



### Florencia Trentini

NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF QUILMES AND UNIVERSITY OF BUENOS AIRES

Holder of a bachelor's degree and doctorate in Anthropological Sciences from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). Assistant researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET), based at the Institute of Studies on Science and Technology at the National University of Quilmes (IESCT-UNQ). Undergraduate and postgraduate lecturer at UBA and UNQ.

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# Who can talk about the volcano? Discussions about the construction of a Mapuche sacred space in Lanín National Park, Northern Argentine Patagonia

## Introduction

The aim of this article is to analyse an intercultural experience for the conservation and management of the Lanín volcano/*pijan mawiza Lanvn*, located within the jurisdiction of Lanín National Park (PNL), in the province of Neuquén, Argentina. This experience takes place within the framework of a co-management project between the National Parks Administration (APN) and the Mapuche political organisation in the province, the Mapuche Confederation of Neuquén (hereinafter the Confederation), which has been in place since the year 2000 through an institutional resolution (Carpinetti, 2005). In Argentina, the 2001 APN Management Plan considers co-management to be "a distribution of responsibilities and competences, and a clear definition of the exercise of public authority and of the guidelines for use and management of resources that arise from the ancestral knowledge of the communities" (APN, 2001).

Likewise, in July 2016, a new political body was created between the APN and the Mapuche people: the Political Board

for the Co-Management of the Lanín and Nahuel Huapi National Parks (hereinafter the Board), with the aim of organising the co-management experiences that were being developed in these two parks. This space provided an unprecedented opportunity for political debate between the office of the president of the APN – represented by the vice president of the organisation – the superintendents of both parks and their technical teams, and the political and politico-philosophical leaders and authorities of the Mapuche people of the provinces of Río Negro and Neuquén. The central topic on the meetings' agenda was the recategorisation of the Lanín volcano/*pijan mawiza Lanvn* (in *Mapuzungun*, the Mapuche language) as a "Mapuche sacred natural site".

Focusing on the development of this debate in the meetings of the Board held in 2016 and 2017, in this work I aim to reconstruct some of the disagreements between the various actors involved in this discussion, and show how different ideas about "the volcano" operated in this process. Accordingly, I take up the concepts of "multilocality" and "multivocality" proposed by Rodman (1992) to account for how these conflicts are related to the ways of constructing, experiencing, understanding, inhabiting and experiencing

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"the volcano". According to this author, overlapping "place narratives" can co-exist, but they can also compete and give rise to "social landscapes" rather than "natural" places that are spatially and cartographically defined and institutionalised. For this reason, "by joining multilocality to multivocality, we can look 'through' these places, explore their links with others, consider why they are constructed as they are, see how places represent people, and begin to understand how people embody places" (Rodman, 1992, 652).

I start from the fact that, within the framework of co-management, this discussion about the possibility of multiple voices and multiple "social landscapes" operates within a "multiculturalist" perspective that values cultural diversity, but thinks about a single nature (single world) (Blaser, 2009; Escobar, 2015). This is materialised in the management plans of the APN and the Lanín and Nahuel Huapi National Parks, where the Mapuche worldview is understood as intangible cultural heritage, and is crystallised in the idea of a dialogue of knowledge between "scientific knowledge", embodied in the APN technicians, and "traditional knowledge", embodied in the Mapuche. Nevertheless, in the discussion about the recognition of the volcano/*pijan mawiza* as a "sacred space", the social landscape inhabited and experienced by the Mapuche people is a more-than-human social landscape that necessitates, from an ontological perspective,

attention to other worlds that struggle to exist. So, how do the voices of non-humans participate in the construction of the volcano/*pijan mawiza*? Who can talk about the volcano/*pijan mawiza*? How does the volcano/*pijan mawiza* operate in the (re) configuration of nature conservation within the frameworks of co-management?

Various works on protected areas (Antümilla-Pangikul and Torres-Alruiz, 2021; Blaser, 2009; Tytelman and Castro, 2022) have considered the tensions between a modern ontology, which frames "scientific knowledge" and operates primarily on the division between nature-culture, and relational ontologies, characteristic of indigenous peoples, "in which nothing (neither humans nor non-humans) pre-exists the relationships that constitute us" (Escobar, 2015, 29). For these latter ontologies, what exists is an entire world that acts through practices linking a multiplicity of humans and non-humans, instead of thinking that reality – the only reality – is something external that exists beyond these relationships. According to the proposals of Blaser (2019), Escobar (2015) and De la Cadena (2020), political ontology aims to pluralise politics and open up the possibility of addressing disagreements between worlds, and "the negotiations that occur within a framework of power in the process of gestation of the entities that make up a particular world or ontology" (Blaser,

Aquest treball pretén donar compte del debat per la recategorització del volcà Lanín/*pijan mawiza Lanvn*, com a «loc natural sagrat maputxe», dins de la jurisdicció del Parc Nacional Lanín, a la província de Neuquén, a l'Argentina. A partir de la perspectiva de l'ontologia política (Blaser, 2009), investiga els coneixements com el del *pijan mawiza*, que es revelen amb senyals, en *pewma* (somnis) o en *perimontun* (visions), que disputen la concepció hegemònica de la conservació en el marc de les àrees protegides de l'Argentina, la qual cosa permet pensar en una multivocalitat-més-que-humana.

*El presente trabajo busca dar cuenta del debate por la recategorización del volcán Lanín/*pijan mawiza Lanvn*, como «sitio natural sagrado mapuche», dentro de la jurisdicción del Parque Nacional Lanín, en la provincia de Neuquén, Argentina. A partir de la perspectiva de la ontología política (Blaser, 2009), indaga en cómo conocimientos como el del *pijan mawiza*, que se revelan con señales, en *pewma* (sueños) o en *perimontun* (visiones), disputan la concepción hegemónica de la conservación en el marco de las áreas protegidas de Argentina, habilitando a pensar en una multivocalidad-más-que-humana.*

This article seeks to account for the debate over the reclassification of the Lanín volcano/*pijan mawiza Lanvn* as a Mapuche «sacred natural site», within the jurisdiction of the Lanín National Park, in the province of Neuquén, Argentina. From the perspective of political ontology (Blaser, 2009), it examines how knowledges such as that of *pijan mawiza*, which is revealed with signals in *pewma* (dreams) or in *perimontun* (visions), have managed to dispute the hegemonic conception of conservation in the context of protected areas in Argentina, enabling to think in a more-than-human-multivocality.

2009, 82). Likewise, this approach makes it possible to address the negotiations and conflicts that arise when these worlds or ontologies attempt to sustain their existence while interacting and blending with others that are different.

From this perspective, in this work, I am interested in investigating knowledge such as that from the *pijan mawiza*, which is revealed through signs, in *pewma* (dreams) or in *perimontun* (visions), that challenge the hegemonic conception of conservation within the frameworks of Argentina's protected areas, and put stress on the "rational/ reasonable policy" (Blaser, 2018) and "multicultural multivocality" with the staging of more-than-human worlds (Haraway, 2019) that overflow the dualistic ontology and allow for thinking in a "more-than-human multivocality".

### Lanín volcano: between tourist exploitation and the *Kvme Felen*

In the Lanín and Nahuel Huapi National Parks, co-management projects have reterritorialised conservation by incorporating the

practices and knowledge of the Mapuche people into the ways of managing the land and resources. This process includes discussion on the incorporation of the category of "sacred spaces" within the APN. This discussion cannot be understood without the global framework that recognises these spaces as "management categories". In fact, both the technicians and officials of the institution and the Mapuche authorities refer to the definition of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and its "guidelines" when explaining what a "sacred site" is. The IUCN defines sacred natural sites as "areas of land or water having special spiritual significance to peoples and communities." Many sacred natural sites are areas of importance for biodiversity conservation. In fact, for many communities, it is difficult to separate the reasons for which they protect the spiritual connections between people and the land from those for which they conserve the biodiversity of their lands" (2008, 30). This global framework maintains that the "sacred natural sites" created by indigenous cultures from their worldviews are the planet's oldest protected areas, which makes it possible to consider shared objectives.



Lanín Volcano (3,376 m ASL), on the border between Chile and Argentina. Every year, at the base of the volcano on the Argentine side, the Mapuche *Gejipun* ceremony is celebrated, strengthening the Mapuche people and the feedback of their knowledge with the *ixofijmogen* (biodiversity, all lives). SOURCE: MAPUCHE CONFEDERATION OF NEUQUÉN (2022).

In the case being studied, the discussion did not start with an agreement, but with a conflict, as the authorities of the Confederation considered that a tourist project promoted by the APN and the municipality of Junín de los Andes "threatened the life" of the volcano. From this point, they began to demand the reclassification of the site as "sacred" and stated in an open letter that "our Lanín has endured for decades the consequences of Western development, based on voracious capitalism. One aspect of this model is perverse leisure that tries, in unconscious tourism, to challenge *pu newen* (forces), and to year after year leave scars that today are beginning to bleed" (quoted in APN-CMN, n.d.).

During this process, Lanín volcano was built up and made visible by the APN through the reification of its "natural" dimensions, which contributed to its positioning as a tourist destination, as a mechanism for value creation in the context of a leisure economy (Beltran and Vaccaro, 2019, 98). Within the frameworks of co-management, this process of natural heritagisation is compatible with the heritagisation of Mapuche culture, since, as argued since the very definition of these projects, the conservation of natural diversity and cultural diversity are concurrent and interdependent tasks. However, in the discussion about the reclassification of Lanín volcano/*pijan mawiza Lanín* as a "sacred site", it is possible to highlight tensions that necessitate a review of this globally supported compatibility in the definitions of co-management of protected areas with indigenous peoples.

In 2006, the political and philosophical authorities of the Mapuche people, framed within the Confederation, urgently convened in response to what they understood to be a "life-threatening" situation for the volcano/*pijan mawiza* due to the careless use of tourism and sports activities promoted by the APN itself. The most interesting thing is that the main evidence for this threat was the lack of snow and the progressive detachment of part of the north slope in 2004. In light

of this, conservation as a means of control (Robbins, 2004) was redefined by the Confederation and used to argue who should be the true guardians of the volcano/*pijan mawiza*, because the institution responsible for its care was putting it at risk. In light of this event, the Mapuche political and philosophical authorities understood that it was necessary to hold a *Gejipun* (ceremony) to strengthen the *genmawiza* (spirit of the volcano) and convened "El Grito del Lanín" (The Shout of Lanín), resuming a ceremonial practice that had not been performed since the arrival of the APN in the 1930s. Since 2007, this ceremony has been repeated every year between the months of January and March at the *rewe* (ceremonial site), and in 2009 the Circle of Philosophical Authorities of the *Pijan Mawiza* was established.

In the face of the advancement and threat of tourism, the Confederation maintained the need to defend the Mapuche life project or plan, or "good living", which in the Mapuche worldview is the *Kvme Felen*. This worldview does not contemplate the same nature-culture division that forms the basis for co-management and is present in the management plans, where it is synonymous with culture or "intangible cultural heritage". For the Mapuche world, the *ce* (person) is one more element that interacts with *pu newen* (forces) within the *az mapu* (order of nature) and forms the *waj mapu* (territory in which all lives are ordered). The *ce* is responsible for maintaining balance and must preserve the harmony of its environment. If not, it can be punished by the *pu gen* (protective spirits of each place) through the *kuxan* (evil, disease). Therefore, the elders express the idea of *kisu gvnewkulelayiñ* (we do not organise ourselves alone) and maintain that the *waj mapu* is a whole that functions harmoniously and circularly (CMN, 2010).

The management plans of the APN recognize the *Kvme Felen* within the "worldview" section and emphasize this idea of "good living" in fullness and balance, in harmony with this system of life that includes non-human enti-

ties with agency. However, the modern ontology that underpins these plans nullifies the agency capacity of certain entities, and makes rivers, forests, mountains and volcanoes part of "nature", while the *pu newen* or the *pu gen* are understood as part of the Mapuche culture, thus breaking with the relationality present in their worldview. This unresolved tension between the recognition and cultural appreciation of their "beliefs" and the difficulty of thinking about how these non-humans operate in networks that enact worlds within the frameworks of co-management is central to understanding the conflicts and ongoing obstacles in the discussion about the declaration of the volcano/*pijan mawiza* as a "Mapuche sacred natural site".

### Mapuche sacred site: more-than-human multivocalities

The re-categorisation debate took place in the Board's first meeting, in mid-2016, with a presentation from the Circle of Philosophical Authorities of the *Pijan Mawiza Lanvn* in which they explained the importance and the "value" of this space to the Mapuche people. The first reaction of the APN vice

president was to clarify that if it was about the "prohibition of use" of the volcano, it was "politically unfeasible". The "use" referred to mainly focused on tourists climbing the volcano and was the main source of tension in the debate process.

The item "Mapuche sacred site" was on the agenda of all the meetings in 2016 and 2017. At each meeting, the Mapuche political and philosophical authorities would express explanations such as the following: "For the Mapuche people, the *pijan mawiza* have history and knowledge, and are the main regulators of the environments" and "Lanín volcano represents the space through which the earth breathes and gives life." These statements highlighted the idea of balance, interrelation and coexistence with different beings, which had been violated by the arrival of the *winka* (white man). At each meeting of the Board, these explanations based on the worldview and the *kimvn* (Mapuche knowledge) were part of the debate. However, I consider that this relationality did not achieve a rational/reasonable political status (Blaser, 2018) that



In August 2022, the APN declared Lanín volcano a "sacred natural site" within Lanín National Park, an initiative that was revoked twenty-four hours later due to jurisdictional conflicts with the province of Neuquén. The photo of the volcano with the *wenufoye* (Mapuche flag) belongs to the campaign to protect Lanín from exploitation policies when it is the guardian of all lives.

SOURCE: MAPUCHE CONFEDERATION OF NEUQUÉN (2022).

would enable the possibility of reconfiguring conservation. For the APN interlocutors, they were interesting cultural data, but they were not part of the problem that needed to be solved, which was related to the site's management and control plan. For the APN, the main concern focused on the use or non-use that "the Mapuche side" intended with the declaration of a sacred site.

In one of the meetings, the philosophical authorities announced the date of the ceremony for the following year, which was to be held between the 11th and 14th of January. Faced with this, the Lanín National Park superintendent stated that it was difficult to sustain the closure of the volcano during the high season for climbing and ask for it be postponed until the middle of February. In response, the philosophical authorities explained to him that the dates are set in relation to "natural matters". The superintendent then asked for agreement on allowing climbs up the volcano to continue during the ceremony, which the philosophical authorities defined as "incompatible".

Each meeting's unresolved tensions made it clear that relations between the parties were not as reflected in the management plans. The "volcano" landscape permitted by the APN does not allow the participation of non-human beings, thus rendering invisible other more-than-human worlds that struggle to exist. Accordingly, the co-management policy operates in a thinkable/rational register, establishes "management plans", "territorial ordinances" and "(re)categorizations", and pushes other issues, such as the fact that the *pijan mawiza* has knowledge and history, into the realm of "culture". In this process, multivocality is monolingual and expressed by the heritage powers (Menezes Ferreira et al., 2014).

However, debate about the "sacred site" enables the creation of a heterotopic space (Foucault cited in Rodman, 1992), that is, sites that can operate under non-hegemonic conditions, sites for the exercise of interculturality or counter-sites (Menezes

Ferreira et al., 2014). As Raffles maintains, "as the place is configured in the narrative, not only multiple places, but also multiple natures, become visible and are involved in claims and reconventions" (1999, 349). This perspective allows attention to be paid to situated multivocalities, the product of inhabiting the territory, which challenge and dispute the idea of hegemonic conservation and the heritagisation of nature and culture, and questions the dichotomies that a priori organise co-management, mainly those established between scientific knowledge and traditional knowledge, between modern ontology and relational ontology, and between nature and culture.

Although *volcano* and *pijan mawiza* were used as synonyms, both in meetings and in minutes and documents, by all the people involved, as a translation of the same word in Spanish and *Mapuzungun*, in reality they were not referring to the same *thing* as an entity. In fact, while "volcano" in *Mapuzungun* is translated as *zequñ*, "*pijan mawiza*" means 'mountain with knowledge', which indicates that it is not a simple translation, but the construction of another type of entity with different characteristics, attributes and relationships. *Pijan mawiza* and *volcano* are different entities, but both are engaged by the Mapuche people when it comes to thinking and doing "politics"; it is a non-human person with agency, will, knowledge and relationships, but also a natural resource and a place that can be managed interculturally. In this way, as I have shown in another paper (Trentini, 2023), relational ontology and modern ontology, the volcano and the *pijan mawiza* are mixed in the world and enacted by the members of the Confederation, generating ontological juxtapositions and mixtures that break with the dichotomous idea that one voice-one culture-one knowledge-one ontology corresponds to a specific group.

From this, I propose we question what becomes invisible when we conceive these co-management spaces based on the nature-culture divide, and what "is lost" in

the forced translation of certain words that enable intercultural dialogue. Debates such as the "Mapuche sacred natural site" deconstruct certain established meanings within the framework of "conservation" in protected areas. They enable spaces where non-human agents are incorporated into rational/reasonable politics, but these initiatives do not – yet – succeed in reconstructing and creating new practices that dislocate hierarchies, dichotomies and hegemonic ontology.

### By way of conclusion

The objective of this article was to show how non-humans participate in landscape design and how certain knowledge, such as that of the *pijan mawiza*, which is revealed or communicated through *peuma* (dreams) or *perimontun* (visions), challenges the hegemo-

nic conception of conservation in protected areas in Argentina, overflowing the dualistic ontology that underpins co-management projects, pluralises conservation and allows for thinking in terms of a "more-than-human multivocality".

While the heritagisation of culture and nature can cause multivocality to become monolingual – which renders other human and non-human voices that can challenge the hegemonic proposals of nature conservation based on the division between nature-culture invisible – some discussions like the recategorisation of Lanín volcano/*pijan mawiza Lanvn* as a "sacred site" enable the possibility of thinking about multiple natures and giving voice to non-humans to "speak" about the volcano and about conservation. ■

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