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## The Changing Role of Chaguar Textiles in the Lives of the Wichí, an Indigenous People of Argentina

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Beating, spinning, and sewing fiber, a woman works to perpetuate her culture a thread and stitch at a time. While her hands work expertly and she talks casually, Carolina is crocheting a hat from a fiber called chaguar to be worn under a motorcycle helmet. She learned to crochet five years ago from a nonindigenous woman whose house she was paid to clean. Because crocheting is not a traditional technique, she only does it to sell to the local townspeople, preferring the techniques from her Wichí heritage. “Wichí” means simply “the people” in her original language. Their culture is centered on their language, Wichí Lhamtés, and the word for their work is Wichí Chumtés. Together these define the central features of their cultural identity.<sup>1</sup> Women work in the gathering, processing, spinning, and weaving of chaguar. Chaguar (*Bromelia hieronymi*) is a ground cover in a dry, salty soil where not many other plants thrive. Today, many Wichí are displaced from their lands in the Chaco, a process accelerated by provincial laws and deforestation due to agribusiness. Carolina uses this textile tradition not only to provide a source of cash income but also to sustain the culture of her community.

The Wichí are an indigenous people from an area known as the Gran Chaco in South America, an area second only to the Amazon in terms of size and ecological importance.<sup>2</sup> It is a vast plain with a gentle slope extending through Bolivia, Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil. Fifty percent of the Chaco lies in Argentina as an arid subtropical region of low forests and savannas bounded by the Andes on its west, the Paraguay and Parana rivers on the east. It is filled with the alluvial sediments washed down from the Andes mountain range and the Brazilian highlands so its soil is sandy and silty, without stones. Drainage is poor with its meandering rivers, sometimes flooding and sometimes drying up in the intense heat. The Wichí have forged a culture over generations in this beautiful but harsh environment through a semi-nomadic lifestyle supplied by foraging, fishing, hunting, and simple horticulture. While they identify as a large ethnic group united through a shared language and customs, they do not form a uniform entity but function socially in bands of smaller groups according to a system of expanded kinship.<sup>3</sup> They have for generations traveled from one camp to another, forming larger and smaller groups based on the ebb and flow of natural resources.<sup>4</sup> One of the most important of their survival strategies is the gathering, processing, spinning, and weaving of chaguar. The intersection of ecosystem, necessity, and social demands lead to the creation of textile forms constructed with elaborate patterns for many different applications.

In the Chaco, the first Argentina national military campaigns against the indigenous peoples began in 1859 and lasted until around 1911. The Gran Chaco was one of the last places in Argentina subjugated due to the harshness of the environment and the many disparate groups that

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Van Dam, “Conditions for Sustainable Use: the Case of Chaguar (*Bromelia hieronymi*) in a Wichí Community of the Argentine Chaco” in *Lessons Learned: Case Studies in Sustainable Use*, (Gland: IUCN, 2001), 104.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

<sup>3</sup> Mariá Eugenia Suárez and Rodrigo M. Montani, “Vernacular Knowledge of Bromeliaceae Species Among the Wichí People of the Gran Chaco, Argentina,” *Journal of Ethnobiology*, Vol. 30 No. 2 (2010), 266.

<sup>4</sup> Van Dam, “Conditions,” 108.

inhabited the area including the Wichí, Toba, Pilagá, Mocovi, Choroté, and Chulupí. In the early twentieth century, many indigenous Wichi were either tricked or forced to relocate to work in slave like conditions, first on cattle ranches and later in the sugar mills.<sup>5</sup> Today while many Wichí communities struggle to remain in their traditional lands, others are displaced into marginal areas, called *misiones*, on the peripheries of towns. Here it is too easy to make the assumption that once removed from their homeland, they lost their culture, and are seen only through the lens of loss and poverty. Upon closer look, we find that they assert an identity that is ethnic versus class based to maintain a vibrant culture even when displaced. They maintain this culture by using many of the practices developed in the Chaco including the continuation of language, clinging to traditional beliefs, creating new routes of sustenance, and the production of textiles.

As an example, Carolina's family lives in a one such displaced Wichi community or *misiones* situated along *Ruta 80* on the far western edge of the Chaco on the outskirts of a small town named after the creator of Argentina's first national oil company, General Enrique Mosconi, whose inhabitants struggle with the reality of lost jobs and opportunities in the boom and bust cycles of an oil industry. Carolina's community consists of thirty-six families many of whom are related. Disliked by the townspeople and facing discrimination, they still maintain their traditions. One of Carolina's family's highest values is the preservation of their language. While they are bilingual in Spanish and Wichí, their first language is Wichí and they insist on speaking it among themselves even while shopping in town where they are ridiculed for its use. Ana, Carolina, and Betina are grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter. Together they represent three generations of artisans. Carolina's husband, Luis, is a member of the Guaraní people, an indigenous group. He sometimes works as a gardener and serves as a cook for the oil crews. While all members of the family work at a variety of other low wage activities including selling chickens, firewood, and cleaning houses, most of their cash income comes from selling chaguar textiles and other crafts.

Because the chaguar plant does not grow well where they now live, they travel forty-five to seventy-five kilometers to the east two times a year, saving up their money to rent a truck. In the Chaco, the chaguar is plentiful but they cannot gain access to large areas because the forest is being sold by international companies as private ranches surrounded by electric fences. Every year they must travel greater distances to gather the chaguar. Because the entire process can take up to two weeks, they construct temporary housing of sticks and plastic to live in while they work. The construction of temporary housing is the same as they have always practiced with the only addition being the introduction of plastic sheeting. Ana Dorio, the grandmother, tells of three types of chaguar found in the Chaco, a short one, which is the best for weaving, a tall variety, that can be used for textiles but does not provide as strong a thread, and a flowering variety that is the best to eat because it is sweet. The Chaguar plant has a head in the center that is white like a potato. They gather the leaves of the plant by hitting this head with a stick so that the leaves loosen and can be gathered. The leaves have sharp spines that must be removed before the leaves can be transported. The chaguar plant is very wet and green when they gather it so they lay the leaves out to dry for one to three days, depending on the weather. The dried leaves are then transported home and store in boxes where it can be processed into fiber as needed. The dried leaves are processed by first soaking them overnight and then beating them using Palo

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<sup>5</sup> Van Dam, "Conditions," 105.

Santo wood (a very valued tree of the Chaco, known for its strength and good smell) or an iron bar. Carolina beats each bundle of chaguar leaves for thirty minutes to an hour to separate the fibers and remove the pulp (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Left Chaguar leaves beaten. Right Carolina in the process of beating the soaked leaves.  
Images by Harry DeLorme*

This raw fiber is then dyed using both the bark and leaves of trees to make a variety of natural colors (Figure 2). One natural dye comes from the large Algarroba tree located in the adjacent field. The algarroba tree is an important tree throughout Salta province. The Wichi use it for everything including shade, fruit, dye, and firewood when the branches fall. The Algarroba seedpods are an important traditional food source used for flour, jams, and beer. Periodically, a large dry deposit of resin forms on the tree, which is then cut off with a machete. The resin makes a very dark brown to black depending on the quantity of dyestuff included in the dye bath. Carolina demonstrates the dye process by placing the dyestuff in a blackened pot over the fire. The tree bark is simmered for thirty minutes and, after allowing it to cool slightly, the fiber is added. The color transfers better when the dye is nice and warm.



*Figure 2. Dyestuffs left to right. Image by Harry DeLorme*

After the fiber has been dyed or simply left its natural off white color, it is spun. Carolina demonstrates the process. First she takes two strands that are the natural length of a leaf and puts them into pairs. She spins it all into sets of two. She does this by rolling the strands between her hand and her thigh first forward and then back. When she joins each pair of two, she staggers them so she can join the separate sections to create a long thread without any knots. She puts wood ash on her leg to prevent rope burns and to soften the fiber. Typically, spinning is not something that can be started and stopped with ease. For this reason, they usually spin at night after their daily activities have ceased.



*Figure 3. (Left) Carolina demonstrates the spinning of the fiber by hand. (Right) The different thicknesses of thread. Images by the author.*

Carolina spins all of her own thread so she knows it is of high quality. Typically it takes her five hours to spin one roll. Fifteen hours is needed to spin the thread for one bag. The size of the thread varies depending on its intended use and purpose. The thin and medium thread is used for bags. Thicker threads are used for netted shopping bags with handles. The thickest threads are used for hammocks. The spinning and construction of Chaguar items is considered an essential part of their feminine identity. Carolina says, "You are not a woman unless you know how to do it. Women cannot waste their time. If they are sitting they need to be working, they cannot just sit." Girls learn to spin at eight or nine years of age depending on the interest of the individual and the wishes of her parents. Children are not forced to learn it. According to traditional Wichí narrative, originally men lived on the earth and women in the sky from which the women descended on a thread of chaguar to steal the men's meat while they were out hunting. One time a man stayed behind and cut the string, trapping the women.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> John Palmer, *Wichí Goodwill: Ethnographic Allusion*. (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1997), 66.



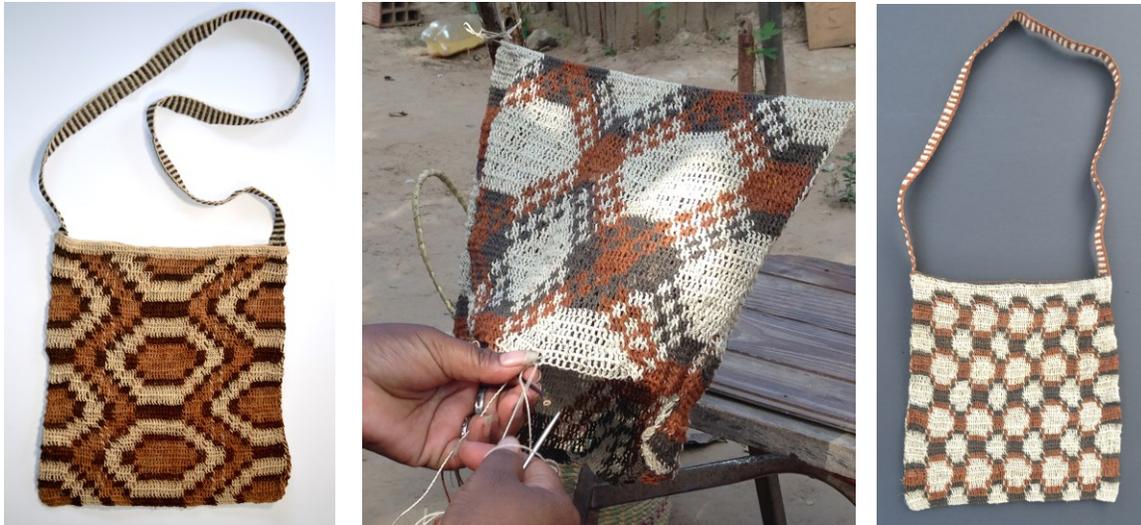
Figure 4, Ana demonstrates how to begin the double weave. Image by Harry DeLorme.

Ana demonstrates one of the first weaves that is learned. It is a double weave used for making fishing nets and the bags used to carry fish. Fishing nets were one of the first items woven from chaguar. Ana's explanation for the origin of the beginning of spinning chaguar is that "Originally, we only ate the tubers of the plant then later the husbands asked their wives for something to carry fish in and the women began to weave with it". The Wichí are expert fishermen and the men still return to the Chaco several times a year for fishing expeditions where they catch fish in scissor like nets just as they have done for generations. To begin the textile, a thread of chaguar is tied horizontally across the back of a chair. Then loops begin to be drawn over the thread. In this case, they will be double loops. A cactus spine is used for measuring the size of the loops. A checkerboard pattern consisting of two colors, know as a tortoise pattern, is one of the first ones taught to girls because of its simplicity. It is a double weave so that instead of going through once, she goes through twice. She counts the number of loops of black and white to keep the squares the same size. The bags are woven as three dimensional objects with the shape and pattern determined by color of the threads and the number of the stitches.

The most traditional woven items are square bags called *hi lus* (Figure 5), used by men for carrying fish, and *sichéts* (Figure 6) large banana shaped bags used by women to carry the sweet, yellow seed-pods of the Algarroba tree. These items are constructed with a netting technique imbedded with patterns derived from animals, for example the "owl's eye" or the "iguana's belly." According to John Palmer, traditionally, a mother would first make a *hilu* for her son at the age of six to eight when he began his informal training as hunter and fisherman. Once he married, his wife would make him a new one. It is used to carry small equipment that they need to the forest and serves as a sign of manhood. As such, a woman could only provide it.<sup>7</sup> These geometric patterns based on animal motifs are similar throughout Wichí textile tradition but the patterns and explanations for the patterns will vary among the different kinship and family groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Palmer, *Wichí Goodwill*, 64.



**Figure 5.** Left to right, *Hilu* with pattern using a repeated Owl's Eye motif, *Hilu* in progress using multiple threads an a pattern named Acron's Footprint (a bird similar to a hawk), *Hilu* with a pattern using a Chañar (a king of tree) Seed motif. Images by the author.

The most traditional woven items are square bags called *hí lus* (Figure 5), used by men for carrying fish, and *sichéts* (Figure 6) large banana shaped bags used by women to carry the sweet, yellow seed-pods of the Algarroba tree. These items are constructed with a netting technique imbedded with patterns derived from animals, for example the “owl’s eye” or the “iguana’s belly.” According to John Palmer, traditionally, a mother would first make a *hílu* for her son at the age of six to eight when he began his informal training as hunter and fisherman. Once he married, his wife would make him a new one. It is used to carry small equipment that they need to the forest and serves as a sign of manhood. As such, a woman could only provide it.<sup>8</sup> These geometric patterns based on animal motifs are similar throughout Wichí textile tradition but the patterns and explanations for the patterns will vary among the different kinship and family groups.

According to Ana, in earlier times the bags that would be used for fishing or gathering wild fruit would be white or just two colors. The more decorative ones would be used for going out and showing what you had. The designs are passed down through the generations and are very old. When someone dies usually their house along with their possessions are burned so all that is left of the women are the designs that are passed down. This design is an example of one Ana learned from her great grandmother in Paraguay. In this pattern, the eye of the owl motif combines with the belly of the iguana motif. The bag prevents the item placed inside from being lost or stolen. The owl watches over the object and the weave structure is tighter to prevent people from seeing inside the bag (Figure 6).

One example of adaptation of materials in the absence of the availability of chaguar, is in the production of the *sichét* which is a large banana shaped bag used traditionally by women to gather algarroba pods. These bags are now made infrequently because of their size and the amount of chaguar required. In response, they have begun taking apart plastic shopping bags and

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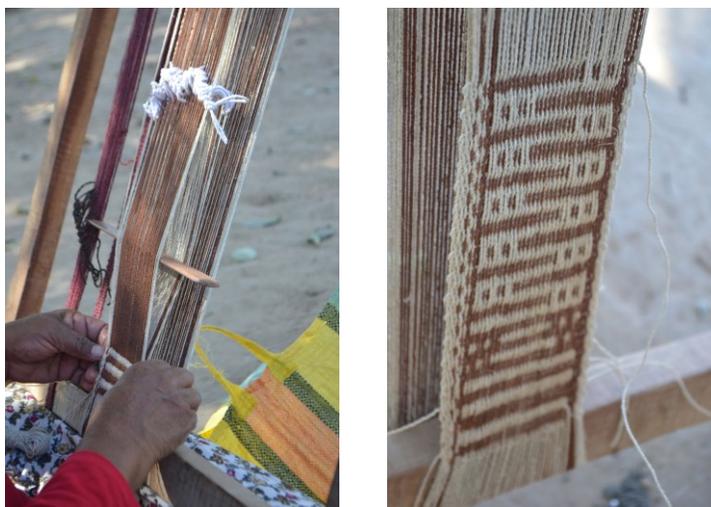
<sup>8</sup> Palmer, *Wichí Goodwill*, 64.

spinning the strands of plastic to create the large, sturdy bags. In Figure 6, Ana is seen constructing the traditional *sichét* form with the plastic fiber in the eye of the owl pattern. The other method of preserving the form is to make a smaller version to be carried like a woman's purse (Figure 6).



*Figure 6. Left to right. Owl's eye and Iguana's belly pattern learned from Ana's great-grandmother in Paraguay. Ana sewing a sichét using spun fiber reclaimed from a plastic shopping bag. A small sichét form used for a woman's purse.*

Another traditional textile tradition is the weaving of warp faced bands and belts on rigid, vertical looms (Figure 7). In the past, looms were made from lashed pieces of wood but now they are constructed frames or backs of chairs. The looms are used primarily for making bands or straps for bags but in the past they were used to create wide and long belts that wrapped around the waist twice. The men would wear the belts with rattles attached when they participated in ceremonial dances or when fighting.



*Figure 7, Left to Right. Weaving on a vertical loom. Beginning of the belt showing the motif.*

Though grounded in their traditions, the weaving and selling of textile items has become one of their important sources of cash income. The *hilu* bags sell for fifty to one hundred Argentina pesos depending on the size. Ana and Carolina now make them for both men and women to use. They come in different sizes from coin purses to larger bags with the price contingent on the intricacy of the design and the color. The traditional, naturally dyed bags are the most labor intensive and their favorites to make but they do not sell well in their local area. For the local market, they make shopping bags used to gather groceries. These bags are much faster to make because they are one color without pattern. They travel by bus for five hours to sell the traditional bags in Salta, the capital of the province and a national tourist destination. There, they sell bags both on the street and in open air markets. In the markets, buyers come to buy in bulk for resale so prices are very low. People buying them for stores prefer the natural colors. Sometimes stores will buy small samples to incorporate into other clothing items such as leather jackets.

Making the textiles for pleasure and not just for money, Carolina applies the traditional techniques and designs to new items, producing these items on commission. Like solving a puzzle, she enjoys the challenge of creating different items using the same traditional colors, weaves, and designs. When commissioned to make sandals, she not only made the sandals but a matching purse to go with it. Other new forms include penholders, vests, money purses, caps, and cell phone holders. However, Carolina feels that knowing the traditions is what makes them indigenous so she works to preserve them by provide workshops on Wichí culture and language for her community, the townspeople, and visitors. She is applying her skills to meet the demands of her contemporary life while holding on to her traditions.

She is a member of the Wichí, one of the original groups of Argentina, a nation historically proud of its European heritage that has begun to claim its indigenous one while still denying them equal protection and participation in the current economy. There is conflicting data but estimates are that 80,000 Wichi live in Argentina in provinces of Chaco, Formosa, and Salta<sup>9</sup>. They are among the poorest, most marginalized people of Argentina but these displaced people rely on those same skills developed in a wilderness. They maintain their language even though they are looked down upon when they are heard speaking it. They adapt their traditional patterns, materials, and forms to fulfill new needs, recognizing opportunities for new uses for materials. As they always have, they travel from place to place to secure goods, visit family, and take advantage of resources. They continue their commitment to the gathering, processing, and weaving of chaguar in face of many obstacles and the ready availability of already processed yarns. As they face the struggles of poverty, oppression, and disenfranchisement, they stubbornly hold on to their identity through their textiles to ground themselves and assert a self-worth not easily recognized from the outside.

### Acknowledgements

My knowledge of the Wichí came first through seeing their textiles and woodcarvings for sale at craft markets while leading study abroad trips through Argentina. In 2010, Luis Daniel Touceda, an Argentina tour guide with a focus in sustainable tourism, introduced me to this family of artisans. Afterwards, I would bring my students each year to spend a day watching

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<sup>9</sup> Van Dam, "Conditions," 106.

demonstrations of weaving, spinning, and dyeing techniques. In exchange, we purchased their crafts and took them back to the university to hold a silent auction to raise money for the artisans. In 2015, I received a grant from the College of Liberal Arts at Armstrong State University to spend two weeks with Ana, Carolina, Luis and Betina, learning their textile techniques. I am forever grateful to this family for the gracious sharing of their time, culture, and textile traditions with my students and myself. My knowledge of the Wichí and their textiles is derived from their first hand accounts. However, this project would not have been possible without the help of Caleb Delorme who spent many hours patiently interpreting and Harry Delorme for his photography. I am also thankful to Dr. John Palmer, who has worked with the Wichí for over thirty years, and has freely given of his knowledge and insight. I am very indebted to all of my Argentine friends who I have been privileged to know and work with over the last eight years, especially Walfrido and Rene Aban.

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