

# Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

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Volume 18 | Issue 2

Article 3

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12-20-2022

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### Recommended Citation

Martín Brañas, Manuel; Silverstein, Sydney M.; del Aguila Villacorta, Margarita; Zárate Gómez, Ricardo; Núñez Pérez, Cecilia; Cándido Yumbato, Alonso; Palacios Vega, Juan José; and Rodríguez Romaní, Rosario (2022). "Ticuna Ceramics amidst the Expansion of Illicit Coca: Rendering New Relations", *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 18: Iss. 2, Article 3, 220-240. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol18/iss2/3>

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# Ticuna Ceramics amidst the Expansion of Illicit Coca: Rendering New Relations

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## Introduction

In Ticuna communities across Amazonia, ceramics are useful objects employed for cooking and storage. Their practical importance, however, does not describe the extent of their significance. Seemingly inanimate artifacts of material culture, they are simultaneously situated in broader ecological relations (Ingold 2012), rendering tangible elements of social and spiritual organization (Lemonnier 2016; D. Whitten 2003; N. Whitten 1978). As local ecologies shift with concurrent political, economic, and social transformations, objects such as ceramics become materials which reflect these changing relations.

In this article, we take up the case of Ticuna ceramics and ceramic-making practices as a means of studying the changes set in motion by the transformation of Ticuna ancestral

lands in Peru's lowland Amazonian region into zones of illicit coca cultivation<sup>1</sup>. We evaluate contemporary practices of ceramic-making within three Peruvian Ticuna communities in this context and the national government's subsequent responses to the coca situation. Here, we use ceramics as a starting point to explore a complex web of relations, as Ticuna communities intersect with both drug-trafficking operations and agents of the Peruvian state.

To tease out the complex social, economic, and political relations that seep into contemporary Ticuna ceramics, we draw on mixed-methods ethnographic research, including participant observation, interviews, and a participatory film project focused on ceramic production. We begin by describing the recent surge in coca cultivation in Peru's triple-border region and the government interventions—both militarized eradication sweeps and state-sponsored alternative development programs—that emerged in response. From there, we focus on the Peruvian state's renewed interest in Ticuna culture by describing a series of state-sponsored cultural revalorization projects in Ticuna communities, beginning with the formal recognition of elements of material and immaterial culture as part of national patrimony, and culminating in the inclusion (and subsidization) of Ticuna artisans in national handicrafts circuits. Ceramics are one such example of cultural patrimony, and we give a detailed overview of the ceramic-making process, describing both its material and immaterial components, as well as intergenerational reflections on these practices within the contemporary historical moment. In so doing, we show how the crafting of traditional forms of material culture, such as ceramic vessels, is both a venue for cultural reproduction and a mediating practice between indigenous communities and powerful entities, including both drug-trafficking organizations and the national government. We suggest ways that cultural patrimony recognition can also act as a form of statecraft—a relational domain rendered tangible through the production of material artifacts such as ceramics.

## The Rise of Coca in Peru's Triple-Border Region

Spread across the borderland region of Peru, Brazil, and Colombia, Ticuna communities of the Amazon have witnessed numerous disruptions and displacements to their lifeways. They have endured the trauma of the colonial encounter and its resultant scourge of diseases, attempts at missionization, and the partitioning of the Ticuna nation through the formation of national boundaries (Goulard 2009; C. López 2014). Ticuna communities have also survived the brutality of the Amazonian Rubber Boom, in which indigenous peoples were subjected to a series of atrocities, from forced labor to torture, in the attempts to fuel a global shift toward greater industrialization (Casement 1997; Chirif and Cornejo 2009).

More recently, Ticuna communities have become enmeshed in yet another highly lucrative global economy—the illicit cocaine trade (Vélez and Romo 2019). From the 1980s, Ticuna ancestral lands have been appropriated as airstrips, used as a handoff zone for drugs traveling from the coca enclave of Peru's Upper Huallaga Valley (Gootenberg 2007). But pressure from militarized incursions on coca-growing lands—part of the notorious Plan Colombia—drove coca production over the border into Peru. In the twenty-first century's opening decade, the region's role transformed from transport corridor to zone of production. Since then, illicit coca production has expanded into Peruvian Ticuna communities, which now contain large parcels of illicit coca crops and maceration operations that transform coca leaves into raw cocaine paste (*pasta básica de cocaína*, or PBC) (López and Tuesta 2015; Silverstein 2021).

The illicit coca industry's expansion on the Peruvian side of the triple border has affected Ticuna communities in myriad ways. Most notably, coca has generated an underground economy that has allowed Ticuna people to access local and regional markets with greater ease, while also reorienting cycles of both labor and ritual. Ticuna communities with better access to local markets have decreased their production of traditional subsistence food crops,

1. We refer to the coca grown in Ticuna communities as illicit coca in reference to a distinction drawn at the federal level between licit and illicit coca. These communities are located in Peru's political department of Loreto, which is not recognized as one of Peru's primary coca-growing regions (located mostly in the montaña regions of the Huallaga Valley and the Apurímac, Ene, and Mantaro River Valley, or VRAEM), and has never hosted an office of Peru's national cooperative for regulating the production and sale of licit coca (Empresa Nacional de la Coca (ENACO), making it impossible to produce "licit" coca for local and national markets, and generating the assumption (largely correct) that the coca produced in this region is destined to be used to make raw cocaine paste (*pasta básica de cocaína*, PBC). Though indigenous Amazonians do have a long history of coca cultivation (the ipadú variety, not ideal for PBC production), this has largely been in home gardens, and not as a for-market crop (see Plowman 1981).

such as plantains and manioc, in favor of planting coca. This, in turn, has created a reliance on cash income from coca harvests to purchase food in nearby towns, such as the provincial capital of Caballococha. Beginning in 2015, however, many coca livelihoods—including money earned growing, harvesting, and processing the crop, as well as earnings providing food and housing for migrant coca harvesters—were eliminated through state-sponsored coca-eradication programs. That year, then-president Ollanta Humala declared a “state of emergency” in two of Loreto’s rural provinces due to a dramatic increase in illicit coca production (*El Peruano* 2015). This state of emergency was framed as a novel and emergent crisis overtaking Loreto’s border region. Notably, the decree led to the construction of a temporary military base in Caballococha, which would oversee several coca-eradication sweeps in the forests nearby. These eradication efforts not only tore up coca plants but also vital sources of income for farmers who had grown accustomed to the steady cash revenue their harvests generated. What’s more, in the wake of eradication many communities faced the hardships of both a loss of income from destroyed coca fields and a labor force no longer accustomed to subsistence agricultural practices (Núñez Pérez et al. 2019).

The surge in illicit coca production in Peru’s triple-border area did not only engender violent forms of statecraft. Although the eradication sweeps were a means of exercising state power, performing authority and the right to use force in a frontier zone, these displays of force came with attempts at more beneficent forms of statecraft intended to create a sense of national political inclusion. In some communities, alternative development programs run by Peru’s national Drug Control Commission (DEVIDA) began cacao-growing operations to create alternative income sources for coca growers (DEVIDA 2021). Smaller projects worked toward commercialization of *farina* (manioc flour), a local food staple whose production was on the decline due to the intensification of coca cultivation, as well. The projects, which were implemented in one of the three participating communities in the ceramics project discussed in this article, continue to be active in the region despite struggles to generate economic pathways for the cacao due to the region’s relative isolation from national markets.

State responses to the expansion of illicit coca have also adopted a more inclusive discourse, including efforts by Peru’s Ministry of Culture to recognize forms of Ticuna cultural patrimony in a national register. In 2014, the ministry began a study Ticuna coming-of-age ceremonies, an effort that resulted in a book and documentary film (Ministry of Culture 2016). A team of anthropologists and filmmakers carried out field research documenting a rite known as the *woxrexcüchiga*, or *pelazón*, a coming-of-age ritual that commemorates the passage of prepubescent girls into adulthood. It is also a rite that reproduces social order, including norms of gender, kinship, and morality (Goulard 2009; Letts 2016). As Letts (2016) has noted, the *woxrexcüchiga* is becoming less common in Ticuna communities in recent decades. Threats to cultural practices such as this have several sources, including the influence of missionaries and the difficulty of obtaining and preparing the ritual’s key elements, which involves months of planning and preparation. But greater integration into industries—including, but not limited to, illicit coca—has also reoriented time around a market logic, making the practice of rites such as the *woxrexcüchiga* difficult to incorporate (see also Núñez Pérez et al. 2018). Along with the *woxrexcüchiga*, the production of elements of material culture that complement these rites, such as *llanchama* costumes, woven tools, and ceramics, simultaneously have become scarce. After the *woxrexcüchiga* project, Peru’s Ministry of Culture began additional attempts at integrating Ticuna cultural practices into both national registers and crafts circuits.

In the following years, the ministry partnered with other local research institutes to document traditional Ticuna use of forest resources and provided funding to involve Ticuna artisans in the national crafts fair known as Ruraq Maki. Ruraq Maki began in 2007 as a program aimed to register, study, and disseminate traditional folk art. This Ministry of Culture program calls

for the participation of popular artists from all regions of the country who maintain traditional and ancestral art practices, many of which date back to pre-Hispanic periods. The main antecedent for the incorporation of artisans into the Ruraq Maki program, and the focus of collaborations between Peru's Institute for Amazonian Research (*Instituto de Investigación de la Amazonía Peruana*, henceforth IIAP) and the Ministry of Culture, was the registration and dissemination of the intangible Ticuna cultural heritage. One achievement of this collaboration between these two institutions and the communities of study was the declaration of the traditional fabrics made with the *huarumá* fiber as objects of National Cultural Heritage. This, in turn, paved the way for the first participation of Ticuna artisans in the Ruraq Maki fair in Lima, where Ticuna ceramics, along with woven bags (*xicras*), hammocks, and *tipitis*, became key elements of representation for efforts to promote and revalorize Ticuna cultural patrimony as an element of Peruvian cultural patrimony.

### Ticuna Ceramics in and out of History

Though bark cloth paintings (*llanchamas*) have engendered their own tourist markets in Colombia (see Chaves Chamorro 2012), Ticuna ceramics are an important manifestation of both material and immaterial heritage. In and around the parts of Amazonia that Ticuna people inhabit, ceramic remains date back 2,000 years (Bolian 1975; Herrera 1987; Goulard 1994). Due to the influence of some Tupi peoples, such as the Omagua, who migrated westward along the Amazon River in the eleventh century (Ullán de la Rosa 2004; Goulard 2009), traditional Ticuna ceramics, classified within the Barrancoid tradition, incorporated elements of the polychrome tradition. Lathrap (1970), for instance, notes that decorative practices such as the elaboration of floral patterns reflect a European influence on Cocama ceramics, which were later transmitted from Cocama to Ticuna artisans, who have continued these forms of decoration until the present day. Despite these influences, Ticuna ceramics have maintained a distinctive form and style consistent with their ancestral ceramics.

Elaborating ceramics requires deep knowledge of the local environment, both the nature of the materials found there and of the spiritual realm connected to them. According to Ticuna oral histories, the mythical twins Mowacha and Aixküna oversaw the transmission of knowledge to Ticuna women. Mowacha specifically taught them to make ceramic vessels (Formabiap 2015). The twins were born, along with their siblings Yoxi and Ipi, from the knees of the great father Nguxtapax. The creation myth determines the specific roles that men and women will play in Ticuna society and establishes the importance of the transmission of knowledge as a fundamental point for Ticuna cultural regeneration. Largely in keeping with these ancestral practices, women primarily produce ceramics, although men occasionally make ceramic objects (Nimuendajú 1952).

Although there is a dearth of ethnographic literature documenting Ticuna ceramic-making practices between the time of Nimuendajú's research in the 1940s and the present, the practices appear to have been passed down through generations, with techniques and rules documented in the present displaying numerous parallels with the ethnographic record. Yet there is no doubt the broader social, economic, and political context in which the ceramics are made has changed. Indeed, although material culture items such as ceramics provide an important window into understanding the ecological relations among people, objects, and the forest, these relations are not frozen in time. They are instead ever changing. In some instances, material culture directly references these shifting relations, such as the military planes and helicopters that Chaves Chamorro (2012) describes in a collection of mid-twentieth-century Ticuna bark paintings (*llanchamas*) housed at the University of Illinois and acquired in the wake of a border conflict between Peru and Colombia. In other cases, these changing relations may not be directly represented via iconographs, but nevertheless present in forms of practice

and the motivations and constraints that shape these forms' conditions of possibility. Here, we are interested in the ways that ceramics have become mediating forces between Ticuna communities, drug-trafficking organizations, and the Peruvian state.

### Mixed-Method and Participatory Research in Ticuna Communities

This study is based on research conducted by a team of researchers from the Amazonian Societies (*Sociodiversidad*) research branch of IIAP (authors 1–7) and the Cultural Patrimony branch of the Peruvian Ministry of Culture (author 8) between 2015 and 2019. Funding was provided to both IIAP and the Ministry of Culture to study the use of everyday resources in Amazonian indigenous communities. The research team had previously carried out a study on the fibers of several species of the genus *Ischnosiphon*—known in the area as *huaruma* or *dexpe* in the Ticuna language—used to produce traditional utilitarian fabrics (Martín Brañas et al. 2017). This study identified the most vulnerable traditional practices in the context of coca, initiating a more in-depth investigation of the crafting of ceramics. The research is part of a broader program that seeks to study and reassess traditional knowledge and practices in indigenous communities in the province of Ramón Castilla, within the department of Loreto. The research team was based in the city Iquitos, where IIAP headquarters are located, but made dozens of trips to the Ramón Castilla district to conduct field research among the Ticuna communities.

General research in these communities included household surveys of use of forest resources (Martín Brañas 2020); knowledge and usage of manioc varieties (Martín Brañas et al. 2017; Núñez Pérez et al. 2018); participatory workshops related to the recovery of traditional knowledge; and focus groups on the gendered impacts of coca and development projects (Núñez Pérez et al. 2019). Research on ceramic preparation was conducted in the Ticuna communities of Bufo Cocha, Santa Rita de Mochila, and Nueva Galilea de Callarú. All three were situated within the system of lakes and streams that form the tributaries of the Amazon River within Ramón Castilla, the easternmost province in Loreto, and were identified during early research trips as communities that were interconnected through kin and labor relations. Importantly, members of the study team had previously identified these communities for their knowledge and use of diverse manioc varieties (Martín Brañas et al. 2019; Núñez Pérez et al. 2018), suggesting still-active pathways of intergenerational transmission of local knowledge regarding forest resources and the cultural practices associated with their use.

Research focused on preparation of ceramics was carried out in two parts. The first came over three visits to the community of Bufo Cocha in 2015, where the first, second, and fifth author cofacilitated participatory audiovisual workshops on traditional use of forest materials with youth from the community. The latter were trained to use cameras and digital recorders and worked with the team from IIAP to document several Ticuna practices involving the use of forest resources—one being the crafting of ceramics. Filming of the ceramic process—the focus of this article—took place in Bufo Cocha. The team held follow-up interviews regarding the ceramics process with members of all three communities.

During the audiovisual workshops, youth from Bufo Cocha recorded all aspects of the ceramic process, from the gathering of the clay to the shaping of the ceramic vessels, to the firing and glazing of finished works. During a follow-up visit, the second and fourth authors reviewed rough cuts of scenes from the film to ensure it accurately represented the process and to obtain translations of portions of the Ticuna dialogue. During this visit, co-reflection sessions were hosted with participants in the audiovisual workshop, which focused on questions pertaining to beliefs and experiences regarding both the filming and recording and the process of ceramic-making workshop participants documented. In anticipation of the third

and final visit of 2015, the second author edited digital audiovisual materials into a short film—*Moeüchi Pa oxi*—which was screened for the entire community and later published in the IIAP's digital repository (IIAP 2015).

In 2016 and 2018, the study team returned for subsequent visits to more closely study and document the ceramic-making process. Adult women from the communities interested in learning more about the ceramic arts also participated. During these visits, team members conducted semi-structured group interviews with ceramic masters and women from Santa Rita de Castilla, Bufe Cocha, and Nueva Galilea de Callarú who participated in the workshop. The sixth author, who is fluent in both Ticuna and Spanish, helped translate when the older ceramic masters spoke. By this time, Ticuna artisans had been invited to participate in Ruraq Maki, with funds from the Ministry of Culture subsidizing their journeys to Lima to vend at the fairs, as well as other expenses. Members of the study team traveled to Ramón Castilla to help Ticuna artisans prepare for Ruraq Maki, as well as to accompany them on the voyage. The team gathered additional ethnographic and contextual material during trips to and from the Ruraq Maki fair in Lima, and via reflections on these experiences upon their subsequent return to their communities.

Prior informed consent was requested before the workshops in the three communities, as indicated by Law No. 27811 in its Title II, Article 2. A study collected the plant species identified for the crafting of ceramics in the communal workshops and in the semi-structured surveys. The collection of botanical samples was conducted following the procedure proposed by Judd et al. (1999). The permission to collect plant samples corresponds to Resolution 0068-2015-SERFOR-DGGSPFFS. Botanical samples were identified according to the taxonomic key of Gentry (1993) and Vásquez (1997). The collected samples were deposited in IIAP's Iquitos Herbarium.

### **Ceramic Knowledge and Generational Gaps among Workshop Participants**

Among the three Ticuna communities involved in this research, we were able to identify only three women (two from Bufe Cocha and one from Nueva Galilea) with full knowledge of the ceramic-making process, from the rules and prohibitions related to obtaining the materials, including songs and chants required to obtain permission to gather the clay, as well as the techniques for molding and firing the vessels. These women were great-grandmothers of children in the community and communicated primarily in Ticuna. They described having learned the process of gathering materials for ceramics from their mothers, whom they had accompanied as young women. A fourth woman, Gladiz, was the daughter-in-law of a ceramic master (Erlinda) and had learned ceramics from her, not her biological mother. At the time of our research, Gladiz had become highly competent in ceramic-making and might now also be considered a master. Among the three communities, a total of sixty-four women participated in the ceramics workshops and expressed an eagerness to learn the practice and become proficient in the manner of Gladiz.

This group of women were not the only ones interested in ceramics, and in the participatory workshops IIAP hosted. A small group of youth from Bufe Cocha also participated in the audiovisual workshops held in 2015. Fourteen participated in the filming workshop, and additional youth participated in the subsequent reflection sessions. Overall, they were eager to learn filming and audio recording techniques and participated enthusiastically in the workshops and the filming process, documenting Gladiz's trip to the gorge with her youngest daughter to gather clay, Gladiz and her mother-in-law's crafting of ceramic vessels, and the process of firing the ceramics, which Gladiz led. Adults from the three communities did not participate directly in filming, although many attended subsequent reflection sessions and the ceramics workshops put on in 2018.





figure 1. Film still from *Moeüchi Pa oxi*, with youth recording audio in the background.

At forty-three years old, Gladiz was one of the few middle-aged adults who was knowledgeable about ceramic-making. She was fluent in both Ticuna and Spanish and became the leader of subsequent efforts to market Ticuna ceramics and other handicrafts at Ruraq Maki. Gladiz's peers, as well as adults younger than her, were far less familiar with the ceramic-making process, although most were familiar with the taboos and prohibitions surrounding the gathering of the clay from the grandfather (*Pa oxi*). For instance, in a 2018 group interview conducted with three women from Nueva Galilea, all three chimed in to tell a story about a pregnant woman who angered *Pa oxi*, first by attempting to gather clay while pregnant, and later by refusing to refer to the clay as *Pa oxi*'s excrement, insisting instead on referring to it as mud or clay. *Pa oxi*, angered by the woman's defiance, causes the water in the creek to rise and drowns her.

The women helped one another to fill in details, recalling how their mothers and grandmothers had told them this cautionary tale. They understood it was a process that involved negotiation with the spirit world, and that violation of these norms would incur adverse consequences. They themselves, however, did not describe any experience negotiating with *Pa oxi* to obtain permission to use his excrement to produce pottery, although they also did not express cynicism or disbelief toward the story.

It is worth noting that these women are part of a generation who came of age when coca was beginning to be planted on Ticuna lands. Time spent planting, tending, and picking coca or cooking for the migrant coca workers was likely a distraction from activities such as ceramic production and weaving, which would have traditionally occupied time between the tending of crops, preparation of food, and childcare. Though speculative, this is one reason why they may have not learned the complicated and multipart process of making pottery, which we describe in the following section.

### Ceramic-Making: Material and Immaterial

As a research team, we came to understand the ceramic-making process's elaborate nature—from the procurement of the raw materials to the forming of the vessels, to their glazing and firing—primarily through the participatory filmmaking project but also through follow-up

workshops and interviews. As such, we developed an appreciation for the embeddedness of ceramics in the surrounding lands via the winding walks through the rainforest to reach the special kind of clay needed, the scaling and incising of trees to obtain glazing resins, and the more intimate crafting work that happened in domestic spaces. Notably, these movements also revealed parallel geographies of coca, as we sidestepped certain pathways to avoid concealed coca fields, passed young men on the path, coming back from a day of work as *raspachines* (coca pickers), or heard stories of old landing strips tucked away in the woods. But coca's presence in the surrounding forests did not overdetermine the work of the participatory film project, nor the subsequent workshops. Rather, coca was something that slipped into conversation, or announced itself through subtle visual clues as we traversed the local landscape procuring the materials necessary for ceramic-making and, eventually, firing and glazing the ceramic pieces.

The process of ceramic-making revealed itself to be both complex and governed by rules. Both ceramic masters and other community members assured us that women primarily did such work, with taboos against pregnant and menstruating women doing so. The following description follows the order of events women described in semi-structured interviews, as well as the ordering of the processes the Ticuna youth filmed in the preparation of *Moeüchi Pa oxi*.

Women extract the raw material to make the ceramic pieces from nearby ravines and creek beds. They do this primarily in the summer, when the water level has decreased and the gray clay deposits, rich in kaolinite, are exposed. Women access the creeks in the morning, when Yewaex, the guardian spirit of the creek, is absent. The presence of Yewaex, who is transformed into a huge black boa or a monstrous catfish (Nimuendajú 1952) and who the Ticunas also call Pa oxi, "the grandfather," conditions the fulfillment of a series of norms that are necessary to safeguard the physical integrity of visitors and their families. Grandfather Yewaex's presence in the ravine transforms the place into a sacred space that must be respected. Pregnant women, women who are in their menstrual period, and children cannot access his abode.

Currently, Ticuna women go in groups to the ravine, but they maintain a deep respect for Yewaex. The visit to the creek should not be planned far in advance, thus preventing Grandfather Yewaex from knowing the women's intentions and invoking the rain. For them, the grandfather is still present in the creek, and if they do not comply with the rules established for the extraction of clay, the objects will break when placed on the fire and be very brittle



figure 2. Film still, asking permission from Yewaex.

when handling them. For the extraction of the clay, Ticuna women continue to request permission from Pa oxi. The songs are reproduced below (Ticuna to Spanish translation by the sixth author, and Spanish to English translation by the second author).

Hello grandfather	Buenos días abuelo	<i>Numaē pa oxi</i>
I am going to take your shit	vamos a sacar tu mierda.	<i>Naü ta nayayaxu</i>
We have come here	Venimos aquí	<i>Nuxā ta ĩnangu</i>
to take out your shit	para sacar tu mierda.	<i>Naü ta nayayaxu</i>
Because we want to make our pots	Porque queremos hacer nuestras ollas.	<i>Erü tomaxrü ta üwechigüchangü namaa</i>
And after we will make your pots in your shit	Y después haremos tus ollas en tu mierda.	<i>Erü yicamaā rü ta cuxü tü ne ta üx ya cuxpan</i>
So you can cook	Para que cocines.	<i>Nawa ta cu üwemüxüca</i>
This is everything we give to you	Eso es todo lo que te damos.	<i>Ñexma tani cuxna ta āgüxü</i>
So you can cook your parrot meat	Para que cocines tu carne de guacamayo.	<i>Curü chaxramachi nawa tü cu muraxüca</i>
So we take your shit	Por eso sacamos tu mierda.	<i>Ñexma ca ni ne ta yau i cuxu</i>
And we gather it so we can go back.	Y la juntamos para regresar.	<i>Rü Ñexguma rü tana nuxtakeē i uxün</i>
Thank you, grandfather.	Gracias abuelo.	<i>Moeüchi pa oi</i>
This is all we want, to gather your shit, grandfather	Es todo lo que queremos, sacar tu mierda abuelo.	<i>Marü yimatama ni ya cuxu ta yaugüne pa oi</i>
This is how it is, grandfather	Así es abuelo.	<i>Ñaümüi pa oi</i>
We come to search for your shit, grandfather	Venimos a buscar tu mierda abuelo.	<i>Rü nuxa ta ĩ Cuxu ca pa oi</i>
We come to look because we want to make our pot, grandfather	Ahora venimos a buscar porque queremos hacer nuestra olla abuelo.	<i>Erü ta üwechigücha nawa ya cuxu pa oi</i>
You are lovely, grandfather	Eres bonito abuelo.	<i>Rü cu menakü pa oi</i>
Give it to use	Entrérganos	<i>Rü tonanaā</i>
give us your shit, grandfather	entrérganos tu mierda abuelo.	<i>i yima cuxu pa oi</i>
We will prepare it well	Prepararemos bien tu mierda.	<i>Meā ta tani ügü ya cuxu</i>
Looking and making your jar	Buscando y haciendo tu jarra	<i>Curü churi i barü nawa tüne ta ügü</i>
your plate	tu plato	<i>torü poratu</i>
your spoon	tu cuchara.	<i>torü cuyera</i>
Now we will go back	Ahora vamos a regresar.	<i>nuxmax ta nawoegü</i>
We have already paid you by making your jar.	Ya lo pagamos con la preparación de la jarra.	<i>marü cuxu tana ütano ta baime-nakü yü</i>

When these rites are completed, the women can begin to extract the gray clay. To do this, they separate the upper layers, and go deeper until they reach the most homogeneously colored clay. They mold clay balls about twenty centimeters in diameter and deposit them in baskets woven with *tamshi* (*Thoracocarpus bissectus*) fibers. Sometimes the women must carry the heavy clay for over an hour to reach their community. Formerly, the clay was taken

to a house built expressly by each clan leader. Today, the activity takes place in each of the families' houses, in the communal premises, or in the traditional *maloca* that some communities continue to maintain.

### Forming the Clay

The clay is mixed with the ash from the bark of the tree known as *apacharama* (*Licania micrantha* Miq.). This bark has a high silica content (Cerdán and Chavesta 2018). Use of this ash as a natural degreaser is crucial, as the mixture gives consistency to the clay and makes it more resistant to firing. The procedure, widely disseminated throughout the Amazon, requires a deep knowledge of the physical and chemical properties of the natural materials found in the forest (Chocano 1998). The silica in the crust expands during firing, compensating for the shrinkage of the clay produced by the high temperature (Vian 1994). Apacharama ash makes the clay less plastic and more manageable, preventing it from breaking when baked in the fire.

Modeling begins with the preparation of the circular base. The work is done on a piece of wood covered with a banana leaf. On the circular base, thin tubular clay strips are placed, following its edge, gently kneading with the fingers as one advances in height. When the vessel is large and its middle part wide, they place pieces of *aguaje* (*Mauritia flexuosa*) wood that support the modeling so that it does not crumble or deform (Nimuendajú 1952:47). These vessels, which have a wide body and narrow mouth, are known as *tüxu*, and they are used to store water or ferment *masato* (manioc beer). *Churi* vessels, by contrast, have a wide mouth but the size of the body varies depending on their intended use. *Churi* vessels are generally used in everyday kitchen activities (Goulard 1994).

To form the ceramic vessels, Ticuna women use their hands and a dried piece of *huingo*, the gourd-like fruit *Crescentia cujete*, with which they remove excess clay from the vessels. Finished objects are stored in the shade for a week until they are completely dry. Once this drying finishes, Ticuna women proceed to polish them to remove the protruding material and give them shine; for this they use the seeds of the *chambira* (*Astrocaryum chambira*) or

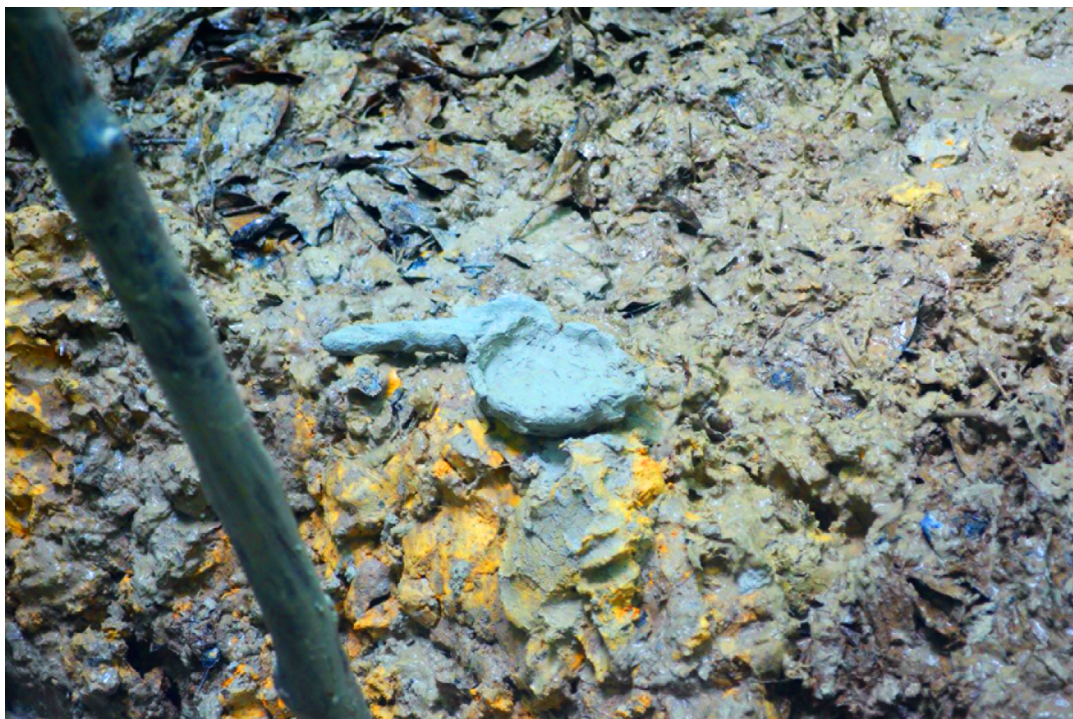


figure 3. Offering left for Pa oxi.

the *inayuga* (*Attalea maripa*). Later they prepare a cream with white clay and water, rubbing it evenly on the pot. They wait for this to dry and polish the objects again. The result is a completely smooth and shiny vessel that can be painted with designs made with different colored clays—primarily red, white, and black—using as a brush the fine stem of the *piripiri* (*Cyperus sp.*). Formerly, the designs were linked to the clan to which the potter belonged, whereas today the designs represent everyday life in the community and in the natural environment. When the designs dry, the pots are ready to go into the fire.

The firing of ceramics requires patience and skill. Potters choose days with little wind to fire the objects, forming branches into a pyre. When only embers remain, the women collect them using machetes or other sticks and place them in and around the vessels. This allows an increase to the vessels' temperature, preparing them for the final round of heat. Later they cover the pots with dry branches and feed the fire. The process is very demanding, as the intensity of the fire must be maintained, feeding it so that the temperature does not drop. The pyre must cover the vessels, but in no instance should the burning wood touch the ceramics, as this will burn their surface, leaving dark permanent stains. Firing lasts approximately forty minutes, during which they turn a whitish ash color. Once the vessels are cooled, the women use latex from the tree known as *leche caspi* (*Couma macrocarpa*) to seal the inside, which will allow storage of liquids without the risk of leaks. The vessels, then, are ready to be used.



figure 4. Film still: Gladiz harvesting *leche caspi*.

### Intergenerational reflections

The audiovisual documentation of the multipart process of ceramic production was intended to generate a short film. When the research team returned for a follow-up visit and to get community members' advice on editing and translating the film, a series of discussions was held between IIAP researchers, workshop participants, and other interested adults from the community. Though youth had done the majority of the filming and taking of still images, other adults watched as Gladiz and her mother-in-law, Erlinda, molded the ceramics and helped with the fires. Many of these adults participated in the subsequent reflection sessions and/or the discussion following the film screening.

Overall, youth participants in the audiovisual workshop demonstrated enthusiasm for the process, noting that they felt happy that so many young people had been included in the

2. La abuelita Erlinda es un ejemplo para la comunidad de Bufo Cocha.”



figure 5. Erlinda forming a vessel



figure 6. Gladiz firing ceramics.

audiovisual workshop, and that they liked to take photos. They also expressed pride in the knowledge Erlinda shared with the group, noting in one of the group discussions that “the grandmother Erlinda is an example for the community”<sup>2</sup>. In one of the photos that served as a discussion prompt, a group of teenaged girls sat watching Gladiz mold a ceramic vessel. In responding to the photo, a group of workshop participants mentioned that the image “makes

us feel good because the young women are developing their knowledge . . . For the community of Bufo Cocha it means that they are learning more about their community”<sup>3</sup>.

Although participants seemed excited about the transmission of knowledge from the experienced ceramic makers to younger members of the community, they also demonstrated an awareness of the waning knowledge of traditional practices such as ceramic-making in their community. This sense of concern was evident in some comments made in relation to still images from the audiovisual workshops that we returned to the community during our second visit. As part of the co-reflection sessions, workshop leaders printed out these images from the filming sessions, and asked participants to reflect in groups about what was happening in them, how they felt about what was happening, and what it meant for their community. In response to an image of Gladiz shaping a ceramic jar, one group noted that the photo “makes us feel worried (*preocupados*) because only Gladiz and the grandmother Erlinda know how to make ceramics. This picture signifies worry because more people should learn how to make ceramics”<sup>4</sup>.

A sense of concern was not limited to knowledge transmission. The year that IIAP researchers began working Ticuna communities, 2015, was also when eradication brigades began coca eradication in Ramón Castilla. The eradication sweeps, which were carried out in the forest surrounding Bufo Cocha, Santa Rita, and Nueva Galilea, left many community members without a vital source of income. Both in interviews and in casual conversations, youth from the communities described being able to earn money picking coca, or cooking for the workers during harvest times, and these wages helped them contribute to their households, and to buy school supplies. It is important to note that none of the three communities had a secondary school, and students interested in studying past the primary level had to relocate to the provincial capital (Caballococha), where they could study at the boarding school (*internado*) designed for students from rural communities such as these. Studying at the internado, however, required money—not only for school supplies but also for appropriate clothing. Indeed, during a reflection session, a group of youth noted a sense of concern about money, since “we, as youth, go to study, and we need money for the supplies that are required of us for all the different school subjects . . . Because in the future, we will need more professionals in the community”<sup>5</sup>.

Concerns about money, however, were not limited to the youth. Even ceramic master Erlinda seemed despondent about the lack of income in the community following the massive eradication of nearby coca fields, saying to IIAP researchers: “It’s sad! There’s no longer coca here, they’ve taken it all. And now the plantains—when are they going to grow? All the people here in Bufo Cocha are sad, they are thinking, it is sad that no one can make any money anymore”<sup>6</sup>. Whereas Nueva Galilea had been included in the cacao-growing projects implemented by DEVIDA’s alternative development program, Bufo Cocha and Santa Rita were not offered alternate strategies for money-generating crops, and had to think of new ways to generate income for items such as school supplies and gasoline to facilitate ongoing connections with resources—such as secondary schools and markets—in Caballococha.

The subsequent workshops, held in 2018, did not directly involve youth, but instead focused on documenting the ceramic masters’ knowledge and sharing these techniques and practices with other adult women from the three communities. Two researchers from IIAP and one from the Ministry of Culture (the first, fifth, and eighth authors, respectively) facilitated these workshops. They generated a space for the intergenerational transmission of knowledge between the two elderly ceramic masters (Erlinda and Zoila) and younger women, many of whom had never made pottery. In this manner, the older women played the key role of teacher, sharing about the environmental and spiritual implications of the ceramics process, and its importance in Ticuna culture more broadly. The women were also able to sing the

3. “[La foto] “nos hace sentir bien porque las señoritas están desarrollando sus conocimientos . . . Para la comunidad de Bufo Cocha significa que las señoritas están aprendiendo mas de su comunidad”.

4. “[La foto] nos hace sentir preocupados porque solo la señora Gladiz y la anciana Erlinda saben hacer la cerámica . . . [la foto] significa preocupación porque las demás personas deberían elaborar la cerámica”.

5. “Preocupación porque nosotros como jóvenes estudiamos y a veces necesitamos dinero para comprar los útiles que nos piden en cada área . . . Porque en el futuro necesitamos mas profesionales en la comunidad”.

6. “¡Triste! . . . ya no hay nada de coca ahorita . . . todito le han sacado. Y ahora . . . y ahora el plátano, ¿cuándo va a crecer? Toda la gente está triste ahí, en Bufo Cocha, están pensando . . . triste que nadie consigue plata ahora”.

songs associated with the gathering of the clay, which remain a crucial part of the process. Gladiz also played an important role in these workshops, explaining many of ceramic-making's technical aspects. She served as a bridge between generations, coaching the younger women in the more technical and practical parts of the process. Gladiz was also central to the involvement of Ticuna artisans in the Ruraq Maki crafts fairs in Lima, helping to create new links between Ticuna artisans, governmental agencies (such as the Ministry of Culture), and national handicrafts circuits.

Ruraq Maki is not a run-of-the-mill crafts fair. Rather, it has become a widely promoted event drawing artisans from across Peru's Andean, coastal, and Amazonian regions to sell their wares to both wealthy *limeños* and international tourists. In addition to the in-person fairs, held twice a year (in non-pandemic times), Ruraq Maki now boasts of a network of online stores (*tiendas virtuales*) accessible year-round, and promoted widely through their vibrant social media presence. Though Ticuna handicrafts do not enjoy the renown of other indigenous Peruvian art forms, such as *retablo* paintings (González 2011), their inclusion in Ruraq Maki became symbolic of a new politics of recognition in the face of increased anxiety over state control of the border region, and a desire to incorporate Ticuna communities into Peruvian national imaginaries. Indeed, at her second crafts fair, Gladiz was selected among the vendors to be featured in a promotional photo with Gastón Acurio, renowned chef and global emissary of Peruvian culture.

### Continuing the Teachings of Mowacha

The contemporary practice of ceramic-making carried out in the study communities maintains many of the techniques recorded in various ethnographic works of the mid-twentieth century. Of these, the most important, based on the data provided, is that carried out by Nimuendajú in the first half of the twentieth century. In *The Tukuna* (1952), he describes the process of making ceramics in Brazilian Ticuna communities. He notes the prohibitions and social controls when it comes to the extracting of materials necessary to make ceramics, something still present in the communities of our study. However, several small differences exist between the practices we observed and those Nimuendajú noted. In Nimuendajú's documentation, offerings to the grandfather incorporated containers filled with masato and tobacco juice, whereas today the offerings are mostly small jars and spoons that are deposited next to the stream. In addition, it was once a shaman or the healer who requested permission to extract the clay, or the excrement of the grandfather. The shaman inhaled mountain tobacco juice and smoked cigars made with its leaves, blowing the smoke in the place where extraction would occur. Where this present study was conducted, however, the women alone traveled to gather the clay and perform the rites. The presence of the shaman—a person who makes prognostications, invokes the spirits, and performs healings—has been greatly weakened and does not hold the importance it once had, like what Letts (2016) documented in her research on the woxrexcüchiga.

Differences in the processing of clay are also notable. Nimuendajú records the use of the species *Licania sclerophylla*, known to the Brazilian Ticuna as *caraipe*, whereas the communities in our study relied on the species *Licania micrantra*, known in Peru as apacharama. It is very likely that the Ticuna use several different species, but during fieldwork we were only able to identify individuals of the species *L. sclerophylla* found close to the communities under study. Still, species of the genus *Licania* are widely used in ceramic-making practices across many Amazonian communities (see Quiroz 2001). One other distinction we found was that Nimuendajú does not mention use of species from the genus *Couma* to varnish and waterproof ceramics. This technique has probably been recently acquired from other neighboring towns. However, Nimuendajú did record use of *Attalea maripa* fruits to polish ceramics, consistent



with our own observations. The burning of the ceramics is like what is practiced today in the communities of study. Overall, the similarities in practices between what Nimuendajú documented and the present study are greater than the differences, demonstrating considerable resilience in both the spiritual and material components of ceramic-making practice.

The complete process to develop the final product—from the time the women leave the community in search of clay to the waterproofing of the vessels—takes more than a week. It is also significant that the average total distance traveled in the process is close to twenty kilometers. Clearly, the practice of ceramic-making demands considerable effort. In recent decades, in part due to the new patterns of labor generated from the proliferation of coca cultivation, the process of ceramic-making has become more challenging to incorporate into cycles of work. Further, coca incomes may have contributed to greater access to relatively inexpensive, mass-produced household wares, including pots and storage vessels, decreasing reliance on ceramics as practical wares. Historically, communities such as these would encounter opportunities to purchase mass-produced pots and storage vessels primarily through river traders (*regatones*), who often took advantage of low levels of literacy and market knowledge in rural communities to charge unfair prices for commercial goods. Wages from coca harvests, however, also contributed to greater access to markets and market wares in nearby Caballococha, as money could be used not only to buy goods but also purchase gasoline to make the necessary trip via motorized canoe (*peque-peque*). Despite a decline in ceramic production, and in knowledge of the process among the majority of adults in these communities, youth and adults who participated in the co-reflection sessions expressed their appreciation for and value of their ceramic arts.

However, as we have discussed, the crafting of ceramics is not merely a practical undertaking. Rather, it is about the reproduction of relationships between Ticuna people, the spirit realm, other social actors, and the surrounding environment. And it is becoming apparent that environmental changes due to incursions by numerous industries—including, but not limited to, coca—have altered local biodiversity. Women from the ceramic-making group observed that availability of species used for making ceramics, especially the species of the genera *Licania* and *Couma*, appears to be decreasing as patches of forest are cleared for coca cultivation. During our fieldwork, the fourth author, an ethnobotanist from IIAP specializing in Amazonian biodiversity, documented a limited number of *Licania* species available in the territories adjacent to the communities (see Figure 2), contrary to earlier surveys of species biodiversity in the region (Prance 1972). Changes in biodiversity are linked to planting of nontraditional crops, such as coca, which alter the natural forests, as prior studies that have documented the negative impacts of coca cultivation on Amazonian biodiversity suggest (Bedoya Garland 1999, 2016). In sum, although Ticuna ceramics do not reflect the ubiquitous presence of drug traffickers in the surrounding communities through any kind of iconographic or morphological features, their material form reflects changes—to the lands from which the clays are drawn, in the constraints on time and new horizons of possibilities experienced by the women who practice the incantations, and in the effort it takes to find the materials necessary to mix with the clay and glaze the finished vessels.

At present, ceramic production reflects new configurations of social, environmental, and political relationships (cf. D. Whitten 2003). The incorporation of several artisan teachers from the Ticuna communities under study to the Ministry of Culture's National Ruraq Maki Program is a clear indicator of this new type of political relations established with institutions that historically have not had a consistent presence in the area. To date, the teachers of the study communities have participated in Ruraq Maki six times, selling their wares amid other vendors in Lima. The inclusion of forms of Ticuna culture in national registers has created new economic avenues for Ticuna artisans and has also demonstrated an important process of reckoning with Amazonian cultures. Throughout Latin America, heritage discourse has

become a critical terrain for struggles over rights to knowledge and place. In twenty-first-century Peru, notes Cox, heritage “has become a vacated image-resource upon which to scaffold dreams, futures, politics, identities, economies, and profits” (2019:355). Through national recognition of forms of Ticuna cultural patrimony, these communities are simultaneously integrated into national imaginaries and visions for the future. This is significant—as Greene (2006) has noted, Peru’s preoccupation with its Inca heritage has long marginalized Amazonian cultures as part of the nation’s indigenous imaginary. Participation in this fair, which draws both national and international audiences, is also a strategic demonstration of national recognition of Amazonian societies’ place in Peruvian imaginaries, a more inclusive representational practice after decades of marginalization of Amazonian communities, including remarks by former president Alan García that likened Peru’s indigenous Amazonians as “backyard dogs” (*perros del hortelano*) (García 2007).

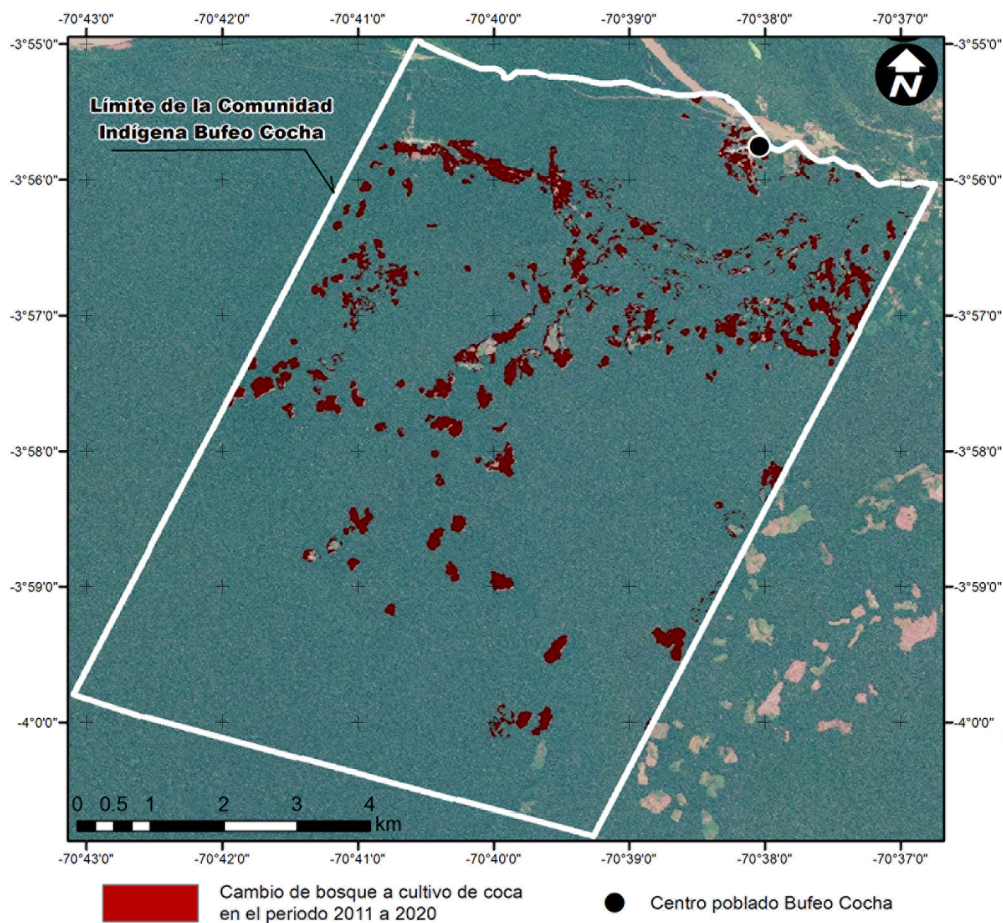


figure 7. Map of forest loss due to coca cultivation. Map by Juan José Palacios.

Indeed, inclusion of indigenous Amazonian cultural practices—from material culture to healing songs—in the canon of Peruvian cultural patrimony represents a new strategy. As Peru enjoys a period of relative political stability after the turbulence of nearly two decades of internal armed conflict, tourism has been an important driver of economic growth. In this manner, the efforts to include Ticuna artisans in cultural revalorization programs and national crafts circuits can be read as part of a broader strategy to market Peru’s multicultural indigenous heritage as a means of drawing tourists—both to heritage sites such as Machu Picchu and Kuelap, and also to handicraft markets in Lima and the provinces. The vast advertising

campaign known as *MarcaPeru* is further evidence of this. Though scholars of indigenous cultural revalorization have noted the importance of indigeneity as a marketable concept in an era of global tourism, reflective of growing interest in both indigenous artwork and knowledge (Brown 2005; Myers 2002; Strong 2012), they have also noted that these efforts simultaneously reflect modes of neoliberal governance that draw on ideas of multiculturalism in attempts to buffer long histories of marginalization and exclusion (cf. Hale 2002).

Notably, these projects are not only about tourism and handicrafts markets. They are also a tactic of governance, employed by a national government deeply insecure about its legitimacy across the Amazonian hinterlands. By framing anti-coca operations in terms of national concern for cultural preservation, militarized incursions on Ticuna land are represented as an act of recognition of the value indigenous Amazonian cultural practices. This also works to promote a narrative of a beneficent state that comes to the rescue of indigenous practices an illicit industry put at risk. In this manner, the apparent threat of coca to Ticuna cultural practices might be seen from a different angle. Although broadly considered a threat to indigenous lifeways, the proliferation of illicit coca may have motivated a long-absent and neglectful state to attempt to integrate Ticuna people into meaningful economic opportunities, from the alternative development programs run through DEVIDA to national crafts markets such as Ruraq Maki.

## Conclusions

In this article we have described the contemporary practice of ceramic-making as carried out in Ticuna communities on the Peruvian side of triple-border region, and in the context of social, economic, and environmental changes caused by the proliferation of illicit coca cultivation in and around these communities. Though knowledge of the ceramic-making process—from the procedures necessary to gather the clay to the techniques for molding and firing—was not widespread in the communities, participation by both youth and adults in the audiovisual workshops of 2015 and ceramics workshops of 2018 demonstrated enthusiasm for ongoing intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Interest in learning from ceramic masters Erlinda and Zoila demonstrates the resilience of these communities in the face of the radical changes to economic and social organization posed by illegal coca cultivation in the area. Indeed, women are the main guarantors of the knowledge, practices, and values of the Ticuna people. They offer the greatest resistance to external aggressions and who, despite the difficulties and the new socioeconomic dynamics, recover and transmit knowledge intergenerationally.

However, despite some of the changes to patterns of daily life brought on by the proliferation of illicit coca, it has not been wholly experienced as a threat. The increase in cultivation in the triple-border region has generated economic income for many Ticuna families who, tired of waiting for the presence of a distant and indifferent state, have embraced the benefits that this farming provides them. Even Erlinda, one of the community members most connected to ancestral practices such as ceramics and weaving, lamented the recent eradication initiatives and the income source they cut off. Though involvement in coca may have moved Ticuna communities away from patterns of life conducive to the practice of traditional arts, it also provided income that helped some families improve their economic situation, access markets in Caballococha, and purchase school supplies for their children. Further, we can also understand the threat of coca as a catalyst for the interest of state organizations—from DEVIDA to the Ministry of Culture—in the well-being of Ticuna communities. Cacao-growing projects and crafts fairs may not provide a solution to economic woes, but they at least begin a dialogue about the difficulties of generating income in the triple-border region. And, as youth from these communities demonstrate, an interest in cultural revalorization is not at odds with goals of continuing school or becoming a professional, goals that require a certain degree of economic flexibility to pursue.

## Acknowledgements

Funding for this research was made possible by the Instituto de Investigaciones de la Amazonia Peruana (IIAP). The second author's participation in this research was made possible by a Fulbright-Hays DDRA grant. The authors would like to thank the communities of Bufeo Cocha, Santa Rita de Mochila, and Nueva Galilea de Callarú for their generosity and willingness to share their knowledge and stories with us all. *Moexi*.

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