

Resonant Temporalities in the Rock Pictograph Alto El Loa, Antofagasta Chile.

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Abstract:

This paper critically reflects on the tensions that arise when attempting to recognize the rock pictographs of the Alto Loa region as intangible cultural heritage (ICH) under the criteria established by the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO (2003). Focusing on the case of the rock inscriptions located in Taira, Lasana, and Chiu Chiu, it proposes a situated reading that acknowledges their spiritual dimension and considers the links between territory and temporality from a relational ontology. It is argued that, although the original practices have ceased, current communities activate contemporary forms of relationship with these pictographs, configuring other ways of knowing and doing. From this perspective, the model proposed by official heritage frameworks is questioned, and the need to decenter dominant epistemic paradigms is raised in order to address alternative forms of continuity and temporality. This approach advocates for a more relational and situated understanding of heritage that recognizes the cultural agency of the people who are part of and create that space.

Keywords: Normative tensions, Intangible rupestre del Alto Loa, Temporalidades cultural heritage, Alto Loa rock pictography, Temporalities

Along the rock overhangs and cliff faces that line the Loa River (the principal fluvial axis of northern Chile) there is a remarkable concentration of rock pictographs made with natural pigments dating from pre-Columbian times. According to the registry of Chile's National Monuments Council, there are more than a hundred sites with these manifestations in the Antofagasta Region, with the ensembles at Taira, Lasana, and Chiu Chiu being especially significant (CMN, 2020).

Focusing more specifically on the issue, the rock pictography of the Upper Loa has previously been addressed within heritage work primarily from archaeological and historical perspectives. While these

approaches have enabled the documentation of the objects, they have in some cases neglected crucial aspects of their meaning, such as their relationship to the environmental setting and to the communities that currently inhabit these territories and recognize the makers of these images as their ancestors. This limitation of approaches has produced a fragmented and partial view of the cultural practices of the authors of these pieces, relegating their intangible dimension to the background.

Beyond their aesthetic and material dimension, these markings can be understood as the result of complex practices that articulate technical knowledge. Within

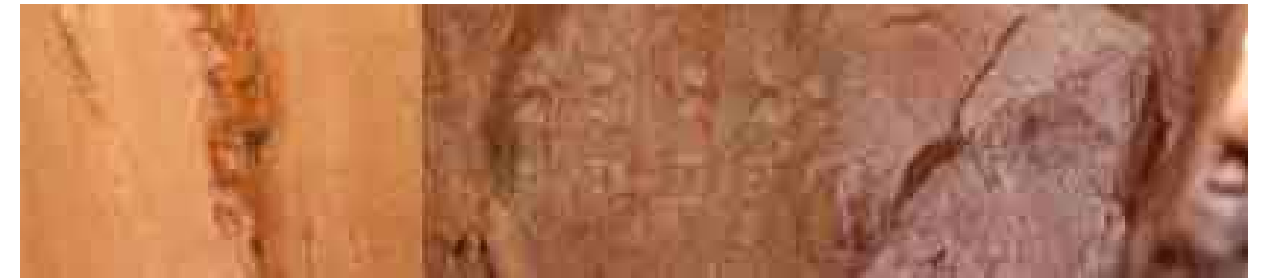


Figure 1 Detail of Rock pictograph in Alto de Opathe, Alto Loa. Source: Author, 2024.

the framework of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), this type of knowledge is recognized as part of what is known as know-how, including as essential components the practices and knowledge transmitted through community experience, the articulation between theory and practice, the skills and techniques forged through action, and their central value in comprehensive and meaningful learning processes.

From this perspective, the pictographs not only evidence a symbolic or aesthetic dimension; they also embody a sophisticated network of technical-expressive knowledge that reflects an integral understanding of the environment. The preparation of the rock supports, for example, required knowledge of the physical qualities of the surfaces. It is believed that the ancient producers of these pictographs evaluated solar orientation, the degree of rock erosion (Sepúlveda, J., Contreras, R., Rojas, N., & Panadés, L., 2021), the relationship to their travel routes, and spiritually significant places in order to create these representations (Vilca Vilca, T., Reyes Berna, L., Ramos Ramos, E., Zuleta Mondaca, M., Varas Mora, A., Chocobar Cruz, M., Cruz Cruz, G., & Aguilar Cortés, G., 2022). Likewise, the methods used to fix pigments reveal an empirical handling of chemical processes, through the use of organic binders—such as resins or fats—(Menéndez, M., 1987) which, in conjunction with the region's climatic conditions, have enabled the preservation of these images to the present day.

These expressions attest to a worldview deeply rooted in the territory. Nonetheless, the absence of evidence

for the active transmission of these techniques or the continued use of their symbolic language suggests a rupture in the chain of transmission. Consequently, these expressions persist today as material vestiges of significant cultural, historical, and spiritual value.

Recognition of these expressions as Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) raises significant challenges in relation to UNESCO's criteria of ongoing vitality, (re)creation, and intergenerational transmission. According to the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), such heritage is defined as that which "is transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity" (UNESCO, 2003).

Within this framework, Chile's Ministry of Cultures, Arts and Heritage—through the Subdirectorate for Intangible Cultural Heritage—is responsible for implementing the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (UNESCO, 2003), which Chile signed in 2008 and ratified the following year. This international instrument guides public policies aimed at recognizing, safeguarding, and valuing the intangible cultural expressions of communities, groups, and individuals. Under this regulatory framework, and despite institutional efforts to broaden categories of recognition, tensions arise when attempting to classify expressions such as those discussed here, which do not

fully align with the criteria established in the current normative framework.

In this sense, when dealing with vestiges of such antiquity, conceptual tensions emerge. We are confronted with a practice that, as the Museo de Arte Precolombino notes (n.d.), “in the vast majority of the continent (...) disappeared soon after contact with Europeans, long before the arrival of the first professional ethnographers to document it.” “With the disappearance of its makers, a significant part of the knowledge concerning the meaning and function of these remarkable graphic manifestations was lost forever, including the technologies used in their execution.” Thus, stating that these objects do not possess a living chain of cultural transmission refers to a body of know-how whose continuity was interrupted. Today, their persistence is manifested in fragmentary or residual form, which poses challenges both for their interpretation and for their incorporation within the framework outlined above.

In light of these tensions, can intangible cultural heritage be understood outside linear frameworks of intergenerational transmission? This question is key, as it directly challenges the guiding criteria that determine inscription on ICH lists. Rather than answering it immediately, it is worth observing the actions currently unfolding in the territory.

At present, various processes of rereading, reinterpretation, re-signification, and reworking of rock pictography are underway, and they have been, and continue to be, driven by members of the very communities that inhabit the territories adjacent to the Loa River. This is evident in contemporary artistic practices, archival work, and symbolic appropriations that reactivate the bond with the engraved and painted rocks. Thus, even though the ancestral practice linked to the creation of rock pictographs has ceased, the actions currently undertaken by the communities in these territories allow the phenomenon to be approached from at least three complementary dimensions.

First, authors such as Néstor García Canclini (1999) have emphasized that heritage is a dynamic process,

traversed by symbolic disputes, diverse social uses, and constant transformations. In this sense, heritage should be understood as a space open to negotiation and re-signification, where the active participation of communities is key for it to acquire meaning, currency, and relevance in changing contexts. Moreover, giving voice to those who live, feel, and recreate these cultural practices is not only to open a space for dialogue; it also entails negotiation, contestation, and the incorporation of the communities’ self-determination as a fundamental principle for heritage validation. Intangible cultural heritage is therefore recognized not as a fixed or immutable entity, but as something articulated dynamically in the present, insofar as an active bond with ancestral knowledge persists within the community.

Here the critique developed by authors such as Laurajane Smith (2006) becomes crucial: heritage is not a thing but a social practice, situated, affective, and saturated with power relations. By seeking to define universally what should be considered “alive,” “proper,” or “recreated,” categorization imposes a way of understanding culture that determines not only what counts as heritage, but also who has the authority to define it, record it, and steward it. This perspective enables a critique of the epistemological structure of the global heritage regime, particularly its capacity to recognize other temporalities. Second, the symbolic and spiritual value of the object endures, nourishing new forms of knowledge, practice, and artistic expression that reaffirm its centrality in the contemporary cultural life of the Upper Loa communities (1).

A concrete example of this ongoing vitality is evident in the work of the artist Luisa Terán, originally from Caspana, who for more than 25 years “creates works inspired by South American camelids” (SIGPA, 2023), animals of profound cultural and spiritual value for the Licanantay people. Using mixed techniques—working

1 - The work has been carried out with the communities of Lasana, Caspana, and Chiu Chiu. It has involved a sustained process of dialogue, opening up prospects for work in other territories adjacent to the Loa River.

with fabric, stone, wood, and plaster—Terán carefully reproduces the pictographs and petroglyphs found around her community, transmitting to new generations not only her love for these animals but also the ways of life that link them to the territory’s natural and spiritual cycles. Similarly, teacher Juan Orellana, together with his students at School G-52 in Chiu Chiu, has promoted pedagogical initiatives centered on the rock inscriptions of the Upper Loa, especially in areas such as Lasana and Chiu Chiu. His work not only compiles ancestral images but also puts them into dialogue with the community’s present identity, emphasizing that “these ancestral elements are part of our history” (Subdirección Nacional de Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial, 2016).

From this perspective, one can understand the cultural vitality that is reaffirmed in notions such as those proposed by Berenguer (1983), particularly in the idea of a possible or plausible cultural continuity between the ethnographic present and the archaeological past, insofar as contemporary communities are not mere witnesses to their distant history, but active participants in it. In this sense, rock pictography is understood as an active and ongoing practice, sustained and reimagined by members of the present-day communities residing in Caspana, Lasana, and Chiu-Chiu. Therefore, the actions of artists and educators such as Luisa Terán and Juan Orellana constitute gestures of continuity that should be included in the debate and analysis of this and countless similar phenomena.

Finally, it is essential to critically address communities’ right to redefine rock pictography from a position of cultural agency and identity continuity, while also recognizing that continuity should not be understood solely as the linear transmission of knowledge between generations, but rather as the persistence of a collective sense of self that is continually updated and re-signified. We also face an ontological problem when confronting divergences in the understanding of time between cultures that converge in the present and ancient ones, where conceptions of time—far from conforming to the chronological, linear model predominant in the West—are articulated through cyclical, experiential, and territorial relations, in which the past is not separate

from the present but coexists with it and transforms it. Moreover, as Sánchez (2019) warns, State actions, even when motivated by protective intentions, can become mechanisms of control that strip communities of their capacity for self-determination. The imposition of an external regime of valuation risks turning heritage objects into silenced relics, detached from the ways of life that give them meaning. Therefore, any attempt to conserve or classify rock pictography that does not take into account this multiplicity of temporalities or the time–space relationship runs the risk of deactivating the living meanings that sustain community practices, while also failing to attend to the specific cultural frameworks of those who enact them and to the particular conditions of their territories.

It is worth noting that this form of imposition operates not only through heritage policies but also through epistemic frameworks that have historically cast Indigenous peoples as belonging to a different time. We owe to Johannes Fabian the concept of “denial of coevalness.” (2) , which refers to how anthropology has situated the peoples it studies in a time different from that of the researcher, using time as a colonizing conceptual tool by denying coevalness (that is, the possibility of being genuinely contemporaneous). This has positioned the communities under study in a past stripped of self-determination, recognition, and the capacity for self-analysis.

A Situated Perspective: Time

Within a situated reflection on the relationships between culture and environment, the worldviews of the communities that lived thousands of years ago along the Loa River offer a fundamental starting point for understanding how ties between dwelling, landscape, and temporality are configured.

This vision is expressed through symbolic and material forms that are intimately interwoven with the rhythms of the Upper Loa territory. In particular, the constitutive

2 - Denial of coevalness is a concept developed by the author Johannes Fabian in Time and the other : how anthropology makes its object (1983)



Figure 2 Paint over fabric and Luisa Terán from behind. Source: Author, 2025.

relationship between rock pictographs and their natural surroundings attests to an eco-philosophical connection of notable depth (Chamorro & Tocornal, 2002, 2005; Grebe & Hidalgo, 1988; Druss, 1976; Latcham, 1938), in which inscription in stone is configured as a meaning-laden act, embedded in a weave of cycles, presences, and territorial knowledges.

The past is not a distant, closed-off era but a dimension of the present, accessible through ritual and narrative (Allen, C., 1994).

Allen emphasizes that in the Andean community she studied, time is conceived as a continuous cycle that is intertwined with space and narrative. She notes that the landscape and specific places play a fundamental role in the community's temporal conception. Sacred sites and geographic markers act as anchors that allow stories to be lived and experienced in the present, establishing continuity across generations and reinforcing collective identity.

As W. Mignolo and C. Walsh (2018) point out, there is a need to decenter hegemonic epistemic thought and to recognize the validity of other ontologies and temporalities that have been historically silenced or subsumed. This perspective assumes that multiple forms of temporality coexist and are renewed in the present without being aligned with or hierarchized by a single dominant chronology.

For her part, Marisol de la Cadena (2010), in *Territorios de diferencia*, has shown how Andean Indigenous worlds

do not operate solely within the temporal framework of the nation-state or the modern global system, but articulate other forms of existence in which humans and non-humans, nature and agency are interwoven in a time that is not homogeneous or continuous, but plural and situated.

Moreover, it is necessary to consider that local inhabitants do not regard the rock pictographs as traces of a distant past, but as a living language in which “those from before” continue to speak and “those of today” continue to listen and practice it.

I began drawing on stone and then consulted my dad. My grandfather, Pablo Terán, has passed away, but I respect him and he is still with me—I feel him with me. He is still with me, and I will call him “papá” because he raised me. (L. Terán, personal communication, April 16, 2025).

This gesture of inscribing marks on stone, as described by Luisa Terán, exemplifies how such inscription becomes a threshold of presence: the act of drawing on stone is not merely an artistic practice but a different temporal relation in which the figure of the deceased grandfather becomes present. In this way, the potency of an understanding of time that approaches pictography as a practice in constant becoming, situated in body, affect, and territory, becomes evident. Moreover, with the aim of problematizing the notion of continuity and questioning its expansive capacity to encompass expressions that do not conform to modern temporal logic or to the linearity of intergenerational transmission,

the heritage object can also be understood from a relational ontology, in which knowledge does not reside “in” the practice but “between” the elements that are linked within it. What tensions emerge when the model collides with conceptions of time and space proper to other cultural ontologies? What, then, happens when we view, from the ICH framework, objects that entail relational transmissions?

We here have customs and traditions within the community. He explained it clearly: if you want to copy them (artists of the past), those drawings are theirs and you must ask their permission. So, as is our custom, I did so. I asked for permission to draw.

My father told me, “If you want to copy it, those are their houses where they live, and they had their drawings there. So it is not for just anyone to arrive, go into their house, and copy what belongs to them. You must always ask permission.” He helped me, and we did everything together. We asked for permission, we went into the little caves, and there I copied them. That was when I was in my twenties. (L. Terán, personal communication, April 16, 2025).

Terán sets out the origins of her artistic practice, which is grounded in an approach to rock imagery that transcends conventional visual or technical frameworks and instead proposes an ethics of relation. The act of requesting permission is a gesture that acknowledges the agency and presence of others who, from certain hegemonic perspectives, have been reduced to vestiges of the past. These presences are not inscribed within a materialist logic of conservation; they are sustained by a relational ethic. Cultural practice thus encompasses not only what is reproducible, but also what is evoked, reimagined, and affectively experienced. The body that asks for permission configures situated acts of knowledge that propose an understanding of knowing between entities that are present. Is this not, then, also a form of know-how?

With mastery of the art, they captured not only the forms of the camelids but also their spirit, their essence, and the augury of a successful hunt (petroglyph from Quebrada Quesala). (Llagostera Martínez, A., 2011).

From another perspective, and based on the petroglyphs of Quebrada Quesala (or Kezala) in the town of Talabre, Llagostera discerns a link to the event yet to come, namely the hunt. The author proposes a reading that resonates with what has been set out here, in which the object harbors spirit and omen and becomes a container for a relationship with the environment and with others, both visible and invisible, who persist alongside it.

This case thus enables a different view of the epistemological structure of the global heritage regime, particularly its capacity to recognize other temporalities. When approached in its own eco-philosophical complexity, other ways of understanding heritage emerge, anchored in multitemporal heterogeneity, in relational continuity with the environment, and in the coexistence of non-linear times. From a decolonizing perspective, the potential of the analysis lies precisely in revealing that there are forms of transmission and presence beyond established categories.

In this sense, adapting the object to current frameworks in order to secure its inscription in official registers is misguided. The intention here is to let these tensions help denaturalize the very criteria of the heritage system that governs us. The exclusion of the object from formal listings makes visible the epistemic limits of that classificatory system, which privileges certain forms of continuity (linear, institutional, documentable) to the detriment of others (cyclical, affective, spiritual, performative). The contemporary rereading of the object by communities living near the sites demonstrates that culture is not at a standstill; it continues to move in forms that lie beyond the reach of regulatory norms.

In short, we propose the exercise of looking from more just and situated epistemologies, which entails recognizing the need to decenter hegemonic interpretive frameworks and to make room for forms of knowledge, and of conceiving time and other domains, that emerge from the territories and communities themselves.

As Llagostera Martínez (2011) notes, “although we speak of the past, this is not a dead history buried in the sands



Figure 3 Ojo de Patache Valley . Source: Author, 2024

of time; it is a history that lives on in the continuity of a people, in their beliefs, in their customs, in their way of seeing life and the beyond, in the features and the olive complexions of their descendants.”

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