

“Wild silk, a hidden treasure”. Thoughts on a safeguarding experience of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in Ancasti, Catamarca, Argentina

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Figure 1: Wild silk-producing moth and its cocoons after collection, placed on wires © Martina Cassiau/ Memória Imaterial edition

The plan for the safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage ‘Mountain silk, a hidden treasure’ seeks to revive the traditional artisanal spinning and weaving technique used for the ‘cocoyo’, the type of wild silk found in the mountains of Ancasti, Catamarca, Argentina. This knowledge —passed down from generation to generation— has survived the passage of time to this day. Bringing this part of history back to life sparks an alert on forgotten traditions and serves as a means for giving value to the cultural expression typical of the land, its landscape and community.

The project was launched in a dynamic and changing environment which gave rise to a feeling of tension, conflicts of interest, clashes and asymmetries between the social actors taking part in this project.

Keywords: Intangible Cultural Heritage, wild silk, safeguarding, Ancasti, artisanal weaving.

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Introduction.

In these pages, I will share some of the thoughts that resulted from carrying out the project for safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage known as 'mountain silk, a hidden treasure', which I had the pleasure to lead and which was developed between 2016 and 2018, in mountains of Ancasti, (Catamarca, Argentina), in the cultural region that comprises the north of what is nowadays Peru, Bolivia, the north of Chile and the northeastern provinces of Argentina, where one of the most extraordinary weaving traditions in history was held.

In short, the project was based on a proposal for the preservation and transmission of the knowledge required for obtaining, spinning and weaving wild silk. This knowledge is part of the life of the community and rooted in the land of Ancasti, a town that has managed to survive over the years in spite of being naturally subjected to migratory, economic and social global phenomena.

After my first visit to Ancasti, in 2016, with some luck I got to meet Doña Paula Romero. This 82-year-old craftswoman presented herself as the only woman who continued to actively practice this technique and said that she really wanted to teach it. From a little carton box, she took out her little treasures: a ball of silk, a spindle with which she is always spinning, and a small piece of fabric. She told me that she has worked silk since she was 12 years old and that she received several awards for the quality of her crafts. She used to receive neighbours in her house to work the coyoyo silk, but nowadays she noticed that women were disinterested in learning this trade.

I understood that I should not separate crafts from women. I could only register the artisan process and see the tradition alive through these artisans. Listening to their life stories and understanding the place that this tradition occupies in their universe, was the opportunity to build community connections and generate spaces for socialization and exchange of knowledge so that the technique could be put into practice and not fall into disuse. The meeting to knit is an excuse to relate or perhaps to relate is an excuse to knit. There is no distinction. Weaving is part of the lives of these women and being able to learn the secrets of this technique was possible thanks to the relationship and the approach to their personal stories.

After the implementation of the project and several months of work, the greatest achievement was the consolidation of a group of women weavers who keep the trade alive. Doña Paula, a master silk artisan, taught a group of women the whole process of the technique known in Ancasti as "the weaving girls". They meet a few afternoons a week to practice and perfect the spinning and weaving technique of wild silk, using the traditional creole spindles and looms.

The goals set for this article are two: the first one is presenting and introducing the different stages involved in the artisanal making of wild silk weaves with the aim of giving visibility to this cultural expression which is characteristic of a moment in time, typical of the land and its community, as a part of the cultural diversity in Latin America. I shall explain how this tradition came to be a tradition from ancient times to this day while, at the same time, evaluating why it is falling into disuse. The second goal is

observing the contrast between the heritage theory and its practice, presenting a real —not an ideal— scenario, and focusing on the difficulties experienced, the unforeseen and the sociopolitical situation. What I intend to do by means of this article is to pose a few questions in regard to the feeling of tension, conflicts of interest, clashes and asymmetries between the social actors taking part in this project on Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Wild silk, the process of artisanal weaving and its historical and cultural relevance.

Wild silk is a very special//peculiar raw material used for spinning and creating of woven fabrics. This native silk is produced by a large silkworm moths that lives and pupates (spins its cocoon) in the deserted hills//mountains of Ancasti, a low-density population rural area and scarce resources in the Province of Catamarca, Argentina. These cocoons fill the thorny woods from where they are collected and, after undergoing a few processes, are turned into exquisite textile pieces.

The insect responsible for the production of this type of silk belongs to *Lepidoptera* order, *saturniidae* family, *rothschildia* genus, and its species has not yet been defined. These moths create irregularly shaped cocoons that are very hard or even impossible to wind, their colour is dark and whitening them can prove extremely difficult. “They offer some advantages, such as their resistance and stability, together with a high performance resulting from the cocoon’s large size. The fibres extracted from them are sparkling bright due to the multiple ways in which the light reflects on them and to their angled —somewhat twisted— shape” (Martinez Pintos, 1942: 143).²



Figure 2: Different shades of silk fleece © Martina Cassiau

² Author's translation (in all bibliographic references that are not written in English).

Since native silk is also affected by natural phenomena, it can result in a wide range of tones depending on the plants the caterpillar parasitizes: we will obtain light brown from “Tinajera”, greenish-brown from “Ancoche”, yellowish-brown from “Afato”, reddish-brown from “Piquillin”, brown from “Churqui” (*Oxalis gigantea*), dark brown from “Clavillo”, light grey from “Alamo” and milky white from “Lechillo”, according to the data collected by the philologist Elsa Gómez, quoted by Corcuera in her research.

In the course of carrying out this fieldwork, I observed and recorded the processes involved in the artisanal production and the people taking part in it. Having the experience of sharing long evenings with these women as they would spin and weave allowed me to register knowledge learnt by means of participating and observing on the field. One of the artisans told me that she was finding it hard to obtain cocoons since, apparently, they were being eaten by large wasps. Cocoons are usually gathered from the field during long walks these women take with the youngest members of the family and they have to go deep into the hills to get them. The male members of these families also collect them if they come across some during their workday at the field.

Cocoons can also be found coupled to wires, where moths continue to reproduce and thus generate more cocoons which, in turn, creates a small-scale domestic production. Some artisans hang these sets of wires from the walls of their homes or workshops, while others hang them from plants. They know perfectly well when the little worm is still inside and when it is not, since they are familiar with their weight and are aware of some details that allow them to tell when the moth is not yet of the cocoon.

This collection procedure is eco-friendly since the cocoon is only used when the moth has left it. These are called “mature cocoons”, whereas those in which the moth is still inside are known as “green” ones and are not used until the insect has abandoned it (Corcuera, 2006). This technique is completely opposite from those applied in the production of other types of silk, in which larvae are killed in massive amounts to obtain a continuous thread, as is the case of the Chinese silk produced by the *Bombix Mori* worm.



Figure 3: Wild silk-producing moth and its cocoons after collection, placed on wires © Martina Cassiau

Another of the artisans showed me the process the cocoons have to undergo. To open them, they are put in groups of around twenty, wrapped around a fabric and boiled with ashes. The use of ashes is essential since it is fundamental for the cocoon to open. A very interesting fact is that if the ashes used come from a log of hard wood such as “quebracho” or “cebil”, twenty minutes will be enough. However, if ashes from a softer kind of wood are used, the cocoons will have to boil for half an hour or more, since they have a lesser “softening” effect.

Then, the artisans will carefully and skilfully spin it by means of using a traditional spindle. Their hands sway rhythmically and their movements become part of their expression. As they run their fingers through the fibres, the raw material becomes delicate silk threads which they will later use to warp the creole loom and weave with warp-faced techniques which they do with great dedication, thus resulting in small scarves and ties. Another way to weave wild silk is by means of a knot’s technique called “macramé”, used for making triangular scarves.

The recording of this process of spinning and weaving of wild silk is considered to be part of what is known as the “Intangible Cultural Heritage”, as defined by UNESCO:

“...knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003).

This trade falls within the category of Intangible Cultural Heritage within the field of traditional craftsmanship techniques since it has been passed down from generation to generation and it is repeated by the Ancasti’s community members in their daily interaction with nature, both while collecting the raw materials (i.e.: silkworm moths cocoons, ash from logs from the local area, water), and when crafting the elements required for the job (i.e.: creole loom and accessories made out of logs collected from the area and then nailed to the ground). As I had the pleasure to learn as I was carrying out this project, the weaving gatherings, the interaction between these women and the exchange of knowledge inspire a sense of identity and continuity in the community of Ancasti.

A link between the past and the present.

As I shall expound in the present section, pieces of research and archaeological findings show, up to this day, that Ancasti is the only area in Argentina where this type of textile craftsmanship was carried out. According to Corcuera’s research (2006), these cocoons served hunter-gatherers in the past as jingles or beads for necklaces or wristbands used as part of shamanic rites.

The Argentinean ethnographer, folklorist and naturalist Juan B. Ambrosetti exhibited the archaeological remains of two hats that used to belong to the inhabitants of the Santa Catalina region, in the Province of Jujuy, and of La Paya, in the Calchaquí Valley: “the raw material employed to manufacture them was the cocoon of a moth whose larva is alive and builds it to become a chrysalis on the locust tree”. These cocoons

are not made of the same material we are referring to, but this proves the knowledge these people had regarding the different means of using the Lepidoptera.

The archaeologist A. Fernández Distel, found remains of these insects in three different locations in the Province of Jujuy. In all of these, the pupas were altered to be used as rattles or beads for necklaces and wristbands used as part of shamanic rites. For that purpose, one of the ends of these little “bags” were cut off so that small stones could be introduced inside and they were then attached to a string. The ones belonging to Huachichocana are dated sometime between 8670 and 3400 BP. They were hunter-gatherers who might have brought them from warmer areas and may have even used them as food.

On the other hand, the cave paintings found in the area of Ancasti display drawings which, according to Néstor Kriscautzky, could be depicting silk moths. Lucas Gheco, —archaeologist and researcher of the Ancasti caves, who I had the pleasure of interviewing in 2017 during his visit to the City of Buenos Aires—, however, disagrees and believes that these cave paintings are subject to interpretation and numerous meanings can be attributed to them.

The various ways for naming the cocoons also place the use of wild silk in prehispanic times, “also known as ‘cuncuna’, ‘pulucha’ and ‘punucha’, all of these of uncertain indigenous etymology. This linguistic fact serves as a confirmation of the fact that this craft has been rooted in Catamarca possibly since pre-Columbian times” (Corcuera, 2006: 118). Moreover, during my visits, as I talked to the people, I was able to register several ways for referring to this insect depending on the area:

- *Coyoyo*, *coyuyo*, *cunucha* and silkworm, in the area of “El Alto”, in Ancasti.
- *Coyuyo*, in San Fernando del Valle de Catamarca.
- *Dumirí-dumiri*, in the area of El Quebrachal (Catamarca).
- *Pulucha*, in the area of Rio La Dorada (Catamarca).
- *Cuncuna*, in Chile.

The oral narrations given by the locals serve as evidence that reinforces the link that this practice has with the past. I first visited Ancasti during the 2016 carnival, where I met Miss Paula Romero. She welcomed me into her home where we talked for a while. She told me about her day-to-day work in the field and showed me a box where she kept her treasures: some little balls of thin-woven silk, some cocoons that were being softened, a few balls of silk fleece and a wooden and bone spindle made by her husband. She told me she learned how to weave at the age of 11 and that she had been working with silk for 70 years. She learned how to do it by looking at her aunts and grandmothers and explained to me that “*purucha was the name given to it by the Indians back then, in ancient times...they were the ones working with these bugs...*”

These woven fabrics are part of an ideological and cultural heritage that proved strong as a means for preserving the identity of peoples or communities. The transmission of knowledge required for the production of wild silk fabrics from one generation to the other also entails the transmission of a way of

interacting with the environment, managing the time that is dedicated to working, getting dressed and surviving.

For thousands of years, these fabrics served to make important political, social and religious distinctions in a much more significant way than anywhere else in the world “...This long-lasting fascination for fine fabrics was the hallmark that characterized the ancient Andean world...” (Rieff Anawalt, 2008: 442). It is for this reason that we consider that the techniques used for the creation of fabrics are a solid link between ancient and contemporary culture, connecting past and present, applying a cultural memory that has existed for more than 500 years.

Wild silk today.

During some of the visits I made to the Ancasti mountain to assess the current state of this textile technique, I met a woman who introduced herself as the only artisan who was still actively practicing this technique. She claimed that, while other women were familiar with the secrets behind the *purucha* and had spun it sometimes, most were working with materials such as sheep wool or industrial thread.

The younger women did not show any interest in learning the trade, claiming that the technique takes too much of an effort and is not too profitable in economic terms, since it is not a popular product on the market. To make matters worse, the municipal State does not take into account artisanal practices when formulating its public policies. It was a foreseeable consequence that this laborious trade would fall into disuse.

Global changes together with massive and cheap means of production exert their impact on local cultures to the point that, in some cases, they even destroy the rich and diverse cultural expressions nurture regional identities. This stems from the fact that craftwork is usually expensive and entails long manual production processes, whereas industrial goods require shorter processes and can be purchased at lower costs.

In the process of formation of the Argentine State and its national identity, many cultural expressions that were contained within one same territory became homogeneous. In the pursuit of finding a “national spirit”, cultural differences were set apart with the aim of seeking a shared tradition, for the same territory and the same blood. In this sense, Ticio Escobar (1986) believes that “pro-government nationalism fabricated the various cultures shaping them to the State’s needs, arguing that “national (identity) should be a homogenous unity” (p. 83).

Nevertheless, many pre-Columbian expressions persist today --some stronger than others-- yet, many stand on the brink of oblivion. Amongst these cultural expressions, there are various textile techniques which are part of the cultural heritage originating from the Argentine northwest region. Barretto (2007) states that “Determining what is worthy of conservation is a political-ideological decision that reflects the values and opinions on which the symbols should remain so that a specific society in a certain period of

time can be depicted, since heritage is an element of identity” (p. 115). From this perspective, safeguarding and spreading this technique implies highlighting the importance of local identities and requires the State to validate this cultural expression.

The “Mountain silk, a hidden treasure” project is a response to this situation. Its mission was to safeguard the wild silk weaving technique with the goal of reviving this cultural expression and reinforcing the transmission of knowledge among women artisans and among different generations, understanding that “... heritage preservation and conservation also involves a process of memory recovering, which will allow the peoples to preserve their identities...” (Barretto, 2007: 90).

From the perspective of this safeguarding project, the protection of the technique of artisanal weaving of wild silk “(...) means preserving it from oblivion, and making it once again part of the collective knowledge, revealing what society keeps hidden from its present and from its past (...)” (Millán, 1964: 69).

In this particular case, it is about safeguarding a pre-Colombian technique still in practice today. Taking into account that it has outlived the spread of Western civilization in terms of the economic and social organization which led to the vanishing of native techniques, traditions and heritages, and resulted in the scorn and oblivion of ancient techniques and practices. Some languages, trades and rituals were hidden, became weaker throughout the years, diluting to extinction.

Launching the project.

This project was designed and created from a protectionist perspective, based on the guidelines of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the ICH. Action plans were set on the schedule and expenditure forecasts were drafted, objectives and expected results were set, a technical work team and strategic allies were defined, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats were identified, and a meticulous plan was made to be set in motion on the basis of ideal scenarios.

The project was carried out from 2016 to 2018. Some of the achievements made include: the formation of a team composed of five women who learned the trade and still practice it daily, protecting it from oblivion and from the passage of time; the launching of a website (www.sedasilvestre.com) which displays the full experience that the project entails and draws attention to the weavers as the protagonists of such experience, the wild silk textiles and their entire production process; the design and materialization of a “step-by-step” manual or instructive that explains how to apply this technique and the organization of the “Mountain silk, a hidden treasure” photographic exhibition which was displayed in cultural centres in the province of Catamarca as well as various recordings and audiovisual materials and a 10-minute documentary that was exhibited in cultural centres in both Catamarca and Buenos Aires. Moreover, the project was presented in the International Congress on Heritage organized by the OAS in Buenos Aires in 2018, in governmental fairs and symposiums in state spaces.

To form the group of women, we toured the houses closest to the farm, presenting the project and briefly interviewing those who were interested. We interviewed several women, all of them knew about the existence of the technique, but not all of them were interested in participating in the classes that we proposed. Doña Paula Romero told us that three girls had come to ask her if she would start teaching and they were interested. Finally, the selection was established according to the proximity of their homes to the house of Doña Paula Romero (where the classes were taught), the time availability and the economic pretensions.

The project also drew attention from cultural spaces and local political actors who showed their interest in it, so much so that the Chamber of Deputies in the province of Catamarca declared the project to be one of cultural interest, and the Secretary of Tourism from the same province signed a collaboration agreement. Likewise, Catamarca's journalists showed their commitment by means of broadcasting information about it on the radio and sharing it on their editorials, making the project and the uniqueness of this cultural heritage known to the rest of the community and, as a matter of fact, they were able to place the focus on the women weavers as guardians of the wild silk, and offered spaces aimed at reflecting upon the problematics of the cultural heritage, its management, politics and craftwork.

This is the ordered, concise and institutional version of the "Mountain silk, a hidden treasure" project, but the truth is that this project took place in a complex scenario: political interests and bids, social vulnerability, public policies and provincial programs, academic interests, archaeological activities, and tension among the silk weavers. Only a few aspects of the originally set out ideas were carried out exactly as planned, since schedules were delayed, some agreements for political support failed to be reached, but at the same time, new opportunities and encouraging scenarios appeared.

Real and non-ideal scenarios. Scheme of socioeconomic asymmetries and unexpected situations within the field work.

All the unexpected factors considered while designing the project account for the complex cultural, political, historical and social fabric in which actions for the management of cultural heritage are intended to take place.

The ideal scenario anticipated for this proposal vanished once we faced real situations: from the political circumstances, the clash of interests among governmental dependencies, the asymmetric socio-economic stances between the artisans and the various collaborators of the project and the economic inflationary fluctuations typical of a Latin-American nation, to the personal life story of each artisan and the quarrels among some of them, the low frequency of buses travelling to Ancasti, the poor state of the roads which hindered access to the place and the weather change which delayed the arrival of moths and their little cocoons.

State organisms and their dependencies are not always equipped with the mechanisms necessary to assemble, dialogue and work altogether. Moreover, in some cases, they were run by officials with

different and opposing interests, which hampered joint actions. This is an obstacle for the conjoined work between various governmental areas.

There occurred some events which were completely unexpected, such as the tragic and sudden passing away of the governor of Ancasti --a situation that moved the entire town and left its mark on the project-. Furthermore, an officer opposing the incumbent provincial party assumed in his place, which implied that all the political support initially obtained was lost due to the dissolution of the agreement signed months earlier.

These women live in the groups of country houses in Santa Gertrudis, a rural area in Ancasti that is very hard to reach. This isolation is not only evidenced in geographical, but also economic and commercial terms as well. When buyers manage to reach these ranches, learn of the value of the produce, become interested and are willing to pay for it, they may --and often, do-- not have the money at that very moment to make the purchase. The ATM's in the town do not dispense much cash, and while at the capital (of the province) I had to queue for a hundred meters just to obtain a limited amount of money: a thousand Argentine pesos (USD15). Under such conditions, the trade of native silk weaves becomes increasingly difficult.

Without the support of the State or NGOs, these female artisans are at a disadvantage compared with the industry and compared with buyers who frequently intend to pay much lower prices for their artisanal crafts.

There is one final layer of vulnerability or inequality piercing through the whole experience: gender. We cannot rule out the fact that this group is entirely composed of women seeking for tools to propel their economic independence, women who find themselves unable to fully perform these activities since a double workload falls upon them as they are meant to be looking after the children, the family, the house and the farm.

Apart from the difficulties and unforeseen events which composed the actual and real scenario, it is paramount to reflect upon the tensions and asymmetries arising between the different actors in the project.

The first asymmetry is that between my role as a project director and the artisans. Our priorities and objectives vary: whereas I prioritize the mid and long-term cultural preservation of the technique and the results of a project academically formulated and financed by UNESCO, to whom I have to answer; their focus is on the possible improvements that can be made to their own workshops and the short-term economic benefits they can obtain.

Then again, by inverting the positions of power, I carried my activities as a cultural agent in a new space, where I had to learn other cultural codes and ways of bonding and interacting. Artisans possess a unique cultural capital, respecting the country life and the artisanal techniques, which outsiders lack and actually

need in order to carry out their research or management duties. They handle the information and have the power to grant or deny access to certain knowledge and expertise.

As to the relationship between the local population and agent or researcher, I would like to express something about the hardship of drawing a line between the project's objectives and the life of the people participating in it. At times, people believe that the agent, due to its academic background, is capable of solving other types of issues relating to daily life such as medical issues, material needs, or bureaucratic and family difficulties.

To conclude, it is worth mentioning that this project was mainly financed by UNESCO, whose footprint and concerns were also at stake in the development of the project. This organism monitors every stage in detail and the decisions regarding the work methodology and the processes for safeguarding the heritage were jointly made and agreed upon.

Final reflections.

As we know, the process of globalization coupled with economic and productive changes have given way to social and cultural transformations, such as the rural migration, the excessive exploitation of natural resources and mountain deforestation. Consequently, certain traditions and trades have been abandoned as a result of the emergence of new jobs, and a new reality has been imposed that sets out new means of survival, a reality in which local traditions are underestimated and novelty is sought, and deemed more evolved and better than anything previous.

Meanwhile, in urban centres, internationalization processes stir a feeling of nostalgia, a desire to return to what is ours, looking back on the customs and traditions that define the identity of a region. And it is on this point where the citizens of certain localities, those who keep certain traditions, are empowered. Now the major cities are looking at them, they deem them important, value them and need them as the witnesses of the inherited identities and customs, thus creating a paradoxical effect, since the local citizens do not hang on to their traditions by their own initiatives, but because the visitor appreciates it. In the words of Barretto, "(...) globalization has triggered a nostalgic effect, people feel the need to be emotionally attached to the places, to their past history and to their own past (...)" (Barretto, 2007: 103).

Additionally, it should be mentioned that the particularities of local cultures or small towns are attracting public interest and so become the subjects of institutional protection through laws, decrees and practices or programs encompassed within the framework of safeguarding an intangible cultural heritage, as a result of the "boomerang" effect of the cultural fading that globalization entails. I agree with what Antonio Arantes (2007) explains when he says that "artisanal knowledge, cultural expressions as well as landscapes are a target of implementation and promotion of development programs in humanitarian, social and economic spheres in the most impoverished regions of the world" (p. 1).

With this text, I sought out to analyse in detail the role we play as cultural agents and participants of cultural management projects of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The variety of participating actors and

institutions have different agency capacities that remain hidden, and many times they have conflicting interests. These tensions must be addressed within each political and social reality where the project is based.

The “Mountain silk, a hidden treasure” experience proves that fieldwork as a knowledge-related practice within the execution of a cultural project differs considerably from any planning made behind a desk. This is an opportunity to enrich the hereditary ways of understanding culture from the life of the very ones who keep it alive.

The difficulties we have been through are likewise part of any other such project of cultural management intended to be carried out. This also serves as information on societies’ characteristics. However, we must not lose focus: working to strengthen the various existing cultural expressions from a collaborative and integrative perspective, without neglecting the basic needs and desires of making artisans' lives more prosperous since they are the ones who teach us how to live in harmony with nature and tell us about our ancestors.

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