Kai: Restoration of the Native Forest for the Conservation of the Craft Tradition of the Pilwa of Lake Budi

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Abstract. The Budi Lake territories are inhabited by Mapuche Lafkenche communities, where their artisans develop the pilwa -bag woven in Chupón fiber- as a traditional craft. The pilwa has been recognized by state organizations for its cultural and ecological value. However, its raw material, the "kai" or Chupón, is declared a vulnerable species. This condition has generated in institutions such as FIA Foundation for Agricultural Innovation, to allocate public resources for its conservation, introducing foreign concepts into the territory for the plant cultivation, which includes the inclusion of plastic in the Mapuche territories. The present paper investigates the cultural aspects of resistance to this vision, and in particular, to the elements of the Mapuche worldview attributed to the species and native forest. The study is based on interviews with Mapuche leaders, indigenous communities and families of Pilwa artisans, who in 2018 raised a project to restore the native forest, for the preservation of the Chupón species and the handcrafted tradition. This project was not funded by the Common Fund. Despite the Mapuche artisan families of the Pilwa, they have started a native forest conservation process in private estates to promote the sustainable land use and maintain the cultural relationship with nature. The findings are expected to support the future community presentation of a native forest restoration project around Lake Budi.

1. Introduction

“That's why it has come back now. Smart people are doing basketry everywhere. We have not forgotten it either. So nowadays the basketry has been reworked but the basketry formerly, since before it was done. Now it is being substituted, but there is not much chupón in our mountains. It is running out because people burn and clean their land, as there is no more. As we do it, I hope that the chupón is not lost and in the same way we will not allow the mapuchezungun to be lost. That is why the students are now working this way, “rescue” they say. And if educators, young people and children work this way then they will learn how they worked in the past... they do not know well, but they will learn.

Only that, brother” [1] [2]
Norma Huenten addresses the brother and talks with the ancient past about the importance of the Mapuche culture and its spiritual bond with nature. She expresses the dispute of the Mapuche people for their territories and the struggle for their social, cultural and political autonomy. The balance with nature has been broken and she makes a call of conscience to humanity, since by losing a natural element we irreversibly lose a cultural element. This statement constitutes a cry of denunciation in the face of the devastation of Nature’s assets that we observe every day.

This text states an approach to the vision of the Mapuche Lafkenche people on different dimensions of the Budi territory, expressed from narrations obtained between 2016-2019, which articulate a two-voice narrative, the first of its inhabitants and the second of background and research. It seeks to account for the differences between cultural and economic conceptions that have stressed this territory.

2. On the Mapuche territory of Lake Budi

“The famous place of the Budi as it was known in this case by the Spaniards and previously called Budi that can have two meanings, one meaning is “füdü” (partridge) and the other is “furi” (from behind). In this territory there is the largest number of indigenous communities in the region... with 80% offspring of the Mapuche communities, this is a Mapuche indigenous reserve, in this case from Chile, because all the communities are in the Budi” [3]

When we talk about Mapuche territory, we talk about a political claim. Naming “old lands” or representing the territory on a map, establishes its existence and constitutes an interpretation “rather on a representative level, as an individual or collective “speech act,” built from social relations and their practices... the Mapuche “territory” or “territoriality” does not exist in itself, but corresponds primarily to a set of representations... of the social world [4]. The Budi is inhabited by the Mapuche Lafkenche people and is made up of material and immaterial elements, which also involves the enjoyment of land and natural resources by their communities and considers the political, economic, social and cultural self-management of space [5]. This territorial space includes not only the people who inhabit it, but also all the composing elements (animals, plants, spiritual beings, hills, estuaries, etc.) [6].

“The territory (of the Budi) in the natural environment of trees, hills and wetlands, is defined by groves that define the ancient forest... In the human and cultural environment, communities continue to retain part of their traditions, names of communities are preserved and some of their rituals or most of the rituals, annually or every two years a “nguillatun” is made, a prayer made to the humanity for the balance, in this case, of the cosmos...” [3]

The balance between human beings and nature and the reciprocity principle present in the Mapuche culture favoured, as in other native peoples, the use of “traditional land use practices” that “allowed a pattern of mimetic, complex and integrative use, in which they mainly used forest clearings and lowlands for cultivation and grazing” [7], “benefiting the biological and conservation self-control mechanisms” [8].

“The forest is very important for everyone, both for the Mapuche and for the non-Mapuche, the land, the water, everything is a connection. The forest has a lot of spirituality ... the forest is similar to the Mapuche family, because there is a father, a mother and children and each of these plants fulfills a function of “lawen” (remedy), a function of spirituality ... and among themselves there are plants that are more adapted than others. In this case the forest is like the Mapuche family, if there is a small tree wanting to grow, the native forest does let it grow. Not so for the introduced one that does not let it grow. The forest is like the Mapuche family, it has been eliminated as many of the ecosystems, and it has been degrading ...” [3]

But the Mapuche people are not the only ones who have developed a territorial interpretation. The State, through economic development strategies applied since 1885, promotes the alienation and lotting of Mapuche territories to generate human settlements for agricultural and timber exploitation, producing a great deforestation. In 1974, the Decree Law 701 was enacted, which granted bonuses for planting exotic species, drastically changing the landscape to this day. In 1997, the Budi is declared IDA Indigenous Development Area, to reduce poverty gaps in indigenous communities. Additionally,
the 1960 tsunami modifies its geography, breaking the lake-sea relationship, causing the stagnation of its waters. This condition, together with the action of man, has exacerbated the ecological imbalance of its ecosystem.

“And at the end the “wigka” entered the community. The Mapuche ruled (dominated) autonomously here. But there were animals, many animals, it is said. Very large animals... Later, as the years went by, the “wigka” entered and brought their knowledge. “Let’s work this way”. That is why later basketry was forgotten, because the agricultural work, as it is called, came in and that is why they became more enthusiastic and they left (abandoned) the basketry. People don't make many baskets... about forty years ago or so” [1]

Due to the ecosystem degradation, the Budi is declared of “very high priority” in the National Strategy for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Biodiversity and one of the last biodiversity reserves in La Araucanía and declared a high priority site for the National System of Protected Areas [9]. These declarations reflect the importance of conserving the ecosystem.

“In the territory, this plant (chupón) and many others, existed since time immemorial, the lafkenche forest is based on maqui, boldo, laurel, cinnamon and another shrub like the murtilla, there were many huge plants, large plants in the Budi territory. It was the Budi landscape, as the Spaniards called it. Then the Agrarian Reform came, where all kinds of plants were eliminated for agriculture and much of what is the chupón ecosystem disappeared, which was surrounded by native trees ... the fields began to erode ... and different microclimates from the Budi began to be created...” [3]

The Budi territories are composed of a cultural landscape articulated by different dimensions: temporal, spiritual, natural, political and economic, from two territorial approaches that contrast: 1. economic development driven by the Chilean State and its public policies, characterized by territorial dispossession and the appropriation and devastation of nature's assets; 2. the spiritual vision of the indigenous communities of the territory, which generate collective strategies of resistance for their conservation. One of the relevant demands for the Budi communities is: the recovery of the native forest and the conservation of the chupón and the handicrafted tradition of the pilwa.

3. About the Chupón and the handicrafted tradition of the Pilwa

“The Chupón is an elongated leaf plant with a lot of thorns in the leaves. The chupón is a native plant, a plant that has existed for a long time because nobody knows the time of its existence” [10]

Chupón (Greigia sphacelata), belongs to the Bromeliaceae family and the genus Greigia, its conservation status is vulnerable and its fiber is used by the Mapuche Lafkenche communities as raw material for the elaboration of everyday objects. The degradation of the native forest, the natural environment of the species, has implied its loss and with it a shortage of material, abandonment of traditional practice and memory loss associated with artisanal expression, weakening the intangible heritage of the Lafkenche culture of the Budi.

Kai, nomination in mapuchezungun of the chupón, “is a plant that has no stem, has long, thick, leathery, rigid and thorny leaves on the edges. It has pink flowers in the centre where the leaves come from” [11] and an ancestral origin:

“... it is originally known as kai and comes from the mythology of Treng-Treng and Kai Kai... it has enormous cultural significance. It is told and said that the snake Kai Kai had the spiny back, so the name of kai. The fiber that is spiny on both sides and in recognition of this mythology that the vegetable fiber is called kai” [3]

The Budi basketry, is distinguished by the use of the chupón fiber and the design of objects, elaborated from the inherited tradition from generation to generation, which contributes with the sale of its products to the subsistence economy of the families of the area. Such designs are the Round Pillow or Tortera, the Circular, the traditional one...

“The chupón is a very useful plant in fiber crafts, with which we make products as craftsmen. We can do many things in it. First, the pilwa that we can manufacture in a different way and model...” [10]

The territory is a political claim: “the claims produced by the Mapuche communities and organizations are primarily ideal, epistemological transformations, based on alternative historical
narratives, local knowledge, cosmogony or terminology changes. But these also involve concrete actions, they cannot only remain in the symbolic field” [12].

“With the importance of the plant (chupón), we must neither destroy it nor throw it in the fire. The value it has in our crafts as a craftsman, the value it has in our culture as Mapuche” [10]

In order to contribute to its conservation, in 2016 the project “Diagnosis for the restoration of the chupón species and the visibility of its ecological, heritage and economic value, associated with the Mapuche tradition of the Pilwa elaboration in the commune of Saavedra, Region of the Araucanía”, financed by FIA and executed by the INFOR Forestry Institute and the Agricultural Development Institute, which sought to contribute to the reproduction and afforestation of the plant under controlled methods: seed extraction, INFOR greenhouse cultivation and planting of the native species reproduced in greenhouses made for the different beneficiaries of the project: Newen Pu Domo, Kuzaufe Domon and Chihuacura Paillafil Family organizations in the Saavedra commune. Both FIA-INFOR and Fundación Artesanías Chile FAC, managed to establish quality parameters for the pilwa elaboration, systematizing the production, carrying out cost evaluation and placing the handmade products in the national and international market emphasizing their ecological and cultural value. This is how artisans have been recognized in relevant cultural spaces: La Moneda Art Gallery and FAC stores. This valuation by the public institutions, contributes to the construction of the collective worldview about the Pilwa, however, it does not ensure identification with its ancestral origin or the development of conservation strategies of the chupón or kai plant relevant to the Mapuche culture.

4. On the cultural vision of the territory
The territory is the product of the interpretations and representations of the subjects and groups. For the Budi inhabitants, the forest restoration, the conservation of the chupón plant and the pilwa tradition, are a significant part of what the Mapuche people understand by “the expression” “land recoveries” emerged since 1991, which has involved not only a transformation of the discourse, introducing historical elements to legitimize itself, but to practice land recoveries, occupy them, defend them, produce on these lands, reorganize the families around them, and even the communities of the sector, maintain control over these, and develop on a local scale self-management and autonomy as well as “sacralise” the recovered lands” [12].

“... what has been lost, this is about the fiber that some families have preserved and have not stopped doing so and have contributed to the revival of culture, today people are taking the value of culture” [3]

This claim: the native forest restoration is as essential as the language recovery and, the incorporation of plastic as a way to renew native species, is an imposition that threatens the worldview and sustainability of the Mapuche territory.

“The most important thing is a product that does not pollute, quite the opposite, if it does not serve the purpose anymore, we can make organic fertilizer, so we can produce new plants in it” [10]

In 2017, the project: “Budi, Heritage Fabric: Ecological Restoration of Kai in Mapuche Lafkenche Territory,” presented by the Lafkenche del Budi Tourism Group, Kuzaufe Domon Group, is nominated to the Common Fund of the Inter-American Development Bank IDB and Azlilko Lewfu Budi Indigenous Association. This initiative, sought to advance in terms of territorial planning and ecological recovery of the native forest and the chupón plant, for the preservation of the handicraft tradition of pilwa. It is a collective initiative contributing to the territory self-management.

“The idea is to make this plant be reborn and proliferate it by creating its own ecosystem, no longer placing it in a greenhouse, but recreating its own climate... so that it proliferates protected by its own friends, the other trees and proliferates in the territory with those emphases” [3]

There is also a mythical origin of the plant, “in this process of re-appropriation and semantization of space, to claim it as a territory with a political, cultural and historical content, “unforeseen” entities or actors such as the gnen (forces) or the pewma (dreams) can intervene” [12]. This condition can be observed in the stories about kai, which refer to a mythological era and have their origin in the Kai-Kai and Treng-Treng myth, so it spreads in coastal areas and in the Budi. This ancestral origin, gives
cultural value to the fiber which is braided from two strands as well as the mythological snakes and is embedding in the fabric of the pilwa families, communities, territories through tradition. The cultivated craftsman is in charge of reviving the myth in its elaboration, bringing the mythical past to the present.

“... my mother says that she learned the pilwa from her grandmother, because she said that it had been more than 200 years since (...) the pilwa was made, because not even my mother knew where they learned to make the pilwa because her grandmother's mother and all that pilwa before, they knew it long before” [13]

In this way, family, community tradition, inherited from generation to generation and a significant part of the culture and family support of the Budi territory, takes on meaning outside the territory, driven by indigenous communities and supported by private organizations and the State, managing to articulate a current discourse, validating the spiritual conception of the territory on a globalized level.

5. Conclusions

There are legal deficiencies in Chile regarding the constitutional and political recognition of Indigenous Peoples [14]. This situation denies the possibility of agreeing on collective means of control and regulation of those of the indigenous territories, whether in the communal, regional or state level based on the worldview of the Mapuche people. The Kai and pilwa, are a contribution in the field of management and self-management of the territory. Currently, indigenous communities carry out concrete actions in the field of ecological restoration: Azlilko Lewfu Budi Indigenous Association, executes the nominated project “Bird watching over a canoe protects the environment, rescues the Mapuche culture and allows the sustainable development of Lake Budi”, financed by the Budi Lafkenche Environmental Protection Fund and Tourism Association, in collaboration with the National Corporation for Indigenous Development, has launched a project for the conservation of the chupón and pilwa tradition.

These actions give account of a territorial development based on the Mapuche identity, manifested in the stories of local actors, where mythological aspects, a sea-related culture and the development of traditional crafts linked strongly to their vision of the territory are pointed out. In addition, indigenous communities manage and self-manage ecological recovery processes with a biocultural approach, executing concrete actions for the biodiversity conservation, traditional practices and the valorization of cultural and natural heritage. The configuration of a territory characterized by the incorporation of interculturality at different levels of public organization and municipal government [15], which has favoured management projects with identity, is also appreciated. It is hoped that the articulation between these key actors will contribute to promote the processes of ongoing autonomy and development with cultural relevance of the Budi, and this experience contributes to generating reflection on the asymmetric relations established by economic and political powers with biodiversity and the indigenous territories of our planet.

“That only, brother” [1]

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