struggle of their community. They see themselves with the responsibility to take what they have learned in university back to their communities. (Arancibia et al. 2014: 40-41).

Other studies show that indigenous subjects are active in the construction and reconfiguration of their identity as indigenous in an urban and university context (Gil Roldán 2005, Simmonds Muñoz 2010; Sierra et al. 2004).

Gil Roldán (2005) identifies the changes and permanence in the identity of *Wayúu* and *Kametsa*<sup>2</sup> women when they enrolled in university studies and migrate from their communities to an urban context. She suggests that their ethnic identity remained as the sense of belonging to their cultures remained intact and it was reinforced with migration (Gil Roldán 2005:37). Although they have incorporated new experiences and news ways to understand themselves as autonomous and independent women, their self-identification as indigenous remains stable and it is reinforced through the use and recuperation of their native language and the “conservation” of their cultural

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<sup>2</sup>Two of Colombia’s indigenous groups. The *Kametsá* inhabit the Sibundoy Valley in the province of Putumayo and the *Wayúú* inhabit the Guajira Peninsula being a binational indigenous group as they also inhabit Venezuelan territory.

practices. While features such as the traditional dress, language, and other costumes might play an important role in defining what it is to be indigenous and who is indigenous, the women interviewed by Gil Roldán (2005:141) claim that what makes them indigenous is the fact that they consciously identify themselves as such.

In addition, Green et al. (2004:20) identify that the experience of indigenous students in university constitutes a reflexive process on how to participate in Colombian society, while at the same time, creating alternative and autonomous life projects close to their communities' needs and expectations (Green et al, 2004:20 in Sierra et al. 2004).

Similarly, Simmonds Muñoz (2010) explores the identity processes of indigenous students in *Universidad del Cauca* in the context of their university education. She argues that students advocate for an education that moves towards *interculturality* and in that way, construct their identity as political and social subjects with an active role in the creation of a dialogue between different ways of knowing, being and doing (p. 119-122).

These studies suggest that indigenous students enrolled in higher education actively construct their identity. However, these studies focused mainly in students coming from specific ethnic communities in Cauca and who were enrolled in specific programmes targeting specifically ethnic groups (Simonds Muñoz 2010) or consist in a general exploration of the experiences of indigenous students in university and their economic, academic and social challenges in adapting to this new environment (Sierra et al. 2004; Gil Roldán 2005).

Therefore, my study intends to contribute to this discussion about indigenous participation in conventional higher education, but explores in depth the tensions that students coming from different ethnic groups experience in the construction of their ethnic identity when they enter in contact with academia and conventional higher education. Also, how they negotiate their identity in an effort to cope with these

challenges. This exploration will also bring to light the stereotypes present in university and how they are contested by these students.

## 2.2 Ethnic Identity

I have chosen to use the term “identity” despite the efforts to replace it with other terms that are believed to avoid its homogenization and reification (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:5). I do so because identity seems to play a central role in the discussion about indigenous participation in university. Similarly, “identity” is given a crucial role in the claims that indigenous peoples put forward, and above all, because they argue that it plays an important role in their social lives and everyday interactions (Caviedes 2010:43). Nevertheless, I am aware that it is both a category of practice and a category of analysis (Brubaker and Cooper 2000:4). Hence, our job as researchers is to explore what it means to people when they make claims in their name, when identity is used as a category, and who is using it and why, rather than to attribute to it an encompassing explanatory value of why people think and act like they do (Törrönen 2013:80).

Identity is defined as a relational construction, in terms of a contrastive relation between I/we and us/the other (Wade 2000:255; Gnecco 2006; Restrepo 2007:26). As a relational discursive<sup>3</sup> construction, it entails a dialectical dynamic between self-identification and the external process of categorization (Jenkins 1994:20). In other words, identity is not only about self-identification or affirmation but also about classification and attribution (Restrepo 2007:28).

Barth (1969:10) defines ethnic identity as a form of social organization with specific criteria for membership, which might be subject to change. Instead of defining ethnic identity as a set of cultural and biological traits shared by a group of people, ascription is determined by what the actors regard as significant, hence, there are no objective traits that determine whether individuals are part of an ethnic group

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<sup>3</sup>To claim that identity is a discursive construction does not imply that they only exist as narratives with no material effects on social reality. The discourse is a social practice which enables thoughts, perceptions, experiences and relationships (Restrepo 2007:27).

or not (ibid:14). Similarly, he argues that ethnic groups exist in relation to other human groups despite, and because of, the interaction between them, which challenges the idea that cultural diversity and difference remains when they exist in isolation and the idea that to preserve an “ethnic identity” one has to avoid contact. While the cultural traits might change over time, this does not imply a change in the organizational relevance of ethnic identities (Barth 1970: 33). Consequently, Barth problematizes the necessary link ‘group + culture+ territory’ that is no longer natural and essential (Briones & Del Cairo 2015:18).

However, it is pertinent to make a clarification about the terms ‘ethnic’ and ‘indigenous’. When I learned about the claims about the potential loss of the identity of the indigenous subjects that enrol in university, there was a reference to their identity as a particular ethnic community (for instance, in the case of my interviewees, as *Nasa, Pasto, or Pisamira*) but also to their identity as indigenous. Therefore, the claims are not only made with regard to the specific characteristics of each group but also in relation to ‘the indigenous’, which is a generic identity that accounts for different groups and communities (Gros 2001:70).<sup>4</sup>

The complex dynamic of identification and belonging that the term ‘indigenous identity’ entails is illustrated in the term ‘indigeneity’. By using this term, De la Cadena and Starn (2007:2-3) highlight the contested character of “the indigenous”. These authors claim that the criteria to determine who is indigenous are not self-evident or intrinsic but indigenous people deal “with the tense dynamics of being

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<sup>4</sup> I must also acknowledge that the category ‘ethnic’ in Colombia could also imply a generic category that not only accounts for indigenous subjects but it also come to refer to black communities, *raizales* (one afro-Colombian ethnic group inhabiting the San Andrés and Providencia archipelago) and ROM (Bocarejo 2011:101). Thus, to be an ethnic subject in Colombia might be referring to either of these social groups. Nevertheless, in the production of knowledge and policies about these groups, the characteristics attributed to indigenous peoples have been used as the overarching criteria for the identification of ethnic groups. Consequently, the multiple experiences of these groups have been rendered invisible and have been homogenised, including those of the different indigenous peoples inhabiting the Colombian territory. In this regard, Rojas (2004:159) states: “An ethnic group is believed to be a population that possesses among other traits, a culture, a territory, a language, traditions and their own form of government. This imaginary has been constituted on the basis of a benchmark, where the ethnic group would seem to be a synonym of indigenous.” (Wade 1996:289).

categorized by others and seeking to define themselves within and against indigeneity's dense web of symbols, fantasies, and meanings".

### 2.3 Higher education and social mobility

Higher education is seen as a tool to improve social mobility (Bill 2004:15-21), hence it is supposed to contribute to the reduction of income inequality (Altbach et. al 2009; Cicalo 2013; Haveman and Smeeding 2006; Sanchez Bonell 2014:111; Vélez Vásquez 2014). In general terms, social mobility can be defined as "the process through which resources, power, prestige or social status are appropriated, controlled and distributed" (Crompton 1994 in Vélez Vásquez 2014:208) and it is often measured in terms of occupational status and income generation (Boliver and Byrne 2013:50).

However, studies have shown that there is no direct link between education, equality and social mobility. The university setting could also reproduce inequalities and divisions within society (Cicalo 2013:129). Contrary to the idea that social mobility depends on merit and success rather than on social origins, factors such as family social background and ethnicity often play a crucial role (ibid; Boliver and Byrne 2013:55). In addition, the focus of inclusion policies to higher education has been to improve its coverage by promoting access through quota policies and diversification. However, permanence and success in studies do not depend on access, and access does not necessarily guarantee quality in education (Daude 2013:7). Therefore, access policies do not automatically produce mobility.

Ethnographical material has shown that education is a "contradictory resource" (Morarji 2014:41) and has questioned the so-called "universal" link between education, development and equality. Morarji (2014) carries out her research in a rural area in Northern India. She shows that education is seen as development and as a tool for social change by educators, parents and youth alike. Education is described by them as essential and as means individual improvement (ibid.: 24, 90-91); it is regarded both as the result and the cause of their marginalization and as the decline of

an agrarian way of life. The idea of “education as development” entails valuing an urban modern life and mental work more than the rural means of production and manual work (ibid.).

Yet, being educated does not necessarily lead to employment or an increased income, nor to the eradication of inequalities (Morarji 2014:90-91). For instance, Highman and Shah (2013:721) show that education is also a source of intra-caste differentiation and inequality given that non-educated relatives and fellow community members are marginalized and doomed to proletarianization. Consequently, these ethnographic studies invite us to explore meanings and experiences of education so as to examine its tensions, negotiations and local forms, especially since education plays a crucial role on the reproduction of social relations (Télliez Iregui 2002:98).

For Bourdieu and Passeron (2001:104), every pedagogic action carries along symbolic violence for it imposes that specific knowledge is legitimate and therefore necessary, natural and unquestionable, which is the system of beliefs, values and behaviour (*habitus*) of the dominant class (Bourdieu and Passeron 2001:104). However, every act of symbolic violence requires its recognition as being legitimate by all parties, and it is there where its power and legitimacy lies (ibid.:58). Its power also lies in the ability to transfer and reproduce what its being learned to other contexts, and not leaving it in the educational context only (ibid.:50). Yet, symbolic violence works since it instils that the exclusion and marginalization of other classes and groups is legitimate. As a result, academic performance depends on the cultural capital instilled in individuals and which they acquire as members of specific social classes through socialization. However, the exclusion of certain social groups from education is explained by the idea that failure and success is the result of individual talent and merit. Hence, structural social inequality is rendered invisible (ibid.:58).

In addition, what it is transmitted through the pedagogic acts does not constitute a simple act of communication given that the message and the transmitter of the



message are both bestowed with authority, thus, clearly defining what is to be transmitted, how and by whom (Bourdieu and Passeron 2001:131)

Bourdieu and Passeron (2001) refer to this dynamic as symbolic violence. Although their theory gives a prominent role to social classes by relating the dynamics of social reproduction to the dynamics of a society of classes, I find their theory to be useful to the extent that it helps us understand how educational settings such as universities reproduce, legitimize and naturalizes social inequalities. However, social classes are not the only mode of social classification.

#### 2.4 Higher education as an expression of *coloniality*

In this section, I refer to *coloniality*, or the process in which a certain way of life, and a specific way of building social and economic relations is imposed over other knowledge and worldviews (Moreno 2011:94). This concept suggests that social existence is not only controlled and classified in social classes, but that under the colonial experience and from there on, classification was made according to ethnic or racial divisions and to the attribution of specific subjectivities to them (Quijano 2014:286).

Under colonialism, different social groups were categorized according to “racial” or “ethnic” differences that were regarded as normal. These classifications were naturalized through the imposition of specific ways of knowing which were regarded useful to the reproduction of capitalism (Quijano 1992:12; 2000:n.p). The suppressed knowledge was conceived as mythical or superstitious and primitive, while knowledge produced by the “West” was regarded as “rational” and “scientific”. This process did not finish with the political de-colonization of the colonies and the establishment of nation-states in the former colonies. On the contrary, it persists as the structural inequalities continue to be intact (Quijano 1992:12-13). Consequently, education reproduces these inequalities and enforces *coloniality* (ibid.). Colonialism and *modernity* have been produced simultaneously (Quijano 2014:286). Accordingly, *modernity* cannot be explained without its darker side, *coloniality* (Mignolo 2011:39).

Caicedo Ortiz and Castillo Guzmán (2008:64-65) claim that university as an invention of *modernity* reproduces this same logic. Knowledge produced in university is the result of a modern rationality which often privileges values such as neutrality and objectivity, which are regarded as universal. As a result, the university becomes the privileged space to produce “valid” and “useful” knowledge. In this view, education produces cultural capital that can be transformed into economic capital (Tellez Iregui 2002:68), thus, (higher) education becomes a tool for social, cultural and economic control (Quijano 1992:12).

Similarly, as a reproducer of the logic of modernity, higher education reproduces the ‘colonial difference’ and a discourse on the ‘other’ and its subjectivities that transforms differences into values and establishes a hierarchy of human beings both ontologically and epistemically (Mignolo 2011:46): “Ontologically, it is assumed that there are inferior human beings. Epistemically, it is assumed that inferior human beings are rationally and aesthetically deficient”.

Kuokkanen (2007:1-3) argues that indigenous knowledge is different from the knowledge of the ‘West’. Indigenous knowledge and education strive for consensus and cooperation, whereas hegemonic knowledge in higher education tends to promote individualism and competition. While the access programs have promoted the enrolment of indigenous subjects in higher education, these programs fail to address the core problem which is that indigenous people are treated as “outsiders” (ibid.) hence, preventing the acknowledgement of other ways of thinking and of relating to knowledge (Caicedo Ortiz and Castillo Guzmán 2008:64-65).

### 3. Contextualization

In this chapter, I illustrate how the “indigenous” has been defined in Colombia by contextualizing the consolidation of meanings and experiences driven by the indigenous movement and later by the Constitution of 1991. When exploring these meanings and experiences, I set the stage to understand how indigenous students validate their identity in a conventional higher education context, and what losing

their identity as “indigenous” could mean. I also refer to how higher education has been understood in the Colombian context in relation to ethnic minorities.

### 3.1 The indigenous in Colombia

The research process to explore how the identity of indigenous students was challenged and negotiated in a conventional higher education context led me to consider that a broader look on indigenous experiences was needed. I needed to refer to how indigeneity has been claimed, fought for and constructed in Colombia. In the next section, I explore how indigenous identity was constructed in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and its influence on indigenous experiences.

#### 3.1.1 The indigenous movements and their relation to the organizational processes of indigenous communities

It is argued that the indigenous movement born in the decade of the 1970’s reconfigured indigenous identities in Colombia (Trojan 2008; Peñaranda 2012a; Gros 1990; Rappaport 2010). These different indigenous councils and organizations strived to set a political agenda for the creation, the recuperation and the transformation of the *Cabildos* (*resguardo*<sup>5</sup> councils) as the center for the social, cultural and political organization of indigenous peoples.

Even though each of these indigenous councils and organizations had their own ways to relate to the state, the dominant landowning class and to non-indigenous actors and they differed on how they consolidated their demands<sup>6</sup> (Gros 1990:293), they contributed to re-define the relationship between indigenous people, the State

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<sup>5</sup> Preserves, henceforth. Commonly translated as reserve in English. However, according to Colombian Law, *resguardo* is not the same as *reserva* (reserve). *Resguardos*, or “preserves” in English, are different from *reservas*- reserves- in that a *resguardo* entails legal ownership of the land, while reserves are owned by the state which grants inhabitants the right to make use of the land but the state remains the owner of it (Echeverry,2005).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, the creation of these organizations and their discourse on their organizational processes and their status as indigenous did not take place without misunderstandings and internal clashes. This occurred because the activists and indigenous leaders had different, and at some point, conflicting views on how to bring about the recuperation of the territories, how the organization should be managed and how the relationship with the local communities that they were representing should be (i.e Gros 1990; Caviedes 2000). Although I address some particularities of each organization, this is not the aim of this paper and I will not go deeper into the topic in this thesis.

and the Colombian society and the way how rural indigenous peoples identified themselves as indigenous (ibid:184).

My aim is to identify the meanings and experiences in which these organizations have based their identity claims and their influence in the every-day organization and interactions of rural indigenous communities. By doing so, an analytical floor is provided to explore the notions of indigenous identity at stake in the context of indigenous students' experiences within university. I will refer to the decade of the 1970's because it is argued that the re-organization of indigenous peoples centered on the *Cabildos*, its authorities, and their self-identification as indigenous was consolidated in these period (Troyan, 2008; Gros 1990; Peñaranda 2012a; Rappaport 2010)

### ***Consejo Regional Indígena del Cauca (CRIC)***<sup>7</sup>

The first indigenous organization in Colombia was born out of a social concentration formed by peasants, indigenous people and agricultural workers and *terrajeros*<sup>8</sup>(sharecroppers) in 1971 in Toribío, a northern municipality in the Province of Cauca. The creation of this organization was possible due to two processes that took place in the region. First, the potential implementation of an agrarian reform brought to the region activists and public workers in charge of consolidating the reform at the local and regional level. They played an important role in uniting rural indigenous communities. Second, the mobilization of indigenous peasants who had been evicted from the land by landowners due to the fear that a potential agrarian reform was going to take place in the region, to the expansion of the sugar cane industry in the region, and the violence between the two Colombian traditional parties (Peñaranda 2012a:20-22).

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<sup>7</sup>Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca.

<sup>8</sup>Terrajero is the person who payed *terraje*, known in English as sharecropping: A system in which indigenous peasants worked at the *haciendas* in exchange for a small plot for their use and living (Findji 1991:127) in a property which was considered part of the land deforced from the indigenous *resguardos* (Gros 1990:190).

The CRIC, influenced by leftist and liberal progressive ideals, affiliated itself at the beginning to the peasant movement and the class struggle. However, the leaders and their non-indigenous collaborators later realized that the left's political ideas did not reflect the indigenous experience; hence, they tried to accentuate the indigenous character of the movement (Gros 1990: 175,184,216; Troyan, 2008: 173).

The indigenous peasants present at the meetings of 1971 in Toribío came from different *Nasa* and *Guambiano* communities with various organizational and social experiences but they came together to share their own internal processes. While *Guambiano* communities had participated in previous struggles to recover the land of their *resguardos*, forming a cooperative association with a strong focus on their *Guambiano* identity (Peñaranda 2012a:30) and preserving their language, clothing and customs, *Nasa* communities were mainly formed by indigenous peasants who did not had a strong sense of ethnic identity (Troyan 2008:174). Consequently, the CRIC tried to build and rebuild their social and political organization known as *Cabildo*.

According to Gros (1990:295) this process of “re-conquest” of *resguardos* and *cabildos* took time as many of them were influenced by the local oligarchy. Until that moment, *cabildos* were run by powerful landowners and the Church, and were serving these elites' desire to control and administer indigenous labor, repress political dissent and carry out an evangelization process to “bring them to civilization”<sup>9</sup>(Tattay 2012:53). Similarly, before the consolidation of the CRIC, the *cabildos* had an internal government structure but they lacked organizational capacity and a sense of political struggle who could voice the demands of the indigenous *terrajeros* for land (Peñaranda 2012a:31).

Even though the members of the CRIC acknowledged the colonial foundations of the *resguardos* and the *cabildos* and the influence that these had had in creating

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<sup>9</sup>According to Castillo (2007:96), historical accounts trace back the creation of *resguardos* in the 16th century around 1531 and 1561. However, it is claimed that some of these were constituted based on the indigenous groups' organizational means of collective property during pre-colonial times and corresponded to old chiefdoms mainly in the Andean region.

frictions and division among different indigenous communities, they turned it to their own uses (Rappaport 2005:158) and based their organizational strength in them to promote solidarity and reciprocity as communal values of indigenous peoples (Gros 1990:193). As a result, the CRIC defined itself as an association in charge of the coordination of the *cabildos* by providing a common platform for the administration and management of the rural indigenous communities (Gros 1990:186, 214). In addition, the CRIC developed a generic idea of the indigenous by defending an overall indigenous process and not a project according to each ethnic group (Jimeno 1996:70 in Rappaport 2010:111).

These movement leaders were directly articulated to the community life, thus, the movement was as well active and influential at the local level in the functioning of the *resguardo* councils (Rappaport 2010:111).

The strategy promoted by the CRIC to rebuild the *cabildos* and recover land was the physical appropriation of land of specific *haciendas* by specific indigenous communities. The necessary legal support was found in the Law 89 of 1890.<sup>10</sup> (Tattay 2012: 57). In addition, the CRIC also legitimized their claims on the reconstruction of the elder's memories about the territory and its limits and on archival research about land titles and colonial chronicles with the help of non-indigenous researchers (Findji 1992:121). Similarly, an education program was developed by the CRIC and later the *resguardo* councils gained more control over the design and implementation of the education strategies (Tattay 2012:67). As a result, local communities started to gather themselves around the idea of land recovery actions and started to have community meetings where needs were identified and a unified message was created to be delivered to the authorities, the landowners and to the local indigenous communities (ibid: 59-62). After 1971, new *resguardos* were constituted and land was recuperated

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<sup>10</sup>The CRIC had an ambiguous position on this law, because it declared that indigenous subjects were “minors” who should be brought to civilized life, but at the same time, this law granted legitimacy to the *resguardos* and the *cabildos* (Gros 1990:189; Tattay 2012:57). However, it has been used to take legal action in favor of land recuperations from there on (Gros 1990:188; Tattay 2012:57).

(Gros 1990:196;Tatay 2012:54), which did not occur without clashes with the government and the landowning class in Cauca.

With time, the CRIC became a model for the conformation of other indigenous organizations (Gros 1990:175). The process initiated with the CRIC is considered as a progressive construction of an autonomous government for indigenous peoples based on collective principles (Tattay 2012:53) and as an organization helping to strengthen local *resguardo* councils. Similarly, despite the internal conflicts, it is believed that the influence of CRIC strengthened regional association, intra- ethnic solidarity and inter-ethnic collaboration, as CRIC leaders traveled to other regions in Colombia and promoted the creation of other indigenous organizations in different provinces such as Tolima, Vaupés, Magdalena, and Chocó (Green 2002:309). Consequently,

“[n]owadays, the Councils constitute a fundamental organization network for the indigenous movement, even in regions like the western plains, the pacific region or the amazon jungle where they did not ever exist before”<sup>11</sup> (Jaramillo, n.d. in Tattay 2012:56).

### ***Organización Nacional Indígena de Colombia (ONIC<sup>12</sup>)***

In 1979, the Colombian government reacted to the creation of different indigenous organizations across the country with a law proposal to redefine Law 89 of 1890. According to Gros (1990:224), under a positive facade which intended to grant a normative framework for indigenous communities’ organizational structure and facilitate the relationship between the State and the indigenous communities, the proposal of an Indigenous Statute represented an attempt to control the growing organized indigenous movement. The proposal granted the State the capacity to guard and monitor the organizations which dealt with indigenous matters, and to concede it the legal authority to certify the existence of indigenous communities, *resguardo* councils and traditional authorities. CRIC and other regional councils started to

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<sup>11</sup>Author’s translation from Spanish.

<sup>12</sup> The National Indigenous Organization of Colombia.

counteract the government's initiative, publishing news articles and mobilizing their activists to the communities to denounce the government's attempt to diminish indigenous autonomy. Due to the opposition to the law proposal by the indigenous organizations, the government withdrew the Statute project and the different indigenous organizations came together in a first national meeting in 1980<sup>13</sup>. They established a National Indigenous Coordination Platform and two years later in Bogotá, 1500 indigenous representatives gathered at the First National Indigenous Congress and approved the creation of the National Indigenous Organization (ONIC). The ONIC soon became a privileged interlocutor with the State (Gros 1990:226-228).

The ONIC restated the strong connection between their identity as indigenous and the collective values expressed in the *cabildos*:

“Experience has shown – both in northern Cauca and across the country- that the *cabildos* are our best instrument to organize ourselves, to recuperate land that has been seized from us and to maintain and develop our community life”<sup>14</sup> (ONIC 1982:215).

Similarly, the organization acknowledged that there are differences among indigenous peoples regarding the way they organize themselves socially and politically which is not always in the form of *cabildos*. However, there is always a sense of collective will in the decisions taken. In addition, they acknowledged that in order to claim their right to exist as distinct human groups, as *peoples*, they had the need to organize and unite themselves and consolidate an organizational structure that could represent them before the State and the rest of the Colombian society (ONIC 1982:215).

### ***Movimiento de Autoridades Indigenas de Colombia (AICO)***<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Six indigenous organizations attended the meeting: CRIVA (Indigenous Regional Council of Vaupés) which represents 35 different groups in the southern lowlands close to the Brazilian frontier, COIA (Arhuacos' Indigenous Council), UNDICH (Indigenous Union of Chocó) which represented approximately 40 *Embera* and *Waujana* communities in the Pacific Coast, UNUMA (The Indigenous Council of Vichada) which gathered the indigenous communities from the western plains of Colombia, CRIC (Indigenous Regional Council of Cauca) and CRIT (Indigenous Council of Tolima).

<sup>14</sup> Author's translation from Spanish.

<sup>15</sup>The Indigenous Authorities Movement of Colombia.



In 1975, three years after the official creation of the CRIC, some *Guambiano* communities decided to distance themselves from the CRIC (Bonilla 2012:140). These communities did not feel identified with the CRIC's actions and ways of carrying the organizational process as the CRIC failed to respond to the eviction of some community members (Bonilla 2012:143). These communities regarded the CRIC as a strongly centralized and vertical organization (Findji 1992:126) and started to question the relationship that the CRIC established with its non-indigenous collaborators who were part of the organization because it rendered the organization less "ethnic" (Bonilla 2012:144). These communities thought that non-indigenous support could be seen in terms of their solidarity to an indigenous cause rather than including them in the structural functioning of the organization, as done by the CRIC (Caviedes 2000; Vasco Uribe 2002 in Rappaport 2010:120). Findji (1992:121) argues that the fact that CRIC's leadership did not react to the policies that the state and the National Peasant Association (ANUC) were putting forward and which diminished the importance of communal land-holdings and favored the recognition of peasant private property, also motivated this distance and the creation of a parallel movement.

These communities created the AISO (Organization of Indigenous Authorities of the Southwestern Colombia) in 1978 (AICO 2011). It later changed its name to its present name, AICO, and included other indigenous authorities from other regions in Colombia. This organization included not only *Guambiano* and *Nasa* communities from Cauca but also *Pasto* and *Kamentsá* from other southwestern provinces such as Nariño and Putumayo (Bonilla 2012:146). They made a public appearance in 1980 when they marched from the Ecuadorean border to Bogotá demanding the recognition of their indigenous authorities and customary communitarian laws (*Derecho mayor*).

Contrary to the CRIC, AICO did not possess a centralized structure or a coordinating body to guarantee unity, rather, it recognized the leadership of each

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community and privileged the self-recognition as *Pueblos*, peoples, for instance, *Nasa*, *Guambiano*, and *Pasto* peoples. As a result, they no longer considered themselves as peasants, but linked their movement to the defense of their right to exist as peoples with a strong connection to their territory (Findji, 1992:123, 1991:126-127).

The consolidation of these indigenous organizations and the restructuring of the *resguardo* councils at the local level led to the affirmation of the ethnic identity of communities of indigenous peasants and *terrajero* communities in Colombia. The organizational work carried out by the AICO, the CRIC, the ONIC and other regional councils and local communities constructed a sense of similarity among rural populations and the configuration of their identity in terms of distinct human groups, as indigenous *peoples*, both in terms of a generic adscription to an “indigenous” identity and to a specific ethnic community and to a specific *resguardo*.

This ethnic identity is constructed around the importance of the “community” and the collective will represented in the leadership of the communities (Gros 1991:284; Findji 1992:130). Thus, to be indigenous means to be part of a community who shares strong community ties linked to a specific territory and the struggle to defend it.

Land is not reduced to a means of production, because indigenous peoples are not only peasants or exploited farmers, but their ethnic identity revolves around their sense of belonging to a community for which land did not have only a use value but it was understood as the community’s territory where autonomy was exercised, and where life took place (Gros 1991:184-185; Escobar 2014:85) For them, land is the basis for their social organization, their livelihoods, their traditions and their collective memory (Castillo 2006:228).

The community is the source for their existence as indigenous people (ONIC 1982:196). It is what gives support to their knowledge and culture. Land and territory are the basis for solidarity and mutual support and a collective sense of self:

“[...]When there is no land, every indigenous subject has to fight alone, defend himself, think alone, bear diseases alone and he does not have who to share his happiness or sadness with .The indigene cannot live alone because the strength to live is found in the community”<sup>16</sup> (ibid.).

Given that the members of a community “find their identities as individuals through their occupancy of the community’s social space” what it is feared to be lost is a “way of life” which means a sense of self (Cohen 1985:12, 19)

The idea of the community as the basis of their identity is shared by the AICO. However, the AICO went further in that it re-vindicated their right to land in terms of their right to be the “authentic” inhabitants of the American territories (Castillo 2007:282). It reclaimed the social and political role of the “traditional authorities” in the maintenance and reproduction of social life in the communities.

If collective will and territory are linked to the idea of “community”, the community not only entails a system of values and moral codes that could be linked to a place but it could also be linked to ways of behaving, acting and thinking (Cohen 1985:12). ). By saying this, I do not mean to treat “community” as a homogenous category as I am aware of the different levels in which the category is played out, locally, regionally, nationally or transnationally, and as it is embedded in power relations. Additionally, despite being symbolically constructed (Cohen 1985:12), the term is also configured in relation to institutions and practices, in this case, the *resguardo* council and the assembly, which serves as an instrument of social control in the case of indigenous people in Colombia. The *resguardo* also represents the administrative instance through which all decisions are made, and the main interlocutor with the state and the basis of their political struggle (Castillo 2006:240).

### 3.1.2 Indigeneity under the multicultural nation-state

In 1991, Colombia witnessed the creation of the Constitutional National Assembly in charge of creating a new constitution. In relation to indigenous people, the

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<sup>16</sup>Author’s translation from Spanish.

constitution of 1991 stands as the consolidation of demands that were advanced both regionally and internationally by indigenous leaders, activists, and scholars since the 1970's. Latin American countries started developing a normative framework to recognize indigenous peoples as juridical subjects, with rights and duties (Briones & Del Cairo 2015:20-21; Postero 2013:109). However, the institutionalization of indigeneity is not exclusively a Latin American issue. Different factors came together and made possible the recognition of indigenous people. First, a transnational movement advocating for the recognition of indigenous people which is materialized in the promulgation of the Convention 169 of the ILO<sup>17</sup> and the subsequent UN Declarations (Niezen 2003). Second, the environmental crisis, a new ecological discourse in which indigenous peoples are “guardians of nature” and the birth of the ONG apparatus (Gros 2012:102). Third, the crisis of a populist governmental structure and the institutionalization of a neoliberal system (ibid.:102; Sevilla 2007:140) which advocated for decentralization and the rhetoric of citizen's participation, in particular in relation to the market; and in the case of Colombia, the interest of the Colombian State to exercise control over territory which had escaped from its control and was mainly inhabited by indigenous peoples (Sevilla 2007:142).

Indigenous people participated in the assembly with two representatives from the indigenous movements and its political movements. As a result, indigenous people were granted a series of collective and individual (in their particularity as being members of these ethnic collectives) rights. They were granted the right to have bilingual education and to have their language as the official language in their territories in order to preserve those groups which had a linguistic tradition alive (Article 10). They were declared autonomous in their territory, with an autonomous administration and own customary laws (Articles 63, 243, 287). In addition, land was conceived as collectively owned (Article 63).

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<sup>17</sup>Colombia ratified this convention in Law 21 of 1991.

As a result, Colombia developed a multicultural regime (Ariza 2009; Castillo 2007; Sevilla 2007) which echoed the claims made by the indigenous movements in Colombia and transnationally by governmental and non-governmental actors. Consequently, Colombia institutionalized a discourse on indigeneity that has become hegemonic (Ariza 2007:16). From then on, indigenous peoples are regarded as Colombian citizens. However, they are considered different from the *mestizo* society and this difference is seen as essential, expressed in their way of thinking, feeling and acting (Gaceta Constitucional no. 4:14 in Ariza 2007:254); in their close relation to the territory (mostly rural) and nature, a substantial relationship which is embodied in the preserves (ibid.:19,363) and maintained through a strong sense of belonging and solidarity (Rojas Birri in Ariza 2009:251).

Henceforth, the claims about the ‘authenticity’ or the ‘real’ character of indigenous peoples have a normative framework (Ariza 2009:17) where these claims are evaluated in terms of traits such as descent, social organization, language, phenotype, self-identification and community acknowledgement. This normative framework is seen by indigenous peoples as the outcome of their struggle (Caviedes 2008: 4).

However, it is argued that to identify indigenous peoples mainly as inhabitants of a *resguardo* which is mainly rural and as legitimate *comuneros* (community members) (Bocarejo 2011:99) can be a way to render invisible the different experiences of indigenous peoples in Colombia. For instance, the experiences of those who identify themselves as indigenous but fail to fit in those definitions such as urban indigenous subjects who are not included and recognized (ibid.; Sevilla 2007).

In the light of the above, studies about how contemporary indigeneity is configured locally and contextually are needed to account for the multiplicity of these experiences.

### 3.2 Indigenous people and higher education in Colombia

The Constitution of 1991 declares that Colombia is a culturally diverse nation and that ethnic groups have a right to an education that respects and develops their cultural identity (Congreso de la República de Colombia, Art. 68). However, there is no unique government policy regarding access to university for ethnic groups in Colombia. Each university adopts its own schema and admission policies that do not change the unequal structural conditions that are the basis of exclusion from higher education for these minorities (Caicedo Ortiz and Castillo Guzmán 2008:74).

Similarly, Colombia developed a legal framework that consolidates a discourse on higher education as a means towards development and inclusion into the productive sector, establishing the aim of higher education. Law 115 of 1994 links education, including higher education, to the development of competences needed for work and to the technical skills for “social and economic progress” of the country (Congreso de la República de Colombia 1994: number 9, article 5), hence for individual and social development ( *ibid*: number 11, article 5). Additionally, this law together with Law 30 of 1992 promote education as a legitimate space where to produce ‘advanced scientific knowledge’ and the ‘intellectual abilities’, ‘for the development of knowledge’ (Congreso de la República de Colombia 1994: number 5, article 5; Congreso de la República de Colombia 1992: article 6).

Under this legal framework, higher education has been the object of a neoliberal agenda that has led to its mercantilization and standardization due to its defence of an education that is driven by the labour market demands ignoring the cultural particularities of indigenous or Afro-Colombian groups (Caicedo Ortiz and Castillo Guzmán 2008:68). By focusing their attention solely on guaranteeing access to these minorities rather than shifting towards securing and guaranteeing their right to education in terms of pertinence and cultural sensitivity, Colombia has reduced the right to education to a matter of access, hence reproducing these groups’ marginalization and exclusion.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research Design

This thesis constitutes a qualitative study on the experiences and meanings constructed around the access and participation of indigenous youth in conventional higher education from the perspective of the indigenous students enrolled in university studies in Cali, Colombia. The value of a qualitative study is that it allowed me to explore their experiences and meanings attributed to their ethnic identity, and to understand how it relates to academia and to the university context. Similarly, it helped us to comprehend how different notions of what is to be indigenous interact in this context.

The study followed an iterative-inductive approach for I began to construct my research study based on the claims made by the indigenous leaders, indigenous organizations and scholars about the challenges that higher education poses on the ethnic identity of young indigenous students. It is not possible to start a research without having pre-conceived ideas or an intellectual puzzle in mind before entering the field or before approaching the participants (O’reilly 2005:26,180). However, I did not begin my study with the purpose of testing the truth or falsity of a theory or a hypothesis in the light of the data gathered and analysed, rather, a theoretical framework was developed afterwards to make sense of my findings. Consequently, throughout my research I remained open and reflexive in relation to my own pre-conceptions allowing myself to reflect on the data while it was being collected.

### 4.2 Constructing my research study

This thesis explores the experiences of the indigenous students enrolled in conventional higher education and how they made sense of their indigenous identity in a context in which the indigenous identity of the indigenous youth was supposed to be endangered. I got in touch for the first time with an indigenous university student

through a friend. I met Lorenzo in the beginning of December. Lorenzo is a *Wiwa*<sup>18</sup> sociology student with whom I carried out an exploratory interview in order to gain insights on indigenous experiences at university. Due to this first conversation with him, I was later able to design an interview guide based on the most salient aspects of our conversation. Since I had moved from Bogotá to Cali in the beginning of January, I decided to stay in the city and carry out my study there. Even though the main reason to stay in my hometown was practical (mainly financial and because there were high chances to have better access to potential participants), I realized that Cali could be a good field site for the study.

Cali, a municipality in southwest Colombia, is home of the *Universidad del Valle*, a public university which according to official statistics has around 27.000 students enrolled in higher education studies<sup>19</sup> (El Observatorio de la Universidad Colombiana 2013) and more than 240 indigenous students<sup>20</sup>. It offers a wide range of professional and technical programmes in diverse areas such as Arts and Humanities, Economics and Management, Engineering, Natural Sciences, Medicine and Social Sciences and it has been ranked on the top- 10 in terms of research (Estilo de Vida 2014), and quality of education in Colombia (El País y Colpremsa 2015). In relation to inclusive access policies, it has implemented a special admission schema for members of indigenous communities which covers 100% of the tuition fee for indigenous students in all programs (ONIC, CRIC & IELSAC-UNESCO 2004:53). In the light of the above, I had a very good opportunity to find indigenous students enrolled in different programs at the university campus.

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<sup>18</sup> One of the four indigenous peoples inhabiting the *Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* in the Atlantic region of Colombia.

<sup>19</sup> The numbers were established by the SNIES, the National Information System on Higher Education, according to data from 2011.

<sup>20</sup> These numbers are an approximation based on the Diagnostic study that the ONIC, CRIC & IELSAC-UNESCO carried out in 2004 in which they establish that there were around 240 indigenous students at Universidad del Valle at the time.



In addition, I had learned that at *Universidad del Valle* indigenous students had established an indigenous council, and that I could try to get access to indigenous students with their help. Later, the students I met told me that this indigenous council was regarded as the first indigenous council established in a university in Colombia, hence, I considered it could be a good context to explore indigeneity in the context of conventional higher education.

Thanks to a contact I had at the University's administrative department, I met Magaly, an indigenous student who became my gatekeeper to other indigenous students at the university. I contacted Magaly for the first time in mid-December but since the university was closed during Christmas holidays and she was in her hometown at the time, I was only able to meet her in the beginning of February when the university resumed classes.

Magaly introduced me to Marisol, another indigenous student at *Universidad del Valle* who happened to be the new governor of the *Cabildo Indígena Universitario Univalle* (CIU) (Univalle's Indigenous Council). After telling Marisol about my research interest, she invited me to attend the CIU's first meeting of the semester to share with them my thesis proposal and get the CIU's approval to contact indigenous students. With their approval, I would have their support and be able to meet other indigenous students.

The first meeting that I had with them and the members of the Council took place on February 4<sup>th</sup> 2015. After my presentation to the Council members, the Council discussed my proposal and on February 11<sup>th</sup>, at their second weekly meeting of the semester, they gave me a positive answer and I started to meet students that were interested in helping me with my study. From an initial list of 9 potential interviews, I was only able to interview six of them, who were the ones who at the end kept the appointments agreed upon for the interviews.

## 4.2 Methods of Data Collection

### 4.2.1 Sampling- Research Participants

My study focuses on identifying the differences and similarities in the experiences of young indigenous university students in relation to their ethnic identity, rather than in the experiences of a particular indigenous group. In this way, I did not want to limit my sampling to particular students from a specific indigenous group but have the possibility to converse with the diversity of indigenous students represented in the student body of this particular university such as *Pasto*, *Nasa*, *Yanacona*, *Misak* and *Pisamira*.

During the second meeting of the CIU, students who were willing to be part of the interviews gave me their contact details. I soon realised that most of them were actively involved in the Council and were mainly from *Pastos*, *Nasa* and *Pisamira* communities. Although I tried to reach *Yanacona* and *Misak* students, it was not possible to do so and therefore interviews were not conducted with students coming from these indigenous groups.

There were some practical limitations such as time constraints and accessibility, therefore the best sampling strategy was a *convenient sampling*. (Morgan 2008:801; O'reilly 2005:39-40; Guber 2005:69). Since my time in Cali was limited and the process of scheduling and re-scheduling was taking a lot of time, I decided to take a pragmatic stand on the sampling strategy and interview those students who said to be willing to help me. It was better to come back to Sweden with meaningful material rather than to come back with nothing at all.

Nevertheless, I am aware that the empirical material gathered is limited as it comes from interviews carried out to indigenous students who belong to an Indigenous Council at a public university. Vannini (2008:216) argues that all social interaction is contingent to the context in which it takes place, and my research is not an exception. Given to the *situatedness* of their involvement in the university context, my empirical material reflects the views of people actively involved in an organizational process

regarded as indigenous and which claims to be vindicating indigenous presence at a conventional university. In addition, I am aware that as these students are representatives in the Council and hold administrative tasks, their roles might also influence their view on the issues explored in this thesis and how they define themselves as being indigenous and their role as indigenous university students. Nevertheless, the empirical findings are valuable given the fact that these students claim to experience contradictions and tensions in relation to their ethnic identity and to explore these experiences is the aim of my study.

*Representativeness* is another criterion in sampling. It is defined as the level in which the sample chosen is able to “[...] have value and relevance for the wider population from which the sample is drawn”, thus, it allows the generalization of the conclusions (O’ reilly 2005:22) However, I intended to understand a few cases in depth (ibid.:225) rather than to provide a generalizable account of the entire indigenous student population. This is not to say that the understanding achieved cannot be transferred to other indigenous students. The literature review allowed me to find similarities between my findings and those of other researchers in other settings. Similarly, my study contributes to those research studies as it contributes to the understanding of indigenous participation in higher education and how the ethnic identity of these students is challenged, negotiated and constructed in this setting.

The result is six in- depth interviews with six indigenous students coming from *Nasa*, *Pisamira* and *Pastos* indigenous groups (see Appendix 1). They all come from different indigenous preserves in the provinces of Cauca, Nariño and Vaupés. The participants are between 23 and 33 years old. These students are actively involved in the CIU, and with the exception of Eudo, who has already graduated from sociology, all the students interviewed are full-time students at *Universidad del Valle*

and were able to enrol in university studies due to the “*condición de excepción indígena*” offered by this university<sup>21</sup>.

In the light of the above, I acknowledge that other indigenous students who meet the eligibility criteria to access university under the “*condición de excepción indígena*” and who were not part of the council were not taken into account. Similarly, the students who did not enrol in university through the special admission policies for indigenous subjects were not part of the interviewees as all my interviewees had enrolled under this special condition.

#### 4.2.2 Interviews

The semi-structured interviews helped me to explore how these students make sense of the world, particularly of their experiences in university, and how they live and inhabit this context.

I designed an interview guide (Appendix 2) with a list of questions and potential topics about their community life in their territories, their motivation to pursue a university education, the reasons for choosing a specific program, their experience as university students and with academia. As these students were members of the CIU, I added questions about their participation in the council. Magaly and Eudo gave me feedback that helped me to re-word the questions from the interview guide and to include important questions. They also suggested I reviewed some literature on indigenous students in *Universidad del Valle* and about the council which I was able to use on my literature review and my analysis.

The interview guide was used more as a conversational guide with main questions and probes to explore in-depth the participants’ brief answers (Rubin and Rubin, 1995 in O’reilly 2005:149) than as a strict guide to be followed. The first interviews allowed me to identify interesting issues to explore and notes were taken during the

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<sup>21</sup>This special admission measure grants access to young indigenous subjects who belong to an indigenous community or preserve which is properly registered before the Bureau of Indigenous, Rom and Minorities Affairs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. These candidates should be registered in the Census that these indigenous communities have to send to the Bureau annually and need to have the approval of the council’s representatives in their own communities in order to be eligible (“*Condición de Excepción*”, 1 July 2015).

interviews in order to include similar questions in the interviews with other interviewees and if possible to come back to the same participants and ask for further elaboration.

The interviews were conducted in Spanish and lasted approximately 60 – 90 minutes.

One main concern in research is the issue of *validity* (Miller 2008:909). O'reilly (2005:154) reminds us that the accounts of our participants might be biased as people may be answering what we as researchers want to hear or what they think we want to hear. However, to base this assumptions in terms of “truth” or “lies” overlooks the fact that our participants or informants have an active role in social processes, including those of their society and that of the interview; in that way, they are not solely determined by these processes but actively contribute to them (Guber 2005:79). Consequently, what the participants told me are an expression of how they (re)shape their stories, how they make sense of their present and their past and how they try to meet their expectations and the expectations of others. Hence “the lies people tell, the myths they live by or the contradictions they express are data in themselves” (O'reilly 2005:154). I realized that my position as a researcher in relation to our interactions could elicit constructions of themselves and their experiences according to what was socially and consensually desirable for an indigenous to say. Therefore, I tried to find the way to come back to them with doubts and to ask for clarifications during my research period. However, these encounters were not possible with all the participants as some of them were busy before, during and after the meetings.

In a similar way, there is a concern about the *reliability* of the results when we face the possibility of our informants “lying” to us. In order to explore the potential biases of the information, I decided to attend different settings in which my interviewees were active and look for the consistency or inconsistency in their accounts and triangulate the findings.

### 4.2.3 Participant Observation

In order to be able to find new participants, I decided to attend the weekly meetings held by the CIU every Wednesday at 13:00 at one of the university's buildings. Soon I realized that the meetings were a good space to learn more about their everyday experiences at the university and about the CIU's work. In addition, meeting with my interviewees in a different context from that of the interview setting allowed me to triangulate their accounts given that key elements about their experiences as indigenous subjects in the university were communicated and talked upon in the meetings.

I also attended the swearing-in ceremony where Marisol was going to take office as the new governor and where Carely and Alexander also took office as treasurer and as the vice-governor. This ceremony gave me an insight on the meanings of ethnic identity in relation to indigenous participation in university.

### 4.3 Methods of Data Analysis

To analyse the data, a thematic analysis was conducted. In order to start the analysis, a verbatim transcription of all the interviews was produced. As a second step, commonalities, repetition and differences were identified throughout and across the interviews (Ryan and Bernard 2003 in Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012:67) to identify themes. The themes were identified according to what was relevant to my research objectives and research questions (Guest, MacQueen and Namey 2012:67). Words or expressions used by the participants were used in order to define potential themes. Often, these words and expressions were used in probe questions in order to ask for clarification and further elaboration. From there, the data was interpreted according to the themes and further interpreted and explored according to the analytical potential of my theoretical framework.

#### 4.4 Ethical concerns and limitations

A written overall description of the research aim was given to the Indigenous Council's authorities at the first meeting of the semester to secure their permission to find potential participants for the interviews and become familiar with the council's work (see appendix 3). In addition, a short presentation of my research interest and myself took place at the meeting. There, I got the chance to meet more indigenous students.

Although more students agreed to collaborate with my research, some of them never answered my calls or e-mails, or simply did not show up on the fixed time agreed between me and them, even though there were attempts to re-schedule meeting spaces for us to meet and talk according to their preferences and schedule. Due to these delays and their lack of response, anxiety accompanied me throughout the research. Emotions and personal doubts are seldom recognized and made explicit in the research and writing process, however, it is part of what has to be taken into account for the idea of neutrality, detachment and a research without obstacles has been questioned in research methodology (Guber 2001:15; Plumer 2001a in O'reilly 2005). I constantly found myself attributing this lack of response to their indifference towards my research or to the fact that the outcomes of it were not bringing direct benefits to them. However, most of the interviewees agreed that the topic was relevant to the Council and that they felt related to my research interests. It might have also been due to their busy agendas as they had to divide their time between their academic responsibility and the Council's activities according to what they expressed. Thinking that I could build rapport easily by appealing to our shared status as university students and in order to avoid imposing myself on them as researcher, I introduced myself as a student carrying out her master thesis investigation. I thought that the tag "researcher" could sound offensive as there were claims made by indigenous peoples that the role of the researcher implies domination and opportunism (Ermine, Sinclair and Jeffery 2004:27). Nevertheless, I could not hide

the fact I was carrying out a research study, and above all, I was not indigenous. These different positions were influential in the way I interacted with them, and might have been influential in the process of building a relationship of cooperation and reciprocity.

Time was also a factor. Participation is a process of gradually building trust and I did not have an extensive period of field work to dedicate to it.

Throughout the research process, I was open about my research interest to secure an informed consent and to be able to build a trustworthy relationship with them. In this way, my research, and therefore, the interests behind the interviews, were overtly addressed with my participants. They agreed on helping me out with my research with the condition of receiving a copy of the final version of the document.

The participation of all the six interviewees was voluntary. They volunteered and agreed to be interviewed willingly; therefore, an oral informed consent was secured. At the end of the research, every interviewee was asked if his/her name should be changed or not in order to secure their confidentiality. All of them agreed that I kept their names and no one claimed that I should not disclose any piece of information from their accounts.

## **5. Tensions and challenges in relation to their ethnic identity**

In this chapter, I will address my first research question related to the tensions and challenges indigenous students experience to their identity as indigenous in the light of their participation as university students.

The first section will explore the tension between their personal aspirations and their responsibilities as members of their ethnic communities. I will also explore the meanings attributed to higher education in relation to both. The second section will refer to how these students see themselves in relation to other indigenous students who do not participate actively in the CIU. The third section will address the stereotypes that exist about indigenous people in the university context.



### 5.1 Personal aspirations and the collective project

All of my interviewees expressed that their personal aspirations on higher education were related to the idea of *salir Adelante* (making it). By ‘making it’ they referred to economic stability and social mobility. According to Bill (2004:15-21) it is common to attribute an instrumental value to education. Through their accounts on their motivations to enrol in higher education, these students shared the assumption that higher education increases the chance of getting a well-paid job after graduating maximizing the chance for economic growth and individual social mobility.

For these students, “*Salir Adelante*” was an expression that accounts for the process of moving away from their communities to study at the university, and the idea of improving their economic situation. To stay in their communities was expressed in terms of staying or remaining in the same place, thus giving a feeling of stagnation, while they often referred to personal fulfilment or advancement, betterment and improvement when they talked about higher education.

Nevertheless, some of the students found obstacles to their project of personal fulfilment. Eudo, Marisol and Alexander expressed that they could not enrol in the programme they had as an initial choice due to the score achieved in the ICFES test. Eudo wanted to study business administration, Marisol wanted to apply for the food engineering program while her score only allowed her to enrol in the technical programme, and Alexander’s score was not high enough to study industrial engineering. Eudo recalled this as follows:

When I was in my community I thought about being a business administrator, to work in a bank or something like that, but the academic system measures you according to the ICFES, and my score was not good enough. I also thought about studying architecture, but I had to take another exam and it would delay my enrolment at the university so I decided to study sociology. I did not know what sociology was, but my dream was to enrol in the university and study something.

First of all, the idea that education is perceived as social mobility is revealed if we focus on their initial choice, Marisol told me that after completing the technical

programme on food engineering she decided to continue with the professional programme because it increased her chances to do better in the future (get a better salary and an advanced knowledge). Similarly, the conversation with Alexander and Eudo showed that they regard education as providing economic stability, and thus, personal fulfilment. When I asked Eudo why he felt the desire to study, he explained his decision as follows:

It was the *deseo de superación*<sup>22</sup>. To be able to go further in the academic context and to go further than my parents' effort. They used to tell me 'no, you have to study, you cannot stay like us, here, staying outside, exposed to the sun and water'. So I enrolled in the sociology programme, but even if I was performing well, I was still thinking that I had to study business administration and work for a bank.

MP: Why did you feel the desire to study business administration?

Eudo: "I think it was because of the system, right? The economic system that one perceives and one is able to see in society. It was like seeing a better self if I was there. But it was a class in sociology where I realized that I was in the right place. [...]."

Likewise, the belief that higher education leads to personal fulfilment and economic stability is also held by the family of all six indigenous students interviewed. With the exception of Alexander's and Gustavo's family, all my interviewees said they were the first members to be enrolled in a university, which was seen as a positive experience and as a reason to feel proud of them, even in the case of Gustavo and Alexander who had relatives with some type of education or training.

Research carried out in a different context has shown that the idea of 'education-as-development' represents a disciplining project striving towards domination and the normalization of dominant values and livelihoods. From her fieldwork in Northern India, Morarji (2014:4) argues that to link education with development, advancement and fulfilment represents "a modernist vision of individual accomplishment and social progress". Similarly, in our context, by stressing the personal aspirations for advancement and for 'making it', the indigenous students interviewed and their families reflect the social imaginary which in Colombia is not only a lay belief but is

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<sup>22</sup>'*Deseo de Superación*' could be translated into 'desire of improvement'.

also reproduced by the State in their legal framework in relation to education (cf. Law 30 of 1994; Law 115 of 1992). Additionally, many of the relatives of these students work as sharecroppers in farms, in jobs related to construction or practice subsistence agriculture. Consequently, by motivating their children to study and earn a university degree and by equating their own experiences to ‘stagnation’ and ‘backwardness’, their parents show the preference for a professionalized livelihood, often associated with a urbanized–lifestyle, rather than depending on rural or manual work as means of living (Morarji 2014:24). This demonstrates that a high value is given to professionalization.

Secondly, this might suggest an influence of their educational background on their choices and that there is a rural-urban and socio-economic disparity in the quality of primary and secondary education of Colombia as claimed by ONIC, et al. (2004:89,91). All of my interviewees received education in rural public schools where the education lacks quality. This might have prevented them from performing well enough on the university entrance exam. As a result, I question the statement that education promotes equal opportunities to all by assuming that the results of a person depend only on their effort and merits and not on their background (including ethnic, social and parents’ educational background) (Montenegro 2014:5). Following Bourdieu and Passeron (2001), the ICFES exam reflects the structural and objective social inequalities that are rendered invisible by the idea of performance as a reflection of merit or of intellectual capacity.

From another perspective, it has been claimed that socio-economic processes and the insufficient policies universities have to facilitate the access to indigenous students have influenced the decisions made by indigenous students in relation to future career prospects (Buitrago 2014:9-11). This author claims that the decisions taken by *Sikuani*<sup>23</sup> indigenous students are made based on the available options rather than on their personal aspirations. This restricts them from following the educational

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<sup>23</sup>An indigenous group inhabiting the plains on the Orinoco region of Colombia.

path they should follow according to the ideals expressed by indigenous leaders of their communities that stress cultural continuity.

In this respect, my research is limited because I did not explore the regional and local socio-economic context in detail. I agree and also believe that the personal aspirations of the students might be conditioned by the opportunities open to them given their educational background (impossibility to achieve higher admission scores) and by what the labour market offers. However, I argue that in the case of the students interviewed, they experience a tension between their views of education as a way to target economic improvement and overcome poverty and how they define and negotiate notions of belonging (García 2005:92) to an indigenous community. It is in the negotiation of this tension between their personal aspirations of self-realization and economic advancement and their belonging to an indigenous community that they find meaning to their studies.

Alexander expressed this as a conflict.

We have a project as a community but we also have a personal project and this is often stressed by my family, I believe that it comes from my family. In fact, I believe that everybody in my family is studying, both children and adults. The only ones who are not studying are my grandparents who remained “there”, but the rest of us are all studying or working, my cousins and everyone. So the idea comes from there, I want to understand what is outside, and I also have a personal project to have a university degree, to be professional and have stability. And that is how you should think when you are a human being, to be professional and to have economic stability and stability in many aspects. This is my personal idea, but I also have a collective idea, well, I want to work in the community project, and this is why we need other societies, to learn how the world is run. I also want to contribute to this. There is also the pride of my family of having professionals. This we are taught since we are children.

[...] So that is where the idea of having a professional career came from, but as I got into the cultural processes...I wanted to study industrial engineering, which was I liked. It was my first option, but I knew that industrial engineering was not going to contribute to my process and I liked the process, so I had a duality. [...].

Even if they made decisions about their university profession based on their aspirations towards personal and familiar improvement, they showed awareness of

the collective responsibility as members of a *resguardo* and an ethnic community. Consequently, the idea that they have about personhood includes individual economic stability but also community awareness. Likewise, Eudo recalled the moment when he realized that sociology was going to be useful for both personal and community improvement:

In one of my classes the subject was about indigenous peoples and to their traditional healing practices. Hearing this talk helped me realize I was in the right programme. On the other hand to continue thinking about the community because I could link what I was studying to what was happening in my community in relation to healing practices [...] I felt more at ease and I felt I was in the right programme and it made me change my mind about the idea of studying business administration and started to think of myself as part of my community. [...] It was the desire to study and go to work for a bank and to think only in myself and my family, not in the community or anything else. But my thoughts changed and now it's thinking about myself, my family and my community.

This contribution is often referred as a moral responsibility towards the community. Through this negotiation, becoming a professional represents a contribution to their communities and not to the dominant productive system as is often claimed (see Ortega and Herrero Suárez 2006:149):

Well, the truth is that my motivation to enter university was twofold: First, because I had always wanted to continue my studies, and not stopping at high school [...] The truth is that in the beginning it was a very personal decision to continue studying, the desire to keep improving myself but later I realized that I could give back to my community what I was going to learn in university, because that is one of the objectives you should keep in mind, to give back in one way or another because everything is reciprocal. Because if they support us, if they help us, if being here is due to their efforts to fight for one or two quotas in every program. It is not something given by the state but it is something that has been fought for. So, first to make use of what they have been able to achieve, , and secondly, to pay it back in the future by returning to our grass root communities to work, because in our communities we are in need of professionals (Hugo Valencia, personal interview, February 2015).

Hugo expresses that studying at the university is a collective achievement and that the community demands reciprocity from the young indigenous students who move away from their community to enrol in university studies. Likewise, all of my

interviewees express that people from their *resguardos* also hold high expectations about their involvement in university and expect they contribute to the development of their communities.

I knew that it would not give me the opportunity to *llevar un proceso*<sup>24</sup>, thus I left it as a second option, even if it was my personal dream. [...] At that time one of my class mates told me ‘you do not have an option, you scored 77 in Spanish and you scored 50 in the rest, check the competition’ and we analyzed how many people had been accepted to the programme. The idea of the community was also present. The leaders supporting me told me ‘you are going to carry out a process so these are the programmes that work for you’ so I erased engineering from my mind. And they talked about literature and I replied, ‘Literature, what is that?’ (Alexander Quiroga, personal interview, February 2015).

In this excerpt, Alexander refers to *llevar un proceso*. A reference to this is common in the narrative of my six interviewees who stress its link to the concept of ‘community’ as a benchmark of their ethnic identity and a ‘sense of self’ (ONIC 1982:196; Cohen 1985:12).

### 5.2 “*Dejarse llevar por...*” vs. “*Llevar un proceso*”

When I asked them about their opinion on what has been said about young indigenous students losing their indigenous identity after their involvement with university education, all my interviewees referred to a tension which according to them serves as an identification criterion to judge who is indigenous or who has lost his/her identity. They often distinguish between those who ‘follow a process’ and those who let themselves ‘be carried away’ (*dejarse llevar por*) by the new experiences in university and their life in the city.

I argue that this distinction is an effort of these students to identify themselves with the efforts of their communities to present a unified ethnic identity and to adscript to a ‘generic’ indigenous identity (Gros 2001). It has been argued that the indigenous organizations are not static and homogenous (Briones & Del Cairo

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<sup>24</sup>I have translated it as ‘to carry out a process’ or to ‘undertake a process’. By carrying out a process, the interviewees not only referred to be enrolled in formal political or cultural organizations in their preserves, but also to be actively involved in community life, such as participation in community assemblies, gatherings, and communal work.

2015:38; Gros 1990: 293) and that the link between the *resguardo* councils and the communities is complex and should not be taken for granted (Fidji 1993:67 in Gutierrez Sánchez 2015:303). However, for these students, ‘organization’ and ‘community’ represent experiences that define their indigenous identity. For instance, Gustavo sees a strong relationship between the refusal to identify oneself as indigenous and the lack of participation in social organization processes such as the CIU:

Yeah, it happens, among all the students who come here, there are some who come from the communities but they are not interested, for whatever reason - globalization or a fad, or consumerism- all the things that invade us from everywhere, because of capitalism. A lot of young students from the communities do not care about the process, as if they were ashamed of it, they start to distance themselves from it, and when they come they just use the endorsement given by their communities to be able to access university and later they say “ I come here alone, I study, I do my own things, why think about the “*cabildo*, I don’t want to waste time on it, I am just here to study” and they only concentrate on and become involved- or carried away- with the academia.

The references to ‘being carried away by the academia’ or ‘being absorbed’ by it was common in all the interviewees. For them, their presence in university is not only limited to being a good student but it requires them to support their communities and its organization processes. Consequently, these students struggle to validate themselves as indigenous and to uphold their indigenous values and experiences. For them to fail to do so is regarded as moral decline and as an inclination towards individualistic values:

Because one does not have a counterpart that tells you what is good and what is evil and one is only immersed in academia, then one is only carried away, then a lot of mates get carried away as the elders say: “the young fellows arrive to the university with a round head and they come back with a square head” this is the term that they use. This is true. The kids go to university and it makes their “head square”. We are taught in academia that our thought should be a straight line, but in our way of thinking we think differently, we think in circles, like our life cycle, we are born, we grow up but we return to where we were born, where our

belly button is<sup>25</sup>. A lot of communities think like that, it is not a linear thought, it's different. So a lot of community members fall for the city, for what is fashionable, for things, and they get lost, they feel ashamed to say they are indigenous, they do not want to know about it anymore. Sometimes they get so carried away that they go back to their communities but to oppose them, to steal things from it, to suggest bad things, to deceive people [...].(Gustavo Baquero, personal interview, February 2015).

For Alexander, Hugo and Gustavo to be active in their communities' organization process had been significant life experiences. Alexander and Hugo were part of the *Movimiento Juvenil Alvaro Ulcue Chocué* (Youth Movement 'Alvaro Ulcué Chocué'). Alexander was also part of the Indigenous Student Council as governor during his secondary school. Meanwhile, Gustavo was a member of the *Guardia Indígena* (Indigenous Guard) when he was a teenager.

The youth movement, *Álvaro Ulcué Chocué*, was born in the *cabildos* of Northern Cauca in the decade of 1980 to prevent the recruitment of the indigenous youth by illegal armed actors. Later on it became a cultural and political project to empower the indigenous youth to be active in the construction of their own communities (Alvarado, et al. 2012: 860). For them, this group became an important place where the values and the meanings of their ethnic identity were transmitted.

The Indigenous Guard is also a *Nasa* institution aiming at protecting and defending *Nasa* territories and its people. Its actions are strongly linked to the land restitution initiatives where the Guard is in charge of providing defence to the communities that have undertaken these processes. It regards itself as a non-violent institution, its members are not armed, and their participation is voluntary (CRIC n.d.).

The youth movement and the indigenous guard are seen both as a response to the armed conflict that has affected the *Nasa* communities and their territory and autonomy (Sandoval Forero 2008:46) and as an exercise of their rights as ethnic

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<sup>25</sup> Traditionally, the Nasa bury the newborn's belly button close to the *fogón* (bonfire) to create a physical and moral tie to the territory (Navia Lame 2014:86)



collective subjects (Alvarado, Patiño and Loaiza 2012: 862). Both initiatives have also been promoted by the CRIC and the ACIN<sup>26</sup> since their creation, and therefore they have strong ties to the indigenous movement in Cauca.

In the case of the *Nasa*, the *cabildos* (*resguardo* councils) and the social and political dynamics constructed around them have played a central role in the socialization process of their communities (Simmonds Muñoz 2010: 64). As a result, community ties are consolidating factors in the construction of their identity.

Eudo, Marisol and Carely also refer to ‘the process’ and to ‘being carried away’. However, their experiences differ slightly from the experiences of my *Nasa* interviewees. Eudo and Marisol come from two *Pastos* communities in the Nariño Province. The *Pastos* communities have kept close ties with AICO, and these communities participated in the consolidation of the AICO (AICO 2011). However, according to them, their personal experiences, have not been related directly to the movement. For example, both claim that even if they were aware of their communities’ assemblies and of some of the traditions they have as *Pastos*, they grew up with a sense of indifference towards their ethnic belonging.

Eudo expresses it as a lack of indigenusness, or as “lacking the spirit of what is to be indigenous”:

Well, let’s say that in my community I knew that the preserve had a council, I participated in the assemblies occasionally, in the elections... I also went to an indigenous school and there they used to talk about indigenous topics, about us like peoples, and also about other indigenous peoples, but I could say that I was missing something to feel the authentic spirit of what is to be indigenous, I did have some knowledge about things, but I did not have the chance to see how important was to be indigenous and the importance of the indigenous territory.

Later in the interview, Eudo relates to “being complete” with a self- reflection process to identify oneself as indigenous and to an active involvement in communitarian organizational processes such as the CIU.

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<sup>26</sup>Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas del Norte del Cauca (Northern Cauca’s *Resguardo* Councils Association). The ACIN is aligned to the aim and vision of CRIC and it groups around 15 *resguardo* councils of the *Nasa*.

Marisol also claimed that before coming to *Universidad del Valle* and getting involved in the CIU, “she didn’t want to feel the indigenousness in herself” because her teachers at school used to discriminate her because of “her indigenous roots”. At school, teachers used to identify each students according to whether they were *mestizos* (mixed) or “*indios*” (Indians). While the *mestizos* were praised by the teacher, the indigenous student was underestimated. Because of these experiences she said that she did not have the bravery to identify herself as indigenous and feel proud of it. In addition, she said that the municipality where her *cabildo* is located, did not have a strong sense of identification with being indigenous at the time. She was told that it was not until the beginning of 2000 when an indigenous mayor was elected that the sense of belonging as indigenous was recognized and publicly used as a force for the organization of the community and a way of belonging.

However, she recalled that when she was a 5 years old girl, her mom and aunt used to wake up early to join other community members in land restitution actions. She highlighted these memories as part of her family’s involvement in the indigenous movement.

Gustavo, Alexander, Hugo and Eudo also referred to the land restitution initiatives as part of the *Nasa* and *Pastos*’ struggle for territory and cultural continuity. These initiatives consolidated in the 1980’s in Southwestern Colombia to appropriate the *cabildos* as their own social and political structures and to recover land as part of their territorial claims. To recall these initiatives is an act of memory, and as such, collective memory becomes more than just the act of remembering, more than just a neutral and natural act. The collective memories are selected by communities and transformed into ideological icons and, as emotional constructions, are built around empathy and group solidarity (Assman, 2006 and Connerton, 2006 in Espinosa Arango 2007:55).

Although Marisol or Eudo did not participate in community organizational processes like their *Nasa* fellow students, they share and appropriate memories such

as the land recuperations as part of their identity. Land recuperations are part of the collective memory of these communities, and as memories, they function as a moral tie between the present and the past (ibid.:55).

Carely illustrates an interesting case. She also referred to the refusal of some indigenous students from *Universidad del Valle* to participate in the CIU and to devote themselves only to their studies, and of this being an expression of this loss of identity. However, her references to ‘a process’ were less frequent. She refers more to an interest about “all that is indigenous” when defining what it meant to be indigenous:

Like they do not identify themselves as indigenous anymore, all they want is to dress nicely, dress up, and they refuse to go the *chagra*<sup>27</sup> or catch fish. They don’t want to be at their rural community but they want to stay in the cities - they say: “I am not indigenous anymore, I do not want to know anything about that, I do not want to do... or go back to that place , denying who I am, where I come from, my origin. There are other things. For example, I miss my food, I do not forget my language, I bring my own *aji*<sup>28</sup>, I bring them here. But I have an aunt, who used to eat what we eat, but she had gone to Villavicencio when she was young. Once when she came back to visit, we were eating fish, [caloche?], and she complained because the fish bones were too thin. I was really mad at her for complaining, knowing herself that she is indigenous, or she does not feel indigenous anymore or what is it? Who does she think she is? Because they are now living in the city, they say they are not indigenous anymore. Then I say, one goes back and acts normally according to what is yours (your traditions) despite the time spent away. But others go away, and it is like they do not want to know anymore, they even speak Spanish to us, then one says “what is wrong with this lady or sir, why do they want to give their back to this, and not be part of this culture?”

Later she defines being indigenous as having a different culture, customs, and an origin, as well as identifying with myths, handcrafts, facial figures and painting. All these things have been defined as the diacritical features that are commonly used to define identity (Barth 1969:14). However, as Barth suggests, these features as such are not what defines ethnic identity. It is the value of these features when they are given moral value and the ability they have to organize that determines the

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<sup>27</sup> The name given to the agricultural plots by indigenous peoples .

<sup>28</sup> Chili.

boundaries between who is a member and who is not. According to Carely, indigenous identity can be seen and be experienced in food, music or paintings. However, it's not these things in themselves what seems to matter to her but the fact that they represent continuous acts of identification in everyday life (Wade 2000:256) and provide a sense of belonging and difference.

The organizational process does not seem to have the same value to her as a member of the *Pisamira* community as it has for her *Nasa* and *Pastos* fellow students. However, references to the community are made based on her experiences with language, food, music, rituals that have value in terms of determining the criteria of belonging to her community. According to Jackson (1995 :12-13) talking about *cabildo*- like organizations started to make sense in the Vaupés region for the Tucanoans speaking natives (*Pisamira* included) in the 1970's when the CRIVA was created under the influence of the regional councils first created in southern Colombia (the CRIC, for instance). This author argues that although being language –affiliated patrilineal clans, the activists from the CRIVA opted for the term 'ethnic groups' to legitimately claim their indigenesness and their belonging to pan-indigenous organizations. For groups like the *Pisamira*, nothing like the *cabildos* existed before, and communal work was not common among the Tucanoans with the exception of rituals and the collective building of *malokas* (longhouses) (ibid:15).

This suggests a conscious effort from these communities to enter the multicultural space providing them with a self-definition as indigenous and granting them legal recognition. Likewise, in the case of Carely, by appropriating the organizational efforts through her participation in the CIU as evidence of her interest in "all that is indigenous' she includes herself in this indigenous space and redefines her sense of belonging.

The previous excerpts from Gustavo's and Carely's interviews illustrate another aspect that was mentioned by the participants when referring to a loss of indigenous identity. According to them, changing the lifestyle towards consumerism and

disapproving the ‘process’ is a sign that other indigenous students have lost their indigenous identity. When the influence of these new lifestyles become important enough to affect their self-identification as indigenous and their responsibilities as members of their ethnic communities, they say they let themselves ‘be carried away’ by a non-indigenous lifestyle.

These claims about what it is an indigenous lifestyle and livelihood or about failing to keep up to certain cultural traits are said to be the hegemonic discourse in Colombia (Ariza 2007:16) as illustrated in the contextualization. However, rather than saying that the interviewees passively reproduce this discourse, their reflection on their experiences and on other’s experiences illustrate the tense dynamics of recognition and belonging for indigenous subjects: how to think, act, and behave according to certain values regarded as ‘ethnic’ and be recognized as such by the State, their communities and the Colombian society.

### 5.3 The university curriculum and the stereotypes about indigenous students

In this section, I will discuss two challenges students face that were prominent during the interviews. The first challenge alludes to what the students perceived is a reproduction of the stereotypes towards indigenous people, that is, of being non-intelligent or not capable enough to achieve a university degree. The second challenge makes reference to the knowledge produced in academia and the way how students perceive that their cultural practices and lifeworld are valued by their professors, classmates and in the curriculum of their programmes. I suggest that even if the attitudes of the professors and classmates are not always seen as discriminatory by my interviewees, these entail symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Passeron 2001:58) and are an expression of *coloniality* and of an Eurocentric rationality that it is still present in education (Quijano 1992; De Sousa Santos 2010).

All my interviewees are enrolled in different programmes, however, they all recalled experiences where their capacities were questioned by professors and

classmates. They expressed that one of the first obstacles they encountered as university students was related to the academic tasks they were required to perform. The many books they had to read and the papers they had to write were recalled as stressful and frustrating experiences. According to them, it was through perseverance and the support of their professors and helpful classmates that they were able to overcome the academic deficiencies they had due to the low quality education they had been given at their rural schools. However, all of them claimed that some professors and classmates still had stereotypes about the indigenous people's lack of intelligence or about not meeting certain expectations about who is suitable for a specific programme. Addressing this, Alexander said:

Well, I arrived to the School for Literature Studies and I began my classes. It became hard for me as soon as I started classes because I met professors who used to tell me 'Ok, you are indigenous, are you going to be able to rise to the challenge? [ MP: *Did they say it to you that way?*] Yes, exactly like that. I did not reply back then, I was really mad but I remained silent. I did answer them but in a different way. When they asked for a text, I tried my best, but they always threw the text back to me and said to my face 'Alexander, we do not know what to do with you, you are not good at writing, this is not for you. We suggest you cancel the programme or change programme'. And that is how hard it was for me.

Alexander's case particularly suggests that some professors think that there is a connection between being indigenous and not being capable of getting good grades in their classes. Likewise, Carely told me that she was also questioned by a professor who asked her if she was sure she wanted to study Literature because she could not meet the requirements of a 'good writer'.

The interviewees attributed their poor academic performance especially in their first semesters to the education they had received in primary and secondary school, which did not prepare them to perform well enough in written tasks. Likewise, they said that their indigenous friends who were enrolled in other programmes had similar experiences with their field. They also said that their performance was lower than that of their classmates from urban schools. However, they told me they often felt that others attributed their low performance to their intellectual capacities and to the fact

that they were indigenous. This reinforces the idea that education in rural settings lacks quality and shows that these disparities are reproduced in the pedagogic setting as an image of the intellectual inferiority of indigenous students. They did not have access to the same knowledge, or what Bourdieu calls ‘cultural capital’ (Tellez Iregui 2002:68) (i.e. ‘good writing and speaking skills’ in Spanish). Consequently, higher education naturalizes these inequalities by making attributions about merit and academic performance based on the individual level or on the stigmatization of social groups being intellectually inferior. Moreover, these attributions tend to exclude these groups from education by presenting this exclusion as an auto-exclusion (Bourdieu and Passeron 2001:58) just as dropping out is seen as the individual’s response to low performance and failure to keep up with the academic level of the university, and not as problem of the educational context and the socio-economic obstacles that indigenous subjects experience when they migrate from their *resguardos* to enrol in university studies. The symbolic violence exerted is part of the experience of *coloniality* which reproduces the colonial differences through which indigenous subjects are regarded as rationally deficient (Mignolo 2011:84).

According to the interviewees, another experience that might influence their academic performance is the importance given to the community project and the responsibilities it involves:

There is always this stereotype that the indigenous student is not able to keep up with the courses, but what lays behind and it is not known by university is that the indigenous student does not only think about the academia, he is also thinking about the *cabildo*’s activities [the CIU, *my note*] and about his community which is always in his mind mmmm... and also economic difficulties. I mean, there are a lot of variables that perhaps don’t allow us to have a 100% performance in our programme. So the indigenous student has many things to do. We, for sure, know that the university requires we pass the courses. But their stereotype [the university, *my note*] is that the indigenous student is not a good student because we do not perform as well as the rest of students, but behind this there are many reasons, as I mentioned before (Hugo Valencia, personal interview, February 2015)

The knowledge produced in the academic setting is regarded as another challenge by the participants. All of them stated that what they learned in university could be useful for their lives and for improving their communities' projects and well-being. However, in the students' view, the knowledge acquired at university does not take into account indigenous knowledge and experiences.

Carely told me that in an elective course on indigenous traditions and orality, the professor decided to talk about the *Yurupary*<sup>29</sup> and asked Carely, as a member of one of the Amazonian Tucanoans where the myth originated, to talk about it during the class. Carely refuses to speak about it because she was told by her father that women were not allowed to speak about the *Yurupary*. In fact, she let the professor know that *Pisamira* women are forbidden to know or to refer to it because the ritual and knowledge related to it is only held by men. The professor excused himself and told her that he acknowledged that this was her culture, but he kept talking about it. Carely felt so uncomfortable that she left the room for a while and stopped paying attention to the teacher as a sign of respect to what her father had told her. Carely acknowledged that the professor did not intend to be rude to her; nevertheless, she felt that her integrity as a *Pisamira* woman was challenged by being exposed to listening about the myth. On the contrary, the professor treated the *Yurupary* as a literary text and highlighted its mythical character. By regarding it as a myth, or a literary production with an academic value, the academic setting decontextualizes it from its social and symbolic meaning and neglects or underestimates the cultural dynamics which give sense to Carely's feelings.

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<sup>29</sup> The *Yurupary* is a complex of myths and foundational stories and ritual traditions considered to a binational (Brazilian and Colombian) myth that has been studied from a literary and anthropological point of view since the 1800's (*El Tiempo* 2 October 1998). *The Yurupary* consists of a series of ceremonies and activities strictly separated by sex that provide a moral foundation for the reproduction and maintenance of the social order (Osorio 2006:105) in various indigenous groups of the Amazon region. During the ritual, men manipulate flutes that represent supernatural beings while women gather together far from men because it is said that women could die, or that they should be punished or killed if they heard the flutes (Herrera Angel 1975.:421).



Similarly, Eudo recalled a discriminatory episode during one of his classes. The CIU wanted to implement a class on *Nasa Yuwe*, the language of the *Nasa*, as an inclusive attempt to bring indigenous knowledge to university. Eudo said that while he was arguing about the importance to include indigenous languages in the curriculum, the professor made a discriminatory comment:

When the CIU had just started, we wanted to make indigenous peoples known by implementing a *Nasa Yuwe* class, so the professor asked why we were in university if we did not adapt to the academic system, that we should better go to a school for shamans instead. The comment seemed quite racist and exclusionary to me [...].

For this professor indigenous languages and knowledge do not belong to academia. According to De Sousa Santos, indigenous knowledge is often seen as belonging to the local domain, to the non-scientific, and it only has value as ‘objects of study’ in scientific research. This is a reflection of the ‘monoculture of scientific knowledge’ as part of a Eurocentric rationality (De Sousa Santos 2010:31).

Alexander expressed that there is a refusal of the academia to “take in” other knowledge and thoughts. He referred to the intransigence of the academic setting that only considers specific knowledge to be the truth and does not question the authority of the professor as a subject of truth. In his case, the experience brought a sense of frustration and disappointment about his programme but at the same time encouraged him to talk about *Nasa* cosmology and oral tradition in his papers. Likewise, Marisol referred to the exclusion of the *conocimiento horizontal* (“horizontal knowledge”), her ethnic group’s stand on epistemology, which does not privilege one knowledge over another and values all knowledge according to each knowledge’s contribution showing her awareness of the exclusionary character of her education:

[...] the *conocimiento horizontal* is related to the worldview of the *Pastos* and in general... let us say that the knowledge of the West is seen as something on top, and the rest is below, do you see? Always trying to treat other things with contempt. Horizontal knowledge states that everything is common, everything is important, you have to know how to manage every type of knowledge and not underestimate or detract value from some things and not from others. This is sometimes seen in the academia. [...]. Only knowledge from Europe is valued

and for instance, Latin American knowledge is not valued, because it is thought to be unimportant, or it isn't given the same importance.

Other issues addressed were the strong emphasis on theory at the expense of practical knowledge that could be useful for helping them to develop projects for their communities (Carely Londoño, personal interview, February 2015). Also, the emphasis given to a competitive productivist logic (Sosa 2010: 23) that privileges human work that contributes to generate economic growth in industrialized terms as a measurement for productivity. For instance, Gustavo claimed that what he learned sometimes goes against the communitarian principles of his community:

Many programmes taught at the university educate us to provide services to a company and in the communities. It is always said that multinationals come to steal water, oil, gold. It seems ironic to know that many indigenous students will go to work for them without thinking twice about what they are doing, because one can learn but it does not mean that one has to go straight to work for them. Instead, one could go to work for one's community and help there, or one can bring projects and suggestions learnt in the academia, because the academia is a tool, and one decides how to use it. For example in engineering we are taught to work for companies and most of them are multinationals, but not everything is bad. It depends on the way you perceive the situation.

In brief, my interviewees perceive that sometimes they are not valued as producers of knowledge, and they are critical about their education. They see value in what they are learning but at the same time they question the fact that their curriculum and the pedagogical setting still disregards their views because they don't think they are valuable. This is another challenge that the indigenous students experience that has at its core the idea that indigenous subjects have a natural predisposition to perform badly because they are mentally deficient. Similarly, their worldviews and knowledge have been undervalued because it is thought that they are a reflection of local and specific cultures, and hence, lack universal value.

## 6. Coping Strategies

Having shown and discussed the challenges my interviewees experience as university studies, in this chapter, I will proceed to show how these students cope with such

challenges and try to navigate the university context with a critical attitude. Similarly, I will show how the stereotypes about indigenous students that still exist in the university setting are confronted and re-signified by these students in an attempt to validate and re-vindicate their knowledge and their status as subjects and producers of knowledge, and their indigeness.

### 6.1 *El retorno*

In this section, I address the meanings attributed by the interviewees to the experience of returning to their communities after their studies. In chapter five, I have illustrated that the participants in this study experience a tension between a life project towards individual and familiar improvement and economic stability and a life project that contributes to their communities. I suggest that the experience of returning is a way to negotiate this tension and it is also perceived as a way to cope with their experience of moving away from their communities to stay in the city to study a university program. As a result, this experience plays a central role in the negotiation of their identity while being in university and when they think about their future.

The experience of returning demonstrates that ethnic identity implies the construction of boundaries which establishes an ‘inside/outside’ or ‘us/the others’ dynamic (Barth 1969:10). The students often referred to the “outside” when talking about an urban life and university, and they referred as “going back” or to the “indigenous world”, when they talked about their home communities and to the social organization in preserves and *resguardo* councils. Likewise, they referred to indigenous students who lose their identity as those students who fail to maintain a close link with their home communities and forget about their community values, especially about being actively involved in community activities such as assemblies, and communal work that reinforce reciprocity, collective will and solidarity.

However, for some of my interviewees, the experience of being an indigenous student in university and spending time with other fellow indigenous students at the CIU has been a way to “be a complete” indigenous subject or to identify themselves

as indigenous. This is the case of Eudo and Marisol. I suggest that in their case, they found a way to claim their ethnic identity and develop a sense of the “inside”, and an “us” while being physically away from their community. This shows that the division ‘inside/outside’, which is often associated to fixed limits and a fixed space, acquires a sense of flexibility, or it is broaden. Likewise, university is experienced as the “inside” when the other interviewees claim their identity is strengthened in the university context due to their participation in the CIU. As a result, the experience of returning has two meanings, one that refers to a physical action of going back to the communities, and a symbolic one expressing their perception of university as a place to be appropriated and where their indigenous identity is claimed, and strengthen. Rappaport (n.d.:2) has claimed that for the indigenous movement in Cauca, the ‘inside/outside’ division is a political metaphor based on space to give sense to the complex dynamic of social and political indigenous organization in Cauca. For the participants of the indigenous movements, this division should however not be regarded as an expression of fixed boundaries. I agree with the idea about flexible and anti-essentialist character of the division, and I argue that the inside/outside metaphor is also used by the interviewees to construct a sense of self. In my view it illustrates how they construct and negotiate their identity as members of particular ethnic communities, as indigenous in a university context and in relation to their future aspirations.

The territory is another important aspect in relation to the experience of returning for the interviewees. The territory plays a central role in their sense of belonging. The territory is a space of collective appropriation through economic, social and ritual practices (Escobar 2014: 90), thus it is not independent from the social relationships that created it (ibid: 89). The territory is a vital space (ibid: 85), where the community is created and maintained and where these indigenous students construct a sense of themselves. For Gustavo, to return to Toribío is part of his life experience as a *Nasa*:

“Our life is like a circle, we are born, we grow up but we go back, we return to where our belly button is [...]”.

Likewise, all the interviewees expressed the desire to go back to their home communities after their studies and get involved in the *resguardo* councils as professional workers. This desire is shared by other indigenous students in other settings (Valencia 2009; Bustamante et al. 2004, Arancibia et al. 2014).

However, by focusing on the experiences of my participants, I suggest that the idea of territory is **broaden**. It does not only refer to a place or a space to which one is linked and one returns, but it also becomes a mobile space (Piñacué Achicué 2014:165). The territory is embodied by these students as they strive to claim a space for them in university. Similarly, as I have shown in the case of Eudo and Marisol, the feeling of returning or to identify as indigenous could also take place in university.

Eudo graduated in 2009 as a sociologist. He returned to his community but he felt it was not the right time to live there because the community members elected as representatives were resistant to new ideas and alternative ways on how to manage their community’s issues. He went back to Cali and worked with the *Universidad del Valle* in research projects about urban indigenous councils and public policy and in March 2015 he was hired by the ONIC and settled in Bogotá. Eudo’s experience shows that the experience of returning is not only reduced to going back to their home communities, but that to work on indigenous issues regionally or nationally is a way of returning and to affirm their indigenous identity. He said:

If you are indigenous, no matter where you are or where you wander around, you always have to remember where you are from and that you are indigenous

This does not mean that Eudo has not considered to go back to live in his community again. He told me that the desire of going back is always present.

Although in general terms, these students expressed they feel welcome in their communities, they are also aware that there could be disagreements with some elders

and community members who might feel threaten by these young community members who went to study in university. The interviewees claimed that to adopt a humble attitude towards those community members who felt the indigenous students are going to impose academic knowledge on what has been done traditionally is a way to make themselves heard and to contribute to the improvement of the community. Consequently, they see themselves as “mediators” and they keep close ties with their *resguardos* while they are studying in Cali.

### 6.2 Indigenous students as “mediators”

All the interviewees referred to themselves as those being in charge of mediating between the “inside” and the “outside” as two different spaces. In the previous section, I referred to how this division represents not only a physical movement from their communities to the urban and university setting, but also an effort to appropriate and inhabit the university as indigenous university students and to claim their indigenous identity in it. An indigenous identity that is linked to a collective sense of self and responsibility:

I don't like the city, the most important thing to me is that I came here to study, to learn what education has to offer, to learn about the State. I learn this part and later with what I take up from education...because one also has to mediate, one has to learn from this side, to be able to create more things... I go back to the community to create projects to benefit the community (Carely Londoño, personal interview, February 2015).

All of them acknowledge there are positive things in what they have learned that could contribute to their communities. However, according to them, it is a duty to have a critical attitude towards the knowledge gained and find ways in which academic knowledge can contribute to the knowledge and well-being of their community. In their interviews, they also referred to the idea of “balance”. They are aware that in some cases, community members might go back to their communities trying to impose new ways of doing things that might affect the community well-being or to gain personal benefits (i.e. a leadership position, economic resources). In this way, they should not privilege one type of knowledge over the other, but they

should find a way to benefit from both for the improvement of their communities and their personal fulfilment. In this regard, each interviewee expressed their views on how the knowledge gained at the university could be useful to develop and strengthen projects in their communities. For instance, Carely wants to collect and study the oral tradition of the *Pisamira* as an exercise of collective memory and to develop new educational strategies to teach to new generations and to the rest of the Colombian society. Eudo would like to be active in the *resguardo* council and better understand the territorial claims and the tools given by the State to protect the territory of his preserve because according to him, the community's authorities have left the issue unattended and there are economic interests from the state in the natural resources that the *resguardo* has. Gustavo would like to improve his community's businesses using the tools that the programme in electronic engineering has given him. Marisol would like to gather all the knowledge that elder women have about food to create a document for consultation to enhance her community's food sovereignty and to improve the feeding practices of the community members. Hugo would like to work in his preserve with education programmes and find ways to teach English and French to the children and youngster of his preserve.

The idea of "balance" is also defined as to move across the inside/ outside, without forgetting about their socio-cultural principles of reciprocity and solidarity and claiming the horizontality of every type of knowledge and respect for difference:

We live in a globalized world and we should learn what is outside to strengthen our knowledge. But we are treated with contempt because the West has always believed that there is only one civilization and that we all should strive to become like it, therefore our worldview is belittled. There is neither equity nor balance; we would like to coexist in the two worlds, in our own world and in the conventional world, the western world. But the western world does not agree, they want to make everything the same" (Alexander Quiroga, personal interview, February 2015).

In this way, academic knowledge should not only be useful for the internal management of their communities, but it should also be helpful to be better prepared

when engaging with a non-indigenous context and the challenges that this engagement involves:

What one does is to maintain the balance. One looks what one could gain from western knowledge and how it complements our own knowledge. It is the way to resist and face this world. The only way is to learn about what we sometimes reject or what harms us to achieve balance. It is very important to have solid foundations on our own knowledge, because what else do we do if they come from outside to attack us, and we don't know how to defend ourselves? That's why I say that we have to learn from academia, to later use that knowledge as a tool to strengthen ours" (Marisol Cuatín, personal interview, February 2015).

### 6.3 The University Indigenous Council at *Universidad del Valle*

In this section, I will explore the importance that the interviewees give to their participation in the CIU as a way to cope with the challenges that their participation in a conventional university brings to their identity as indigenous.

In the decade of 2000, indigenous students started to create indigenous students' associations called *Cabildos Indígenas Universitarios* in several public universities across Colombia with the aim of guaranteeing their access and permanence and that universities addressed their specific needs. These organizations base their existence in the socio-political organization of most indigenous communities in Colombia, the *Cabildo*, but differ from it, as they did not organize themselves around a particular ethnic group but around their self-identification as indigenous.

It was in 2003, with the election of its representatives, when the CIU officially started as such. However, the process had already been active since the arrival of the first indigenous students in 1991 who used to come together to discuss their experiences as indigenous students and to look for an interlocution space with the institution to guarantee their permanence in university (Gutierrez, 2011:121-127). At the same time, those meetings were spaces where they could make sense of their experiences as indigenous in an urban context, far from their communities (ibid.)

The CIU provides them with a social network where they can share their experiences as indigenous students with other fellow indigenous students and where they get support and company when they feel lonely. It also offers to some of them a



cheap place to live and share their expenses. This is the case for Hugo, Alexander, Carely, Eudo and Marisol, who lived in the council's house at the moment of the interviews. To get a house where around 25 indigenous students live especially in their first semesters required the interlocution with the university's administration and the province's governor basing their demands on their right to permanence and access to higher education.

The CIU has offered them the opportunity to be engaged in activities considered "indigenous" which has given them a sense of bonding and connectedness. Carely expresses it as follows:

They had a *chagra*<sup>30</sup>, they had events for indigenous students. There I feel the same person, I feel like at home with other indigenous people. It's like another community here in the city. There I could make friends and I found a place to stay; it is another opportunity to learn and meet other indigenous groups.

The orchard is one of the activities that the CIU has been created to promote solidary work and to remain close to their territories while being in the city. In other words, it has become a way to return to their territories, not physically, but through the communal efforts to harvest and maintain a spiritual connection to land:

The council's orchard intends to grow healthy plants free from fumigation. The council's members go and forget about academia and see how beans, corn, valerian, the flies' howler, and plantain grow every day. In the indigenous council, not only the mind is cultivated but also land, we learn to love our mother." (Cabildo Indígena Universitario 2015).

Another activity in which CIU members come together is the gathering they organize every Friday at the *Tulpa del Lago*, a construction that resembles a longhouse built by the University at the CIU's request. There, the indigenous students come together to dance Andean rhythms and sometimes drink *chicha*<sup>31</sup>, light a bonfire and cook together.

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<sup>30</sup> An orchard, a community or family owned land plot.

<sup>31</sup> An alcoholic beverage made out of fermented corn, quinoa, barley or cassava roots. In pre-hispanic times it was used as a ceremonial beverage offered to gods and ancestors. Nowadays, it is used as in social gatherings and it is offered to guests in some houses in the Andean high plains (AICO n.d.).

These activities reinforce the sense of reciprocity, communal organization and cooperation on which they base their indigenous identity. Through these activities they defend not only their self-identification as *Pastos, Yanaconas, Misak, Nasa* or *Pisamira*, but they incorporate new experiences that unite them as indigenous. They claim to work in *minga* in their everyday life building solidary networks, both in the university and in their home communities. The term *minga* refers to the joint work of community members that come together to perform different tasks (i.e sowing and harvesting, building roads or houses) (De la Torre and Sandoval Peralta 2004:52) that are for collective use or used by families of the community. This was demonstrated in one of the weekly meetings where they arranged a *minga* to cleanse a family-owned orchard of one of the members. The following weekend, a group of them traveled to the member's *Nasa* preserve in Cauca and contributed with their work. Nowadays, this term is also used to refer to other forms of civil resistance as the *Mingas de Pensamiento y Resistencia* (Mingas of Thought and Resistance) where indigenous students come together to discuss and debate matters of interest outside the classroom setting. These gatherings are an expression of their struggle as indigenous peoples (Laurent 2010:40) and an expression that knowledge is constructed collectively through debate and dialogue (Kuokkanen 2007:1-3). These activities also reflect that these students appropriate spaces in university and render visible their presence in it.

Another way of appropriation of the university setting is through the creation of three elective courses as part of their curriculum. After a debate inside the CIU and with the support of some professors at the Faculty of Humanities, the CIU asked the university to open three elective courses: *Nasa Yuwe*, Ethno- Knowledge and Legal Pluralism. These courses aim at providing both indigenous and non-indigenous students a basic knowledge on indigenous languages (in this case the *Nasa* language), an intercultural learning experience of the different systems of knowledge among indigenous peoples and afro-descendant communities, and an understanding of the autonomous law systems and conflict- resolution mechanisms of indigenous peoples

(Guitierrez, 2011:138-142). These courses have counted with the presence of indigenous activists and elders and the non-indigenous students have had the opportunity to visit some *resguardos* to learn about indigenous territories. However, the CIU has been the only responsible of maintaining these courses going, facing an indifferent attitude from some of the university's staff, thus, they remain to be isolated efforts from the CIU or from professors who are sympathetic to its efforts, to make a bridge between their needs and knowledges, and academia. These efforts have not been accompanied by institutional, pedagogical or curricular changes in other fields of knowledge and neither the university has encouraged a critical discussion about what is considered hegemonic knowledge and the universality of "scientific knowledge"(Mohanty 1994:153-154) According to Elsa Barkley Brown (1989: 921) in Mohanty (1994:152) what it is needed is: .

It is not only a matter of thinking differently but about [...] coming to believe in the possibility of a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation, without imposing consciously or unconsciously a notion of the norm".

Nevertheless, the CIU strives to play an active role in contesting the stereotypes that still exist in the university about indigenous peoples not being intelligent or capable enough. They participate in social forums in the university and they have achieved a space in the university's newspaper where they write about the council and the current situation in their communities. The interviewees told me that thanks to the CIU they have learned more about the everyday struggle of indigenous peoples in Colombia and have enhanced their leadership abilities.

These strategies are labelled as "resistance" by my interviewees and they constantly link them to the indigenous peoples' efforts in Colombia to have their rights to autonomy and territory acknowledged. For instance, Eudo referred to the CIU as the continuation of the indigenous movement and how it has taken on the challenge of advancing their claims in new contexts such as the university. By virtue of this link, they keep close relationships to the elders, spiritual and political leaders

in their home communities who always attend the swearing –in ceremonies to give the approval to the new elected council’s members every semester.

As a result, the indigenous students gathered in the CIU work to be social actors in the university, to both claim their right to education and to be acknowledge as producers of knowledge. Also, they work to render visible what happens in their home communities and to push forward a sense of unity of indigenous peoples in Colombia. These students have a self-understanding of them as *Pastos*, *Nasa*, *Misak* and *Pisamira*, but above all, by maintaining a trans-ethnic organization, they strive for unity:

I came to understand what resistance meant when I arrived to the council. What it means is that we are in a different place than our grassroots communities, but we keep creating and making our way, we keep opening spaces of identity, of being indigenous, to be able to access university and stay in it and return as professionals to our *resguardo* councils afterwards with a clear mind about what to do in our communities. We also work to create worthy conditions to be in university and the only way to remain strong is to come together as indigenous students, unite and keep working for our people (Marisol Cuatín, personal interview, February 2015).

They do not oppose to being educated in conventional higher education settings, they do not oppose to migrating temporarily to the cities; they are not against individual economic stability and improvement. Resistance for them means to engage with their education, with an urban kind of life, with technology and science and get what is worth and useful for their personal fulfillment and the well-being of their communities. They resist as they remain in university, despite how challenging their programs might get and how hard it becomes to support themselves. Meanwhile, they commit themselves to demand their right to exists as peoples which is the political project of indigenous people in Colombia (Congreso del CRIC, Mayo 2009 in Laurent 2010:57)

## 7. Conclusions

This study has explored how indigenous students engage with conventional higher education. Specifically, it has identified the tensions and challenges that indigenous students experience in the university context in relation to their ethnic identity. In addition, it has identified how these students face these challenges and tensions as a way to negotiate their sense of belonging to a rural indigenous community and their participation in a conventional university.

The study followed an iterative-inductive approach in which empirical material mainly from in depth interviews was analysed and discussed. Rather than establishing themes beforehand, the tensions, challenges and coping strategies were identified based on the material gathered in the interviews and, in a lesser degree, from participant observation.

The most important findings evidence a process of negotiation between their personal aspirations and collective responsibilities and collective life projects. This process of negotiation results in an active participation in the CIU, a trans-ethnic organization that strives to render visible indigenous peoples in university and contest the stereotypes that still exist in university about indigenous peoples.

First, the student's personal aspirations that are based on the idea of "making it" and of being able to overcome the marginalization and stigmatization of their rural livelihoods is crucial in their decision to get higher education. The fact that social and economic classification privileges an intellectual and professional way of production over a manual or a wage labour-related means of living is also motivating this decision. Considering the parents' occupation as leading to stagnation, these students are motivated to find better employment opportunities that would improve their and the nuclear family's standards of living. Higher education is seen as a means to achieve this goal; however, the students need to negotiate between individual ideals of development and communitarian values based on solidarity and reciprocity. Higher education is a tool to develop their communities, as long as students do not forget

their responsibilities towards their communities. This negotiation is key to define what being indigenous means for them and hence, it serves to determine who has lost its indigenous identity due to migration and their engagement with university studies.

Secondly, exploring the views on education of the students led to the conclusion that university education does not question the colonial difference produced under *coloniality* (Mignolo 2011). Some professors and students are surprised about the enrolment of indigenous students, as if they were not capable to perform well because they are “indigenous”. Moreover, sometimes the indigenous student’s knowledge is only seen as an expression of their culture without real value as long as it is not translated into academic and scientific language.

As response to these challenges, the students have developed various coping strategies to adapt to the university setting. The students have opened cultural, political and educational spaces in order to claim the right to be in the university setting. Some interviewees also experienced the university setting as the space where they claim their indigenusness and they become “completely indigenous” as they become aware of their role in improving their communities and in pushing forward a trans-ethnic organization under the idea of unity and continuity. As a result, the idea of territory and the division between the “indigenous world” and the “non-indigenous world” is broaden. The territory becomes a mobile space (Piñacué Achicué 2014:165) as it is embodied by these students when they make sense of their new role as indigenous students and they keep close ties to their communities while they are in the city. This study has shown that rather being passive subjects whose identity is lost when they move to the cities and engage with academia, they are social actors with political intentionality (Peñaranda 2012b:16) inside and outside the university setting. By labelling their experience in university and in the CIU as resistance, they link their struggle to the efforts of the indigenous movement to secure their right to exist as peoples (Findji, 1992:123; 1991:126-127).

This study has also shown that they do not reject scientific knowledge. Rather, they reject the idea that science is the privileged way to understand the world, and they reject the basis on which it has been regarded as hegemonic (Mohanty 1994:153-154). They have shown to be aware that “Differences are not, necessarily, the basis for domination”<sup>32</sup> (Quijano 1992:19). This is why, for instance, they refer to “horizontal knowledge” and they try to include courses about indigenous languages, their own legal systems and systems of knowledge. As a result, they work together to make university an inclusive space and question the stereotypes that some professors hold about indigenous students’ abilities for higher education and who question their role as agents of knowledge.

However, the research process also made evident that the experiences of rural indigenous students do not exhaust indigenous subjectivities and experiences. This constitutes a limit in my research because all my interviewees come from rural indigenous communities. However, this also indicates potential further research in order to understand contemporary indigeneity in Colombia. Indigeneity is a field of negotiation, contestation and tension between recognition and belonging and between institutionalized and different indigenous communities’ understandings of ethnic identity which does not necessarily fit the idea of indigenous peoples as belonging to rural and peripheral lands. The *condición de excepción indígena* is oriented towards guaranteeing the access for candidates from rural indigenous communities, while this opportunity is limited for indigenous subjects who do not come from a *resguardo* and belong to an urban indigenous council that is not easily recognized as such by other indigenous authorities or the State. As a result, the experiences of indigenous peoples who inhabit urban contexts and how they negotiate their belonging to an indigenous community when they engage with higher education deserve further exploration.

Nevertheless, this study has contributed to understand in depth the challenges indigenous students from rural communities face in university and how they make

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<sup>32</sup> My translation from Spanish.

sense of their identity in this setting. Furthermore, in terms of the discussion about “inclusive education”, their coping strategies have shown that despite the fact that their access and their permanence in university still remain important issues for them, inclusion also needs to be addressed differently. It should lead to the creation of spaces in which students, indigenous and non-indigenous, discuss the limits of scientific knowledge and academia, and the use and limits of other practices and ways of being and acting in the world. This is where the potentiality of initiatives such as the CIU lies.

However, these spaces have been opened by the students themselves, while the university staff has remained distant, indifferent or has adopted a patronizing attitude towards these initiatives. The belief behind these attitudes is that indigenous knowledge and ways of action are anachronic, a reflection of the past, rather than what they actually are: a contemporary way of understanding and being in the world.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Participants' profiles

#### **Carely Londoño**

Ethnic group: Pisamira

Age: 23

Programme: Literature Studies

Home community: Comunidad Yacayaca, Vaupés.

She is currently the council's treasurer.

Interviewed on February 13<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> 2015.

#### **Hugo Valencia**

Ethnic Group: Nasa

Age: 26

Programme: Bachelor in Foreign Languages

Home Community: Preserve "Kiwe Thek Cxaw", Santander de Quilichao, Cauca.

In the moment of the interviews, he was the coordinator of the council's house.

Interviewed on February 20<sup>th</sup> 2015

#### **Marisol Cuatín**

Ethnic Group: Pastos

Age: 24

Programme: Food engineering

Home Community: Preserve of Muellamués, Guachucal, Nariño.

Interviewed on February 23<sup>th</sup> 2015

#### **Gustavo Banquero**

Ethnic Group: Nasa

Age: 25

Programme: Electronic engineering

Home Community: Preserve "Tacueyo", Toribío, Cauca.

Gustavo was the council's governor in 2014.

Interviewed on February 18<sup>th</sup> 2015.

**Alexander Quiroga**

Ethnic Group: Nasa

Age: 24

Programme: Literature Studies

Home Community: Preserve of San Lorenzo, Caldono, Cauca.

Alexander is the council's vice-governor for the year 2015.

Interviewed on March 5<sup>th</sup> 2015.

**Eudo Cuarán**

Ethnic Group: Pastos

Age: 33

Programme: Graduated in Sociology

Home Community: Preserve of Males-Córdoba, Nariñ.

Eudo was the council's governor in 2005. Although he has already graduated, he has kept a close relationship to the council. He is currently working for the ONIC.

Interviewed on February 26<sup>th</sup> 2015.

**Appendix 2: Interview Guide**

Interview with indigenous students (Translated from the original in Spanish)

**I. General information:**

Name:

Age:

Ethnic group:

*Resguardo*:

**II. Background details:**

1. How many members are in your family? Describe family composition.
2. What is your (family members) occupation?
3. What is your (family members) level of education?

**III. Education:**

1. Tell me about your primary and secondary education. Was it a private/public school? Did it have any link to your *resguardo*?
2. What kind of knowledge were you taught in school? In relation to your community?
3. Tell me about your experiences in relation to your education.

#### **IV. Community affiliation**

1. Tell me about how life is in your *resguardo* (social, economic, cultural activities).
2. How does your family relate to the community life in your *resguardo*?
3. How do you relate to the community life in your *resguardo*?

#### **V. University Studies/Experiences/impressions**

1. What was your motivation to study a university degree?
2. Why did you decide to study (programme)?
3. How did your family react to your decision?
4. Did people in your community say anything about the decision? Who and What.
5. How do you support yourself while you are studying?
6. How did you experience your first contact with the university environment and the city life?
7. How is your relationship with your professors and classmates?

#### **VI. Knowledge acquired in Academia**

1. Tell me about what you have learned in your programme.
2. Have you experienced any difficulties in your studies?
3. Has there been anything that has made you feel uncomfortable or discriminated?
4. Do you see any utility in what you have learned in your programme for your life?

#### **VII. Future prospects**

1. How do you see yourself in five years?
2. Do you plan to return to your community?

#### **VIII. The Council**

1. How did you learn about the Council?
2. What motivated your participation in the Council?
3. What have you learned from your participation in the CIU?
4. Tell about your role in the Council and the different activities created by the council.
5. What is the relationship between the Council and the authorities and organizations in your communities?
6. What are the differences and similarities among the different groups that form the council?
7. What is the council relationship with other students' groups in the university?
8. How do other students see the council?
9. What do you think other indigenous students participate/ don't participate in the council?

#### **IX**

1. What does it mean to identify yourself as indigenous?
2. If you compare your feelings and thoughts about your self-perception as indigenous before your entrance to the university, have they changed? In what sense?
3. It has been said that the indigenous youth who migrate to the cities to study a university degree have the risk to lose their identity, what is your opinion in this regard?

### Appendix 3: Proposal presented to the CIU members

Cali, Febrero 5 de 2015

Queridos estudiantes del Cabildo Indígena Universitario de La universidad del Valle:

A continuación encontrarán un breve resumen de mi propuesta de tesis y sobre la solicitud hecha ante ustedes con el objetivo de pedir su colaboración y ayuda.

## **Identidades Indígenas y Educación Superior**

### **Contextualización**

De acuerdo con Mato (2012:23), las políticas asociadas a las instituciones de educación superior en América Latina han reproducido patrones coloniales de dominación y exclusión. La “universalidad” de los conocimientos impartidos en las universidades se basa en una visión “occidental” del conocimiento y se privilegia sobre otras formas de producción de conocimiento, entre ellas las de los pueblos indígenas y afrodescendientes.

Sin embargo, al lado de estos fenómenos se sostiene que la Universidad debe ser un espacio inclusivo donde la diversidad sea promovida y respetada (Unesco, 2008), y de esta forma, se crean políticas orientadas a facilitar el acceso a los grupos minoritarios a la educación superior (Muñoz, 2007). De acuerdo con la Unesco (1998) la sociedad gira en torno al conocimiento y a la investigación y por lo tanto es imperativo crear oportunidades para que las minorías étnicas tengan acceso a la educación superior. En el caso de Colombia, hay medidas orientadas a asegurar la entrada comunidades étnicas y el acceso a la Educación Superior comúnmente en forma de cupos, becas, políticas de cuotas y otras medidas de admisión especial (Muñoz, 2007: 134; Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2008).

Si las acciones de los Estados han estado orientadas a garantizar el acceso de los grupos minoritarios a la educación superior la cuestión de si existe una articulación con las demandas de pertinencia y sensibilidad cultural hecha por los grupos minoritarios sigue siendo importante sobre todo cuando la Educación Superior niega epistemológicamente y hace invisibles formas indígenas de relacionarse con el conocimiento y la educación



(Muñoz, 201: 131) que conduce a efectos negativos, como la deserción (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2008; Muñoz, 2007: 135) o la aculturación (Muñoz, 2007: 135).

## **Pregunta**

Dentro de algunas lecturas y conversaciones acerca del tema de la educación superior y las comunidades indígenas, se citan afirmaciones de miembros de diferentes comunidades afirmando que la universidad vuelve a muchos jóvenes indígenas “cabezas cuadrículadas” perdiendo así la “esencia” del “ser indígena” o quejándose que las comunidades enviaron a la universidad indígenas y les devolvieron “blancos”. También afirman que a las universidades entran pocos y muchos no regresan. En vista de estas afirmaciones,

*¿Cómo es la experiencia de los estudiantes indígenas en la universidad del Valle?*

*¿Qué significa el Cabildo Indígena Universitario para los estudiantes indígenas?*

## **¿Cómo?**

Debido al corto tiempo que tengo en Colombia, la idea es poder conocer la experiencia del consejo directivo y de los demás estudiantes involucrados a través de la realización de entrevistas grupales e individuales. En el caso de las entrevistas grupales la idea es que se preste como espacio de discusión sobre la identidad indígena y sobre su experiencia y expectativas acerca del Cabildo.

Por otro lado, me gustaría poder conocer más acerca de cómo surge la idea de fomentar un proceso como el del Cabildo en la Universidad y cómo ha sido la recepción de este en la comunidad universitaria y por los estudiantes indígenas

Las entrevistas individuales me permitirán explorar de forma más profunda, las motivaciones de la elección de su carrera, la diversidad de comunidades indígenas representadas en el Cabildo, entre otras.

Es muy importante que sepan que el material resultado de estas entrevistas y observaciones y notas que yo haga se pondrá en conocimiento de todos ustedes y se mantendrá la confidencialidad y anonimato en caso de que así se quiera. Así mismo, las entrevistas estarán abiertas a si ustedes quieren incluir preguntas que puedan enriquecer su seguimiento y sistematización de las experiencias que se desarrollan y las expectativas de los estudiantes frente al proceso y frente a la universidad. En este sentido, si la información que se da en las entrevistas es útil para que ustedes enriquezcan el centro de

documentación y den a conocer al cabildo entre los demás estudiantes indígenas y la población universitaria en general, ustedes dispondrán de la información sin ningún problema. Si mi trabajo de tesis puede contribuir a visibilizar el Cabildo yo estaré más que dispuesta a permitir que la tesis sea un espacio para esto.

Pongo a su decisión que estas entrevistas grupales e individuales y cualquier otro acompañamiento que pueda hacer se realice entre el 12 y 28 de febrero según su disponibilidad y tiempo.

Les agradezco mucho el haberme recibido de forma generosa y abierta el día de hoy y haberme dado tiempo y espacio para la presentación de esta propuesta.

Cordialmente,

María Paula Silva Correa

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