

## **El Pueblo Xinka, Presente!: Key Learnings from Our Presentation at the 2025 International Indigenous Voices in Social Work Conference**

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### **Abstract**

In 2011, the Indigenous Xinka people of Southeastern Guatemala emerged on the national and international stage as thousands of community members protested against the Escobal mining project—the second-largest in Guatemala's history. Xinka activism is deeply rooted in their cosmology, which emphasizes living in harmony and balance with *Nuestra Madre Tierra* (our Mother Earth). Within this worldview, Xinka are bound to the protection and defense of the natural world, understanding that humans are sustained by *Madre Tierra*, the giver of life, and thus must maintain a careful balance in their way of life, resource use, and reciprocal care for her.

The Escobal mine is a devastating example of how colonial and imperialist projects engage in extractivism, plundering natural resources for profit. Indigenous Xinka bodies are continuously targeted by a racist, capitalist system that exploits their labor in agriculture while simultaneously destroying the land through mining. Since the Xinka community began resisting the mine, numerous organizers have been killed. This brutality is part of a historical pattern: during the Guatemalan Civil War, over 200,000 Indigenous people were murdered and 40,000 disappeared. This presentation examines the last 15 years of Xinka struggle, specifically highlighting the intersection of extractivism and the exploitation of Indigenous bodies—particularly Indigenous women and children. It argues that decolonization must also mean depatriarchalization. Through examples of Xinka organizing, it explores how their movement protects both land and community, offering critical lessons in the ongoing dignified struggle for autonomy over ancestral lands, and Indigenous bodies.

### **Indigenization Statement**

David Nisthal's lineage originates from the Xinka territories of Jutiapa, Guatemala. Born on Ramaytush Ohlone lands (San Francisco, CA) and now residing in Honolulu, O'ahu, Hawai'i, he is a Faculty Instructor in the Thompson School of Social Work and a third-year PhD student in the College of Education. His work focuses on the impacts of colonization on identity and

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wellbeing in classrooms, with research centered on Indigenous social movements and Xinka political identity formation.

Citlalli (Star) Mauricio is a Two-Spirit individual whose work focuses on community education, technology, and Indigenous language revitalization across Hawai‘i, Turtle Island (North America), and Abya Yala (Latin America). Their ancestral lineage is rooted in the Nahua and Chichimeca Jonaz pueblos (communities) of Central Mexico, with ties to Guamare, Maya Yucatec, Maya Poqomam, and Chibcha communities.

### **Introduction**

The International Indigenous Voices in Social Work Conference (IIVSW), held at the University of Calgary in August, 2025, brought together Indigenous healing practitioners, scholars, elders, students, and community members committed to wellbeing, social justice and transformative social work. Our presentation, “El Pueblo Xinka, Presente!”, shared teachings from Xinka contemporary resistance to extractivism, and frameworks guided by Xinka principles and values. Drawing from community histories, women-led organizing, and Xinka cosmovision, we reflected on how Indigenous social movements articulate counter-realities to colonial systems while embodying teachings passed down from generations. This manuscript offers key learnings from our presentation and contributes to the ongoing conversation on Indigenous resistance.

### **Xinka Cosmovision & Living Territory**

A foundational principle for Xinka peoples is that territory is a living relational network consisting of the natural world: rivers, mountains, sky, cosmos, ancestors, and human and non-human kin. Territory is inseparable from the body—what Maya and Xinka scholar articulates as the “Cuerpo-Territorio” framework (Cabnal, 2016). Balance with Ixiwá and Tata Tiwix (creative life forces) shapes communal reciprocity, ethical decision-making, and pathways to healing. In

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this worldview, land defense is not solely ecological, but it is also relational and tied to Xinka cosmology and bodily autonomy.

### **Historical Continuities of Xinka Resistance**

We discussed Xinka resistance from the 1500s to the present, demonstrating that contemporary resurgence is rooted in centuries of dignified resistance and cultural continuity. Xinka peoples resisted Spanish invasion, enslavement, catechization, racial classification, and dispossession. Despite genocidal policies and attempts to erase Xinka identity, the Xinka pueblos protected their teachings, language, and ceremonies through everyday practice and communal land stewardship. Today's resurgence is therefore not new, but a continuation of an ancestral commitment to protecting life, and Mother Earth.

### **The Escobal Mine as a Contemporary Site of Colonial Brutality**

We presented the case of the Escobal mine in southeastern Guatemala, operated by a Canadian corporation that did not provide Free, Prior, and Informed Consent to Xinka or any other Indigenous community in the region. Although community referenda showed an overwhelming opposition, military repression, intimidation, and criminalization intensified. Water contamination and disruption of Xinka spatiality further harmed Xinka communities. This case demonstrates how transnational extractivism repeats colonial logics by exploiting Indigenous land as resource, enacting state-sponsored brutality, and undermining Indigenous governance systems.

### **Indigenous Women's Leadership and Cuerpo-Territorio**

A central emphasis in our presentation was the leadership of Xinka women defenders, particularly “Asociacion de Mujeres Indigenas de Santa Maria Xalapan Jalapa” (AMISMAXAJ), who articulate the inseparability of land and body. Xinka women face gendered violence such as harassment, militarization, and targeted threats, which are intended to fracture community resistance. Despite this, women lead transformative work: communal gardens, political education, storytelling circles, and the reclamation of ceremony and autonomy. Their leadership teaches that the liberation of territory requires the liberation of women's bodies and identities.

### **The Creator Complex and Colonial Distortions**

The “Creator Complex” describes a colonial worldview in which colonial men position themselves as the ultimate authority over creation, replacing Indigenous systems of relationality and reciprocity with hierarchy, control, and domination. By elevating a singular male creator, colonial theology justifies patriarchal power, land theft, forced conversion, and the erasure of women, Two-Spirit, and queer roles central to Indigenous societies. This framework commodifies the Earth, knowledge, and healing, imposed uniform standards of language, governance, and theology, and recast storytelling to privilege colonial narratives. The Creator Complex thus represents not only a theological shift but a comprehensive system of social, political, and ecological domination.

### **Tekuan Pathways for Resistance**

Our presentation highlighted teachings from the four sacred Tekuan mountains—Ipala, Jumay, Tekuan Bu, and Alutate—each offering relational guidance for resistance and community wellbeing, and providing a counter-narrative to the Creator Complex:

- **Alutate:** kinship, reciprocity, interdependence; modeled through the milpa system
- **Tekuan Bu:** story sovereignty, memory, and narrative integrity
- **Jumay:** the responsibility to protect Mother Earth
- **Ipala:** spirit, ceremony, and cosmovision as ethical foundations.

This framework can help to move social work beyond crisis response toward relational, land-based, and spiritually grounded practice.

### **Story as Memory, Healing and Resurgence**

We shared a Xinka creation story that we titled “Made of Clay, Passed Through Fire” as a reminder that Xinka identity is forged through struggle, resistance, and communal responsibility. Stories carry memory, cosmology, and ground political strategy, and hold space for diaspora to reconnect with ancestors, heal intergenerational wounds, and enact ethical commitments to ancestral communities.

### **Implications for Indigenous Social Work**

Our key implications for practice include:

1. Indigenous worldviews must guide the frameworks of social development, not merely complement Western models.

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2. Cueropo-territorio (land-body) autonomy is central to wellbeing and must be integrated into social work practice.
3. Story, ceremony, and memory are legitimate forms of knowledge and healing.
4. Social work must uphold Indigenous autonomy, including Free, Prior, and Informed Consent.
5. Diasporic Indigenous peoples hold responsibilities to both ancestral homelands and the Indigenous territories they inhabit.

### **Conclusion**

The Xinka contemporary movement teaches us that Indigenous resistance is relational and rooted in the living territory. Our presentation at the IIVSW conference affirmed that Indigenous communities across the world share commitments to defending land, life, and collective wellbeing. As Xinka, Nahua and Chichimeca presenters living in Hawai‘i, we continue to learn what it means to walk with intention, autonomy, and dignified resistance.

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