

Mapuche handicrafts trading: Production of sense and socio-cultural reproduction

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The aim of this article is to study the characteristics and the dynamics of different ways of trade of handicrafts used by the producers belonging to the Mapuche communities in Lacar and Huiliches Departments in the Province of Neuquen, Argentina. The trade of handicrafts is of vital importance for the inhabitants of these areas of this Patagonian province. Direct selling to tourists, sales in organized events such as fairs and meetings, the commercialization through downtown shops, and the in situ purchase made by different intermediaries constitute different alternatives to the commercialization made by the state agency *Artesanías Nequinas* (Handicrafts from Neuquen according to its name in Spanish). These scenarios, in which the sale of handicrafts is developed, are linked to the reproduction of producers and contribute to set different identity expressions, constituting spaces for production of senses, both from Mapuche communities (sellers) and from the Winkas community (consumers).

Key words: handicraft production, Mapuche people, cultural reproduction

1. Introduction

This article is the result of previous studies obtained by field research: (gathering data by ethnographic interviewing, interview recording, participant observation) from the scope of Social Anthropology, among Mapuche aboriginal population from Southern Argentina. The methodological approach to this issue is based on the scope of theoretical anthropology, mainly qualitative analysis focused on handicraft production, ethnicity and related process. The

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The Mapuche are one of the 20 aboriginal peoples who live today in Argentina in the southern region of the country called Patagonia. A great deal of Mapuche population live in rural areas called reservations in the following provinces: La Pampa, Rio Negro, Neuquén and Chubut. The settling of the Mapuche people in reservations

was the consequence of their defeat at the middle of the 1880s both in Chile and Argentina when the whole Mapuche territory was incorporated into the organized national domain. Since then they are confronted with a major problem of social and cultural adjustment: to adapt to live now constrained to fixed reservations under the expansion of the cattle ranch system, when they had once been accustomed to wide stretches of free land.

Because of this system, it is becoming increasingly difficult for young men to secure enough land to enable them to support wives and children. Also, because of economic pressure, a few men and women annually leave the reservations to look for work in cities or in privately owned estates. In this way the Mapuche reservations became a reservoir of cheap labor force in rural areas for other more advanced components of the capitalistic system.

The basis of the Mapuche household economy are breeding sheep and goats, and a few cows and horses, complemented by agriculture, and occasionally hunting and food gathering. The making and selling of hand-worked articles (weaving), has become important as an aid to the family budget.

The main source of income is the selling of sheep wool and goat hair, which the producers sell to intermediaries who have control of prices and are the main furnishers of goods (flour, wine, sugar, clothes, seeds, etc) to the Mapuche households. The economic relation between intermediaries and Mapuche peasants is always asymmetrical, and the former take great vantage from the latter.

The production of the kitchen garden over irrigated plots is designated to family subsistence consumption, although it is not enough to feed the whole family throughout the year. In account of this we can characterize the Mapuche peasant economy with the following features: insufficient natural resources (land, water and grass), no land ownership, domestic labor force, excess of labor force, lack of profits, impossibility of capitalization, limited technology and market submission.

Finally, we can assert that the most striking features of the Mapuche reservations are: a) the inequality of their ethnic status; b) the special legal status of the land tenure which does not recognize common property; and c) the uneven relations they establish with the market system.

However, handicraft production is undoubtedly an important income for indigenous communities to survive. Such resource is not

only linked to revalorization of ancestral practices and rescue of knowledge derived from their ancestors, but it is also directly related to their economy and social reproduction conditions.

As it has been pointed out in other occasions (Rotman, 2002; Balazote and Rotman, 2006), the elaboration of handicrafts is part of the multiple income sources that native communities have. This also makes reference to cultural aspects, as a practice of symbolic representations deeply rooted in the history of these groups.

At the same time, handicraft production is a field of intervention privileged by different organizations and institutions, which main goal is the implementation of "development projects". The design of these projects aims mainly the strengthening of productive aspects; either business activities performed by the state, or business activities performed by different NGOs and those financed by international organizations devoted to these affairs, neglecting the trade of handicraft products. This is one of the most problematic issues, and constitutes the "bottleneck" of handicraft activities showing a lot of difficulties when it tries to solve such a problem (Rotman, 2002). In this sense and in spite of its importance, we discuss this problem just to go deeper into the strategies implemented by craftsmen, because understanding this point is essential to an efficient re-design of the activity.

The aim of this article is to analyze the main features and dynamics of different ways of selling handicrafts used by Mapuche¹ producers from communities in Southern Neuquén, Argentina.² The trade of handicrafts is very important for indigenous inhabitants from these areas in the Patagonian region. Direct selling to tourists, sales in organized events such as fairs and meetings, the commercialization through downtown shops, and the *in situ* purchase made by different intermediaries constitute different ways to trading made by *Artesanías Nequinas* (the state agency). These scenarios, in which the sale of handicrafts is developed, are linked to the reproduction of producers and contribute to set different identity expressions, constituting spaces for the production of senses, both from

1 Mapuche (Land's people in the native language) is the name of one of the aboriginal peoples from Argentina. They live all around the Patagonian Region in reservations in rural areas, but a great deal of them, around 71%, also live in towns and cities all over the region (ECPI, 2006: 20).

2 We basically worked on field research at Curruhuinca and Vera communities (Lacar Department), Chiquilhuin and Aucapan communities (Huiliches Department) in Neuquén Province.

the Mapuche community (sellers) and from the Winkas³ community (consumers).

2. Artesanías Neuquinas⁴

During the 1960s, the Neuquén province created *Artesanías Neuquinas*, being its specific goal the trade of handicrafts produced by Mapuche families. The company constitutes a specific environment for handicraft trading, having as foundational grounds "... to bring back, promote and develop the Mapuche handicraft activity, revitalizing its cultural meaning by turning it into a permanent and profitable source of employment, with the aim of achieving the continuance of those craftsmen from rural areas in their original places. This allows rescuing socio-cultural meanings they have and the value of artistic objects they create" (www.helenroberts.co.uk/artnqn/artesano.html).

As we have pointed out in our previous works, the characteristics of the MPN (*Movimiento Popular Neuquino* in Spanish) the main political party⁵ stamped a very particular seal on this company. The raising of *Artesanías Neuquinas* and its methodology for more than twenty years is part of the relationship established by the Provincial State with Mapuche communities. The appearance and evolution of such entity are related to the characteristics that Neuquén has been adopting during two decades. The conformation of an enclave economy (Rofman 1999) based on the income of resources coming from oil production profit, implemented into a political hegemonic system by the provincial MPN party allowed (in spite of the fluctuating cycle of oil prices) access to political control based on clientelistic relationships.

The State of Neuquén established a relationship over impoverished sectors, mainly indigenous communities, particularly as part of the execution of social welfare assistance programs. Mapuche domestic units settled in rural areas undergo a series of restrictions that prevent them from progressing economically. The development of handicraft activities has been a strategy employed by many families that looked for an increase in their incomes. However, the isolation and decapitalization conditions favoured the

implementation of monopolistic practices that did nothing but reproducing the initial precarious economic situation.

This was the situation in which *Artesanías Neuquinas* was constituted as an enterprise destined to deal with the commercialization of handicraft production of Mapuche communities, trying to break the unclear (in terms of market) chain of sale of such goods. The fulfilment of this goal allowed the Provincial State to "reach" rural localities in which indigenous population was impoverished to a great extent, being set a favorable environment to exercise mechanisms involving political and social control.

The situation described above is completed by a particular kind of interethnic relationship configured on submission, exclusion and disciplining of Mapuche community. In this sense, the action of the entrepreneur becomes functional and complementary to other state areas such as the Ministry of Social Action and the Bureau of Indigenous Affairs. However, the indigenous communities far from accepting passively the practices and rules implemented by the State, have answered with heterogeneity, from the use of alternative means of commercialization, or the diversification of trading by choosing the most advantageous options, to the extent of direct confrontation with the enterprise itself by claiming better prices and flexibility linked with production regulations imposed by *Artesanías Neuquinas*.

Resistances against the provincial enterprise as an exclusive trading channel can be synthesized as the resistance against the following topics:

- a) Unilateral fixing of product prices.
- b) Low prices in goods purchasing.
- c) Rigid production patterns and standards fixed by the enterprise.

However, a great part of the Mapuche community accepts to trade their handicraft production despite these difficulties due to the following reasons:

- a) Continuity of incomes that assures them the periodical purchasing.
- b) The flow of goods and services associated to client-based practices on the part of the provincial State.
- c) The possibility of being trained on handicraft production.

3 Winka in the Mapuche language are also called *mapuzungún*, which means "white people" or "foreigners".

4 For further information about the dynamics of this State enterprise, see: Balazote and Rotman, 2006.

5 The *Movimiento Popular Neuquino* (Popular Movement of Neuquén) is a provincial party that has ruled Neuquén ever since the advent of democracy (1983).

The incidence of *Artesanías Neuquinas* in handicraft trade is quite uneven. Those communities which are located near tourist centres such as Curruhuinca community in San Martín de los Andes, have different alternatives of exchange that allow them to obtain better conditions when they sell their handicrafts. On the other hand, those communities located away from tourist centres show a degree of dependence almost exclusive on the provincial enterprise and its trading conditions, which are much more disadvantageous.

“There are people from Junín who sell almost everything to Artesanías Neuquinas. Things are very different in Junín from what they are in San Martín de los Andes. In Junín tourism has to ‘reach’ the communities to buy handicrafts, whereas in San Martín tourism is part of the communities themselves” (Junín de los Andes Municipality official).⁶⁷

So far, we have briefly explained what happens with the State incidence in the trading of handicrafts produced by Mapuche communities in Neuquén. In the next topic we shall focus on different alternatives that communities of Lacar and Huiliches Departments use to selling handicrafts to individuals.

3. Trading Mapuche Handicrafts

a) Direct Selling to Tourists

There is great development of intense tourist activity in Lacar and Huiliches areas. However, the characteristics of such activity are different and this has a remarkable incidence on commercialization strategies implemented by the Mapuche producers from different communities. The first of these is located at the Cerro Chapelco complex in San Martín de los Andes, with ski slopes and winter sports practices. Excursions offered by travel agencies include trips around different sports, spread all over indigenous communities around San Martín de los Andes. This closeness enables craftsmen to offer their products directly to consumers. Such contact with tourists, without any intermediaries, al-

6 The research team decided to maintain anonymous the Mapuche informants in account of ethic issues related to fieldwork in social anthropology.

7 Junín de los Andes is a small city where the municipality of Huiliches Department is located, and San Martín de los Andes is also a small city which main economic activity is winter tourism.

lowed Mapuche people to obtain a great number of advantages, (e.g. better prices). At the same time, these transactions are made in cash payments, which allow craftsmen to have money in cash.

“When I sell these *copetineros* (little dishes and trays for appetizers or snacks) to tourists I sell them at 45 or 50 pesos, but when I sell them to the shops in San Martín, I sell them at 20 pesos, 25 pesos at most” (Craftsman, Churruhuinca community).

Indigenous producers try to get good locations for their products to be properly seen by visitors. This issue creates conflicts related to the appropriation of spaces ideally located for handicrafts selling. The stalls standing right at the edge of the routes that lead to tourist information centres are secretly disputed. The regulation of the offer by the indigenous authorities does not prevent tensions caused by the appropriation of better locations for handicraft selling.

Handicraft trading is not continuous. The amount commercialized is related to periods of high and low presence of visitors as potential buyers. At the height of the season (winter and summer) trading also differs because the activities carried out by tourists in wintertime are mainly focused on snow sports, paying almost no attention to handicraft production. On the other hand, summer time is highly propitious to sell this kind of products.

“During summertime I go to the harbour [located at Quila Quina spot], when is full of tourists. I always sell things there (...), during wintertime everybody goes to the hill [Cerro Chapelco] and nobody stops to see anything here. During winter I sell handicrafts to Patagonia Regalos [shop located on the main street of San Martín de los Andes, specialized in selling handicrafts] and Artesanías Neuquinas” (Craftsman from Curruhuinca community).

“During summer I sell more to tourists. In winter I use to sell more to shops downtown” (Craftsman from Curruhuinca community).

“I always sell something here because people come to see the waterfall” (Craftsman from Curruhuinca community).

“My mother has a stall near the road, in the viewpoint. During summertime she sells products everyday”. (Woman from Curruhuinca community).

“I am planning to go to other provinces to sell handicrafts, Buenos Aires, for instance. I don't sell too much over here because there are a lot of craftsmen. (...) There's a lot of competence. During summer there are a lot of people who come and stay at Peiwen [a location near Lacar lake], and they always come to buy things (...) often there are people who came here every year” (Craftsman of Curruhuinca community).

“In August, September, October and November there is a low season, then at the end of November and December (summertime) the activity increases again. During January and February it is a good time for selling handicrafts, and on March there's a low season again. The height of the winter season begins in June” (Craftswoman, Curruhuinca community).

Competence among craftsmen is not limited to trading because jealousy is often present and linked with originality of style and design. Prestige of craftsmen is related not only to quality of their work, but also to their creativity (Rotman, 2007).

On the other hand, the time it takes to sell a product is very important for local economies. If decapitalization is very important, the urge for selling is essential.

Fixing prices for products is usually the consequence of bargaining between producers and buyers. This practice is reluctantly accepted by craftsmen because it devaluates the prices of handicraft production.

“There is always someone who likes the job I've made, but they don't want to pay... then you give discount (...) lower prices. It's just a matter of necessity... Chileans are people who usually bargain. My brother is used to higher prices when selling things to them so he would earn the same. They do the same at the shops (...)” (Craftswoman from Curruhuinca community).

Two of the topics that craftsmen take into account in fixing prices are: first, the time they need to work on the products; and second, the prices of the same products sold downtown.

“In determining prices we first see what the price of the same product in San Martín is and then we sell it a little bit cheaper. We also consider how many times it takes to make a piece” (Craftswoman from Curruhuinca).

Most of the products sold to tourists are of a low price and paid in cash. The selling of large size fabrics is negotiated differently and the production made by commission.

The handicraft trade situation in the communities located near San Martín de los Andes that we have previously analyzed is remarkably different than those from Huiliches Department. The constant presence of tourists in San Martín de los Andes and the easy way they have to buy handicrafts differs from the situation in Junín de los Andes, where craftsmen need to attract tourist to their spots to sell the products.

“Selling takes place here, mainly. They come here, to the workshop. Also, we'll participate at the “Craftsmen Meeting” to be held in Junín next July, when we can sell something, but it is better here” (Craftswoman from Chiquilhuin).

The attraction of tourists and the promotion of handicrafts quality, results from a collective work. The design and distribution of brochures in tourist information centers, as well as the placement of strategic banners over routes next to the community shows a practice individually rooted as alternatives to commercialization.

“We have also been promoting out things on the radio and over there (...) because when we receive tourists we ask them how they got here and they say that they came here through the Tourist Information Centre” (Craftswoman of Chiquilhuin group).

Chiquilhuin's craftsmen do not sell their works to *Artesanías Neuquinas* due to the reasons mentioned above. The construction of a shop, where there is a workshop of fabrics and weaving production and where those pieces are sold, allowed them to get more independence from the state enterprise.

Prices are determined by every craftsman, but there are usually common questions and coincidences to determine it. In Chiquilihuín there are *caminos*⁸ exhibited with different sizes and patterns, there are belts, sashes, socks and hats. All these products are labelled with fixed prices, which minimize the chance to bargain for tourists and prevents from competition among craftsmen.

“Everyone fixes the price of their own work; they are almost at the same price anyway. The price of the weaving depends on the design, the color, the size, the time it takes to make it. If it takes longer, one has to value the work done as well. Making a *camino* like this one can take two weeks of work (...) only to warp, and then weave and nothing else. Work is inside of all those things” (Craftswoman of Chiquilihuín group).

The community of Aucapan has a local radio station which advertises handicraft production and invites tourists to visit the community. This local radio is recognized by the producers because of its efficiency. Producers also said that their sales have increased from the time this idea was carried out. This practice is incipient and the importance of direct commercialization with tourists in this community is quite low. Notwithstanding the sales to *Artesanías Neuquinas* is their main source of income as opposed to Chiquilihuín community.

The scenario of commercialization described constitutes a singular interethnic experience. Such visits represent a first approach to the Mapuche culture, as an attempt to understand better the hidden meanings of an unknown culture. The offers made by private companies and state organizations to tourists exacerbate this issue by presenting an exotic, harmonic and crystallized view of the Mapuche culture. In this sense, fiction distorts the encounter and the real living conditions of Mapuche households as well as the historical reasons that originated them.

b) Selling to intermediaries in the communities

Geographical location of the communities fixes the characteristics of handicraft commercialization. Those groups located near the tourist centers consider their situation much easier

⁸ A *camino* is a rectangular-shaped weaving made manually in a vertical loom.

to sell their products. Meanwhile those groups located far from these places had to adopt other ways. Notwithstanding there are intermediaries who often visit the communities of Aucapan and Chiquilihuín. These intermediaries purchase the production and sell them in shops located at San Martín de los Andes, Junín de los Andes. This is an alternative that becomes especially appealing to the Mapuche producers. The purchase is mainly oriented to pieces made of wood due to the fact that weaving requires more time of elaboration and are more expensive.

Other intermediaries who visit these communities are agents related to commercialization chains, specialized in foreign trade. In this case the preferences are indigenous fabrics and they demand that the products must be made with materials such as sheep wool and colorings made with local plants and minerals. However, as far as prints are concerned, exigencies may include either traditional designs or figures and ribs not related to Mapuche iconography. In these cases manufacturers accept conditions imposed by these agents.

The payment of these products is in cash, although some agents use to pay with food stuffs as a condition of the agreement.

“In that case that was profitable to me (referring to a farmhouse that used to sell handicrafts to foreign visitors). Because perhaps they wouldn't give me money in exchange (...) I had everything I needed for my house. Next year I would take my works over there and would pay with those works (...) when I needed my own money, they would also give me money” (Craftswoman from Aucapan).

It is important to point out that this way of trading linked to international markets is irregular and contrasts with the frequency of the operations made by Mapuche craftsmen with representatives of the shops settled all over the urban areas of the region.

The conditions imposed to producers undermine their creativity. The elaboration of pieces that combine designs, colors, techniques and instruments of several origins are linked with the main goal to satisfy consumer's requirements.

c) Trading through downtown shops

Handicraft trading in specialized shops has great differences with purchasing situations analyzed previously. We can observe the absence

of Mapuche craftsmen in the relationship between purchaser and seller. In this situation the ethnic issue is present in a symbolic construction made by the selling strategies and the idealization of consumers.

Located at parks and streets often visited by tourists, these shops sell handicrafts without going deeper into specifications about their ethnic origin, production methods, or even the functionality and the usage of these pieces. It is common to see Wichi and Qom⁹ handicrafts mixed with other Mapuche products on the shelves and windows of the downtown shops of San Martín de los Andes.

The provisioning of these shops is partially linked to what has pointed out on previous paragraphs. Owners or employees of these shops frequently visit the communities to buy the handicraft production. However, a great part of the stock comes from craftsmen who go to the urban centers looking for better prices. It is important to say the economic effort that involves such movement, not only for the expenditures incurred, but also because they have to postpone other productive activities carried out in the domestic units. At the same time, the social networks that craftsmen keep with relatives and friends who live in tourist centers are essential to obtain accommodation as well as food during the trading activity.

There is another way in which urban shops get their supplies; it consists in setting up small workshops at the back of the same shop in such a way that clients do not have direct contact with craftsmen. The owners give tools and raw materials to craftsmen and they had to do the pieces in the way decided by the owner. This productive organization is exceptional, but we are interested in describing it as long as it results paradigmatic about handicrafts trading in tourist centers such as San Martín de los Andes.

The "invisibilization" of craftsmen both as a producer and as a Mapuche is remarkable, confirming the essential characteristic of this method for handicraft trading that keeps the producers away from the consumers. The ethnic issue is present, but disassociated and distorted according to functionalities of marketing strategies.

Goods traded are wooden pieces usually made of lenga tree (*Nothofagus pumilio*), such as the musical instruments called *pifil-*

ca and *kultrun*¹⁰ in the Mapuche language and weavings. Most of them come from Mapuche groups located at a long distance from shops, due to the fact that those which are closer to tourist centers have, as we pointed out, some other convenient selling option.

Merchants quoted that most of sales are wooden products in account of their low prices, especially when this quotation is compared to that of weavings. Craftsmen get paid in cash and upon delivery of handicrafts.

Another practice consists in leaving products "on consignment" specifying the price and the origin of the item for its exhibition on the retail shops. This way is not really profitable for craftsmen as they do not receive money upon delivery of products; they just receive later, a percentage of money obtained in trading.

The relationship that links shop owners to Mapuche craftsmen is neither occasional nor sporadic. On the contrary, this relationship tends to reproduce social networks assuring the continuity of commercial ties. At the same time, craftsmen also try to maintain these commercial bonds even if they had to sacrifice opportunities like direct selling of goods to tourists during high season periods. This option guarantees the offer to those merchants whom they are indebted to sell.

"Selling handicrafts to merchants is better because they buy my products all the time, throughout the year. They pay me like 50 percent less, but this enables me to sell handicrafts the whole year. I sell a different kind of products to each shop (...)" (Craftsman from Chiquilhuin).

Although the maintenance of this social relationship, craftsmen criticize trading conditions.

"I sent my products to merchants, but they pay me half of the price (...) it is not profitable. They want a great deal of articles and this is the problem (...) otherwise they don't care" (Craftsman from Curruhuinca).

9 Wichi and Qom are two aboriginal groups from the Chaco Region and Northern Argentina.

10 These instruments are often used during the religious ceremony called *Nguillatun*, performed at the end of summertime in rural Mapuche communities. It is a very important ceremony where all the community households participate in the prayers, religious dances and ceremonial music during four days. The *Nguillatun* is also a ceremony of supplication to the creator god *Ngünechen*. This ceremony for the Mapuche communities is organized usually to plead for rain or for a solution to major conflicts affecting a large number of the people.

In places like Junín de los Andes, where the flow of tourists is lower, the method for trading varies. In the retail shops of this town, owners do not pay for the production. Articles are sent on consignment and are exhibited during a time at a minimum price established by the craftsmen. Then, producers go periodically to deliver new goods and to earn the amount of the sold articles. This pattern is highly resisted and criticized by craftsmen who are indebted to accept it.

d) Trading in fairs and events

Handicraft trading in fairs and events is an interesting space to analyze, not only related to quantitative importance of the volume of sales, but also for the foundation of a field in which different social actors intervene. The Mapuche seller establishes contact with consumers in a situation made up by the intervention of different state structures, as well as traditionalist organizations, native-activist organizations and NGOs, linked with producers. These entities establish mechanisms to operate in the selection of participants, distribution of resources and management of promoting actions.

However, the relevance of this kind of profit has a low impact on household economies. These events are festivals and exhibitions in regional towns during a few days, and involve a selection process of craftsmen. They had to obtain finance support by some promoting entity which will provide them travel tickets, accommodation and food. The network of personal and client-based relationships signs this selection process, and it is important to stand that benefits obtained by this trading option is not homogeneous at the Mapuche communities. Only a limited number of craftsmen can obtain these profits and the criterion of quality selection sometimes is not so important in this process. Nevertheless, not all the handicraft production follows this option. Sometimes, occasionally and just for a few products, craftsmen manage to pay a canon to attain a place to sell production.

We have selected three cases for the analysis: the *Fiesta del Puestero* [a festival] *Semana de la Artesanía del Aborigen* and the *Trabun*¹¹ [Week of Native's handicrafts and Trabun]. The first two are held at Junín de los Andes, and the third one is held at San Martín de los Andes, being the last an event that allows a more open participation of Mapuche craftsmen.

The *Fiesta del Puestero* is organized by the Huiliches Traditionalist Center during two weeks on February. Celebrations include parades of this traditionalist groups and military teams. Horse breaking is one of the main attractions of this party. These celebrations are held to reinforce traditional culture of *puesteros*, mainly pastoralist of goats and sheep.

There are different stands exhibiting Creole and indigenous handicrafts, and traditional meals. In these stands sellers wear traditional clothes, and at night there are shows performed by local and national artists. The meeting of inhabitants from diverse ethnic origins, (Mapuche craftsmen, merchants, tourists and urban population from Junín) makes possible a peculiar interethnic and intercultural arena.

Gaicho know-how and skills such as horse breaking and much hability of cattle raising system are presented in these shows. At the same time, Mapuche craftsmen exhibit their works as a sign of "cultural revival".

The perception of Mapuche craftsmen about this festival emphasizes pragmatic aspects. First of all, the possibility of selling products, which enables them to earn money in cash, although they know the scarce amount they can obtain.

"The selling is not enough but it is a possibility to show our work to many people"
(Craftsman from Chiquilihuín).

From the beginning of this festival, the organizers tried to achieve the goal of the idea was to rescuing "history, folklore and popular tradition". The participation of military groups, civilians, peasants and landowners, white people and Indians makes possible that different discourses and representations from very different social actors become juxtaposed dissolved and causes them to be reorganized. The ethnic identity of the Mapuche appears as subsidiary and subordinated to the general logic of the party. The participation of indigenous communities in this event is important, but it is not considered a Mapuche celebration by the indigenous leaders.

During wintertime on July, the *Trabun Kezau* is held at Junín de los Andes. *Trabun Kezau* means "Meeting for the Work of Land's People". This event initially was denominated "Provincial Meeting – Week of Indigenous Craftworks" but it takes its present name from the *mapuzungun* (the Mapuche language) since 2001. This event occurs during winter holidays, when the main flows of tourists arrive, espe-

11 Trabun means "meeting" in the Mapuche language.

cially from the provinces of Rio Negro, Neuquén and Buenos Aires. During this season, Mapuche homesteads settled in rural areas next to the Andes, are in the lowest productive activities.

The objectives of the meeting stated by the organizers consist in strengthening Mapuche culture, exchange promotion, cooperation development, and the search of wealth for all participants. Following this discursive pattern, the exhibition and selling of handicrafts constitutes an efficient mechanism to afford the “revalorization of diversity of native Argentinian heritage” (<http://muypatagonia.com>). This festival is sponsored and financed by *Artesanías Neuquinas S.E.P.*¹² and the Municipality of Junín de los Andes. A great number of people from Mapuche communities and many tourists from neighboring villages participate to this meeting. The event has several attractions, such as music shows, exhibitions of Mapuche popular medicine, selling of traditional craft work and regional food. The organizers of this event promote it emphasizing that “(...) visitors will be able to appreciate the job of these people, as well as traditions and beliefs of a millennial culture”.

“Guests will be able to enjoy edible products such as pine forest mushrooms or berries collected and dried with traditional methods, as well as exquisite jams and preserves made of wild berries (elderberry and rose hip) meat *empanadas* (Argentinean pie), *tortas fritas* (a type of fritter), home-made bread, boiled maize and pine nuts. They will also see exhibitions containing weavings, works made of wood and leather. These exhibitions are free and open to all public, and people can attend artistic shows featuring regional dancing groups and musicians of different Mapuche communities” (<http://www.mapuche.info/indgen/noticiasonline>).

The invitation to this event is limited to a few numbers of craftsmen. They must be appointed and supported by the community itself. The costs for transportation, accommodation and feeding are paid by the organization. Not every group in the province is represented in this event; only those groups that have a relevant handicraft production manage to get the support needed to participate.

A great number of municipal and provincial offi-

¹² State-owned organization, S.E.P., according to its abbreviation in Spanish.

cial attend the opening and closing acts, standing out the representation of *Artesanías Neuquinas*, the provincial enterprise.

“(...) to continue working on traditional handicrafts respecting ancestral techniques of elaboration, dyeing, and natural raw materials constitute the essence of these unique works (...) *Artesanías Neuquinas* is the only enterprise in the country that was created by a Provincial State for the benefit of indigenous craftsmen. We are concerned about the fact that many provinces in our country neglect the stimulation towards the craftworks of native communities” (President of *Artesanías Neuquinas*).

A relevant activity for handicraft production is the *Certamen Mejor Pieza Artesanal de Arte Mapuche* (Best Handicraft Piece of Mapuche Art Contest). The winners of this contest are determined by a specialized jury after a meticulous examination. Categories are: weaving, wood, pottery, silverwork, musical instruments, stones and leather.

Every December, for more than twenty years, the *Trabun* or Meeting of the Communities is held at the central park of San Martín de los Andes. There is a stage at which local artists and invited guests perform their acts and there are stands offering traditional food and drinks as well as urban and Mapuche handicrafts.

The origin of this celebration date back from the end of the 1970s when the border dispute among Argentina and Chile was reaching its highest level of virulence and war was very close. At that moment, a group of neighbors started to gather to support peace talks between Chile and Argentina.

“During those days, while soldiers were getting ready in the headquarters for a possible war against Chile, and even schools were protected from airstrikes, people on the streets wondered: A war? Against whom?” (*Rio Negro*, 9 December, 2007).

To understand better the dimension of this initiative it is necessary to remember that a big percentage of San Martín de los Andes' population is from Chilean origin or descendant.

The first meeting was made in 1984 and it was organized by a folk club called *Numilen* and the Center of Chilean residents. From the

beginning this event constituted an alternative space, which allowed the revalorization of different expressions of popular culture, strengthening identities and building a scenario for cultural resistance.¹³

Local Mapuche musicians, poets, actors and craftsmen were invited for the first meetings. After a while, cultural groups from Chile started to participate. They found in the *Trabun* a place to express all those sentiments they couldn't in their own country. In 2000 the City Council from San Martín de los Andes declared the festival as an official celebration. In other way the promotion of the meeting as a touristic event caused its popular diffusion, and a great number of high income tourists were able to attend.

Spatial arrangement of the stage and stands favour the journey along the streets surrounding the park. Visitors will find on every corner bonfires made by musicians who also establish direct contact with participants. The whole square block ends up surrounded by a large number of craftsmen showing and selling their goods. In many stands, visitors can see those belonging to Mapuche households who sell products like saddle pads, horse blankets, weavings, wood carvings, silverworks, saddlery, etc. The participation of craftsmen from Vera and Churruhuinca communities is very easy because they are very close to the town. Nevertheless, only a limited number of domestic units specialized in handicraft production has access to selling stands at the *Plaza San Martín* (San Martín Square). A family strategy is to gather the production of different members of the family and trade it altogether using one single point of sale. This allows to lessen costs and to take care of the stand collectively.

Craftsmen from groups located far from San Martín de los Andes attend this event as guests, but there is a limited number who can participate as they have to get specific financing support for their transportation.

Mapuche producers do not have too much expectations of trading in this event. On the other hand, contact with tourists represents direct selling from producer to consumer without any intermediation, which enables craftsmen to fix better prices and to obtain payments in cash. As it can be observed, several institutions and social actors participate in the organization of festivals, fairs and meetings. Traditionalist centers, town councils, provincial organizations, groups of neighbors, resident centres and indig-

enous groups of the region come together to the events described. The multiplicity of interests and positions turns visible the constitution of a field where the appropriation of traditions is constantly disputed and identities are reconfigured.

In this sense, Mapuche identity appear as an element deeply rooted in a polysemic structure in which the history of Mapuche struggle to be themselves appears dissolved and rearticulated. Then, multiplicities of narratives are presented and depending on several interests.

4. Conclusions

In this article we have analyzed different ways of Mapuche handicrafts trading in the province of Neuquén, in particular those mechanisms implemented in the area of Lacar and Huiliches Departments. This region is characterized by an intense tourist activity that grants a peculiar mark to the case that has been analyzed.

We have discussed the trade of handicrafts through the provincial enterprise *Artesanías Neuquinas*, the direct sale to tourists, the exchange made with intermediaries who visit the communities, the transactions made with regional merchants, and last but not least, the occasional participation of craftsmen in different fairs and festivals.

Each of these alternatives has their own peculiarity, and a particular configuration of scenarios involving economic and symbolic networks. The valorization of traditional production involves the starting up of mechanisms that operate over producers' identity. This symbolic construction is not reduced to a particular form of producing senses, although objectives and courses of pragmatic action are indeed defined according to this construction.

All things related to the Mapuche community are at the same time the core of a narrative that impulses ethnic validation and recognition, as well as a content to be negotiated in the handicraft trading process. The implementation of reproductive strategies is directly related to the development of identitarian practices.

The rescue of Mapuche traditions is a process of selection and reconfiguration of elements from the past (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983), which helps to the validation and legitimization of Mapuche communities in present time. In this sense, handicraft production is linked with beliefs and heritage. In this sense craftsmen's reproductive practices and production of senses constitute two inseparable dimensions that belong to the same process.

13 During the conflict both countries were ruled by a military dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet in Chile and General Jorge Rafael Videla in Argentina.

Also, we consider necessary to understand the flow of handicrafts production by the analysis of a wider exchange system, because of the multiplicity of social agents involved in the process. In addition, it is impossible to reduce the link between producers and consumers to an economic-quantitative dimension leaving aside all symbolic issues. In this sense consumers' perspective acquires central importance. Then, what elements determine demands, needs, individual taste and fashion? These are very important questions, and the answers exceed the limits of this article. However, it is possible to state that acquisition of handicrafts is related to the valorization made by consumers of Mapuche works.

What has been outlined leads us to make some analysis about buyers. From industrial development at a large scale, during the raising of capitalism, mass-made production results contradictory to the possibility of establishing social and cultural differences. The taste for antique and exotic features is an aspect to be considered within the process of handicraft consumption. The uniqueness (and hence exclusivity) of acquired pieces, contrasts with the indistinctiveness of the consumption of serialized products. On the other hand, the acquired handicraft is transformed into a material ascertainment (and exhibition) of a journey through exotic regions. Then, consumption of handicrafts is a distinguishing feature for social differentiation.

Consumers, also, do not know too much about all the process the purchased articles suffered during handicrafts production (historical functions of the pieces, craftsmen living conditions, trading channels and so on). What really means for consumers is the certification of genuine origin of the articles. Then authenticity operates over social validation of handicraft production. Then, such criterion is the outcome of social discrimination and cultural classification, reflected on handicrafts. As Spooner points out: "(...) authenticity is the conceptualization of a slippery legitimacy, not properly defined and socially ordered" (Spooner, 1991: 279) in handicraft production, this is a central issue in the purchase process. In account of all the ways of trading analyzed, *Artesanías Neuquinas* undoubtedly, is in the best conditions to "guarantee" this aspect. The designed packaging, logos, trade-mark and certifications found on every piece ensure its

Mapuche origin.¹⁴

The heterogeneity of handicrafts buyers is a critical issue to be considered. Mapuche handicrafts represent different meanings in order to different social and cultural origins of buyers. The production process: making, trade and consumption involves remarkable changes in the appreciation and functions of the piece. In this path there is a reinterpretation and re-functionalization of these objects. As stated by Bourdieu (1993), the representations of agents varies according to their position and *habitus*, as a perception system, as cognitive and assessment structures they acquire through their status in social world. The symbolic work of valorization and classification related to handicrafts is not a neutral socio-cultural practice. Producers, intermediaries and consumers make different appreciations and the "inter-game" of representations constitutes a field in which different aspects of interethnic conflict are discussed.

Moreover, there is a constitutive practice that adds real and imaginary elements to the Mapuche struggle for ethnic reaffirmation. However, there is also a co-constituent activity that appears during trade operations, the effects of practices and representations of consumers and intermediaries of handicraft production.

14 Direct selling by the producers undoubtedly guarantees "authenticity". That is the reason why selling at trading-specialized shops has to reinforce this characteristic to attract possible buyers.

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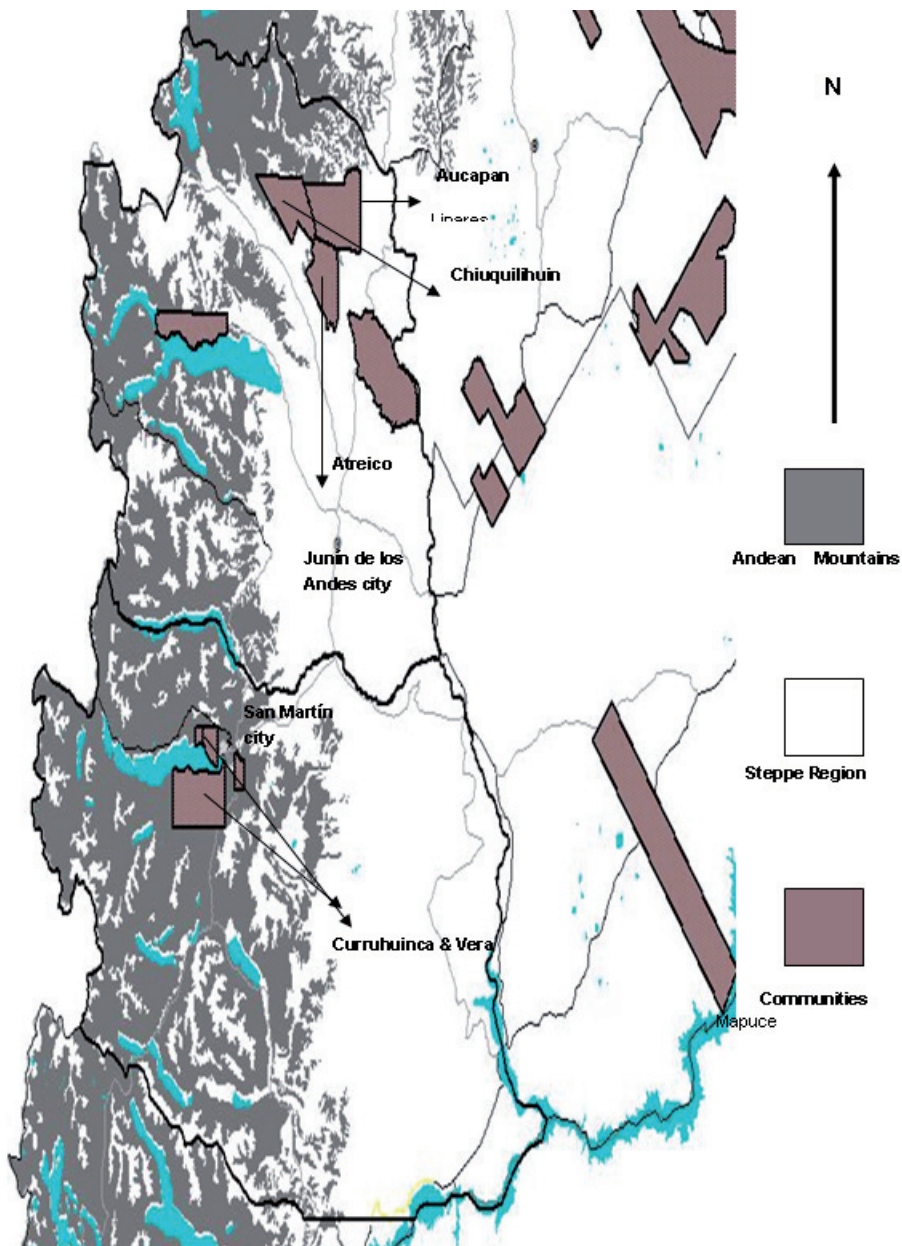
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Appendix: Mapuche communities in Southern Neuquén, Argentina





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Izvorni znanstveni članak
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Trgovanje Mapuche rukotvorinama: proizvodnja smisla i sociokulturna reprodukcija

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Cilj ovog članka je proučiti karakteristike i dinamiku različitih načina trgovanja rukotvorinama kod proizvođača iz Mapuche zajednica u okruzima Lacar i Huilches u provinciji Neuquén u Argentini. Trgovanje rukotvorinama je od ključne važnosti za stanovnike ovih dijelova te patagonske provincije. Izravna prodaja turistima, prodaja na organiziranim događanjima kao što su sajmovi i susreti, komercijalizacija kroz gradske trgovine i prodaja na licu mjesta predstavljaju različite alternative komercijalizaciji koju provodi provincijska agencija *Artesanías Nequinas* (rukotvorine iz Neuquéna). Ovi scenariju u kojima se razvija prodaja rukotvorina povezani su s reprodukcijom proizvođača te doprinose različitim oblicima identiteta te stvaranju prostora za proizvodnju smisla, kako u Mapuche zajednici (prodavači), tako i u Winkas zajednici (konzumenti).

Ključne riječi: rukotvorine, narod Mapuche, kulturna reprodukcija