

The Indigenous Arts Center and Its Cultural Regeneration Model: An Exercise on Cultural Rights

Humberto García¹⁰⁰

Eneida Hernández¹⁰¹

Introduction

On this Totonaca land, a cultural process started over 20 years ago. The story begins with a major international festival, in the year 2000, in the spring of the new millennium. The purpose established by them was to show the world the archaeological area of El Tajín, having the living Totonaca culture as host.

The archaeological monuments zone El Tajín¹⁰² is located in the eastern Mexican territory, on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. According to the Totonacas, deities live in this sacred city. El Tajín and its Pyramid of the 365 Niches were declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1992. The Pyramid of the Niches is a building that symbolizes a solar calendar, possessing a unique beauty that embodies the knowledge and artistry of the ancient inhabitants of the Totonac lands. In this place was held the first Tajín Summit Festival during the spring of the new century. This event was proposed by the government of the state of Veracruz. Thus, the organization of an international festival would help to promote the heritage richness of this site and to attract visitors to the region. The event was also expected to generate economic income.

More than two decades later, we can say that the Tajín Summit Festival, also known as “The Identity Festival”, positioned itself as one of the most important events, not only in Mexico, but also internationally. It has allowed the region to become a major tourist attraction during the festival, which is always organized around the spring equinox. This is a high season for tourism service providers. This results in the generation of jobs and, therefore, economic income for its inhabitants.

100 Of Totonaco origin, pedagogue as a profession, current director of the Indigenous Arts Center (CAI). Creator of the cultural regeneration model from the Indigenous Arts Center. University academic with 19 years of experience.

101 Engineer of Nahuatl origin and founder of the Indigenous Arts Center. Current councilor for indigenous art processes CAI fosters in new generations.

102 This is the official denomination given by the National Anthropology and History Institute (INAH).

The Tajín Summit also led to the creation of the Takilhsukut Park for hosting the Festival and other massive events. The government of the state of Veracruz created a Public Trust for Administration and Operation of the Takilhsukut Park, through an official decree adopted in 2005, in order to ensure its management. This trust operates with an initial investment from the state government in assets, equipment, and facilities such as auditoriums, spaces for workshops, therapies, green areas, etc.

Since 2006, this place has become the headquarters of Xtaxkgakget Makgkaxtlawana/ The Artists' Glow, the Center for Indigenous Arts (CAI). The Center was selected in 2012 on the Register of Good Safeguarding Practices of UNESCO. This recognition has become a management key that has gradually allowed the position the Intangible Cultural Heritage from the Totonaca people in different scenarios.

For all these reasons, the cultural experience of the Totonacapan, supported by the Veracruz government, generated the conditions to create the CAI in 2006. The Center was established under the principles of public policy on social investment in education for indigenous peoples. Additionally, it recognizes creative diversity, promotes respect for intercultural dialogue, aims at decolonizing indigenous art, strengthens the self-management abilities of indigenous peoples, and supports regional development. All these public policy principles are established in local, national, and international laws endorsed by Mexico. In the CAI, we only proposed to make them effective, put them into practice, so that they were not mere words on the paper or speech.

The key motivation was a retrospective look to ancient Mexico, where pre-hispanic cultures had their own educational institutions to develop fundamental aspects for the continuity and development of civilizations. There were institutions such as *calmecac* and *telpochcalli*, where the governors and warriors were formed. But there were also the *cuicacalli* (singing houses), *xochikali* (sacred flower house), the paintings house, the maidens house (where they learned the art of dance and about life), and the healing house, among others.

The main intention was, and is still today, to forge the human heart. Likewise, to understand why we are here and to do what we need to do, with sense, with principles, discipline, commitment, and love. In short, bringing out the light in things. For these reasons, and also as a result of the approach to the Totonaca culture, the CAI has turned into a space for dialogue and exchange with academics and indigenous and non-indigenous artists. Here, managers are trained for a regional cultural regeneration process, from the art and culture of our indigenous peoples.

In this sense, we, the Totonacapan, revitalized a model of formation, research and artistic creation for cultural boosting. The Totonaca civilization has built a real, own institution that allows the healthy coexistence with the inherited heritage, giving meaning to Good *Living* from an indigenous standpoint.

In 17 years, the CAI has been consolidated as a family of dialog and exchange. A community of creators who gather to strengthen our knowledge, looking for our own ways to form the future's indigenous from our own language. We speak, we think and we act as Totonacas. All this as advised by the *Napuxkun Lakgkolon* (Grandmothers and Grandfathers' Council). With them we have built indigenous art schools/houses, such as: *Kantiyán* (Wisdom manor), flowery word house/school, traditional medicine house/school, cotton world house/school, traditional Totonaca pottery house/school, flyers house/school, music house/school, scenic representation house/school, traditional cuisine house/school, paintings house/school, carpentry house/school, land house/school, community tourism house/school, communication and dissemination media house/school, *xochikali*, the flower house/school, museology house/school, the CAI-UNAM project, music initiation house/school for children and youngsters, CAI in Zongolica and in Oluta.

As an Indigenous Arts Center, we are located in the community of El Tajín, in the city of Papantla. More precisely at the Takilhtsukut Park, 1 km away from the El Tajín archaeological zone, 7 km from the city of Papantla, 20 km from the city of Poza Rica, 228 km from the city and harbor of Veracruz, state of Veracruz, and 287 km from Mexico City.

The CAI is our educational institution with a holistic focus, specialized, public, and open, safeguarding our material, spiritual and natural cultural heritage from ancestral knowledge in the cultural, educational, and artistic spheres. With all that, we contribute to the continuity, the retrieval of our own ways of transmitting knowledge and wisdom, and the restitution of the social and spiritual meaning art has to the indigenous people.

The Center enforces the constitutional right of indigenous peoples to fully exercise their culture, their education, and the use of their language. It is also responsible for enforcing the enhancement and development of their ancestral knowledge, music, dance, health and use of media. Furthermore, it supports their unique methods of organizational work, conflict resolution, and holistic development, encompassing physical, mental, and spiritual aspects. To the Totonacas and Nahuas in Veracruz, art is not limited to aesthetics – it is conceived from the deep meaning of life itself to become better, full individuals. It strengthens the social cohesiveness, peace and regional development.

In this institution, indigenous people are the lead actors, guides, masters, creators, and academics. They are responsible for the analysis and discussion on what art represents for them. As well as proposing the way of teaching it, as an integral and holistic formative process in a public space. The educational model is the root of the formation. It systematizes and guides the art teaching processes that allow the apprentice to be more conscious of its meaning and value, as well as discover the Gift each person has.

Like no other teaching-learning center in Mexico, in the Indigenous Arts Center culture and arts are sources of wealth, creativity and economic, intellectual, and spiritual development.

Cultural regeneration model

The Cultural Control Theory is supported by the recognition of culture elements that peoples recognize as their own. That is, those on which they have full control in the processes of creation, design, production, use, handling, sharing and enjoyment. Imposed elements, those coming from colonial processes, some violent and others more subtle, are also included. Likewise, the appropriated elements, that is, those coming from other cultures, but that the group or people handle with their own decision, and which has its use under control, are analyzed. Other elements in this classification are those estranged, which are owned in their origin, but over which the ability to decide was lost, and those out of context and with no meaning to their creators.

From this foundation, the Cultural Regeneration method is created, proposed by Dr. Gustavo Esteva, who also dimensions the three different levels or scopes of the cultural existence:

The mythical plane, which would correspond to a tree root. This plane is not visible and nourishes the trunk, branches, flower, and fruits of the culture tree with meanings. "It is the world view, the vision of self, of the divine, human, time, space, spirituality, knowledge, wisdom..."

The structural plane corresponds to the tree trunk. It is partially visible and partially not visible, including the person's structure, family, social organization, institutions, ritual practices, and also linguistic structures and rules.

The morphological plane is completely visible, including language, technology, clothing, food, music, dance.

Over this methodological foundation, we proposed the creation of the Indigenous Arts Center. This is a project for education in arts that conveys to new generations the millennial legacy of the Totonaca ancestors, from their own concepts and forms – in other words, we proposed to create a School in our own way.

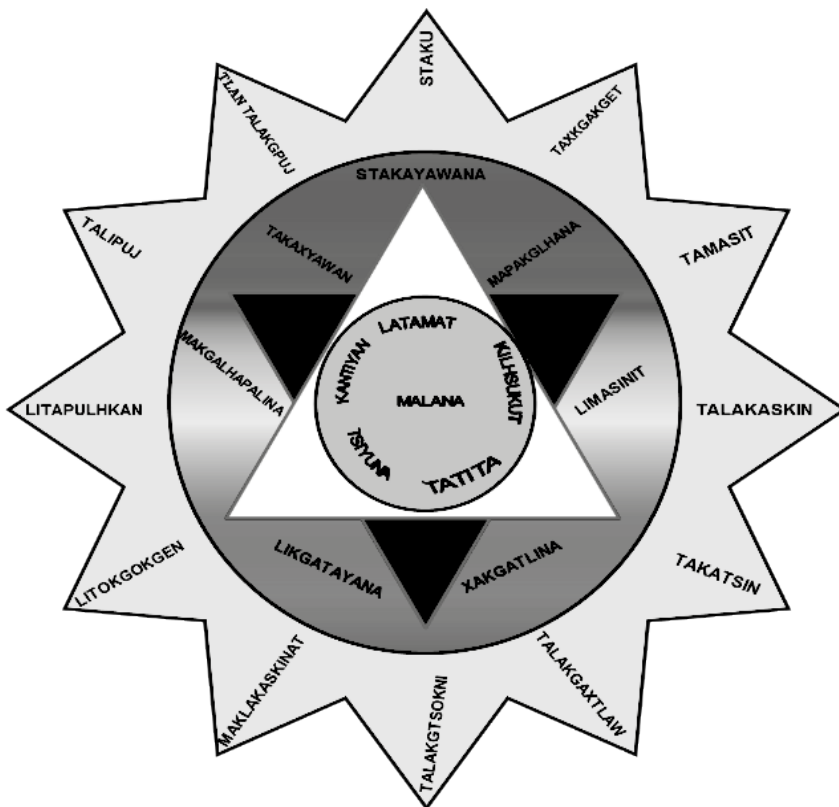
In the establishment of our Center, a diverse group was involved, including masters, elders, tradition keepers, ritualists, cultural promoters, community leaders, Totonac and Nahua artists, as well as academics. Representatives from the Totonac Council, the Indigenous Languages Academy, the Regional Unit on Popular Cultures, the Veracruzana University, and the System for Full Development of the Family were also engaged. Additionally, various traditional and cultural organizations emphasized that organizing ourselves and striving for a better future is the most effective way to validate our rights as indigenous people.

The fundamental element for its creation was, is and will be the use of indigenous language, the general and specific knowledge of indigenous art, the life philosophy that allowed the respectful dialog.

All the creators from CAI are highly sensitive persons aware of the indigenous identity and cultural diversity. Far from generating differences, we turned into a social capital for the good living because our principle is respectful dialog. In addition to the artistic techniques, one fundamentally learns the essence of the *tonaca being* from developing art.

The educational model is the root of the formation, it systematizes and guides the transmission-learning processes. This allows the apprentice to be more conscious of its meaning and value, as well as discover the Gift each person has – developing it will make their life more complete.

A twelve-point star is the symbol or representation of the educational model from CAI and articulates the Totonaca concepts. The center of the image represents life and its creators or deities. It symbolizes the circularity of existence, the inter-relationship between everything that is created.



Totonaca wise people say that, when there is life, it is reflected in green color: everything blossoms, the land is fertile, people smile, there is health, mind and body develop creatively. It is the spiritual part of teaching. The relation between artistic practices and their deities. It determines the holistic sense of the formation. It gives meaning to rituals and ceremonies that accompany the educational process.

The triangles represent duality: light/darkness, heaven/underworld, good/evil, man/woman, black/white; together, they symbolize perfect balance in life. Both aspects must be considered; otherwise, there will be chaos in the person's life. They establish full education, the complementarity of different types of art, and the importance of balance.

The third circle symbolizes the deep knowledge from creativity. Characters that intervene in the formative process are represented in it. Those keeping the knowledge to instruct, educate, guide, or redirect the student or apprentice.

The twelve vertices symbolize the number of times the moon is full during one year. For us, Totonacas, a full moon means good times for fertility, a timely moment to seed. The necessary elements for the pedagogical process and the teaching values are represented in this space. The Gift, a fundamental aspect for developing art, is in this plane.

Since the creation of CAI, the wisdoms from Totonaca art have been intrinsic elements that allowed us to generate good practice processes for the cultural indigenous policy. Through this, we have achieved recognition of cultural and creative diversity as a heritage of humanity from within. Knowing yourself and recognizing yourself as the bearer of great wisdom has been planted in the minds and heart of those who comprise the CAI family.

By fostering effective and respectful intercultural dialogue, we have learned to love one another as siblings, fighting discrimination and racism. This path has led us to decolonize the view on indigenous art, because we strengthen our creative abilities from our *Gift*.

Together, we have built our own educational model with holistic focus for transmission and learning of our millennial legacy, so that future generations are good people.

CAI: justice to the Totonaca people

The CAI has turned into a tireless advocate for the indigenous culture, working in close collaboration with local communities to revitalize and preserve their traditions. Its houses/schools offer a variety of educational programs that include teaching the tradition through artisan craft, traditional medicine, cuisine, dance, music and more. As mentioned before, this allowed CAI to be acknowledged internationally, receiving the prestigious recognition by UNESCO as Intangible Cultural Heritage in the Good Practices category.

Here, in these Totonaca lands, our grandparents lived, they founded the sacred city of Tajín. In this place are buried the bellybuttons from our parents. In this place are the

roots of our being. Here we have our legitimate right to belong from how we conceive life as indigenous people. Laws express it as it follows.

Article 4 of the Political Constitution of the United Mexican States establishes: Every person has the right to access culture and to enjoy the goods and services provided by the State in this matter, as well as to enforce their cultural rights. The State will promote the means for promotion and development of culture, tending to the cultural diversity in all its manifestations and expressions, with full respect to creative freedom. The law will establish the mechanisms for access to and participation in any cultural manifestation.

On the other hand, Article 5 of the Political Constitution of the State of Veracruz de Ignacio de la Llave recognizes that: The State has multicultural and multi-ethnic compositions sustained originally by its indigenous peoples. The law will promote and protect the development of their languages, cultures, uses, and habits, resources and specific forms of social organization.

In Article 2 of the Law on Rights and Indigenous Cultures for the State of Veracruz, there is assurance that: The indigenous peoples and communities have the right to self-determination, autonomy or self-government in issues related to their internal affairs, to preserve, revitalize or develop their own political, legal, economic, social, and cultural institutions.

More than political wills, we aim at enforcing laws to continue forming dignified citizens from the indigenous art standpoint.

The Indigenous Arts Center is an institution justified for its valuable work in safeguarding the people's cultural heritage. Also, because through it, we strengthen the transmission of millennial artistic work from indigenous art. In this sense, we contribute to the fight against discrimination and racism, because we promote with dignity our ancestral indigenous legacy in the local, regional, national, and international levels. Through this, we boost the economic, educational, social, artistic, and cultural development of our people, thereby contributing to the generation of other sustainable sources of income for indigenous families considered vulnerable. However, for us, they are bearers of artistic talent with greater possibilities of growth based on their own life models. We have bet on it, and this has given good and great results, such as the distinction by UNESCO.

This recognition reinforces the purpose and existence of this Arts Center. The Center is not only focus on technique. It emphasizes the formation of worthy human beings, with abilities, craftsmanship, attitudes, values, and development of the spirituality of each individual who participates in it, since we consider ourselves a true family.

Present challenges

The Indigenous Arts Center in Veracruz represents a beacon of hope and a role model for preservation and promotion of the cultural heritage in Mexico and the world. However, despite its remarkable achievements, the CAI also faces challenges that must be addressed to ensure a brighter and more sustainable future for cultural heritages.

It has not been an easy process – despite the progress that allowed the recognition by UNESCO, we have faced major hurdles. The first challenge was to convince the Totonacas so they could believe in our proposal as a serious project. We had to explain that they would be the masters and would have control over the way to convey their legacy. It was hard work because for several years they had to endure the imposition of models of education and life.

The national homogenizing educational system has been one of the main agents for acculturation of our original peoples. “School hurts us,” our grandparents said.

We know of the long night they endured in official schools – for a long time they could not speak their own language, exercise their culture in exchange of aspiring to be “incorporated to progress”. Our great cultural diversity was considered “an obstacle to development”.

Another challenge we have had to face in CAI, a permanent one, is to communicate worlds – that is, to enforce the recognition to our diversity, to the fact that we are a multicultural country and that a respectful and effective dialog must be boosted in the cultural interaction.

Our indigenous peoples have had to develop strategies for resistance and survival in refuge spaces. Not only geographic, which are increasingly limited, but also in the family and ritual spaces, at times masking the true meaning of own concepts and forms.

Globalization and modernization frequently endanger traditional cultural practices. The urbanization and migration of indigenous communities to cities may result in the loss of their culture and disappearance of their language. Also, the transmission of knowledge and traditions to younger generations often faces challenges. The lack of interest among young people and the competition with global cultural influences may hamper the continuity of cultural practices.

Therefore, CAI still faces challenges that require urgent attention:

- Limited resources: insufficient funding frequently limits the ability of CAI to expand its projects and meet its goals.
- Awareness and participation: despite the efforts, many people are not yet aware of the importance of CAI and the need to preserve intangible cultural heritages. Also, it is crucial to foster active participation from local governments in preservation efforts.
- Long-term sustainability: to ensure a sustainable future for CAI, it is essential to develop long-term funding strategies and create succession plans to ensure the true continuity of cultural regeneration.

Solutions for a better future

To achieve a more promising future for CAI and for the cultural heritage it represents, here are a few key recommendations:

- Increase financial support: governments, cultural organizations and private donors must increase their financial support to CAI to allow the free sovereignty of its governance.
- Development of alliances: collaborate with other cultural organizations and governmental entities to strengthen CAI's capacity and expand its reach.

As mentioned, the Indigenous Arts Center in Veracruz is a beacon of hope in the effort to preserve and revitalize indigenous cultural heritages. With continued support and long-term vision, we can ensure that this important work continues fulfilling its role. Through investment, education, and support from organizations, we can make sure that this cultural wealth continues to be transmitted in future generations and to the world altogether.