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Tensioned Territories:
Resignifying and Rewriting Indigenous Cultural Heritage in the Chilean Megamining Context—The Case of the Quechua Community of Quipisca, Atacama Desert, Chile

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The processes of consolidation of modern Latin American states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries involved territorial expansion and the construction of a political hegemony that promoted a monocultural national identity. Within this framework, subaltern territorial identities, including Indigenous ones, were rendered invisible and disconnected from modern political projects.

In this nineteenth-century context, shaped by modern thought, anthropological and archaeological knowledge played a central role in producing narratives about history and the national past while also shaping imaginaries that situated Indigenous identities in a remote time, detached from modernity. This process enabled the appropriation by the state of Indigenous material culture, transforming it into mere archaeological objects or museum pieces, including the remains of Indigenous ancestors, which became part of national collections of cultural heritage.

In Chile, such traditional modes of producing scientific knowledge have been increasingly challenged by Indigenous organizations that fight for recognition of their identities and political autonomy over their ancestral territories, grounded in universal human rights. In this context, the postdictatorship Chilean state implemented political and legal mechanisms inspired by multicultural policies, which made possible the inclusion of Indigenous rights, such as Law 19.253 on Indigenous Peoples, the ratification of International Labor Organization Convention 169, and more recently the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), together with policies of cultural heritage valorization.

At the same time, during the 1990s, extractivist policies intensified in northern Chile, where most mining projects are located in territories claimed by Indigenous communities, placing significant pressure on local resources such as water. Within this scenario, archaeological practice became subordinated to the requirements of the Environmental Impact Assessment System, consolidating a model of "contract archaeology" oriented toward fulfilling the technical-administrative demands of extractive projects.[1] This situation fostered the production of heritage data through private consulting firms, regulated by the logic of the market and detached from local social realities. By excluding communities from processes of documentation and dissemination of results, the territory is emptied of meaning and archaeological heritage is reduced to inert, decontextualized fragments.

In response to these tensions, our participatory research was carried out in tune with the concrete demands of the territories, particularly in relation to the identity and territorial claims of the Comunidad Indígena Territorial Quechua de Quipisca (CITQQ), located in the Tarapacá Region. In this process, Indigenous cultural heritage has become a key articulator of identity and territory, in line with critical heritage studies that challenge the authorized heritage discourse.[2] Heritage is thus understood as a social construction rooted in memory and identity,[3] and as a living and affective process embedded in local ontologies[4] that give meaning to territory.[5]

Our collective experience aimed to document Indigenous heritage and memory in a territory threatened by copper extractivism, specifically by the Cerro Colorado Mining Company, located in the ancestral lands of Indigenous communities such as the CITQQ. To this end, we drew on collaborative methodologies based on dialogue of knowledges, which integrated local knowledge—oral narratives, memories, symbolisms—with academic contributions from anthropology and archaeology. These methodologies allow the community to be recognized as an active agent in knowledge production, disputing the conventional frameworks of contract archaeology, while also dialoguing with approaches that emphasize sustained collaboration with descendant communities.[6]

Quechua Territory of Quipisca and the Tarapacá Region

The Quipisca ravine is located in the precordilleran belt of the Tarapacá Desert, in northern Chile's Norte Grande. The toponym *Quipisca*, of Quechua origin, can be translated as "place of load" or "loaded place," referring to its strategic position in ancient networks of regional and local mobility and exchange. The valley is composed of multiple subsectors that demonstrate a long history of occupation, including Jatuva, Pauchaniza, Chanza, Santa Cruz, Siza, Cahuasilca, La Aguada, La Capilla, La Palma, Ponucha, Angostura, Taypimarka, Accha, Tauquinza, Liaxa (Liacsa), Puquio (Pukio), Yala-Yala, Serpejo, Yipiga, Zapala, Corralito, and Coya, among others. One of the most important settlements is known as Quipisca Antiguo or La Capilla, where the remains of a colonial church still endure as a symbolic and spatial landmark.[7]

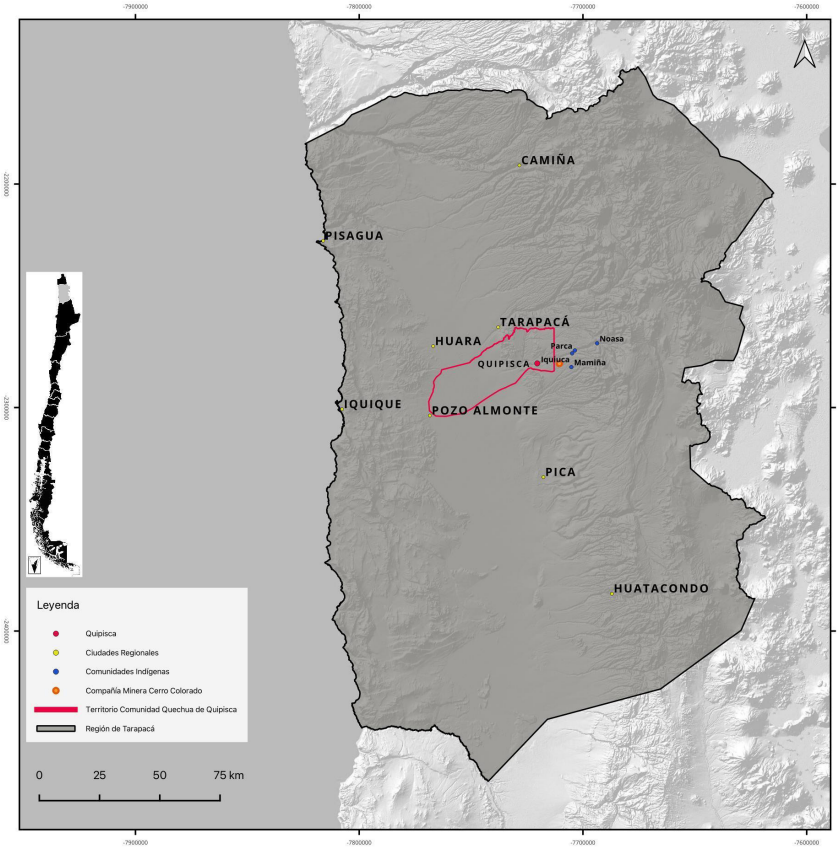

Figure 1. *Map of Quipisca in relation to the Tarapacá region. Photo courtesy of Juan Andrés Moraga Nova et al. "Arqueología participativa en contextos de extractivismo minero: el proceso de valorización comunitaria del patrimonio arqueológico de la Comunidad Indígena Territorial Quechua de Quipisca, región de Tarapacá, Chile"* (Práctica Arqueológica, *2025*).

Parish records from this church date back to approximately 1760 and include documentation of baptisms, births, marriages, and deaths. These sources form a fundamental basis for reconstructing the Quechua family lineages of Quipisca, as they contain surnames that persist to this day, such as Bacian, Quihuata, and Cholele.[8] According to oral tradition, the settlement was abandoned due to a socionatural disaster whose precise dating has not been determined. However, an inscription located in the current chapel, dated 1875, suggests that the event may have been linked to the earthquakes[9] of Arica (1868)[10] or Iquique (1877),[11] which caused the collapse of the old colonial church and the displacement of inhabitants to other parts of the ravine, such as Taypimarka, Liaxa, Tauquinza, and Palma. Despite this abandonment, Quipisca Antiguo continued to be sporadically reoccupied during the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries due to its strategic position in regional mobility networks. More than a set of ruins, this place is understood by the community as the first major settlement of the ravine, a site that connects memories, people, and histories that continue to be lived as fundamental to local identity.[12]

Our research is situated in this territory, within the Tarapacá Region, characterized by clearly marked ecological zones: the precordillera, the altiplano bordering Bolivia, the Tamarugal pampa, and the Pacific coast, where the city of Iquique—regional capital and administrative center—is located. These conditions historically favored processes of mobility between different ecological tiers, corresponding to what Murra defined as "ecological complementarity" in the Andes.[13] This mobility continued into the recent past, reaching its height during the nineteenth-century guano and nitrate booms, when these dynamics intensified and attracted European, Asian, and neighboring migrants from Bolivia, Argentina, and Peru. Mobility was also shaped by religious practices, visible in traditional festivities that continue to prompt seasonal returns: the Virgin of Carmen at La Tirana, San Lorenzo of Tarapacá, and, in the case of Quipisca, San Isidro Labrador, whose feast each May brings the community back to the ancestral territory.[14]

From a productive perspective, the Quipisca ravine historically relied on agriculture and, in a complementary way, on artisanal mining known as *pirquinería*.[15] Both practices, weakened by migration and low profitability, led to a process of depopulation that culminated in the near abandonment of the ravine by the 1980s. Today, heritage-based tourism has emerged as an alternative strategy through which the community seeks to repopulate the ravine and revitalize cultural practices at risk of disappearance.

Water availability has been key in this historical process. The ravine is an arreic basin that only receives fluvial contributions during the altiplanic winter, when summer rains generate floods known locally as *waiko* (Quechua for "water descent"). Historically, these events were used for flood irrigation, complemented by *puquios* or subterranean springs that supported agriculture on terraces and raised fields. This hydrological base explains the continuous human occupation of the ravine from pre-Hispanic times to the present, visible in a dense archaeological landscape: sacred hills (*apus*), geoglyphs, petroglyphs, cultivation terraces, habitation sites, and caravan trails.

The surrounding highlands, rich in mineral outcrops, sustained artisanal *pirquinería* and were integrated into a dense network of caravan routes connecting Quipisca to nearby territories: north to the Tarapacá ravine, east to Mamiña, Parca, Iquiuca, and Noasa, south to the Pica oasis, and west to the Pacific coast. These routes, active since pre-Inca times, continued to operate during colonial, republican, and modern periods. Today, the ancestral territory claimed by the community is also subject to large-scale interventions by transnational mining companies, which have produced contamination and drastic transformations of the landscape. These tensions have led the CITQQ to assert recognition of its ancestral land, where archaeological remains—from segments of the Qhapaq Ñan to colonial vestiges—serve as arguments for ethnic legitimacy, cultural continuity, and Indigenous heritage rights. Within this framework, the community engages in anthropological and archaeological methodologies that contest extractivist narratives and reaffirm the historical, cultural, and ontological significance of its landscape.[16]

Quechua Indigenous Community of Quipisca and the Chilean Socioenvironmental and Multicultural Context

In Chile, the concept of an Indigenous community refers to local and territorial groupings of Native peoples recognized by the state under Law No. 19.253, enacted in 1993 during the postdictatorship period. This modern legal definition reactivates historical notions of collective life based on kinship and territory, comparable to the *pueblos de indios* of the colonial era. With their own particularities, in the Mapuche sociocultural world this form of organization corresponds to the *lof*,[17] while in the Andean world it is expressed as the *ayllu*, a unit that articulates social, productive, and spiritual relations within a shared space.

The Quechua Territorial Indigenous Community of Quipisca (CITQQ) was formally established in 2009 under the provisions of the Indigenous law, although its historical presence in the Quipisca ravine dates back to pre-Hispanic times and continued throughout the colonial and republican periods. A symbolic reference to this historicity is Quipisca Antiguo, where material and documentary vestiges persist that confirm community continuity in the territory since the late colonial period.[18]

Unlike what occurred in southern Chile, where the Mapuche people maintained territorial autonomy until the late nineteenth century, the territories of the Atacama Desert—and particularly the Tarapacá region—passed through successive phases of control: Inca rule, Spanish colonial administration, the Peruvian republic, and, finally, annexation to Chile after the War of the Pacific (1879–1883). The colonial period deeply transformed the cosmological configurations of Indigenous populations. Through the policies of "extirpation of idolatries," worship of *huacas* or sacred places was persecuted, where *apus* (ceremonial hills) were conceived of as nonhuman entities with which permanent relationships were maintained.[19] Despite these impositions, communities preserved social and ontological dimensions that remain recognizable today.

In this sense, Indigenous identities in Chile are the product of long-term sociohistorical processes, but they gained renewed strength after the country's return to democracy (1990 onward), when specific legal frameworks began to institutionalize, albeit partially and conflictively, a national Indigenous policy. Various scholars have described this phenomenon as the "Indigenous emergence," a process of increasing visibility that placed Native peoples at the center of public debate and political life.[20] Within the disciplinary field, this process also impacted archaeology and heritage: Indigenous communities began to contest control over their material remains and memories, challenging contract archaeology and promoting collaborative and critical methodologies.[21]

Implementation of Public Policies

The first two decades following the return to democracy (1990–2010) were marked by center-left governments under the *Concertación* coalition, which advanced legal reforms to modernize the state apparatus in line with progressive discourses of the period. These reforms responded in part to growing social, cultural, and environmental demands, but also facilitated the expansion of national and transnational capital into strategic sectors such as mining, hydroelectric power, forestry plantations, and salmon

farming. In practice, this period represented the deepening of the neoliberal model designed during the dictatorship by the so-called Chicago Boys. The Indigenous Law No. 19.253 and the creation of the National Corporation for Indigenous Development were part of this institutional framework, which sought to channel ethnic demands within state-defined boundaries.[22]

In parallel, Chile's environmental legislation was consolidated, characterized by a late development and limited enforcement in its early stages. In 1994, Law No. 19.300, the General Environmental Framework Law, was enacted. It created the National Commission on the Environment, introduced environmental impact assessment, and established initial mechanisms for citizen participation. In 1997, Supreme Decree No. 30 approved the regulation of the Environmental Impact Assessment System (SEIA), distinguishing between Environmental Impact Declarations (DIA), simplified in scope, and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA), more exhaustive and specialized. In 2010, Law No. 20.417 was enacted, establishing the Ministry of the Environment, the Environmental Assessment Service (SEA), and the Environmental Superintendence (SMA). Finally, between 2012 and 2013, Supreme Decree No. 40 updated SEIA procedures, incorporating stricter baseline requirements, expanding mechanisms of citizen participation, and introducing Indigenous consultation as a component of intercultural dialogue.[23] The late consolidation of this regulatory framework had critical consequences: both EIAs and DIAs often lacked sufficient information to evaluate significant impacts, while the SEIA itself had no legal authority to reject projects. Added to this were episodes of corruption and collusion between political and private sectors, which favored the unchecked expansion of extractivism. Within this context, citizen participation—and particularly the territorial and identity-based claims of Indigenous peoples—was systematically marginalized.

Since the 1990s, multiple socioenvironmental conflicts have become paradigmatic: the Ralco and Pangue hydroelectric plants in Mapuche territory in Alto Biobío;[24] the Pascua Lama mining project of Barrick Gold in Diaguita lands; and the HidroAysén initiative in Patagonia, among others. These cases illustrate the structural tension between a state-promoted extractivist development model and the territorial and cultural rights of Indigenous communities.

Consequences of Megamining in Quipisca

The Cerro Colorado Mining Company (CMCC), an open-pit copper mine, began its operations in the Tarapacá region during the 1990s, consolidating since then a series of projects evaluated through Chile's Environmental Impact Assessment System. Among them, the Cerro Colorado Mining Site Update Project (2006) stands out, a period in which the partial destruction of the ceremonial hill Cerro Negro occurred—an *apu* regarded as a tutelary mountain by the CITQQ—together with the expansion of waste-rock dumps that reached the ravine bed, contaminating it and fragmenting the sacred relationship between the *apus* and the ritual landscape.

Subsequently, operational continuity was authorized through the Cerro Colorado Operational Continuity Project (2013), which extended the mine's lifespan until 2023.

However, the Water Supply Project (2019), which sought to implement a seawater desalination system, was withdrawn in 2020 due to technical deficiencies in its evaluation and, above all, the opposition of Indigenous communities, including the CITQQ. This marked the first time in its history that CMCC entered a mine closure stage, a condition that remains in place to this day.

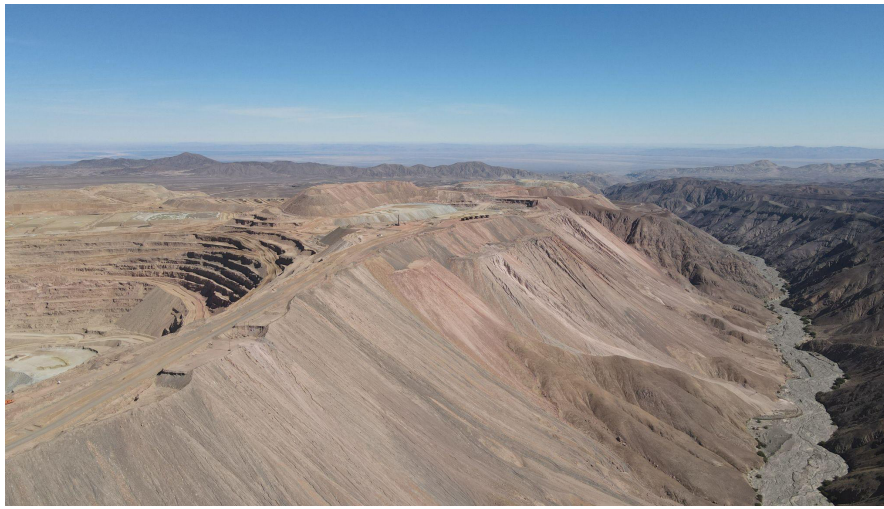

Figure 2. *Impact of mining on the Quipisca watershed. Photo by Juan Andrés Moraga Nova.*

Figure 3. *Impact of mining in Quipisca, western waste-rock dump. Community members observe the excessive growth of mining waste piles. Photo courtesy Juan Andrés Moraga Nova.*

Currently, the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) Modification of the Cerro Colorado Operational Continuity Project—through drilling platforms and test pits—is under review. This project has again generated local opposition since it proposes exploratory drilling from the precordillera to the marine seabed. Despite CMCC's lack of a coherent explanation, this initiative is interpreted as a preliminary step toward the submission of a new Environmental Impact Assessment by late 2025, which aims to ensure water supply through seawater desalination.

The arrival of megamining in the Quipisca ravine not only directly affected the CITQQ but also gradually transformed the social, economic, and environmental relations with neighboring settlements such as Mamiña, Iquiuca, and Parca. Many of these localities abandoned traditional practices such as agriculture, reorienting their economies toward an increasing dependence on mining, both in terms of employment and services. This productive transformation fractured historically connected socioterritorial units while simultaneously intensifying internal disputes and tensions over territorial boundaries and modes of negotiation with the private sector.[25] From an environmental perspective, CMCC's waste-rock dumps have occasionally spilled into the ravine, while at the same time altering the cultural and ritual landscape by disregarding the meanings attributed by the community to hills, geoglyphs, and ceremonial spaces.[26]

The tension of meanings surrounding the representation of territory is also expressed in the friction between positivist scientific knowledge and Indigenous knowledge. In Chile, environmental assessment policies are organized through technical-administrative instruments that, in practice, have favored the outsourcing of work to private consultancies and standardized protocols (EIS/EIA). This orientation has been critically discussed for its tendency to reduce heritage to fragmented and decontextualized categories.[27]

This logic has shaped the role of anthropology and archaeology within Environmental Impact Assessment System processes, prioritizing compliance with formal requirements over community involvement and the reciprocal circulation of results. Critiques from heritage studies have pointed out that such practices reinforce an "authorized heritage discourse"[28] that marginalizes local values and community-based meanings. In the Quipisca ravine, contract archaeology developed for years without effective engagement in the Indigenous communities directly affected, with little or no communication of findings and excluding the CITQQ from participation in the management of ancestral material culture.

In response, the CITQQ consolidated itself as a political actor in the region's socioenvironmental struggles. Since 2009, the community has issued public claims regarding the destruction of the environment, geoglyphs, and sacred sites, achieving recognition of its concerns by both the state and private companies. A symbolic milestone was the agreement reached with CMCC to suspend mining operations during the Inti Raymi festival after the community argued that waste-rock piles delayed the rising of the first rays of the sun over the sacred *apu* Watawatana, significantly disrupting ceremonial practices and Indigenous ways of life.

Figure 4. *Sunrise during the Inti Raymi festival, held every year in June. Mining operations prevent the ceremony from taking place on Apu Watawatana hill. Photo courtesy Juan Andrés Moraga Nova.*

Collaborative Archaeology and Anthropology: Methods and Perspectives from Tarapacá

The experience of the Quechua Territorial Indigenous Community of Quipisca (CITQQ) in documenting its heritage is grounded in a methodological framework that combines long-term ethnography,[29] collaborative archaeology,[30] and participatory action research.[31] Unlike studies carried out by private consultancies or contract archaeology subordinated to the timelines of the extractive market, the process in Quipisca is built from the community outward, with the active participation of its members and the accompaniment of collaborating professionals. This work does not merely produce archaeological or anthropological data: it constitutes a political act that disputes the power to define what heritage is and what it means in contexts of mining extractivism.

From a methodological perspective, this work rests on three pillars. The first is ethnographic continuity, based on a long-term relationship between researchers and the community, where trust, reciprocity, and respect for local temporalities have guided practice. Field interviews, collective walks through the mountains and ravines, joint surveys, and participation in ceremonies have configured a situated ethnography that conceives academic work as accompaniment rather than distant observation.

The second pillar is interdisciplinary collaboration. The CITQQ has advanced its own way of documenting territory, where local knowledge confers with academic tools. In this way, collaborative archaeology and anthropology avoid reducing knowledge production to fragmented and decontextualized diagnostics, instead integrating memories, perceptions, and affects. Within this framework, the Quechua notion of *Yachai* constitutes a central principle, as it refers to a living, intergenerational, and situated knowledge that connects ancestors, tutelary mountains, and current generations in a continuous process of learning and memory. As we argued in a recent article—*Participatory Archaeology in Contexts of*

Mining Extractivism: The Process of Community Valorization of the Archaeological Heritage of the Quechua Territorial Indigenous Community of Quipisca, Tarapacá Region, Chile, published in *Práctica Arqueológica* (2025)—this perspective makes it possible to integrate local memories with technical methodologies.[32]

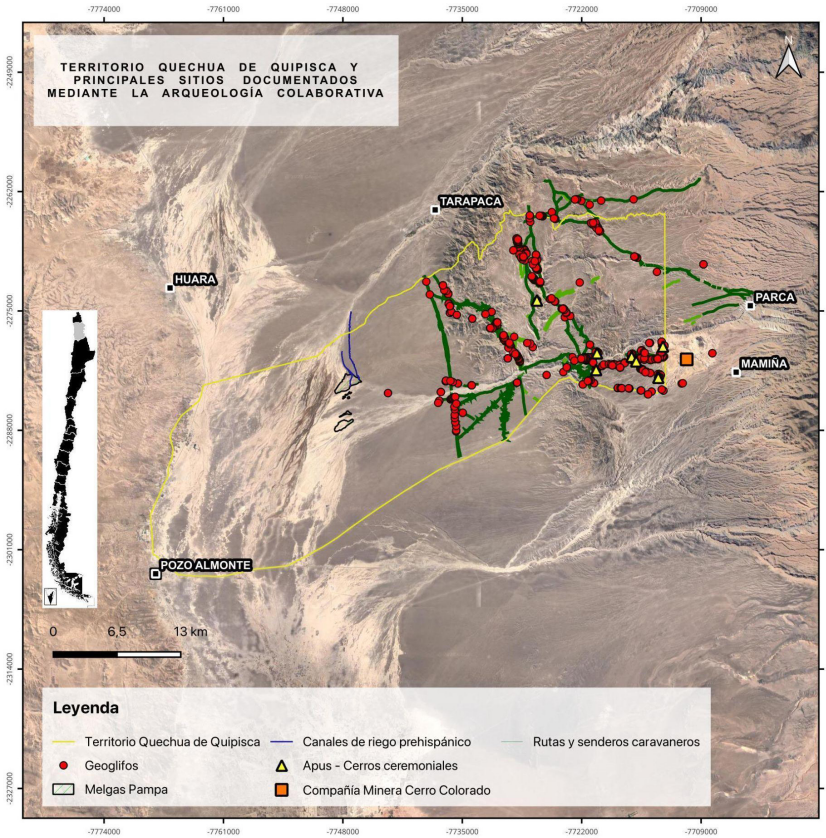

Figure 5. *Indigenous heritage sites documented through collaborative archaeology and anthropology. Photo courtesy Juan Andrés Moraga Nova et al. "Arqueología participativa en contextos de extractivismo minero: el proceso de valorización comunitaria del patrimonio arqueológico de la Comunidad Indígena Territorial Quechua de Quipisca, región de Tarapacá, Chile"* (Práctica Arqueológica, *2025).*

The third pillar is its political-critical dimension. Documenting heritage in Quipisca is not a neutral exercise: it means disputing the "authorized heritage discourse"[33] and challenging the hegemony of positivist archaeology,[34] which has historically operated in the service of the state or extractive companies. In this case, heritage is understood as a field of power in which the community exercises its right to socially construct memory and territory. No longer are universities, private consultancies, or ministries the ones who determine what counts as heritage,[35] but rather the Indigenous communities themselves, accompanied by allied professionals. This mode of critical

archaeology renders the Quipisca experience unique in Chile and establishes it as an international reference for decolonial methodologies.

The results of this strategy have been significant. In Quipisca, more than 210 geoglyph sites have been documented, collectively containing over 1,160 motifs associated mainly with ancient caravan routes. These findings, detailed in the aforementioned article, constitute a visual archive laden with historical, identity, and spiritual meanings that the community has begun to reinterpret from its own perspective. Likewise, more than fourteen petroglyph sites have been recorded. Their iconographic diversity includes geometric, anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and phytomorphic motifs, located in sectors such as Dupliza, Angostura, La Palma, Liaxa, Taypimarka, and Wasayaje. The documentation has also identified more than twenty-six caravan routes and trails, many of which remain active in collective memory and articulate historical relationships with neighboring territories such as the Tarapacá Ravine, Mamiña, Parca, and the Pampa del Tamarugal. A particularly significant finding has been the identification of a segment of the Qhapaq Ñan, resignified by the community as a key historical and symbolic element for its territorial identity.[36]

All these records have been systematized in a GIS-based georeferenced archive, complemented by an audiovisual repository that brings together photographs and videos of festivities, rock art manifestations, old small-scale mining sites, and agricultural spaces. This corpus is organized in the community digital repository Ñawpa Yachay, conceived as a tool for collective memory and territorial management.[37]

Taken together, these results not only enrich the archaeological and anthropological knowledge of the region, but also position the CITQQ as a legitimate actor in the production of heritage knowledge. The community demonstrates that it is possible to investigate, document, and resignify heritage from below, in a process that combines science, memory, and politics, contributing directly to identity and territorial vindication.

The Awki Project, Protective Spirits

The Awki Project, Protective Spirits is a collaborative research initiative carried out between 2020 and 2021, made possible through public funding from the National Fund for the Development of Culture and the Arts (FONDART), specifically under its program supporting Indigenous Peoples and First Nations. This is a Chilean public grant that provides funding for artistic and cultural projects through national and regional calls. Established in 1992, its main objective is to support the development of the arts, the dissemination of culture, and the preservation of the country's cultural heritage. Within this framework, the project's primary goal was to document the relationship between CITQQ and its *apus* (sacred mountains), focusing on the area known as Alto Quipisca Sur. This territorial space is particularly significant, as the mining industry plans to expand there in the future, while the community recognizes it as a living, spiritual, and relational landscape where memories, ritual practices, and ancestral ties are anchored.[38]

The research was carried out within a framework of collaborative archaeology and anthropology, based on the principles of participatory action research. Through community surveys, collective walks, and audiovisual recordings, an archive of memory was created that highlights the ways in which the community experiences and resignifies its territory. This methodology contrasted with the fragmentary approaches of contract archaeology, as it integrated local knowledge and oral narratives with academic tools and techniques such as GIS-based georeferencing. In addition to this, a short documentary film was produced that highlighted this relationship between the *apus* and the community.[39]

The project strengthened the knowledge and valuation of the network of ceremonial *apus* that form the heart of Quipisca's ritual landscape. Among them are Watawatana, Serpejo, Loma Negra, Kuntur (also known as Cerro Quipisca), Tauquinza, Monugna, and Cerro Negro, all understood as protective entities that structure the ritual and relational landscape of the ravine. To this network was once also connected Cerro Colorado, which since the 1990s has been transformed into the open-pit copper mine of the Cerro Colorado Mining Company. The physical disappearance of this *apu* clearly illustrates how extractive expansion not only transforms the material territory but also interrupts ceremonial connections that historically linked the sacred mountains, thereby fragmenting the ontological fabric that sustains communal life in Quipisca.

Figure 6. ***The ceremonial apu or sacred hill called Serpejo. Its slopes feature an abundance of geoglyphs. Photo courtesy Juan Andrés Moraga Nova.***

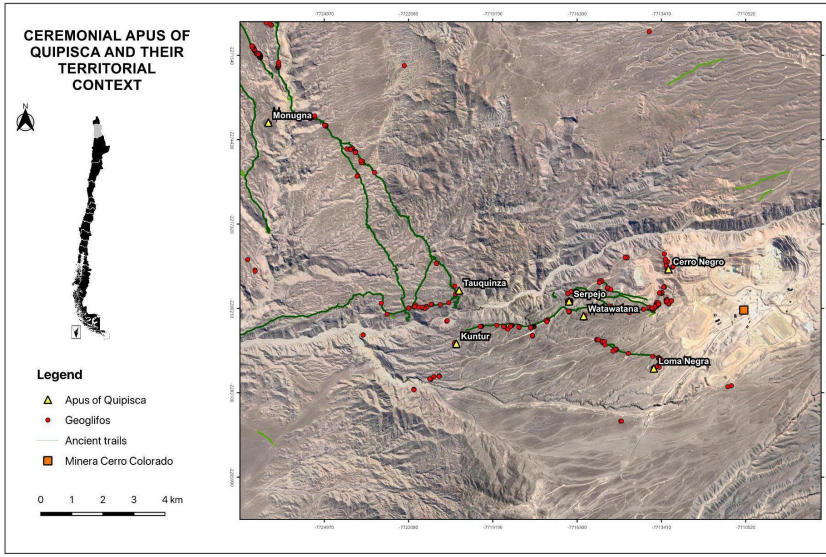

Figure 7. *Ceremonial apus of Quipisca and their territorial context. Map prepared by the authors in 2025.*

During the Awki Project, Protective Spirits, a series of stone structures were documented at the summit of the *apu* Kuntur. Due to their spatial arrangement—aligned toward the sunrise on the eastern horizon facing the Andes Range—they were interpreted by the research team as *saywas*, monolithic markers related to the ritualization of time measurement. Their orientation suggests connections with other Andean examples associated with agricultural-ritual calendars and astronomical observation systems. The structures were observed during solstices and equinoxes, confirming alignments with sunrise positions on those specific dates. In addition to the *apu* Kuntur, the community and research team have been documenting a wider network of insular-type ceremonial mountains whose summits contain ritual shrines; these tutelary *apus* are understood to be in dialogue with one another. In relation to this, recent regional studies have highlighted the presence of similar constructions along segments of the Inca road system (Qhapaq Ñan), interpreting them as Inca *saywas* built for purposes of territorial demarcation, ritual observation, and as components of an astronomical calendar.[40]

For the community, these *apus* and *saywas* are an extension of its own knowledge system, in which astronomical and ritual practices are not merely technical but deeply ontological: they express the continuity of an Andean worldview that conceives nature as a living and relational whole. In this sense, *huacas* and *apus* are not inert objects but subjects with agency, forming a network of reciprocity between humans and nonhumans. This reciprocity is renewed in contemporary ceremonial practices such as the

Inti Raymi and other *pago a la tierra* rituals, during which the community invokes the tutelary mountains and ancestral protectors that safeguard the ravine. These acts reaffirm a living relationship with the landscape, where spiritual and ecological dimensions are inseparable. In sharp contrast, environmental and archaeological studies promoted by mining companies conceive the territory through a naturalist ontology—as a set of economically quantifiable resources—whereas in native ontologies the land, stones, and minerals are living beings endowed with spirit and intentionality. From this perspective, mining activity not only transforms the physical environment but also wounds the spiritual and relational fabric that sustains life in Quipisca.[41]

Figure 8. *Documenting saywas at the ceremonial apu hill of Kuntur or Quipisca. Photo courtesy Juan Andrés Moraga Nova.*

The Quipisca case resonates with scholarship on Inca astronomy and the Cusco *ceque* system, which demonstrated how pillars and solar markers structured agricultural and ritual calendars.[42] Scholars have also described the sacred landscape of Cusco and the organization of ceremonial lines that ordered social time.[43] Other research emphasizes the articulation between solar observatories and ritual practices in the Andean world.[44] Classic studies of solar observations and ritual calendars in Cusco further contextualize the materialities documented in Quipisca. More recently, studies in Socaire (Salar de Atacama) have examined local expressions associated with *ceques* and astronomy, broadening the comparative framework for northern Chile.[45]

The concept of *awki*, which gives the project its name, refers in Quechua to "grandfather" or "protective spirit." Applied to the tutelary mountains, it conveys the belief that the *apus* are alive, that they feel, protect, and converse with the inhabitants of the ravine. For this reason, their defense is simultaneously patrimonial, spiritual, and political. This understanding—documented throughout the collaborative process—reinforces the community's relationship with its territory and its right to define it.

Figure 9. *Saywa on Cerro Negro, where community members perform a ceremony. The landscape shows the mining impact that affected the sacred mountain. Photo courtesy Juan Andrés Moraga Nova.*

Figure 10. *Sunrise in March, during the autumn equinox in the southern hemisphere. The sun between the turrets. Photo courtesy Juan Andrés Moraga Nova.*

Ultimately, the Awki Project constitutes a milestone in the cultural and territorial defense of Quipisca, as it highlights the landscape as a network of spiritual and social relationships, in contrast to the naturalistic view that reduces it to an inert space rich in exploitable resources. By focusing on Indigenous ontology, the territory is nourished by agency and the *apus* are recognized as ancestral protectors. In this way, the Awki Project challenges hegemonic heritage narratives that fragment space and strip materialities of their symbolic, spiritual, and relational meanings. Through this approach, the project not only enabled heritage documentation but also made visible alternative ways of inhabiting and signifying the territory, rooted in Quechua memory, spirituality, and identity. Together, these practices contribute to the construction of a critical and situated heritage that strengthens the community's self-determination.

Conclusion

The experience of the Quechua Territorial Indigenous Community of Quipisca (CITQQ) demonstrates that cultural heritage is not a collection of inert objects but rather a field of political, symbolic, and ontological contestation in which the continuity of communal life is at stake in the face of extractivism. The collaborative documentation of tutelary mountains, *huacas*, geoglyphs, and caravan trails constitutes an exercise that weaves together science, memory, and spirituality, reaffirming the community's agency as an active subject in the production of knowledge. In this regard, participatory action research, long-term ethnography, and critical archaeology provide tools to counter the hegemonic narratives of mining and the state while foregrounding an Andean ontology in which the *apus* and the landscape are living and protective beings.

The Quipisca case thus offers both a methodological and political reference for critical heritage studies in Latin America and beyond, showing that it is possible to generate situated and decolonial knowledge that not only enriches archaeology and anthropology but also strengthens the identity and territorial claims of Indigenous peoples. In a global scenario marked by extractivist expansion, the experience of the CITQQ stands as a testimony of resistance, but also of creativity and reexistence, where heritage becomes both a tool for the future and a foundation for self-determination.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

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