

Audiovisual Minga! Co-creating Community Stories While Building Intercultural Partnerships in Higher Education

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Abstract

In 2016 the authors designed an educational interaction for U.S. college students (Northeastern University, Boston, MA USA) and Kichwa indigenous media makers (Otavalo, Ecuador) to support community initiatives while opening students to different cultural frameworks and ways of being. Three iterations of this course (2016, 2017 and 2023) initiated our experiments in intercultural media co-creation in higher education. Our adaptive and responsive curriculum reaches across cultural, geographic, and socio-political borders to explore a more just and equitable media ecosystem. The methodologies are based on the Kichwa values of minga and ranti ranti (shared work and reciprocity). These Kichwa structures guide pre-production, story development, film production, film screenings, and the collaborative partnerships with nature and community. Through this indigenous led, indigenous centered engagement students begin to recognize and question individual values underpinning western viewpoints rooting their contribution from their distinct cultural position while interrogating it. By co-creating community stories from an indigenous perspective, we build curricula that strengthen intercultural partnerships, changing how we think and design for the future.

Keywords: Narrative Sovereignty, Indigenous Self-Representation, Reciprocity, Co-creation, Higher Education, Teaching

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Introduction

A “pluriverse” is a world within which many worlds fit. The Zapatistas popularized this term through their land struggles in Chiapas (Escobar, 2018, p. 68). By contrast, a One World World (OWW) Western paradigm is commonly reinforced in academic institutions in the United States (Escobar, 2018, p. 66). To challenge this paradigm, we designed a course that brought together university students from Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts, USA, and members of the Association of Audiovisual Producers Kichwas (APAK) in Otavalo, Ecuador. We built co-learning partnerships between Northeastern, APAK, and Kichwa communities, co-creating audiovisual materials to strengthen community initiatives while exposing Northeastern participants to different ways of thinking and being.

About Us

Samia Maldonado is a Kichwa Otavalo woman born in Imbabura and a founding member of the Asociación de Productores Audiovisuales Kichwa (APAK). David Tamés, the son of Cuban immigrants, grew up in Florida and is now a media maker teaching in Boston, Massachusetts. Cristina Herdoíza, an APAK producer, was born in Quito and raised in a Western household. Throughout her life, she has immersed herself in Kichwa communities, which have radically influenced her life choices and thinking. Jean Schmitt, who came from a middle-class academic upbringing in the United States, raised her son in a bilingual/bicultural household spanning two continents—incorporating English and Spanish languages, and U.S. white and Ecuadorian mestizo middle-class cultures. She currently teaches and maintains an artist studio at the University of Arkansas.

Together with students, we practice *Minga Audiovisual*, APAK's method of community audiovisual production adapted from the traditional Kichwa minga—shared work for the benefit of all. As we engage in minga—writing, teaching, making videos, and entering community spaces—we recognize how our distinct worldviews influence our participation in shared work.

Kichwa Self-Representation in the Media

Audiovisual production is not traditional to the Kichwa-Otavalo, a people with a rich oral tradition. Community distrust of photography and filmmaking developed over a century as Western-extracted images either romanticized or degraded Kichwa people, with no economic or cultural returns to their communities. This history led to both widespread rejection of being portrayed or recorded and disinterest in learning media-making processes.

Minga Audiovisual: Adapting Minga to Mediamaking

In contrast, minga is very familiar. Kichwa mingas extend back as far as memory allows, centered on Ayllu kinship relationships based on common origins and territories. In Kichwa communities, minga, the shared work, occurs daily in construction, planting, harvesting, organizing festivities, and as a response to solving anything that the community or its members need.

APAK's Edison Muenala describes their approach to community filmmaking: "We were searching for a way of doing and teaching. From conventional filmmaking knowledge it was not possible. So we thought: what if we are guided by our own ways of doing things, what is

common for everyone, so that everyone understands what it is about? This thought led us to break with established media-making processes. So we keep doing minga and more minga. Through these forms, we practice culture, strengthen bonds, and self-represent the vitality and value of the Kichwa Native Peoples.”

In 2009, APAK launched the television program *Bajo un Mismo Sol (Under the Same Sun)*, featuring the Peoples and Nationalities of Northern Ecuador in alliance with audiovisual producers from various Indigenous nationalities of the coast and Ecuadorian Amazon. For over 15 years, the program has documented crucial aspects of Indigenous life and knowledge, including *Sumak Kawsay* (good living), territorial defense, language revitalization, traditional crafts, ancestral stories, and Andean music. The broader initiative includes programming that actively works to challenge social prejudices about Indigenous language, food, cultural practices, and education, while preserving traditional knowledge like ancestral medicine and midwifery practices. Through this programming, APAK claims the right to audiovisual communication with self-representation of their own narratives in ancestral languages. Due to the program's longevity, a new generation of Kichwa media makers has grown up watching it.

Welcoming Western Participants

In welcoming Western participants into the minga, *los mingueros* (minga participants) experience both balances and imbalances in our distinct ways of thinking and being. This occurs through what we could call "ruptures"—when fixed borders or differences dissolve into a shared relational space, leading to openness and receptivity. We all feel the tensions that lead us to interrogate Western worldviews.

In 2016, we planned the first *Latitude 0* course for Northeastern University. The main goal was to expose students to ways of thinking and being very different from their own in a transformational way while supporting community initiatives through audiovisual production. This early APAK/Northeastern partnership allowed us to design encounters where participants could share non-hierarchical spaces, where cultural, geographic, socio-political, and economic borders could be explored as territories of encounter rather than divisions. Through multiple iterations of the course (2016, 2017, & 2023), we are learning that built into the age-old cultural practice of minga and, by extension, *Minga Audiovisual*, we find adaptive, responsive, immersive, and non-hierarchical educational and filmmaking methods that can lead the way in transforming both higher education curriculum design and Indigenous community filmmaking methods.

In minga, participants recognize each other as equals. Throughout the process, everyone is under everyone's gaze, approving and failing, mutually sharing knowledge and experience. *Minga Audiovisual* is concrete and relational: it produces an audiovisual product while also building important relationships between all participants—Community (family), Community, University, and APAK. These relationships aren't accidental—they're carefully cultivated by all parties, with APAK's family-based (ayllu) structure helping to establish genuine connections with communities and other participants.

Film Example: Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama

One example film from 2023 is titled "*Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*" ("*The Water Rituals of Warmi Razu Mama*"). In this film, the Kichwa community of Tunibamba shares

their sacred water ritual with non-Kichwa participants to highlight the importance of their sacred land and to welcome tourists to participate in the ritual. In the film, two Northeastern students join two Tunibamba elders for the ritual and then encourage others to take part. This film was produced through audiovisual minga and embodies many of the strengths of the process. As we discuss the stages of minga, we'll describe stills from the film that highlight each stage. The 4-minute, 9-second film can be viewed in its entirety here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Af7q3v2XjA-jgRvS-_z-2X4Zo42ZQWxx/view?usp=sharing

Stages

For a process to be considered minga, all stages must be completed to everyone's satisfaction. If any stages are skipped, it is not considered minga. Below, we describe the stages, highlighting audiovisual and intercultural dynamics. We begin with the final stage and then proceed in chronological order.

Watapa Tuparishun.

Watapa Tuparishun is the reflection stage of minga. Through various feedback formats—including group reflection and sharing, feedback meetings, and written reflection—relational and technical aspects of the process emerge that may have gone unnoticed. Experiences, observations, and sensations are recorded, and technical and logistical notes serve to improve the next *Minga Audiovisual*.

In our projects, feedback sessions occurred between the university and APAK; students, community, APAK, and teachers; field producers, APAK, and teachers; and within APAK internally. In 2023, we paid special attention to group cohesion and teamwork. We recognized the importance of community producers and communities. One behind-the-scenes group visited all communities but did not establish a relationship with any single representative, community, or place. This group showed the least cohesion, which impacted their experience and understanding of minga. We also found that groups that maintained clear roles while remaining flexible built the strongest camaraderie and trust. This minga-inspired flexibility provides an alternative to competitive structures in higher education.

Tandanakushun.

Tandanakushun means "Let's unite! Let's organize!" This call triggers community action with a clear purpose. Because minga is an ancient tradition, this call is not thought, but felt. This stage is about welcoming. In our *Minga Audiovisual*, the welcoming stage began on the first day in Otavalo. This meeting took place in the APAK studios with community producers and families, APAK, and Northeastern participants. APAK welcomed students, community members, and teachers. We became *mingueros* (minga participants), sharing experiences and expectations for the minga. Intercultural *Tandanakushun* is about considering how worldviews influence each person's engagement with the process. As each participant shares, we all feel welcome.

The opening scene of "*Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*" features a Tunibamba community member offering a welcoming message. The subtitle reads: "Greetings to all who watch this video, you are cordially invited to get to know the Tunibamba Community." This shot serves as an invitation for all viewers to learn about the sacred water ritual and the community (Figure 1).

Wankurishun.

Wankurishun is the call for collective unity and the stage where all *mingueros* commit to community work, providing ideas and technical knowledge to achieve goals. In *wankurishun*, community producers introduce their community through photos, videos, maps, and other materials. We learn about the community's connections to territory, ideas, knowledge, history, memory, and needs for the audiovisual product. This is when the collective fabric begins to find its shape, enabling forward movement.

Groups form, including teams of four students, a community producer, a technical producer, an APAK facilitator, and when possible, a translator. Ideas begin to emerge. A structure develops as the team reveals their skills, which are matched with the community producer's vision. *Minga* values knowledge from both thinking and *senti/pensar* (feel/thinking)—knowledge born from the combination of thinking and feeling. Rather than fostering competition, *mingas* thrive on the mutual recognition and validation of each person's talents, skills, strengths, limitations, and character. For video production, this phase results in co-produced pre-production documents that structure the community production day.

In the film, the *wankurishun* extends to a unity and commitment to nature central to community beliefs. Several scenes strengthen the connection with, and commitment to, the land and traditions of Tunibamba. The title frame features blue text, "*Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*," against a backdrop of snow-capped Cotacachi, the sacred mountain, centering the importance of territory to the community (Figure 2). Another scene shows a sweeping view of the Andean landscape with the two elders and students walking along a hillside path. (Figure 3.) Draped in clouds, the mountains and valley below provide context for the film's setting. Along the path, one of the elders stops to gather medicinal plants. The elder pauses among yellow wildflowers. He speaks in Kichwa with the subtitle: "Mama Razu, I ask your permission to collect these plants since I need them to heal myself as well as my family" (Figure 4). The presence of the community at every stage, ensures that scenes will reinforce connections to nature and territory.

Uchay Uchay.

Uchay Uchay translates to "little-by-little, step-by-step, together." This phase includes the production day inside the community. During this phase, we photograph and record video and sound according to the plan. Many relational aspects also come to the forefront. The community producers open their community for the first time. As they welcome university students, there is uncertainty about how they will perceive the differences they encounter. Community producer Susana Oyagata noticed how Western participants' individual perspectives are greatly challenged when they first enter the communities. She speaks about the moment when everything begins to flow: "*Hay que solidarizarles!*" ("We have to bring them into a state of solidarity") (Susana Oyagata, personal communication, June 2, 2023). This happens in the down times as community time unfolds—accompanied by small rituals, silences, listening to others and the territory, carrying equipment, helping each other, snacking, warming up, dancing, and embracing the unexpected. Even language barriers diminish during bus ride conversations, bouncing in the back of a pickup, or everyone eating with their hands at a *pampa mikui* (outdoor communal meal during filming).

During any *minga* stage, roles may change. Nothing is rigid. While defined roles are important, they can vary. The *minga* goal is concrete and holistic. Roles shift to best meet the

common goal. *Mingueros* show initiative, commitment, and fluidity while a common will prevails and decision-making responds to the common objective. A *minguero* assigned to camera may also end up recording sound. This flexible structure removes hierarchies, and competition dissipates. Everything flows!

Entering the communities for the first time brings forth ruptures. For most Kichwas, opening their territory to others is sacred and includes reciprocity with the space and the community that welcomes us. Physical permissions are granted by territory and community leaders. Spiritual permissions come from the territory itself and everything that lives in it. The latter requires opening for Western participants and provides an opportunity for examination. By entering the community in this way, all activities become fluid and without problems.

In the community, on production day, experience is the greatest teacher. A scene from "*Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*," shows a close-up shot of bare feet walking on muddy ground scattered with yellow leaves (Figure 5). Walking barefoot on the muddy path emphasizes the direct connection between people and earth during the ritual. Removing one's shoes when entering the sacred space is a sign of respect and a way to connect directly with the earth. For one Northeastern student participating in the water ritual, the transformative moment came when they learned they needed to remove their shoes. They realized that their job was to absorb, and when they felt the mud beneath their feet, they knew this experience would be spiritual, but not comfortable (Student interview, June 6, 2023).

Chapashun

Chapashun means "let's review, let's evaluate, let's see how it goes." This stage launches the post-production filmmaking phase and begins with reflection on the community production day. Community producers and students reflect upon and share how it felt, what they learned, what they would change, one phrase to describe their experience, an incredible image, and whether they met their objectives for production. After sharing impressions, the editing phase begins. Students distribute footage and begin putting scenes together. The scenes are shared among the group, with the community producer's input critical to ensuring the community's self-representation. In the editing phase, the community producer represents the community's perspective and voice.

During the previous *minga* stages, group bonds are strengthened through strong community relationships. This growing empathy shapes design decisions throughout. Community-centered design decisions ensure self-representation, including attention to the importance of color, symbols, sounds, and music. There are many "have-to's" that become clear. In the title scene of "*Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*," the mountain represents the essential connection to territory while the sound design includes the sounds of the sacred waterfall mixed with the deep, resonant blow of the *churro*, the conch shell horn that serves as both music and a welcoming call. All three elements needed to be present to open the film in a way that centered the community's values. This constant presence of the community through the participation of the community producer de-emphasizes the sense of a big evaluative moment so common in higher education. Instead, we are reminded that throughout *minga*, all *mingueros* are under everyone's gaze, approving and failing, sharing knowledge and experience so all *mingueros* bring forth their best efforts toward the highest quality common goal for the common good.

Imakuanta Rikushun.

In *Imakuanta Rikushin*, we hold a community screening and celebration. Communities come together to share food, reflections, and learning. In this stage, video, audio, photography, and graphic design files obtained during the *minga* are returned to the community. The documented wisdom, practices, and traditions go back to their source—the community itself. Returning knowledge to the community is the ultimate closure.

Representatives from students, community producers, APAK, and communities share their impressions and experiences of working together. Community members give *medianos* (gifts for students, teachers, and APAK). These are foods considered valuable, usually fruits and grains, as well as handmade crafts like bracelets for each *minguero*.

Mingueros also celebrate with music and dance. This vibrant moment was captured through spontaneous video documentation. In the video, APAK technical producer Edison Muenala leads the *mingueros* in a circular dance. The sequence shows a crowded indoor space with participants arranged in a circle, following traditional Kichwa dance movements. Community members dance with Northeastern students and teachers, reflecting the intercultural nature of our work together. The joyful atmosphere is evident in the hearty laughter visible in several frames. Someone in the background documents the moment with a phone held high, while others are fully immersed in the dance. The act of dancing in a circle while stamping feet is traditionally connected to "waking the earth" through rhythmic movements. This moment embodies intercultural *Minga Audiovisual*, dissolving borders into shared relational spaces where the shared work and reciprocity lead to new bonds based on openness and receptivity.

As the credits roll, the closing scene of "*Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*" shows another moment of spontaneous dance emerging. The scene captures people dancing in a circle on a muddy road, with misty mountains in the background (Figure 6). This wasn't a planned shot but emerged organically, and everyone danced. Students described being barefoot, wet, tired, and hungry after the production day. But when the elder, Taita Rafael declared that *minga* ends with dance, they thought, "We're going to dance, this is how we do it." The students' realization that "co-creation was happening" right there, with sound equipment still rolling, and another's epiphany that "it's not about me, it's about the spirituality of the group" describes the moment when exhaustion and discomfort gave way to communal spirit and collective practice.

Conclusion

Minga Audiovisual and the IAFOR Experience, Reflections by Jean Schmitt

I come from the middle of the United States which, by some measures, may be considered the belly of the beast. I'm thinking about Baden Offord's analogy, where we cross the river (of our overlapping contemporary crises) through established ways over the bridge and by responsive/collective ways using a raft (Baden Offord, 2024). I'm also thinking about Yirga Voldeyes' call to participate in different learning structures (Yirga Gelaw Woldeyes, 2024). I hope our work with intercultural *Minga Audiovisual* might explore what building a common raft and experimenting with alternative learning structures might look like.

I'm an artist teaching at the epicenter of Western One World World thinking, where the concept of nature and human relationships involves separation, invisibility, and reinforcement

of hierarchies. I don't just want to help my art and design students get off the bridge; I'm very interested in building rafts to cross together at the river's rhythm.

In our *Minga Audiovisual* project, it might look like this: We'll celebrate our exit from the bridge as a prefabricated path. I'll meet with our Kichwa collaborators and think about how to design the most incredible raft possible... And immediately they might say, "Well... have you considered? Here the river moves very differently. Can you feel how the current changes? Faster, then slower. Can you see how the river will change depending on how we relate to it? Let's listen to everyone, especially those closest to this stretch of the river." Big Western ideas might lead to shipwreck; knowledge of the river implies memory, experience, and wisdom that comes from lived and shared relationships. Perhaps we might integrate with the river while crossing it. This way is very different from the commonly followed one.

The call to participate in intercultural *Minga Audiovisual* opens the possibility of living a unique experience, trusting the river and the people closest to it, regardless of how tumultuous the waters may be.

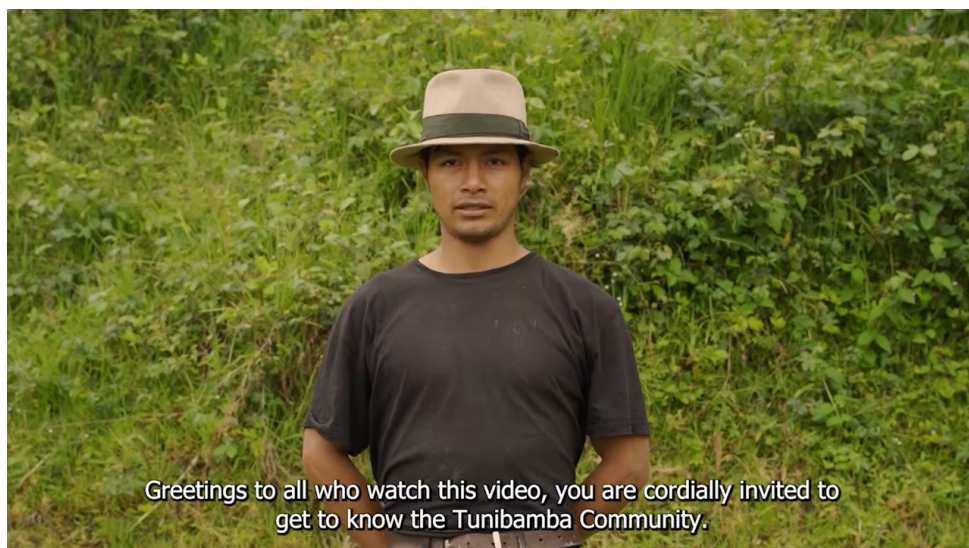


Figure 1: Film Still From *Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*



Figure 2: Film Still From *Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*



Figure 3: Film Still From *Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*. Tayta Rafaél Pérez, community producer.



Figure 4: Film Still From *Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*. Tayta Rafael Panamá, ceremonialist.



Figure 5: Film Still From *Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*



Figure 6: Still From Documentation Video of the Imakuanta Rikushun



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Figure 7: Film Still From *Rituales de Agua Warmi Razu Mama*

Declaration of Generative AI and AI Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

Claude.ai was used as a translating aid as the authors wrote collaboratively in both English and Spanish. Claude.ai also assisted with the basis for some image descriptions, as well as improving language to remove redundancies and create a better flow.

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