

Epistemic violence against indigenous peoples

Injustice regarding the validity of ancestral knowledge has been one of the many racist practices established by the colony. For five centuries, a systematic attack has persisted, in a bid to bring an end to creation, conservation and transmission of the knowledge of native peoples. In recent decades, religious fundamentalism has rebooted this symbolic violence to divide indigenous communities and benefit the installation of extractive projects and large-scale agricultural monocultures.

By Silvel Elías - August 1st, 2020

Epistemic violence is a consequence of [epistemic injustice](#), that is, the structural prerogative that a system of knowledge, self-perceived as more accurate and valuable, has over another system of knowledge, which it deems to be inferior and uncertain. Epistemic violence exists when methods are used that lead to the extermination, annulment and destruction of certain knowledge and its bearers, reaching the extreme of their irrevocable loss, as epistemicide.

There are several examples of such epistemicide: the destruction of indigenous spirituality, the loss of native languages, the disuse of certain productive or food processes and the replacement of indigenous forms of governance and natural resource tenure. Primarily, if this is due to pressure from the dominant powers. Under these premises, an attempt is being made to address the epistemic implications brought on by the death of the Mayan Q'eqchi' indigenous healer and spiritual guide, Domingo Choc.

Five centuries of epistemic violence

The destruction of indigenous knowledge, spirituality and territories that began five centuries ago with the European invasion of the New World - which colonialism then turned into the Third World or Underdeveloped World - is an expression of epistemic violence that has since been used by Western powers to expand their domain and plunder the material and immaterial assets of subjugated peoples. Epistemic violence employs apparent subtle methods, for example through education, religion, politics, social integration and

development projects. Nonetheless, it also implements violent methods, such as corporal punishment, criminalisation, lynching and genocide.

It is common knowledge that Spanish missionaries, bearing the flag of the inquisitors, arrived on these shores to contribute to the conquest and civilisation of peoples they considered to be savages. And so, they dedicated their efforts to destroying all cultural and spiritual manifestations of the indigenous peoples who, through incomprehension, deemed their actions to be witchcraft: Bishop Diego de Landa burned most of the Maya Codices in the Yucatan community of Maní, Hernán Cortés executed Moctezuma and Pedro de Alvarado burned the K'ichés rulers, Oxib Kiej and Belejep Tzi' alive, during his invasion of the Q'uma'rkaj capital and executed the Kaqchikel Kají Imox ruler in a bid to quell the rebellion.

Throughout colonial - and later national state - domination, cases of violence against authorities and community leaders fighting the dispossession of their territories and destruction of their knowledge and beliefs, have been replicated. A clear intent to annihilate the bases that sustain the life of the people: the genocide and massacres during the Guatemalan internal armed conflict between 1960 and 1996; the 1936 execution of seven indigenous mayors of Nebaj during the dictatorship of Jorge Ubico; the 1932 massacre that almost led to the extermination of the indigenous people in El Salvador; the assassination of 20 Guatemalan spiritual leaders in the last 18 years; the recent assassination of two indigenous leaders in Costa Rica; and the thousands of indigenous people throughout the continent who have been killed for defending their cultures and territories.

It is not just a matter of criminal acts against specific individuals, but instead a systematic attack on the ways in which the knowledge of indigenous people is produced, preserved and transmitted. The aim being to impose on them, other ways of knowing, thinking and believing, in a clear manifestation of epistemic inequality, where indigenous knowledge (mis-named as traditional or popular knowledge) is undermined for its alleged lack of scientific rigour or punished for being superstitious and for violating the beliefs of official religions.

From this point of view, the extrajudicial execution of Domingo Choc is not an isolated case committed by a small group of members of his own community, but is part of a long history of epistemic violence. This violence, perpetrated through religion, politics, law, education,

science, technology and development projects, has had multiple consequences: the undermining of the indigenous cosmovision and spirituality; the abandonment of the Mayan calendar; the replacement of native agricultural crops with improved varieties; the conversion of communal forests into protected areas; the subordination of indigenous midwives and therapists to the public health system; and the kidnapping, folklorisation and commercialisation of ancestral knowledge and cultures.

Religious fundamentalism as epistemic violence

Religions, above all Catholic and Evangelical, compete for the souls and goods of the communities and also demand that the indigenous people abandon their ancestral beliefs, in order to then impose a theocentric and eschatological vision on them. This means a perspective that opposes their worldview; one based on balance, respect and harmony with Mother Nature, that is, a holistic view of life.

Over the past four decades, neo-Pentecostal sects have gained more influence in politics and economy in several Latin American countries, assuming a major role in Brazil's, Bolivia's and Costa Rica's electoral campaigns. In Guatemala, they were used as a counter-insurgency strategy during the internal armed conflict, particularly by the government of José Efraín Ríos Montt, which was when the most atrocious massacres took place.

Within this context, to save their lives, thousands of indigenous people were forced to convert to evangelism, testifying to prosperity for having abandoned paganism, witchcraft and their traditional heritage. Many of the sacred Mayan sites have been literally taken over by these sects to conduct their own celebrations. This has been the case at Cerro Quemado, an ancient sacred Mayan site located in Almolonga, an eminently indigenous K'iché village, where 90 percent of the population is said to have converted to evangelism.

Epistemic strategies of the State

Meanwhile, the education system wipes out ancestral knowledge by not including it in its syllabuses. Far from respecting the heterogeneity of knowledge, the bilingual system reduces itself to classes only being taught in the mother tongue during the first years of study and from then on official content is imposed on the students, without any geographical or cultural contextualisation. Nor are there any opportunities for intercultural

bilingual teacher training, since this course was shut down a couple of years ago, including the five rural teacher training colleges that provided this orientation. Technical training for indigenous people and university offerings are practically non-existent, except for the recent creation of the indigenous universities of the Ixil and Kaqchikel peoples.

There is no investment whatsoever in science and technology to recover, promote and protect the ancestral knowledge systems. Instead, appropriation and epistemic subordination of this millennial wisdom by academic centres in disciplines such as ethnobotany, ethnomedicine, agroecology and ethno-development prevail.

In recent decades, global forums on biodiversity and climate change have argued with increasing conviction that the ancestral knowledge of indigenous peoples, which is based on balance and harmony with Mother Nature, is fundamental to halting the imminent disaster that looms over our planet. Similarly, they encourage the understanding, recovery, protection and practice of Ut'z Kaslemaj, or "to live well", a principle adhered to since ancestral times.

However, the indigenous peoples contest that they are not being taken into account in the decision making on climate and biological diversity, the epistemic inequality involved in the dispossession of their knowledge and the use of their territories for the implementation of projects in the name of climate change that ultimately never benefit them.

The consequences of epistemic injustice in Guatemala

Along with the community governance structures and their inherent ancestral knowledge, indigenous territories have been plundered and dispossessed to make room for extractive projects and large-scale agricultural monocultures. The lowlands in the north of the country, where the community of Domingo Choc is located, have witnessed the most gruelling effects of neoliberal extractive expansion: from threats and violent practices to the dispossession of land from peasant families and entire communities. This region in particular demonstrates the depopulation of several communities, in whose territories giant oil palm plantations and cattle pastures have been set up, without the government having the institutional capacity or the political will to regulate these transactions. And much less, to protect communal tenure systems.

A report by the Guatemalan Human Rights Ombudsman, Augusto Jordán Rodas Andrade, highlights that in 2019 alone, there were 327 attacks and 39 murders of indigenous people who defend their collective rights to land and ancestral territories, especially in cases related to installation without consultation of mining and hydroelectric projects. Although the Political Constitution of the Republic does include, in Article 67, the protection of the lands of indigenous communities, in practice, the State does not have the administrative or legal mechanisms to put this mandate into effect. Even though it has upheld ILO Convention 169

In recent months, the Constitutional Court has ordered the suspension of three of the largest mining projects in the country, due to their failure to comply with consultation protocols with the indigenous peoples. In the case of the Xinca people, the mining company argues that this mechanism is not applicable, given that there are no indigenous inhabitants in the area, despite many cultural studies and data from the latest population census confirming otherwise.

On the other hand, the mining, hydroelectric, construction, oil and agricultural monoculture companies have skilfully succeeded in creating a divide within the communities, setting those in favour against those who oppose the projects. It is a strategy of domination, where dominant interests create and sustain alliances with local actors who benefit from the influx of capital into the territories they control, transforming and attracting community loyalties in their favour to facilitate territorial control.

On the legal front, Congress has delayed the approval of several bills that are of interest to indigenous peoples, which include laws on land regularisation and on indigenous communities. In the failed attempt at a state reform, it was not even possible to include the recognition of indigenous jurisdiction into the justice system, another example of the systemic racism which prevents the appreciation of all knowledge and mechanisms of indigenous communities for the administration of justice.

At an administrative level, the State undermines the community authorities, devaluing their role or replacing them with the so-called Community Development Councils, two entirely different concepts. The first is in charge of the administration of justice and community coexistence, and the latter is tasked with the management of public works and community

services. Uniting both local institutions into one, constitutes an epistemic inequality that degrades the value and credibility of ancestral knowledge and authority.

Epistemic violence and the assassination of Domingo Choc

The devaluation of the ancestral community authorities' role in recognising and dealing with a case of grievance (such as the accusation against Domingo Choc), explains why this case has not been resolved by local authorities and why the perpetrators have disregarded the calls for reason made by other members of the community.

The unfortunate assassination of Domingo Choc should not be seen as an isolated act, but as part of the epistemic violence against the knowledge of indigenous peoples. There is an effort to destroy knowledge and beliefs that differ from those of the epistemic Western dictatorship. Partly because of their lack of understanding, but mainly because they pose a threat to the strategies of control and plundering of the territories.

Several analysts have asked themselves how much ancient wisdom was lost with the passing of the healer and spiritual leader Dominic Choc. We may never know. But the question we must ask ourselves is: What commitments should be made by the government, in order to bring an end to the epistemicide against the indigenous peoples?

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