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the TREE *of* LIFE *as a*
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

VIVIAN M. JIMÉNEZ ESTRADA

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, 252 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1V6, Canada

■ Abstract

This paper is grounded on the premise that research, as a colonising practice, needs constant reconceptualisation and rethinking. I propose a methodology based on some of the values, visions and stories from my own Maya Indigenous culture and knowledge in addition to other Indigenous cultures across the world. I argue that researchers need to constantly acknowledge and change the negative impacts of ignoring multiple ways of knowing by engaging in respectful methods of knowledge collection and production. This paper contributes to the work Indigenous scholars have done in the area of research methodologies and knowledge production. First, a general overview of the values and concepts embedded in the *Ceiba* or the "Tree of Life" is presented; then, a discussion of what respectful research practices entail follows; finally, it concludes with a reflection on how the *Ceiba* is a small example of how researchers can adapt their research methodology to the local context.

■ Introduction

Indigenous scholars across the world, especially in Canada (Hermes, 1998; Weber-Pillwax, 1999; Wilson, 2003), the United States (Cajete, 1994) and New Zealand (Smith, 1999), have made valuable contributions in the area of research, specifically in Indigenous research (Smith, 1999). Indigenous research, broadly defined, pertains to applying the culturally-situated visions, understandings and directions necessary to engage in processes that ultimately facilitate and promote the well-being of Indigenous communities in a holistic manner. As a Maya woman who currently lives on Mississauga territory in Toronto, Canada, I am dismayed at the dearth of contributions made by Indigenous peoples in the geographical south, and I am grateful to the many First Nations peoples of this territory who have shared their oral traditions and knowledges with me. These knowledges have awakened and enriched my own understandings of the issues at stake when conducting research, but also of the similarities within our differences as Indigenous peoples. The teachings and knowledges intersect with my own, and collectively, they inform what I propose as a culturally-based research methodology – the Tree of Life, or *Ceiba*.

The *Ceiba* reflects values that intersect across many Indigenous cultures. One of these values is honouring our past, present and future by remembering the teachings contained in the oral stories that elders and community members hold, whether recorded in print form or not. Oral traditions, cultural understandings and ceremonies are a vast field of knowledge where metaphors connect diverse Indigenous cultures while also providing a vehicle for sharing and communicating important lessons in a culturally-appropriate manner. Connecting with other Indigenous peoples creates a community of peoples with common visions walking with the teachings they know. Some Indigenous peoples of this Mississauga territory call it the "Red Path"; we Maya call it *sacbe*. To walk this path, creating community is important, especially for those of us who have been forcibly displaced from our traditional territories. For the internally and externally displaced, relearning our ways while ensuring their protection is crucial. One way to relearn has been listening through oral traditions or books written by Indigenous peoples. These stories have taught me lessons in history which point to the importance of reclaiming my own Maya Indigenous identity. In referring to an Indigenous

identity I mean to say that I honour the cosmovision, understandings and teachings that make Indigenous cultures distinct and diverse. This paper is a small contribution to the field of Indigenous knowledge and research methods that value and privilege the knowledges, understandings and values of my Maya culture – past, present and future. It is important to add that efforts to construct education systems and institutions that are centred on these knowledges are well underway in Guatemala through organisations like the Consejo Nacional de Educación Maya (CNEM) (2004), where this work has pertinence because it proposes a research method based on our knowledges. It also expands the work of Indigenous scholars around the world.

I am aware that reclaiming oral traditions and Maya cultural practices requires that research is culturally-situated. In this sense, it is both a political and spiritual act, since researching, documenting and disseminating Indigenous knowledges have historically been, on the one hand, a part of what Linda Smith (1999) calls a "colonial project". She claims that more often than not, research has been complicit in a series of actions that undermine, misinterpret and misconstrue Indigenous knowledges in an effort to further advance acts of colonialism and oppression. On the other hand, Indigenous peoples have "always been researchers" (Ermine, 1995) and continue in this role. It is in the spirit of continuing our role as researchers with an awareness of that colonial legacy that I follow the steps of Indigenous scholars who are increasingly creating and participating in research processes. Such processes follow an "ethic" that shifts from "research for research's sake (knowledge in the abstract) to research that serves a specific purpose or need of the community within which it is situated" (Hermes, 1998, p. 158). In this paper, I reference specific and contextually relevant Indigenous knowledges to honour multiple ways of knowing. Although Indigenous peoples are diverse, we do share respect and honouring as important values. Engaging in respectful practices to gather, interpret, share and contextualise these knowledges is part of situating research methods (Hermes, 1998) in a particular culture to challenge how

> research is implicated in the production of Western knowledge, in the nature of academic work, in the production of theories which have dehumanized Maori [Indigenous] practices that continue to privilege Western ways of knowing while denying the validity for Maori of Maori knowledge, language and culture (Smith in Menzies, 2001, p. 19).

I begin the paper with an overview of the aspects embedded in the metaphor of the *Ceiba*, or Tree of Life. This metaphor is an integral part of the understandings and cosmovision contained in the Maya sacred book

of Creation, the *Popol Vuh* (Recinos, 1987). Secondly, I point to the different parts of the tree, addressing the theoretical framework, discourses and where the research connects the past with the future. I want to advise the reader that these are the beginnings of a larger work where I intend to exchange ideas with other Maya scholars who are working in the field of Indigenous knowledge and research methods. I want to first clarify why I use the *Ceiba* as a metaphor and the limits of this paper. I posit that it explains Maya ontology, or the theory of understanding what is "real". Maya cosmology, as the *Popol Vuh* narrates, identifies reality not as linear and unidimensional but as circular and multidimensional. The *Ceiba* is the axis through which the world goes through, which also comprises Maya epistemology or the study of systems of thinking and knowing: How do we know what we know is "real"? In contrast, Western ways of understanding have often overlooked Indigenous ontology by claiming their understanding of the world as universal. Along with positivist thinking, such claims have negatively impacted the manner in which research is carried out. The *Ceiba*, as a fundamental aspect of Maya ontology and epistemology which values multiple ways of knowing and understanding the world, is an appropriate framework for developing a culturally-based research methodology. This directly impacts issues of pluricultural and culturally-grounded education and research. *Pluricultural* is a term used in Guatemala to refer to the presence of four different cultures (Maya, Garífuna, Xinca and mixed bloods or *mestizos*), and 21 different Maya languages. This term serves as a way to denote a system that not only includes Indigenous peoples and knowledges in a Western pedagogical framework, it actually moves beyond it to construct a system based on the knowledge and understandings all cultural groups (see CNEM, 2004, for further illustration on the use of the term).

Secondly, the limits of the paper are many. The paper is based on my initial thoughts and understandings based on documents I have read and the stories I have listened to. It is also important to acknowledge how my lived experiences with cultural and physical displacement, internalised racism and oppression are also stories linking me to other Indigenous peoples. Just as important are the stories of reclaiming, strengthening and continuing to transform cultural practices that are no longer equitable. I do not personally know of many people living in Toronto who live and claim their Maya Indigenous identity and knowledge; therefore, the search to find meaning and understanding of the knowledge I carry is not easy.

Due to the unequal nature of the politics of knowledge production, most of the documents available as regards the Maya context are written by non-Indigenous scholars, some working closely with Maya communities in Guatemala (e.g., Mosquera

Saravia et al., 2002; Tedlock, 1993; Warren, 1998). There are a number of anthropologists who have done important work as allies to the Maya in Guatemala. At the time of writing this piece I also came across the work of Maya intellectuals such as Demetrio Cojtí and Victor Montejo, unfortunately their important work is not included in this paper. To ensure the knowledge in these documents reflect the general understandings of the Maya cosmos and realities, I referred back to the stories of the *Popol Vuh*, literature written on the foundations of Maya education (CNEM, 2004) and personal communications with a Maya colleague in Guatemala and a close Maya Tzotzil friend who lives in Toronto. I have also paralleled these to stories I heard from elders in Toronto at various times in the past four years, and from articles and books written by some Indigenous scholars across the world (Battiste, 2002; Cordero, 1995; Dei et al., 2000; Graveline, 1998; Hermes, 1998; Montejo, 2005; Ren, 2005; Smith, 1999; Wilson 2003).

▓ Situating my research methodology

My ancestral memory, as tapped during my interactions with Aboriginal peoples in Toronto – listening to elders, participating in the work of agencies such as Native Child and Family Services of Toronto (NCFST), and speaking with Aboriginal academics and non-academics – have been central to my realisation of the similarities we share in our understanding of the universe. As part of a process of decolonising my mind (wa' Thiong'o, 1996), spirit and ways of conducting research in the academy, I privilege Indigenous understandings as part of reclaiming the Maya identity suppressed over years of complex historical, social, economic, political and cultural genocide. Shawn Wilson (2003, p. 161), an Opaskwayak Cree scholar, has emphasised "the importance of relationships and the realisation that everything needs to be seen in the context of the relationships that it represents". Karen Martin's "chronology of effects that have affected Aboriginal peoples and therefore Aboriginal research" (Martin in Wilson, 2003, p. 162), is useful in determining which phase of research I wish to expand on, as outlined in her "phases in the development of Aboriginal research ... *terra nullius*, traditionalising, assimilationist, early Aboriginal research, recent Aboriginal research and Indigenist research" (Martin in Wilson, 2003, p. 162). I believe this paper falls within the category of Indigenist research as it "challenges Indigenous scholars to articulate their own research paradigms, their own approaches to research, and their own data collection methods in order to honor an Indigenous paradigm" (Wilson, 2003, p. 170). To honour an Indigenous paradigm, researchers and academics alike need to understand, not only respect protocols as regards to the collection and dissemination of data, but also engage in a reflective process as to what Indigenous

research is and who is ultimately benefiting from it. This, I argue, is the ultimate axiological position, or the values which guide my research.

Charles Menzies (2001, p. 22), an Indigenous anthropologist, documented personal research guidelines that would interrogate the protocols during the research process. These guidelines include: (1) initiating dialogue; (2) refining the research plan in consultation with the Nation; (3) initiating research, ensuring community members are part of research team; and, (4) writing, analysing, revising and distributing information with the community and maintaining contact after leaving the community to ensure data analysis is accepted. Such a process is useful to Indigenous scholars like me, who live outside traditional territory and who may not have grown up in a traditional cultural setting, embedded in the Indigenous culture and language. I believe those of us who grew up removed from these knowledges may benefit from borrowing research guidelines as a starting point for initiating contact with the communities with whom research will be conducted. These guidelines will ensure that we are not participating in the colonial process itself by "expand[ing] the power and knowledge of the dominant society at the expense of the colonized and the excluded" (Menzies, 2001, p. 22). Therefore, to assert the agency of the community with whom one conducts research necessitates an acknowledgement that colonisation is alive and thrives in the protocols of the institutions where our schooling takes place. To ignore that research processes are tainted by larger systems of oppression makes all of us complicit in a need to decolonise our methodologies and praxis through following a protocol of respect toward the communities with whom we work. This reflection is a necessity not only for non-Indigenous researchers but also for Indigenous researchers given the complex factors that make researchers "outsiders" and "insiders" in communities. I use the term "insider" in the same manner Mary Hermes (1998) does, which "calls on *epistemic privilege* [sic] to validate ideas and considers emotions and 'all the details of the ways in which [their] oppression is experienced' to be an essential way in which knowledge is constructed" (Narayan in Hermes, 1998, p. 166, my emphasis).

▓ Basic concepts in Maya cosmology and relevance of the *Ceiba* research model

The illustration on Maya cosmology (Figure 1) from the document called "Maya Achí wisdom" (Mosquera Saravia et al., 2002, p. 42) describes the metaphors of the *Ceiba*. It illustrates how the *Ceiba* encompasses understandings of the Four Sacred Directions and the Wheel of Life. The concepts I will refer to revolve around the Mayan concepts of duality: east/west; north/south; above/below; sky/earth; good/evil; shadow/light; male/female; life/death; beginning/end; emptiness/fullness.

These dualities are embodied in the importance of the number 2, from which the *Popol Vuh* states that all reality begins, since one cannot exist without the other. This concept of a unified dichotomy, not in the Western sense of binaries that divide entities but rather as dualities that highlight the interconnectedness of opposite energy forces, highlights the manner in which research needs to balance the information that is disclosed with a way to make the information useful for the lives of the members of the participating community. Dei et al. (2000) have identified these as similarities that cut across Indigenous cultures and facilitate the dissemination of the balance needed to conduct research and maintain integrity and respect not just for the people in the communities but for the universe as a whole.

Duality, as briefly illustrated, is an important concept in understanding the notion of maintaining balance in the universe. According to the Maya and other Indigenous cultures, there is a fifth direction which is the centre; a sixth direction which is the Zenith; and a seventh direction which is the Nenith. In the *Popol Vuh*, the centre is represented by the *Ceiba*, or the axis from which all life emanates and through which all life passes. As a Maya researcher in search of ways that validate and honour multiple ways of knowing, duality not only unifies, it also diversifies and holds the unit together. By contrast, a researcher that only takes information and does not give anything back to the community upsets this balance.

The *Ceiba* is the metaphor that expresses the constant struggle in which opposing forces try to become unbalanced. As the axis through which all creation passes, all of us who are part of Creation have the responsibility for restoring and maintaining balance. The concept of balance becomes crucial when ascribing to an Indigenous research methodology as one of the ways in which it positively informs it is through acknowledging that our past informs the present and present actions carry consequences into the future. This understanding is also expressed in the metaphor of the Seven Generations that illustrates how our actions today spiral into the future for Seven Generations. As a research methodology and principle, I believe it provides the grounds from which to feel and think more clearly before engaging in harmful activities. Similarly, the belief that we "build on earlier realities" (Cajete, 1994, p. 28), alludes to how knowledge has been shared and reconstructed to reflect the vitality of cultures. It also speaks to self-reflection processes that are necessary to move forward with the help of lessons learned from past mistakes. Cajete's (1994, p. 28) vision to "engineer a new reality built upon earlier ones, while simultaneously addressing the needs, and acting in the sun of our times", coincides with Anishnabek peoples' Seven Grandfather Teachings: wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility and truth. In Maya cosmology, these values include cooperation, balance,
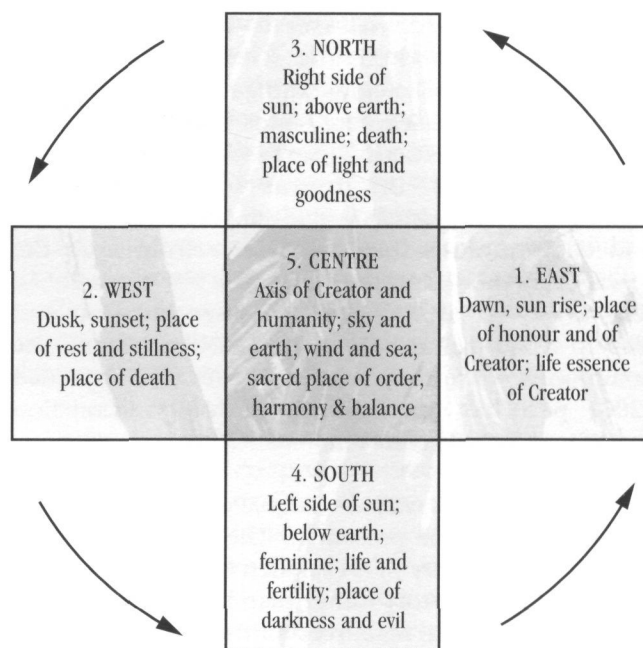

Figure 1. Maya cosmovision (after Mosquera Saravia et al., 2002, p. 42).

respect, sacredness, truth, thanksgiving and diversity. The *Ceiba* encompasses all these values, and they guide the research methodology.

The *Ceiba* research methodology

Wilson (2003, p. 171) has traced some useful guidelines to understand the cultural appropriateness of research methodology. Likewise, Maya scholar Carlos Cordero emphasises the importance of "approaching knowledge through the senses and intuition" (Cordero in Wilson, 2003, p. 171). This aspect transcends and connects the material with the spiritual world, implying that researchers need to look beyond the superficiality of signing an informed consent form and instead engage in practices that build a relationship with the community involved. It also goes beyond the connection between researcher and "researched", whereby both have the responsibility and respect to change the terms of the research if it proves disrespectful and/or dangerous in any way for the communities involved. Challenging the limited capabilities of negotiating informed consent forms also challenges the power differentials often present between academia and communities, an issue not often addressed.

Dei et al. (2000) ascertain that an Indigenous epistemology acknowledges multiple ways of understanding and seeing the world. Through the *Ceiba*, seeing and understanding the world in multiple ways implies valuing the duality professed in Maya cosmology. Understanding that this duality engenders unity as opposed to division promotes balanced processes of gathering, analysing and producing knowledge. In this sense, knowledge can no longer be

"objectively" separated from its source and inevitably has to go through processes of legitimation from the communities where the research takes place. Honouring and privileging Indigenous knowledges require that the researcher states her/his own roots of motivation for entering into research relationships. For communities, this means open and honest communication regarding the dangers, implications, and complications that could arise from both the research methods and the outcomes. For researchers, it is a way to rethink the processes involved and also to weigh rewards both for her/himself and the community – are they balanced? Avexním Cojtí Ren (2001, p. 5) has expressed this motivation in relation to anthropological research:

> Control of the Maya past is equal to the control of our power in the present ... The reconstruction of our past history [has excluded us] and we want to relate our history rather than being treated as objects, historical resources for the public and on the market. We want to speak on our own behalf; we want to tell our own story.

In a country where more than 65% of the population is Indigenous with 23 distinct languages (in spite of this diversity and of signing the Peace Accords in 1996 and ratifying ILO Convention 169, Spanish remains the official language) and where poverty and violence have marked the lives of the majority, research that shows respect and values life and cultural diversity is not merely an intellectual pursuit – it is a necessity. This is marked by the efforts that different organisations have made in terms of questioning the very meaning of education and trying to construct education systems that are not merely bilingual but pluricultural and reflect the diversity of the Maya, Xinca, Garífuna and Mestizo peoples of the country. For the purpose of beginning to set a research framework, I posit that the values embedded in the *Ceiba* form what I call the roots of research. As stated earlier, Indigenous peoples have always been researchers (Battiste, 2002; Cajete, 1994; Smith, 1999). Careful observation with the heart, mind, spirit and senses allows researchers to gather information. In Maya cosmology, as stated in the *Popol Vuh*, this information is tested and reshaped to particular contexts. The roots lie in the belly of Mother Earth and are grounded in a particular set of understandings that inform the direction in which the tree will grow. The basis for a research methodology, the roots that inform research, must be grounded in what Menzies (2001), Smith (1999), Weber-Pillwax (1999) and Wilson (2003) have agreed are initial contact protocols based on a perceived question that needs addressing.

To make research respectful, not only to Indigenous communities but to all communities where research is conducted, we need to understand where imbalance exists. The colonial legacy of education and research is based on a Western model that ignores multiple ways of knowing, appropriates and repackages what is considered suitable for its purposes, and makes universal claims on that knowledge (Smith, 1999). Negating and/or appropriating knowledges ruptures the balance in the *Ceiba*, and from this perspective the research will cause more imbalance. Any research needs to coincide with the concepts, vision, needs and objectives of the communities involved and affected. What guides the process for this research methodology is to gather these knowledges to create a method that is a "situated response" (Hermes, 1998) that honours Maya cosmology and epistemology. This method is founded on my individual and collective understandings and conceptualisations of some aspects of Maya knowledge, where they are situated and how as human beings that form part of a common cultural location are able to tap into it. Reflecting back on my previous research (Jiménez, 2002), I can see how good intentions do not automatically become good research practices. This is especially true in regard to keeping in touch with the communities that formed part of the process and also disseminating the words that may or may not reach them because it is in written form or not in an Indigenous language. Language is key in developing and continuing to support the communities with and for whom researchers work. Learning my own Maya Ach'i language is a goal to conduct appropriate research in the future.

Keeping in clear communication with the members of that community necessitates periodical visits and/or correspondence including the consultation throughout the process as regards to the knowledge being produced. Being accountable to this protocol necessitates good visioning in the sense that the expenses that will be incurred for communication should be factored in with the rest of the research process. During my previous research (Jiménez, 2002) I did not have the financial or technical means by which to follow through with these very important factors. Factoring in language instruction, translation and interpretation costs will also ensure that the skills I bring to the community will be shared if the community so wishes. In effect, an important aspect of conducting research, as expressed by many researchers also involves the transferring of skills so that local members can reproduce the research process themselves with the goal of fostering autonomy. As Smith suggests, this position then also requires looking at ourselves and asking tough personal, political and institutional questions regarding the research we conduct:

> This is not part of a purely pragmatic response to increasingly militant and assertive Indigenous peoples. Rather, it is part of a necessary program of decolonisation in which researchers develop

a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform research practices (Smith in Menzies, 2001, p. 23).

The implications of conducting Indigenous-based research within institutions where ethical processes are conceptually different from the understanding of Indigenous communities cannot be ignored. In this sense, proposing criteria for the ongoing negotiation and respect needed when working with institutionally marginalised communities necessitates a discussion around a restructuring of such ethical frameworks. But, it also needs a clarification of the theories that inform the methods of research used.

The bark, or the theories guiding the research

The bark is the structure that will ensure that the values or axiological position of the research are upheld. To scholars such as Russell Bishop (1998), Linda Smith (1999) and Cora Weber-Pillwax (1999) this means following cultural protocols and respecting the time and space necessary for the research to take place or not. I am especially interested in referring to methods in the plural sense, as I support Hermes' (1998, p. 57) position that:

> methods are categorically distinct from theory. They are disinterested tools for extracting information, ways of doing (not thinking about) that are implicitly a one-way interaction ... project theory intersected with methods continuously ... [and] acted as a situated response.

The assertion that theory is distinct from methods necessitates a consideration for ways in which to ensure accountability. For example, Taurima and Cash (2000, p. 2) posit that one way to do this is to shift from a sense of "talking past each other to talking to each other". The metaphor of the *Ceiba* is reflected in the way Maya traditional decision-making processes are carried out. In my previous research (Jiménez, 2002), I discussed community decision-making processes and protocol. This cultural tradition is not maintained in all communities, but I feel it is important to reclaim and share it to maintain a process of accountability on issues that affect the community. I highlight this lesson since attending these meetings allowed me to present my research, clarify intentions and also get feedback regarding my work. This process is very much tied to the understanding that duality is part of unity, and so in every aspect of research a "positive intention" may be countered by a "negative result". In this case, a researcher is in fact responsible for taking all these aspects into account and making sound judgments accordingly.

As researchers, we need constant reminders of how theory is constantly intersecting with methods.

Therefore, accepting the limits of both reflects the diversity and specificity needed to counteract universal theories or methods. This means that, if at one particular point the theory needs to change to adapt to the method and vice versa, or if the research will not take place at all, the researcher needs to present an alternative plan. This part is especially difficult given that most graduate students receive little or no support in case this happens. I reiterate that an understanding of the conceptualisation of respect and reciprocity, a duality that is important in the *Ceiba* understanding of valuing relationships, help guide the research. Weber-Pillwax (1999) states:

> Respect is more than just saying please and thank you, and reciprocity is more than giving a gift. According to Cree elders, showing respect or *kihceyihtowin* is a basic law of life. Respect regulates how we treat Mother Earth, the plants, the animals, and our brothers and sisters of all races ... Respect means listening intently to others' ideas, that you do not insist that your idea prevails. By listening intently you show honour, consider the well-being of others, and treat others with kindness and courtesy.

The theories grounding the *Ceiba* research methodology are Indigenous knowledge, anti-colonial thought, woman-centred understandings and decolonising praxis. I will first discuss Indigenous knowledges referring to the conceptualisation Dei et al. (2000, pp. 5-6) use:

> A body of knowledge associated with the long-term occupancy of a certain place. This knowledge refers to traditional forms of social values, as well as to mental constructs that guide, organize and regulate the people's way of living and making sense of their world.

In addition, it is crucial to state this refers to the original inhabitants of the particular place from which the knowledges are tapped. Omitting this aspect would ascertain the myth that settler society is part of this body of knowledge. Bishop (1998) and Smith (1999) refer to this body of knowledge in order to "challenge Eurocentric paradigms in research" (Shahjahan, forthcoming, p. 3). Indigenous research methods, then, encompass some characteristics that cut across time and space (or cultures) and are crucial for the process and goals of research methodologies: respectful knowledge that contributes to the well-being of the cosmos. There are some theories that actually support the attainment of this balance, and I will refer to them briefly, to acknowledge their contributions.

Shahjahan (forthcoming) has succinctly outlined the stages of anti-colonial thought. Based on these

understandings, he posits that the similarities of anti-colonial thought to an Indigenous perspective are best expressed by Baber (1996, p. 95) when cautioning about the implications of essentialising "Western knowledge systems" and removing their context. Shahjahan (forthcoming) sets the stage for the application of the initial phases of anti-colonial thought to contemporary times in his discussion about the absence of an alternative framework in which agency regarding research is addressed. In this sense, Smith and the scholars mentioned at the beginning of the paper provide the much needed critique and move beyond the critique by engaging in research that is both culturally-situated and agency-based.

As a continuation of anti-colonial thought, decolonising praxis speaks to the move from oppositional discourse into the embodiment and actions that interrogate the colonial legacy. I previously stated that decolonising practices within research methods are not only a matter of naming colonialism and critiquing it: they entail an active engagement with a mirror in which to reflect and interrogate our own actions and motives as researchers. I go back to the idea that for Māori people, this means looking people in the eye and talking to one another so that their motives are revealed. Likewise, the *Ceiba* approach to research methodology entails a constant awareness of the instances where, for the sake of saving time or another material circumstance, research is done in ways that are detrimental to the balance of the community, ourselves and the universe. Smith (1999) and Bishop (1998) have specifically addressed this need in their work. I would like to also bring these understandings into the research that is done with and for Maya communities since, to date, I am not aware of a single document that speaks from a culturally-situated location. In addition, I have not come across papers written about, for or from Mayans that challenge "objective" research methods, but also speak of research processes that are transformative. By transformative I mean research that subverts current unequal power relations due to the racialised, gendered and oppressive frameworks from which research has traditionally been enacted.

The trunk

To my understanding, the trunk of the *Ceiba* not only holds all the life-promoting energies with which we live, it also creates a vehicle for transmitting the knowledge that grounds our actions and therefore informs the directions into which we are heading. In other words, if the trunk is also a metaphor for the elements which keep the tree alive, I will extend the metaphor to say that the trunk contains all the ideologies with which we ally our research. Personally, through the exchange of information pertaining to the commonalities in Indigenous knowledges, I define

my theoretical framework as one that is informed by Indigenous knowledge; that is, decolonising and also one that centres balance on all fronts. This means that although these characteristics intersect with theories of feminism, anti-colonialism and critical pedagogy, I refer to these as Indigenous knowledges and woman-centred epistemologies. I take this position since this stance better reflects my cultural location, since the Maya culture is traditionally matrilineal. However, Mosquero et al. (2002) state that based on anthropological research, there is enough evidence to support that the Maya Ach'i were mainly a patrilineal society. This notion can be countered with the stories in the *Popol Vuh*, which always acknowledge the female side of Creation and deities before the male ones, as an acknowledgement of the centrality of the female in the universe. This illustrates my argument of the necessity to continuously negotiate meaning with the communities with whom we conduct research.

The branches

As a last part of the *Ceiba*, the branches represent the many ways in which to share this information. The indivisibility of the people from whom knowledge is collected grants the responsibility to share the protocols with the respect and reverence that not only participants deserve, but life itself. One core aspect to remember in this methodology is that the spirit that informs and guides the research process transcends the material world. The *Ceiba*'s essence and spirit is an understanding that as human beings and researchers, we need to honour and privilege multiple knowledges, peoples and life. This understanding flows through the branches, a metaphor for the areas in which the research will need to reground itself by going back to the roots of research, or the original intent for gathering knowledge and information.

The branches then represent how research connects different cultures, peoples, times and spaces. This connection will hopefully heal the division and imbalance perpetuated by oppressive and damaging research. The *Ceiba*, as a research methodology, has the potential to:

* rehumanise knowledge disseminated in academia and in the classrooms;
* support the understanding that our lives, actions and memory affect the nature of one's scholarship and locating ourselves in our research implicates our accountability for what is produced and to a certain extent, to how the research will be used by others;
* add to already existing critical thinking tools to transform not only research ethics but also its methodology;
* role-model respectful relationships with all human beings while at the same time forcing us to be honest about our limitations and boundaries;

- possibly engage non-academics in their own research processes and support their own research goals; and
- interact with all our relations in a way that is not only relevant to the academic setting but also to our lives in general.

I believe that the possibilities for grounding the research in Indigenous knowledges has many implications that necessitate a constant rethinking, rechecking and restructuring when necessary. As I continue learning more theories that speak to the struggles that peoples experience in different areas, I realise the reluctance to engage in a truly respectful and reciprocal research relationship could be related to institutional and personal factors. On the one hand, I personally know that the tight deadlines and minimum funding makes it difficult, but not impossible, to engage in time-consuming processes that ensure accountability and responsibility in all we do. If we accept that respect and reciprocity mean more than saying "please" and "thank-you", but to challenge our actions and motives, then this means also a deep transformative process regarding how we operate in this world. On the other hand, the challenges of conducting research also imply that the lives of participants may also go through similar transformative processes. Further, if, as researchers, we are not equipped with proper support mechanisms to address these issues, how could we work with the communities in which we conduct research if this trust and respect is absent? These challenges inevitably surface in the research process.

Such institutional and personal barriers cannot be ignored and we need to also have support mechanisms worked into our research process. This means engaging in research that supports the community so that the community may support it in the face of adversity. I truly believe that honouring the knowledges, spirits and processes of the research itself will yield balance. What I mean is that, from the *Ceiba* tree, I have stated that there are forces that try to unbalance the universe. If we think of the challenges as forces that need balancing, then time, financial and intellectual constraints will not matter too much. Transcending the material with a more spiritually-centred notion of the implications of our actions, I believe, can have positive effects in working for, with and in relation to all parts that inform our realities, our universe and the future.

It is appropriate to end with an overview of a research model that is similar to what I propose. Russell Bishop's (1998) "model of critical and cultural consciousness" is an interesting example of the connections between different Indigenous cultures. Bishop is Māori from New Zealand, and it is our understanding that as Maya people, we are the Māori's "older siblings". The evidence is in our stories, art and songs. The six critical principles Bishop refers to, which Taurima and Cash (1999) outline, support my

concerns about research and the use of the *Ceiba* as research methods:

1. The knowledge carriers are the principal researchers (representation).
2. They control the knowledge (power/imposition).
3. Their stories are valid (representation).
4. The research is for their benefit and for the Māori community (benefits).
5. Māori mentors guarantee cultural safety for the knowledge carriers and the research facilitators (legitimation).
6. The research facilitators are accountable to the mentors who also formally initiate the project (accountability/initiation).

They further explain that these protocols are:

> living practice rather than only ... a document, [to ensure] that the major questions raised in Bishop's model are answered in ways that protect the knowledge carriers, ensure that the inquiry benefits the community, and support Maori language and cultural aspirations. Publication ensures that the inquiry process, no less than the knowledge gathered in the process, is "open", "public" "without disguise" (the meaning of *"Tumatanui"*). It is open for all to make their own judgments (Taurima & Cash, 2000, p. 4).

Conclusion

To end, I would like to reiterate that research is a complex endeavour that needs to remember and prioritise the values of respect, responsibility and accountability. My own journey in academia – especially in past research activities – has not been easy. Walking a path without clear guidance is not easy. I believe that this discussion facilitates a "coming home", a return to the roots that connect and clarify my role as a researcher. But mostly, I believe that it will help me further understand what I consider are the basic elements of knowing oneself, to relate to the metaphor of the *Ceiba*. Sylvia Maracle has said that:

> In trying to walk the traditional path there are four lifelong questions we ask ourselves: Who am I? In order to answer that I have to know: Where have I come from? And once I know where I have come from, I have to know: Where am I going? And once I know where I am going, I need to know: What is my responsibility? (Maracle, in Anderson, 2000, p. 40).

I try to conduct my research as best I can with the resources I have and with the awareness that it is my

responsibility to learn from my mistakes and to honour the wisdom from elders, ancestors and those spirits that guide my actions. To the spirits that have guided me thus far, through story, reversed situations and uncomfortable realisations I say *Maltyox*. May their wisdom be present in all I do.

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About the author

Vivian M. Jiménez Estrada is a Maya woman, born in Guatemala City, who migrated to Canada in 1988. She obtained a Bachelor (BES) and Master degree (MES) from the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University, where she also works as a researcher with the International Secretariat for Human Development. As a second year doctoral student at Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, her research focuses on the application of global Indigenous knowledges in "education", specifically as applied to the development of a Maya University in Guatemala. She is also interested on the interconnections between race, culture, gender and spirituality in education and knowledge production.