




Archaeological Ethnography of Indigenous Heritage Rights: Emergent Realities around the Petroglyph of the 'Chiquí' in Amaicha del Valle (NW Argentina)

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to an ethical and post-disciplinary reflection in indigenous and postcolonial archaeologies. Adopting the relational perspective of political ontology unravels the complexities behind the seemingly superficial conflicts over the interpretation of a piece of rock art and the failed implementation of the solar energy project in the Indigenous Community Amaicha del Valle. The juxtaposition of state-authorized and place-based narratives and political actions brings to the fore conflicting perspectives of heritage, rights and indigeneity. Through ethnohistorical and early archaeological accounts from the Calchaquí Valleys, the research reveals the epistemic disavowal of Indigenous histories and lifeworlds as the Argentine state established its national sovereignty and development models between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. The case study also draws on archaeological ethnography to highlight generative spaces of knowledge and articulation across divergence and materiality, and that conflicting heritage ontologies can generate new cultural-political forms that diverge from the established consensus.

Resumen: El objetivo de este artículo es de contribuir a una reflexión ética y posdisciplinaria en arqueologías indígenas y poscoloniales. Al adoptar la perspectiva relacional de la ontología política, se desentrañan las complejidades detrás de los conflictos aparentemente superficiales sobre la interpretación de una pieza de arte rupestre y la implementación fallida del proyecto de energía solar en la Comunidad Indígena Amaicha del Valle. La juxtaposición de narrativas y acciones políticas autorizadas por el estado y basadas en el lugar pone de relieve perspectivas conflictivas sobre el

patrimonio, los derechos y la indigeneidad. A través de relatos etnohistóricos y arqueológicos tempranos de los Valles Calchaquíes, la investigación revela la negación epistémica de las historias y los mundos de vida indígenas a medida que el Estado argentino establecía su soberanía nacional y sus modelos de desarrollo entre fines del siglo XIX y mediados del XX. El estudio de caso también se basa en la etnografía arqueológica para destacar los espacios generativos de conocimiento y articulación a través de la divergencia y la materialidad, y que las ontologías patrimoniales en conflicto pueden generar nuevas formas político-culturales que divergen del consenso establecido.

Résumé de recherche: Cet article a pour objectif de contribuer à une réflexion éthique et post-disciplinaire sur les archéologies indigènes et post-coloniales. L'adoption de la perspective relationnelle de l'ontologie politique vient délier les complexités sous-jacentes aux conflits apparemment superficiels quant à l'interprétation d'une œuvre d'art rupestre et au développement raté du projet d'énergie solaire au sein de la communauté indigène d'Amaicha del Valle. La juxtaposition des narrations autorisées par l'état et fondées sur le lieu et des actions politiques met au premier plan les perspectives conflictuelles du patrimoine, des droits et de l'indigénéité. S'appuyant sur des récits ethno-historiques et archéologiques anciens issus des Vallées Calchaquí, la recherche met en évidence le désaveu épistémique des histoires et mondes de vies indigènes alors que l'état argentin établissait sa souveraineté nationale et ses modèles de développement entre la fin du dix-neuvième siècle et la moitié du vingtième siècle. L'étude de cas s'inspire également de l'ethnographie archéologique pour mettre en exergue les espaces générateurs de savoirs et l'articulation à travers la divergence et la matérialité, mais aussi que les ontologies de patrimoine conflictuelles peuvent générer des formes politico-culturelles nouvelles divergeant du consensus établi.

KEYWORDS

Postcolonial theory, Relational ontologies, Rock art, Andean cosmopolitics, Indigenous archaeologies

Introduction

In April 2017, a press release from the government of the province of Tucumán (Argentina) announced that an agreement had been reached

between a French energy company and the Indigenous Community Amaicha del Valle (*Comunidad Indígena Amaicha del Valle*—CIAV). Under this agreement, the former would be allowed to install a solar power plant on the latter's territory, after completing the mandatory environmental impact assessment and obtaining the required informed consent from the CIAV General Assembly (Government of Tucumán 2017). However, in order to be operational, the photovoltaic plant also required the connection to the existing power line infrastructure. This was owned by a transnational mining company operating a few kilometres crossing the border of the province of Catamarca, which refused to grant the permit for the use of its infrastructure because of the expansion of the operational activities over the original closing schedule. Despite having already obtained the required community consent from the CIAV assembly, the French investors ultimately decided to relocate the project to another community in the northern province of Salta. Little more than a year after the agreement was announced and unexpectedly terminated, the CIAV leadership sought effective protection measures for a petroglyph that was found in the same area as the planned solar energy plant, on the banks of the river Las Salinas (Fig. 1).

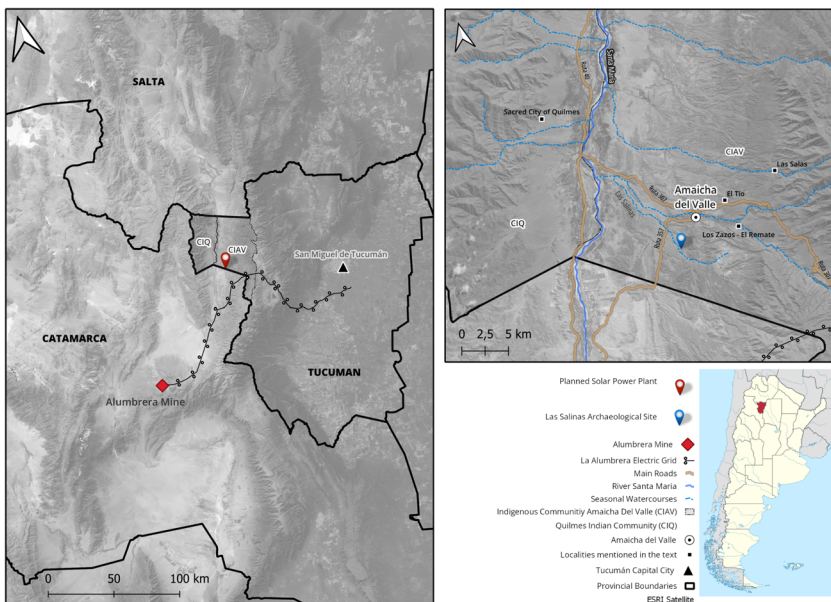


Fig. 1. Map of the study area and localities mentioned in the text. GIS elaboration by the author

The archaeologists from the University of Tucumán who studied the site concluded that the petroglyph was part of a larger palimpsest of different periods of occupation, dating back to 6500–5900 BP (Adris 2013: pp. 49–50; Somonte and Baied, 2017: p. 39). In a friendly disagreement with the archaeologists’ conclusions, the CIAV authorities claimed that the petroglyph was *not only* a prehistoric artefact, chronologically and ontologically detached from the present, but it was *also* connected to the history and living knowledge of the community. To their interpretation, the two figures portrayed in the petroglyph were not generic “anthropomorphic” and “zoomorphic” representations of a lost cosmology, but one was “the Fox”, the trickster character of many folk tales throughout the Andes (Allen 2011; Pache 2012), while the other human-shaped figure was linked to “the Chiqui”, a marginal, almost forgotten character of the Indigenous Diaguita-Calchaquí oral tradition and carnival celebration that was usually considered as the impersonation of misfortune (Gentile 2001).

A few months after the definitive relocation of the French development inversion, the CIAV leadership submitted a petition to the Tucumán Cultural Authority to include the Chiqui petroglyph in a special register of “Indigenous Community Heritage” under the relevant provincial legislation (Tucumán Cultural Authority 2018). The emergence of Chiqui as an alternative place-based heritage narrative defies standard analytical categories, regimes of conservation and disciplinary classification. Moreover, the divergent reading of this piece of rock art makes visible a confrontation with the “authorised heritage discourse” (Smith 2006) that determines what is legally accepted as worthy of protection for its antiquity, authenticity, and tangible or intangible qualities. The articulation of the petition for the special register within the historical and cultural-political agency of the CIAV points to a different orientation, stemming from the lingering memories of anti-colonial struggles in the Andes and resistance in the modern Argentine state, towards conceptualising Indigenous heritage rights from an ontological perspective “in which time, place, materiality, and consciousness are intimately interrelated” (Allen 2024: p. 277).

Following Rivera Cusicanqui’s (2012: p. 105) use of *ch’ixi* to illustrate the decolonising options coming from “the Aymara idea of something that is and is not at the same time”, the interpretative divergence around the Chiqui petroglyph unsettles the intertwined logics of multiculturalism and strategic essentialism that devitalise indigenities through scientific and political commodification. Without assuming a conceptual identity, but rather a linguistic and “worlding” proximity, *chiqui* and *ch’ixi* share the meaning of something born out of ambiguity and indeterminacy, which may go unnoticed and appear homogeneous on the surface, but reveals deeper cultural layers and political significance when approached with curiosity and attention. This suggestion allows the case study to be further interrogated to identify the “disciplinary entrapments” (Shepherd 2013: p. 434) that underpin the craft

of archaeological knowledge in postcolonial contexts and undermine the cosmopolitan aspirations of participatory ethics, community-based methodologies, and rights-based heritage approaches (Atalay 2012; González-Ruibal 2019; Meskell 2009; Rizvi 2020; Wylie 2019). While acknowledging the complicities of heritage policy with global extractive development and nationalism can enhance local self-reflection and agency in archaeological history and decolonial practice (Hamilakis 2007; Jofré and Gnecco 2022; Lazzari and Korstanje 2013; Londoño 2021), the article also draws attention to the socio-material assemblages, multi-temporal and affective relations between people and territory that can multiply the imagination and possibilities of Indigenous sovereignties.

The juxtaposition of state-authorised and place-based narratives and political actions around the Chiqui petroglyph brings to the fore conflicting perspectives of heritage, rights and indigeneity, which may engage readers beyond the regional and interdisciplinary scope of the article. In the light of the “ontological turn” in archaeology (Alberti et al. 2011; Olsen 2010; Pétursdóttir and Sørensen 2023; Troncoso 2024), anthropology (Blaser and De la Cadena 2018; Descola 2013; Kohn 2015; Viveiros de Castro 2015) and critical heritage studies (Harrison 2018; Onciul 2024; Sterling 2020), the case study contributes to the blurring of disciplinary boundaries based on a common critique of modern Cartesian divisions between subject and object, present and past, culture and nature. The following sections first trace the genealogy, emergence and concealment of the figure-concept of *Chiqui* in ethnohistorical and archaeological sources from the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries in northwestern Argentina. This entails uncovering the disavowal of Indigenous peoples’ histories, ways of knowing and cultural-political manifestations as constitutive of modernity’s universal principles of reason and progress.

According to Shaw (2008: p. 208), this is a crucial issue because the state, at its inception, prevents the emergence of individual or collective subjects outside of “modern conceptions and expressions of political possibility”. So, she argues that the movement towards the recognition and implementation of Indigenous peoples’ rights and self-determination also involves “a reconstitution of the political that addresses the historical violences of sovereignty” (Shaw 2008: p. 212). In this sense, it is useful to consider, with Ortner (1995: p. 175), that a deeper engagement with the “ambiguity of resistance” is needed to shift the political capacity of subaltern subjects away from patterns of systemic oppression. Thinking of resistance as “creative and transformative” (Ortner 1995: p. 191), rather than merely oppositional, highlights the second main thread of the article, which is to demonstrate through the case of the Chiqui petroglyph that conflicting heritage ontologies can generate new cultural-political forms that diverge from the established consensus.

Central to this argumentation is the redefinition of indigeneity to assess forms of political subjectivation and territorial sovereignty that are *ch'ixi* (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012: p. 105), that is, simultaneously antagonistic to and constitutive of those allowed by modern politics. Simpson (2016: p. 329) has introduced “refusal” as a key concept in contemporary Indigenous studies, by which she means the exposure of long-standing settler-colonial violence and the opening of “a theoretical possibility for imagining and writing the political ethnographically”. Breaking the silence of multiplicity and disagreement disrupts multicultural policies of recognition by inviting into participation other subjects, human and non-human, previously excluded from conventional politics, aesthetics and consensual mechanisms of heritage regulation and territorial development.

Blaser (2013: p. 548) has identified “ontological conflicts” as those involving the presence of political actors and socio-natural configurations that put the binary assumptions of “an all-encompassing modernity” into question. In this respect, the Andean region is particularly important because it reveals a long-term historical and material perspective to contextualise the refusal of people, things and places to be bound by the onto-epistemic hierarchies dictated by universal modern-colonial orders (Allen 1998, 2017, 2024; Arnold 2019; Haber 2007, 2016; Orlandi 2022a; Sillar 2004). Developing Stengers’s (2005) idea of “cosmopolitics” to make visible the effects and affective capacity of non-human interactions in the history of science, De la Cadena (2010: p. 361) has argued that “a pluriversal politics (or a cosmopolitics) would accept what we call nature as multiplicity and allow for the conflicting views about that multiplicity into argumentative forums”.

The case study presented in this article is instructive in terms of understanding the pluriversal nature of heritage, rights and indigeneity. The failure of the development promises of wage jobs and low energy rates linked to the solar power plant was determined by the decisions of private entities (the mining company and the French investors), rather than by the refusal of the CIAV to build the infrastructure in the collective land of the community, or by the scientific concerns for the protection of the archaeological heritage of the Las Salinas river. So, one could ask to what extent state-allowed mechanisms of heritage conservation and multicultural governance can prevent Indigenous peoples’ lands, cultural and political institutions from being placed at “the doomed margins of modernity” (Shaw 2008: p. 208)? Combining cosmopolitics and archaeological ethnography allows for taking into consideration the past-present connections, spatial and affective materialities that let “new and emergent realities come into being” (Meskell 2012: p. 140). Digging in the case of the Chiqui petroglyph as a “thought-experimentation” (Holbraad 2009: p. 434) to unpack relational ontologies in contemporary indigenous archaeologies and heritage rights practice, the

article exposes a crucial “space of equivocation”—in the sense attributed by Viveiros de Castro (2004: p. 9) to “a difference in perspective” which impels communication rather than impeding it—that of assuming as dead matter what others claim to be alive.

Epistemic Disavowal: Indigenous Heritage in the Nation-State

The divergent interpretations of the petroglyph found on the banks of the Las Salinas River in Amaicha del Valle have raised the question of whether the timely emergence of the Chiqui narrative might be related to a concept or event inscribed in an Andean material, rather than exclusively discursive, order of things (Allen 1998; Arnold 2019; Rivera Cusicanqui 2012). The Quechua and Aymara vocabularies of the colonial period associated the word *chiqui* with a wide range of situations that expressed the contingency of misfortune (Gentile 2001: pp. 14–17). This connotation persisted as an attribute attached to places, people and animals in order to convey danger or ominous events. According to Gentile’s (2001: p. 42) thorough investigation, even the term “Calchaquí”, which today geographically and ethnically denotes the Diaguita peoples living in the Argentine interandean valleys between the provinces of Salta, Catamarca and Tucumán, after the name of the historical *cacique* [chief] who led a major anti-colonial uprising in the sixteenth century, may have originated from the juxtaposition of “*chiqui*” and “*calchani*”, i.e. how the Incas called the rebellious Kakán-speaking people who had suffered uprooting and adversity.

The transformation of *chiqui* from a vernacular concept to a personified character of the regional folklore unfolded since the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The affirmation of Argentine national sovereignty and the massive influx of European descent settlers into the interior of the country brought unprecedented socio-political changes and a dramatic shift in the public manifestation of indigeneity, multiplying cultural landscapes and social imaginaries animated by devilish beings and events (Escolar 2012; Gordillo 2002; Isla 2000). Forced assimilation into the state and the sidelining of subsistence economies in favour of seasonal work on the landowners’ sugarcane plantations provoked the contextual emergence of cultural-political practices through which local communities could make their dissent visible, even as their collective subjectivities before the republican state faded.

It was around this time that Lafone Quevedo (1888), a pioneer archaeologist and member of the country’s mining elite, reported the “Feast of the Chiqui” in a village in northwestern Argentina. According to his account, the celebration coincided with the carnival and consisted of a race

around a carob tree decorated with the severed heads of hunted animals and child-shaped dough dolls, called *huahuas*, which were given as prizes to the winner. Participants drank freshly brewed carob beer and sang “*indian songs*” that included invocations to the rain and references to *chiqui* as the “divinity” responsible for people’s misfortune. Drawing on the available colonial sources, Lafone Quevedo (1888: pp. 249–250) concluded that the Feast of the Chiqui was “a curious remnant of the pagan world [...] to ward off misfortune in times of drought or other calamities”.

Lafone Quevedo’s account was expanded by Quiroga (1897: pp. 5–6), who collected more evidence of the celebration in local communities and identified some details in the decoration of funerary urns belonging to the Santamariano archaeological tradition (11th—seventeenth centuries), such as snakes, *suris* [*Rhea pennata*], the carob tree, human figures holding *humas* [severed heads], all of which seemed to confirm the sacrificial function of the ritual in demanding water (see Nastri et al. 2019: p. 61). Similarly, Ambrosetti (1899: pp. 154–155) claimed that the pre-Hispanic origins of the “Feast of the Chiqui” could be found in metal artefacts decorated with similar motifs. He linked the persistence of these cultural traits to the harshness of the environment and the stubborn character of the Diaguita-Calchaquí people, described as “vengeful, bloodthirsty, and fierce” (Ambrosetti 1917: pp. 131–134).

These authors attempted to find traces of the Feast of the Chiqui in the region’s rich archaeological record, and ultimately included the Chiqui in a pantheon of mythical figures that reflected the epistemic hierarchies of their underlying settler-colonial interpretive framework (Fig. 2). In this respect, Lafone Quevedo (1891: p. 370) concluded that “it is not possible to credit the semi-civilised Diaguita and Kakkan tribes with the art objects which constantly turn up”. At the same time as public museums and private collectors in Argentina and abroad were flooded with Calchaquí “antiquities”, backward “beliefs”, like the Feast of the Chiqui, were supposed to disappear once the region was fully integrated into the civilising mission of the nation-state.

Another “residual” pre-Hispanic tradition of the region captured the attention of archaeologists and ethnographers in northwestern Argentina for it seemed to convey more virtuous qualities than the Chiqui. Ambrosetti (1899: p. 155) and Quiroga (1897: p. 22) claimed that Pachamama was the civilised version of Chiqui, which was either imported from or imposed by more advanced people in the central Andes. Backed by scientific authority, the opposition between Chiqui and Pachamama—“two divinities that repel each other” according to Quiroga (1897: p. 22)—became significant in discerning “[Indigenous peoples’] disposition to improve themselves and fully join the civilised life” (1897: p. 29).

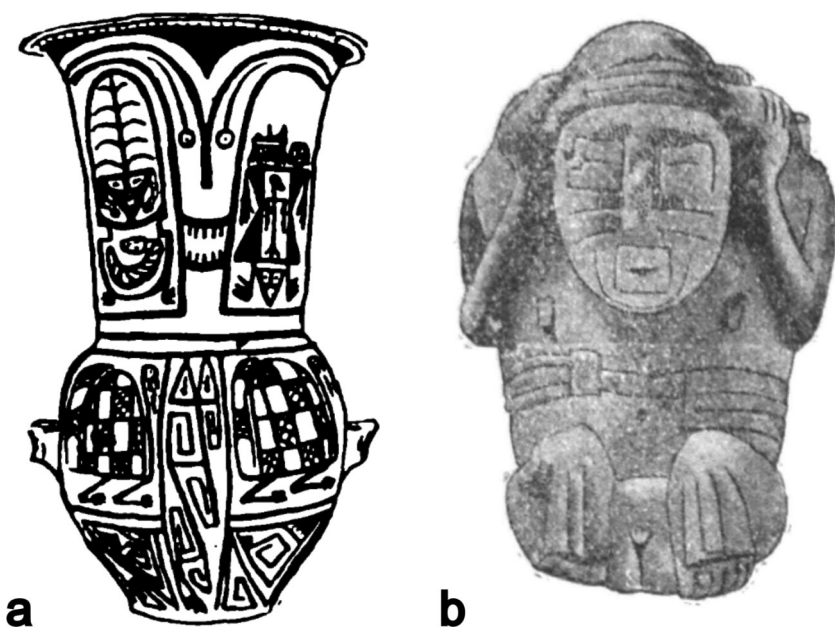


Fig. 2. Archaeological objects from the Calchaquí Valleys related to the “cults” of Chiqui (a) and Pachamama (b), according to Quiroga (1897, Fig. 3, Fig. 7)

The complicity between scientific, developmental and nationalist discourses recast enduring colonial privileges and harmful practices against Indigenous peoples’ bodies and territories. One of Ambrosetti’s most influential students, who succeeded him at the head of the Ethnographic Museum in Buenos Aires, articulated this enduring tension between archaeologists and local communities in stark terms: “what is dead is dead and belongs to a museum... There will be no contenders in the distribution of indigenous heritage: science will be the only and universal heir” (Debenedetti 1917: p. 248).

The establishment of the authoritative voice in the history of archaeology in Argentina coincided with the naturalisation of the “metaphysical gap” (Haber 2007: p. 221), which relegated the “indigenous” to an object of curiosity, disciplinary inquiry and social criminalisation. Rodríguez (2008: p. 87) has referred to the “Calchaquí dystopia” to explain how the praise of “indigenous” cultural achievements in the past overshadowed the dismantling of collective institutions and community land tenure in the present. The modernist imagination, which generally portrayed Indigenous peoples as extinct or disappearing, corresponded to the desire of Argentina’s liberal ruling elites to homogenise “a nation perceived as threateningly multiple” (Segato 2007: p. 31).

The unruly character of the Chiqui could not accommodate such a desire for homogenisation—in contrast to the alleged moral disposition to civilisation of the Pachamama—nor could its ambiguity channel the necessary confidence in private initiative, individual rights and capitalist accumulation. The silencing of *chiqui* as a concept for understanding present and historical relations within an Andean material-discursive order of things, and the contextual appearance of the personified characters of Chiqui and Pachamama are intertwined processes within the same “authorised heritage discourse” (Smith 2006). Selected cultural traits are purified of any components perceived as backward and disruptive to the political and economic orders of the state, and translated into archaeological narratives or residual folkloric objects, in order to justify community land grabs and the delegitimation of customary law by appealing to the common heritage of the nation.

Heritage Cosmopolitics: Tourism, Development and Divergence in the Calchaquí Valleys

The portrayal of the Chiqui by Lafone Quevedo, Quiroga and Ambrosetti crystallised in subsequent compilations of Calchaquí folklore during the first half of the twentieth century. The fate of the “Feast of the Chiqui” was briefly addressed by the renowned folklorist Carrizo (1942: pp. 432–434). He claimed that by the time of his survey, the celebration already lost its “traditional character” and was indistinguishable from one of the many carnival entertainments.

One of the last public use of *Chiqui* as a character of Calchaquí folklore and as an interpretive concept was in Juan Oscar Ponferrada’s play *El Carnaval del Diablo* [The Devil’s Carnival] (1943). The plot revolves around a role reversal between the devil-like figures of Pujllay (Happiness) and Chiqui (Misfortune) during carnival celebrations in a village in northwestern Argentina. The trick leads the unsuspecting characters of the play to experiment that everything that looks like joy ends up being fatal, “as if one were talking about sadness in the depths of happiness” (Ponferrada 1943: p. 159). The subversive nature of Chiqui is enhanced, rather than diminished by its intertwining with carnival celebrations, which already represent a disruption of usual temporal, social and political orders (Haber 2016). As a conceptual tool, *chiqui* makes visible past-present continuities and divergent readings through material histories and connections that unsettle the conciliatory narratives of Indigenous heritage under neoliberal multiculturalism.

Unlike many other communities in Argentina, the CIAV has collective title to the land it has occupied since pre-colonial times. This recognition

is based on the memory and intergenerational transmission of the Royal Deed of 1716, by which the Diaguita people were granted the possession of the territory roughly encompassed by present-day communities of Amaicha del Valle and Quilmes (Arenas and Ataliva 2017; Isla 2009; Korstanje et al 2013). Despite their geographical proximity, the two communities experienced very different fates.

In 1665, the last stronghold of resistance in Quilmes was forced to surrender after 130 years since the first uprising of the *cacique* Calchaquí, and two thousand people were resettled close to the centre of the Spanish colonial power in Buenos Aires. Many managed to escape and could return to their land; many others died in captivity or seeking freedom during the long journey. On the western bank of the Santa María river, the territory that historically belonged to Quilmes was considered empty and incorporated into the colonial hacienda administration. The surviving families were forced to work for the *patrones* (landowners), to have their children educated by them, and to pay them a tribute for living in their own territory. These subservient and degrading conditions persisted until past the mid-twentieth century, remaining vivid memories for elderly community members. One of them, the secretary of the Union of Diaguita Peoples of Tucumán (*Unión de los Pueblos y Naciones Indígenas de Tucumán—UPNDT*), pointed out to me the logical continuity between the modern nation-state and the colonial administration—“it’s the same with other methods, other tools, other weapons”, he insisted, “the denial of livelihood is extermination; it’s genocide”—and called on the scientific and heritage communities to take responsibility for “archaeology has played a *gloomy role* in the desecration of our ancestors’ graves and belongings” (interview, July 2017).

The frictions over community land tenure resonate in contemporary heritage politics. The ruins of the ancient city of Quilmes are one of the focal points of emerging conflicts over Indigenous heritage in the Calchaquí valleys (Lazzari and Korstanje 2013: p. 400; Orlandi 2022b). Since its constitution in the 1970s, the Indigenous Community of Quilmes (*Comunidad India Quilmes—CIQ*) struggled to re-signify the archaeological ruins into the Sacred City of the Diaguita-Calchaquí people. In 2008, that aim was eventually achieved thanks to the insistent fight of the CIQ and the changes in legislative frameworks that finally recognised the cultural rights of Indigenous peoples. Since then, the CIQ has co-managed the archaeological site with the Tucumán Tourism Entity, but the rebranded Sacred City of Quilmes is still located on “a public–private island” within the officially recognised territory of the community (Korstanje et al. 2013: p. 58). The insulation of a discrete heritage object from its broader socio-territorial relations has weakened community governance and participatory man-

agement efforts by flattening political resistance to the state multiculturalist rhetoric.

On the eastern bank of the Santa María river, Amaicha del Valle's families who had been resettled in the Tucumán lowlands during the colonial period were able to maintain a relationship with their ancestral territory and retained the title enshrined in the Royal Deed within the republican state (Rodríguez and Boullosa-Joly 2013). The exceptionality of Amaicha del Valle soon became the target of Tucumán's sugar industry and political elites who saw the Calchaquí valleys as an expanding frontier for tourism and rural development in the second half of the last century.

The inauguration of the paved road linking the capital city of Tucumán to the highly popular tourist Route 40, which passed through Amaicha del Valle, was hailed as an essential piece of infrastructure "to facilitate the immigration of skilled agricultural and breeding workers" (Cano Vélez 1943: p. 79). A few years later, in 1947, the "Festival of the Pachamama" was created in Amaicha del Valle, transforming the traditional carnival celebrations into a major tourist attraction, while community governance and collective land ownership became a fixed set of cultural practices stuck in an immemorial past and at odds with the social and economic development of the region. The ambiguities surrounding the Festival of Pachamama grew as the strategic use of indigeneity became increasingly important in attracting international development cooperation funds to Amaicha del Valle (Boullosa-Joly 2010), as well as to other communities in Argentina (Benedetti 2021; Crespo 2017: p. 154), in order to pursue the legal recognition of "indigenous" status and the promises of "rationalisation" of cultural and natural resource management.

The CIAV leadership was able to channel these intertwined movements and played a leading role in Argentina's multicultural awakening that culminated in the 1994 constitutional reform. However, the further touristic commodification of Pachamama and the vestiges of incomplete, broken or readapted development infrastructures scattered across the territory are reminders of the ambiguities that accompanied state recognition policies and community governance at the turn of the century (Fig. 3). The double-edged nature of this materiality reverberates in local memories and senses of place, intruding into the performances of heritage and indigeneity.



Fig. 3. a.1) The entrance gate of the *Pachamómento* arena where the activities of the National Festival of Pachamama have been concentrated since the nineties (Isla 2009: 130); a.2) The Museum of Pachamama in Amaicha del Valle that was built by the same local entrepreneur-artist who had the private concession of the archaeological ruins of Quilmes from 1992 to 2007 (Orlandi 2022b: p. 13); b.1) Abandoned storehouses of an international development cooperation project in Amaicha del Valle, which led to a harsh dispute between opposing community factions (Isla 2009, p. 1); b.2) Ruined van of the CIAV inside one of the abandoned storehouse; c.1) A research participant cleans the head key of a high-pressure irrigation system in an abandoned farming plot in the village of Las Salas (CIAV); c.2) A wooden stick supports the main tube of the high-pressure irrigation system in Las Salas, which was replaced because of the miscalculation of the flooding of the seasonal watercourses by the developer's engineers. All pictures by the author, August–September 2018

Take the case of the *apachetas*—the white stone piles that have proliferated in the Calchaquí valleys as markers of cultural authenticity and ceremonialism, at the initiative of national and international development agencies (Fig. 4). When I asked what kind of knowledge was linked with these objects, a member of the CIAV’s Council of Elders explained to me that “the *apacheta* always marks places where the paths diverge” (interview, July 2018). The installation of these monuments in public spaces is imbued with the rhetoric of multicultural reconciliation (Mathews-Salazar 2006); yet, the *apachetas* also relate to the warning against getting lost in a changing rugged landscape. The *apachetas* identify places where, consciously or not, one becomes part of a conversation with the local episteme (Haber 2016: p. 86). Like the divergent paths signalled by the *apachetas*, the generative ambiguity of the figure-concept of *Chiqui* multiplies perspectives and



Fig. 4. **a** The *apacheta* erected to give a more “indigenous” appeal to the renovation of the central plaza of Amaicha del Valle (Mathews-Salazar 2006: p. 75); **b** Public celebration of the Day of Pachamama in Amaicha del Valle on 1st August with local and provincial authorities; **c** An *apacheta* confronts the state propaganda signpost for the water management works in the locality of El Tío (CIAV). All pictures by the author, August 2018

eschews unambiguous readings. Thinking through materiality, relational ontologies and divergence helps to locate these grey areas in time and space, uncovering more-than-human histories, relationality and emerging realities of Indigenous heritage rights.

“A Beautiful Madness”: Indigenous Heritage Rights in Practice

It is not uncommon for archaeologists conducting research in Amaicha del Valle to become embroiled in community politics and factionalism (Aschero et al. 2005; Korstanje et al. 2013). When I visited the archaeological site of El Remate, during my fieldwork, I was surprised to find a patch with the drawing of the Las Salinas’ petroglyph sewn into the guest book of the local visitor centre (Fig. 5). One of the local managers of the site, from the nearby village of Los Zazos, explained to me that the decision to use the motif from another and unrelated archaeological site was made many years earlier, during an outreach activity with the archaeologists from the University of Tucumán, because for them the petroglyph resembled a connection with nature that now seemed lost, as he explained, “the *indios* [Indigenous ancestors] knew how to reason with animals” (interview, September 2018).

How an image carved on a stone thousands of years ago could possibly relate to the socio-political dynamics of the community at different times was a question that lingered in my mind. An elderly community member

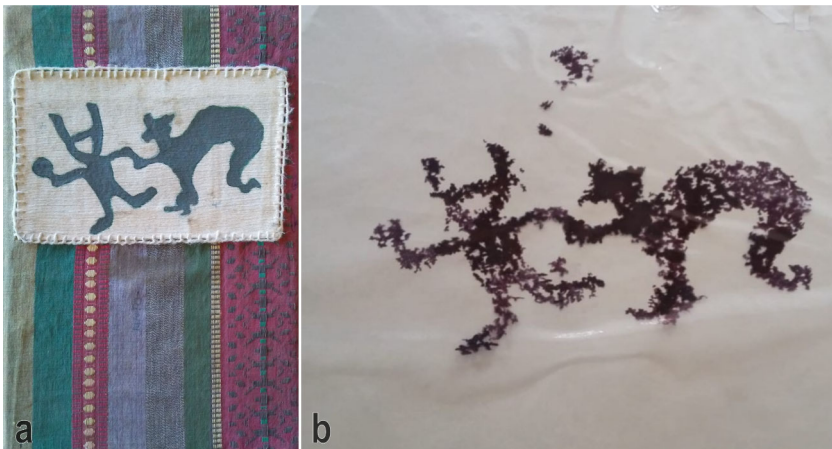


Fig. 5. **a** The patch with the Las Salinas petroglyph drawing sewn into the book of presence of the El Remate visitor centre in Los Zazos (picture by the author, August 2018). **b** Graphic rendering of the petroglyph of the Chiqui (courtesy CIAV and Faculty of Fine Arts, University of Tucumán)

added another layer to this troubling connection. Recalling his involvement in a rural development project with an Italian NGO in the nineties, he noted that the engineers had failed in their attempt to drill a well to modernise water management in the area of the Las Salinas river. So, I showed him the picture of the Chiqui petroglyph and he immediately recognised the devil in it, not because of any particular feature of either the masked human figure or the animal—for “the devil turns into whatever the devil wants” (interview, September, 2018)—but because the place was usually associated with the *salamanca* (Isla 2009: p. 84). This is a cultural-political phenomenon of Indigenous resistance in northwestern Argentina, parodically linked to the notorious Spanish university city, which conveys the subversion caused by “a seemingly phantasmal event of transmission of skills, knowledge and power” (Escolar 2012: p. 3). The appearance, disappearance and reappearance of the *salamanca* form a vortex that entangles divergent ontologies and political subjects, disrupting power dynamics and epistemic hierarchies.

Chiqui and *salamanca* overlap spatially and conceptually in their capacity to render Indigenous perspectives on heritage and territory visible and divergent from the assumptions of archaeologists and development technicians. According to the former *cacique* of the CIAV, Eduardo “Lalo” Nieva, creating an alternative heritage narrative around the Las Salinas petroglyph was an opportunity for the community to continue asserting a space of autonomy and negotiation with state and international actors. An Indigenous rights lawyer by university education and professional experience, the *cacique* epitomises the legacy of leaders who fought to secure the land of the community (Rodríguez and Boullosa-Joly 2013). He contributed to the development of national and international frameworks on the rights of Indigenous peoples, being one of the drafters of Law 25.517/2001, which established the right of descendant communities in Argentina to the return of human remains stored in national museums and private collections, and required consultation and community-informed consent before any intervention affecting Indigenous communities and territories.

The *cacique* and I found in the Chiqui petroglyph an exemplary case to expose the “implementation gap” of Indigenous heritage rights. While retaining the centralised prerogatives of the state in cultural heritage matters (Manasse et al. 2010), the Government of Tucumán has declared the “Rite of Pachamama on 1st of August” as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of the Province (Provincial Decree 2113/2002). In the provincial constitution of 2006, the art. 149 recognises “the special relationship between [Indigenous] communities and their Pachamama”. The controversy around the interpretation of the Chiqui petroglyph manifested the limitations of current legislation and collaborative heritage management, which depoliticise Indigenous histories and practices, reducing them

to cultural beliefs for external touristic consumption. According to the *cacique* Nieva, “*a beautiful madness*” was needed to widen the narrow interpretation of Indigenous heritage within the existing law and cultural development promoters.

We drew the legal justification for the special register of “Indigenous Community Heritage” from a broad interpretation of provincial law 7.500/2005 on Cultural Heritage, whose article 11 states that “entities, organisations, and individuals” are entitled to promote initiatives to improve heritage conservation. The juridical status of “indigenous” communities makes them appropriate collective subjects that could legitimately claim to take care of heritage. In accordance with international and domestic prerogatives, they have the right to do so following their criteria of conservation, cosmovision and care of the territory, and to seek cooperation with other entities and individuals—if they so wish. As the *cacique* pointed out during the meeting organised to deliver the report of my fieldwork activities to the CIAV authorities, “what we have done for the Chiqui is not so much outside the law as it is being and walking on the edge of the law... *It’s the exercise of rights in practice*” (community meeting, December, 2018).

Intercultural heritage ethics makes room for a conscious and careful conversation to avoid reproducing colonial power relations and toxic legacies in research and development agendas (Lazzari et al. 2024). This conversation should bear witness to the multiple perspectives of being and becoming with the materiality of the past and the sociality of the territory. The *cacique* Nieva identified this open-ended conversation as an essential requirement for the “sustainability” of knowledge production, that is, the ability to pass over to future generations the “complementarity of knowledges”. Hence, the importance of fair and meaningful consent-seeking and consultation procedures as a generative bundle of possibilities:

“Consent should lead to reciprocity [...] Reciprocity requires dialogue and finding a middle ground. You receive someone, but you also give back what you have learned. Isn’t that reciprocity? Isn’t that the enrichment that comes from cultural diversity, without trying to change you or assimilate you, but within a framework of mutual respect?” (Interview, August 2017).

Similar attention to reciprocal commitment and generative encounters is found in the eruption of the Chiqui petroglyph in the political dynamics of the CIAV after the failed agreement for the solar power plant. The conflicting narratives around the Chiqui petroglyph did not end in singularity, but allowed the coexistence of multiplicity and the emergence of community-led collaborative actions. Following this open-ended conversation, the proposal of the special register of “Indigenous Community Heritage” was motivated by the need to provide Indigenous peoples in the province of Tucumán with a legal instrument to inscribe sites and objects with their collective memory and territorial relationality, in addition to natural,

archaeological, historical, artistic or other disciplinary and state-sanctioned heritage values. It does not invalidate academic knowledge but opens up undisciplined ways of making visible alternative heritage assemblages for community histories and Indigenous governance.

After its inscription in the special register, the drawing of the Chiqui petroglyph was chosen as the logo for the Community House of Memory. This local museum and collective archive has been established on the premises of an abandoned hotel owned by the province of Tucumán in the town centre of Amaicha del Valle, which also hosts the House of Indigenous Governance, among other public services, since it was occupied and reclaimed as a community heritage by the CIAV leadership in 2009 (Arenas and Ataliva 2021: p. 44). Translating the discursive recognition of Indigenous peoples' rights into counter-hegemonic material narratives and political actions brings to light "the ability to write and rewrite the social history of the community" (Arenas and Ataliva 2021: p. 18). It is a means of exercising sovereignty over the territory beyond dichotomous assumptions of modernity and the essentialist traps of multicultural policies that portray the "indigenous" as passive beneficiaries of state and international development aid.

Conclusions

The aim of this article was to contribute to an ethical and post-disciplinary reflection in indigenous and postcolonial archaeologies. The relational perspective of political ontology has unravelled the complexities behind the seemingly superficial conflicts over the interpretation of the Chiqui petroglyph and the failed implementation of the solar energy project. The research provided a glimpse of the long-standing lived entanglements between people, places and things that can help to identify and challenge the structural violence against Indigenous territories and lifeworlds in South America and beyond (Jofré and Gnecco 2022; Nicholas 2022). The disavowal of place-based politics, material histories and socio-territorial relationality points to the deployment of dominant heritage discourses and aesthetics as the Argentine nation-state consolidated. This is particularly relevant at a time when the few gains made in the field of Indigenous peoples' rights are being dismantled by the rise of mega-mining extractivism and ultra-liberal political agendas (RIDAP 2024). It informs a collaborative and methodological standpoint that draws attention to the gaps in scientific knowledge and legal frameworks in order to multiply the political possibilities of Indigenous heritage rights within, and outside of, modern politics and regulations.

Taking seriously the local knowledge that associated the Andean trickster character of “the Fox” with the mischievous Chiqui of the Diaguita-Calchaquí oral tradition and carnival celebrations has revealed another way of piecing together Indigenous heritage. Trickster stories reveal “knowledge spaces” where power relations are subverted and alternative narratives can be assembled (Turnbull 2002: p. 287). The petroglyph was not just a discrete archaeological object, ready to be discovered and be explained through disciplinary knowledge. On the contrary, a cosmopolitical approach to rock art research makes it possible to understand and historicise socio-material assemblages, fields of relations, practices and experiences that transcend the modern divisions between past and present, nature and culture (Troncoso 2024: p. 54). This living connection points to the divergence of Indigenous perspectives from institutional practices that promote the separation of heritage and territory, and invites transversal and multi-temporal readings to disengage from taken-for-granted anthropocentric and Eurocentric models and values. A member of the CIAV’s Council of Elders summed up what this shift in perspective means for raising public awareness of community lands and institutions: “We have always been here, although they have not shown us” (community meeting, June 2018).

The cosmopolitics of Indigenous heritage rights makes visible knowledge spaces animated by human and non-human beings. *Chiqui* was the name given to misfortune and materialised in the seemingly dance of the devil and the fox, channelling histories of trickery, sorrow and recomposition from scratch. This has prompted self-reflection and warning on the risks of compromising with a one-way road to development, bringing awareness that things may not work out as planned and may come back to haunt us in unpredictable forms. In other words, misfortune and accidents (*chiqui*) are an integral part of life itself (*pacha*).

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