

# Internship at Fundación Chol-Chol

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With the summer internship subsidy from the Anthropology Department, I was fortunate to be able to work at Fundación Chol-Chol (Chol-Chol Foundation) as an intern for one month in July 2018. Fundación Chol-Chol is an NGO located in Temuco, a city in the Araucanía region of Chile, where indigenous people Mapuche has been dwelling for thousands of years. The foundation works mainly on preservation of traditional Mapuche artefacts through the promotion of fair trade, by means of providing trainings and sales channels. They also manage an artefact shop at the Regional Museum of Araucanía in Temuco. Their objective is to improve quality of life of indigenous people by connecting them with the modern economic system, without sacrificing their traditional ways of living.

One month was not enough for me to launch an entire new project. Still, I had the valuable opportunity to get involved in a huge variety of work. I was primarily in charge of interviewing indigenous artisans that worked with the foundation, so as to present the stories behind them and behind their work to possible customers and the public through photography and short descriptions. I was also able to help with reception at the Regional Museum of Araucanía, as well as making the catalogue of indigenous artefacts.

One of the biggest challenges that I faced was the language barrier - most Chileans don't speak English. Reasonably, all the work involved during the internship was done in Spanish. Luckily, before doing the internship, I had already been studying in Chile as an exchange student for one year. In addition to daily interactions with locals, I had also taken several Anthropology courses at the university that had enriched my Spanish vocabulary related to the foundation's work. In the end, I did not really have difficulties reading Spanish materials and understanding my colleagues and interviewees who spoke in Spanish. The only problem was that I might not be able to write descriptions with perfect Spanish. Fortunately, I had a Mexican colleague who could help proof-read my writings before publication.

I applied for this internship not only to know more about the Mapuche culture, but also to explore how NGOs targeting on indigenous cultures work. And, more importantly, if they actually could improve people's life as effectively. In the end, I noticed a lot of dilemmas and contradictions of the foundation's model during the one month of internship. For example, the foundation insisted on the use of "natural" and "traditional" ways of weaving and dyeing, which clearly wouldn't be as efficient and perfect as industrial production methods. At the beginning, I found it totally unbelievable that these "traditional", "naturally produced" socks that in reality looked so rough and pale could possibly be sold with such an unreasonably high price. Surprisingly, we were receiving a lot of orders. Of course,

what costumers looked for was not flawless products, but the “cultural values” behind.

Are these “cultural values” as authentic as they seem, though? Some of the artisans we interviewed told us frankly that their parents had always been using chemical dyes. What made them resume the use of traditional ways of dyeing? The answer was an unpleasant truth: to support their children’s education. Traditional products could be sold at a higher price than “modernized” ones. These “cultural” values that we imagined could actually be totally economic.

Another time, I was asked to research on the “historical basis” of traditional artefacts’ choice of colours, with the objective of proving to our costumers that all these colours have authentic cultural values to the Mapuche people. After searching in books and on the internet, I could not find any particular cultural reason why some colours were used instead of others. So, I asked, “what if the choice of colours is arbitrary? What if it was just an artisan’s personal preference? What if it was just because raw materials for making certain colours were more abundant?” Some artisans that we interviewed indeed gave these kinds of answers, but my supervisor insisted that we would still have to make up something so as to justify the foundation’s model of work.

Another artisan interviewed mentioned a work that represents “wisdom”. Traditionally, it should only be given as a gift to a person that the artisan highly respects. Now, it has become one of the products sold by the foundation. Once, a costumer found the work very interesting, and asked the artisan about the cultural meanings behind. After hearing the story, the costumer decided not to buy it in order to show respect. This was another example that shows how traditional value contradicts with the modernization and commodification of certain cultural elements.

In fact, the foundation’s central idea of preserving culture and traditional artefacts through its commodification could be problematic in many ways. Commodification itself contradicts the traditional values of many artefacts, and sometimes being honest and respectful to these values makes it harder for the products to meet the market’s demands. The only way to solve these problems is to construct unauthentic and illusionary cultural values for the products that coincide with modern society’s trend. Of course, if the objective of the foundation is merely to improve indigenous people’s economic condition, there is nothing wrong with distorting their traditional values.

Therefore, one approach that made more sense to me was the one adopted by the last interviewee, who did not claim her work to be hundred-percent “traditional”. She was more like an artist who intended to show ideas, symbols, values and colours of the Mapuche culture in a modern way, creating products with “real” market values, that are not based only on illusions or misconceptions. For example, she produced paintings that showed conflicts between industrialization and Mapuche people’s relation with the nature, and miniatures of traditional tools. These products are not identical

to the work produced traditionally by the Mapuche people, but they could carry many of their cultural values and information.

Some might think this approach is “wrong” because in this way these traditions are being modernized and distorted. However, here comes another classic dilemma of Anthropology – who are we to say that certain cultures should always stay the same, while our own culture is constantly being influenced by modernization? Some of these indigenous people themselves might want to preserve their traditional ways of living if possible, but how about their children? Who are we, or even their parents, to decide that they should be isolated from modern influence?

To conclude, these contradictions and dilemmas could continue forever. As Anthropologists, it would be even harder for us to make such decisions and judgements since we are supposed to be culturally relativistic. Still, I have learned a lot about the real situation faced by indigenous people and organizations dedicated at related issues. At the same time, I have gained valuable experience of conducting interviews, research and many other things that would be very useful to my Anthropological study in the future. I would really like to thank the Anthropology Department for subsidizing and encouraging students like me to take up these kinds of opportunities.

