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## Plastic sewing:

chairs and scooters' repair on Indigenous lands of the Argentine Chaco

Visual Ethnography

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**Abstract:** By this photo-essay, which is part of an ethnographic research on machines, their maintenance and repair on Indigenous lands of South America, I explore the techniques that the indigenous Wichí of the Argentine Chaco have developed to repair plastic. With chairs and motorbikes becoming fixtures in the local landscape, plastic things and their breakages have actually become part of their daily lives. More specifically, I show how the Wichí men creatively appropriate the female practice of weaving to sew up the fairings of their two-wheelers and keep their chairs upright.

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**1** This research is part of the ANR project *Interruptions - Accidents, dysfunctions and downtime. Extractive territories otherwise*.

How do people, who most often lack the knowledge of how to maintain and repair an engine and, even more often, lack the tools to maintain and repair it, could 'hold it together'? This is the question that guided my research on the emergence and construction of mechanical knowledge among the indigenous Wichí of the Argentine Chaco (Preci 2020). During my fieldwork, I sat on hundreds of chairs to eat, rest or converse. I also rode a lot of motorcycles, often on the back, to be taken somewhere. Motorcycles being my favorite thing to study, I paid attention to their condition, their noises, their parts, their repairs, but the chairs never caught my attention. It was when I sat on a plastic chair with a sewn-on armrest that I began to observe them and realized that most of them had broken, but were still standing thanks to the stitching done by their owners. The plastic repairs soon caught my attention and I began to see them everywhere. The fairings of motorcycles – or, more precisely, scooters – as well as chairs, were always in my sights. As if it needed saying again, objects suddenly become visible when they “become inoperable – they break or stutter and they then become the object of attention” (Graham and Thrift 2007: 2).



**Photo 1** The broken armrest has been sewn together with iron wire. The fact that the chair is less comfortable and that the armrest does not serve to support the arm is secondary to the fact that the chair remains intact. The armrest has therefore lost its primary function, but this does not prevent the chair from continuing to serve.

Front and rear mudguards, fork protectors, radiator gills or side plates are not essential parts of a two-wheeler's performance. However, despite this apparent uselessness, before being replaced, these plastic components are first repaired, like an aluminum gearbox that is too damaged, a handlebar that is bent or a damper that is too stiff. In the absence of spare parts and faced with the repetition of breakages, the owners of the motorcycles – most often men – reinvest a typically female practice among the Wichí (Montani 2017: 422) by sewing back together the pieces of broken parts. Just as it is usual to see a woman sitting while weaving in front of her house, it is now very common to see a man repairing or trying to repair his scooter or motorcycle. There are very few mechanics, and the few that exist are often expensive, so everyone takes

care of the maintenance and repair of their machines. Thus, the courtyards have become real open-air workshops where children's toys, spanners, chickens, screwdrivers, pop bottles and jerry cans are scattered on the ground. Since they often lack the required tools to repair, the Wichí men improvise with what they have at hand and find new functions for knives, spoons and anything else they can use to repair their two-wheelers.



**Photo 2** The contemporary masculine practice of sewing together plastic components reminds us of the weaving and warping traditionally done by women. By processing the leaves of the *chaguar*, a plant of the *bromeliaceae* family, they obtain threads of vegetable fiber that they use to make bags – but also dolls, pouches and other things – that have a double function: they are used for storage, transport and protection, but they are also sold as handicrafts, providing a relevant source of income.

The predisposition to repair is not new: before changing or buying something that has broken, the Wichí always try to repair it. Although the plastic parts have an aesthetic purpose, they try to restore them as best they can before throw them away. Just as they today repair plastic artefacts such as chairs, but also seals or bicycle tires, they once repaired calabash pots. “The *porongos*, especially the large ones, were difficult to obtain and this increased their value. The fact that Wichí men repaired the *porongos* by sewing them together with *chaguar* fibers and sealing them with wax is an indication of the high esteem in which they were held” (Montani 2017: 266). Thus, my interest in motorcycles and their uses (Preci 2023) has now turned to their repairs, and in particular to the fairing's stitching. The fact that these parts are frequently and carefully repaired or, better said, sewn back together, reveals their significance and importance for people's daily lives.

Within the literature on breakage, it has often been argued that it is an opportunity to learn and innovate. In addition to these approaches, this photo-essay follows a renewal that is currently in vogue (Denis, Mongili and Pontille 2015; Martínez and Laviolette 2019; Strebel, Bovet and Sormani 2019). These investigations invite a greater focus on repair and maintenance and, more broadly, on the myriad of small gestures that make things hold together in everyday life. That is, the 'care of things' (Denis and Pontille 2022). Thus, through this photo-essay, which is part of an ethnographic research on machines, their maintenance and repair on Indigenous lands of South America<sup>1</sup>, I would like to talk less about inventiveness and learning than about resourcefulness and creativity, in the sense of the capacity of individuals to find solutions to keep their two-wheelers running and their chairs solid. Questioning the repair of plastic things is, finally, a question of understanding the relationship that Indigenous people have with this new material and these new materialities which, despite their recent introduction, have very quickly become part of everyday life.



**Photo 3** Being able to repair one's scooter is a source of pride. Here, Rabán poses with his brand new-looking scooter, which has already undergone numerous repairs to both the engine and the fairing. Cared for in the smallest detail, the two-wheelers are central to the lives of these men and their families, as they are used to take children to school, to fetch firewood, to run errands, to visit distant relatives or to go to church. Both maintenance and repair require time, money and knowledge that is acquired on-the-job, one scrap after another. Despite this importance in their daily lives, and apart from the Spanish loanword *moto*, there is still no translation in Wichí language for the term motorcycles. The word *w'ute*, saddle, which is also used to designate horses and bicycles is used without distinguishing between models, brands, and whether they are scooter or off-road motorcycles (Preci 2020).



**Photo 4** If the pairing of chairs and motorcycles does not seem to have much in common, apart from the fact that you sit on them, both appeared in the Indigenous lands of the Chaco region in the late 2000s, when people began to receive social benefits that enabled them to acquire these types of goods. Today, it is common to see chairs and at least one motorcycle in front of a house when you go visit someone. These two things have become central to the domestic space of the Wichí people. Moreover, they reveal new spatial practices and ways of living. The need for chairs is directly linked to the sedentary lifestyle and progressive concentration of the Wichí in urban centers. The less they move, the more they sit. Conversely, the more they settle down, the more they give themselves the means to move to the forest and, therefore, they buy motorcycles.



**Photo 5** During social allowances paydays, the villages are transformed. Merchants from nearby towns and local vendors set up their kiosks and display their wares on the main avenue. Closed to traffic, it becomes a colorful square, bustling with music from the speakers, the shouts of the vendors and the hubbub of the customers. You can find food, medicine, clothes, motorcycle parts, shoes, televisions, laptops, household appliances and furniture made of wood and, above all, plastic. There are different models of chairs, white or colored, with or without armrests, with more or less reinforced backs, etc. They are expensive and people manage to take them home. Just as vendors sell chairs and anything else made of plastic that can be used for household tasks, two-wheelers sellers set up temporary shops in village squares and offer good deals: it is enough to receive social allowances in order to obtain a loan. The fairing of the scooters breaks more easily than that of a motorcycle because its structure is not adapted to mud tracks and bumpy forest paths, but it costs less. The new scooters stand out for having the seat covered under the plastic, to keep it clean and intact for as long as possible.



**Photo 6** The arrival of motorcycles and plastic chairs coincides with the rush of imported objects that has literally invaded the Chaco in recent years, posing the unprecedented problem of the transformation and disappearance of waste. This waste accumulates on the outskirts of the villages in more or less unauthorized rubbish dumps that are gradually taking over the forest. Every evening the garbage truck of the local council comes to unload the waste while the pigs come for food and some inhabitants discreetly wander around looking for something to recover. Bottles and even more plastic bags cover the ground and, carried by the wind, hang from the trees and alter the horizon. If the image of a pre-industrial society without waste is a phantasm (Joulian, Tastevin and Furniss 2016), these rubbish dumps still contradict a certain image of the virgin forest and of a rural society that is less polluting than an urban one.



**Photo 7** When the armrests are gone, the backrest has definitely cracked and at least two out of four legs have broken off, the chair can no longer be turned into a stool and its remains are thrown away. Unless you burn them, it is difficult to make them disappear.



**Photo 8** The inscription on the back of the chairs acts as a reminder to the owners: 'Mascardi, quality as always [*la calidad de siempre*]. Made in Argentina [*Industria Argentina*]'. Apart from extending its life and recognizing its usefulness, repairing a broken thing is also a way of enhancing its value. The personal commitment, the time spent and the creativity required to repair it are all factors that express the value, both monetary and utilitarian, of the thing.

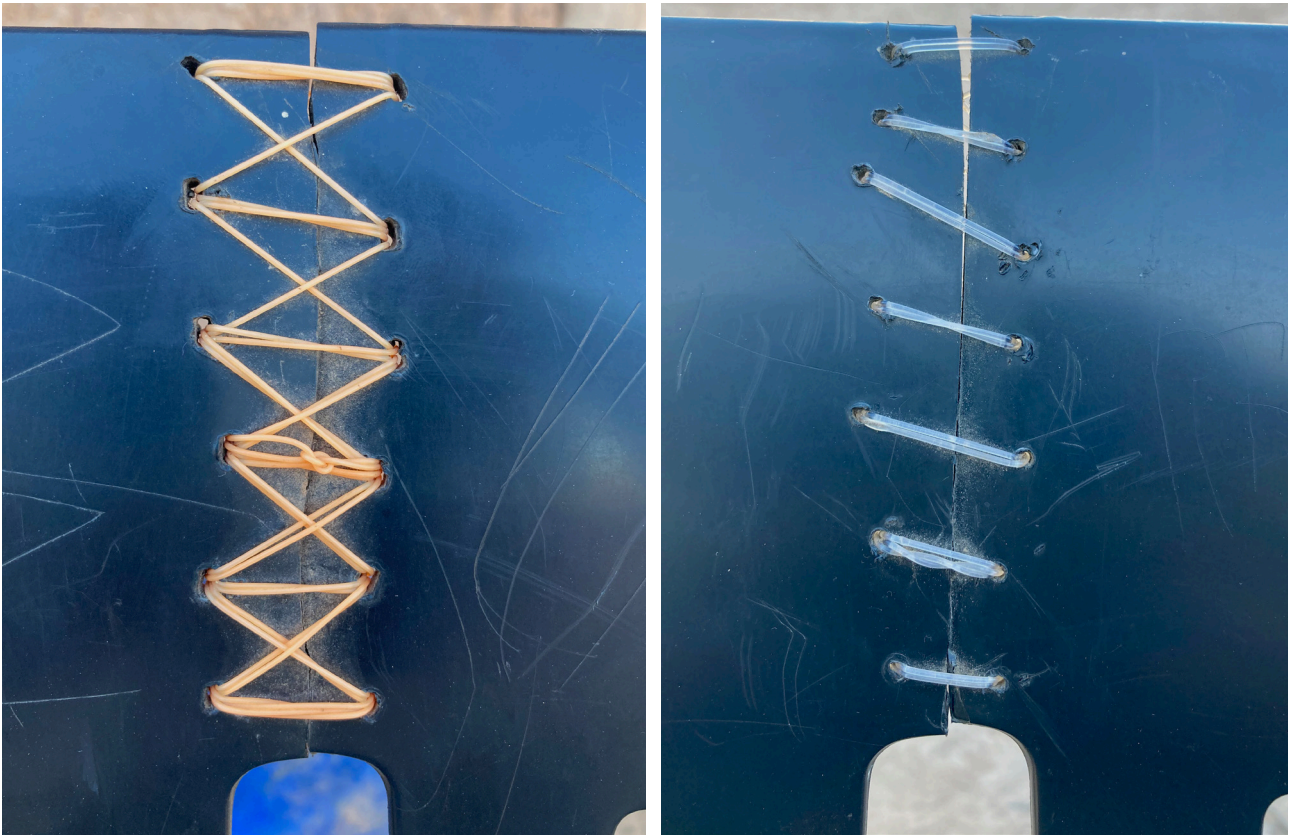




**Photo 9** This rear wing has been stitched up particularly well with plastic thread. If plastic sewing is a common practice and most scooters have been sewn, each seam keeps its specificity and makes the two-wheeler unique. As this WhatsApp story from 14 November 2022 reposted by one of my contacts shows, the seam also becomes a sign of distinction that identifies its owner: "Hi everybody good morning, I'm asking if someone see a blue moto YAMAHA CRIPTON 110 that has been stolen earlier this morning at \*\*\*'s home. As a sign the plastic pieces on the front are broken if anyone has seen it anywhere, please let me know". In this case, we don't know if the front is simply broken or broken and then sewn, either way the breakage is highlighted as a point of distinction that everyone should be able to spot.



**Photo 10** The parts no longer fit together, they have become damaged and when they broke, a piece was probably lost. But the wire keeps the fairing together. Indeed, once sewn together, the plastic pieces mend. The material loses its rigidity and more easily absorbs the shocks and vibrations to which the scooters are subjected every day on the region's mud tracks.



**Photo 11-12** In the past, chairs, *lêwej-wet* in Wichí language, were made from the hardwoods of the region, mainly *algarrobo*, while the seat could be made from small wooden planks or, more frequently, from cowhide. Although the Wichí had long worked in sawmills and made chairs (Preci 2021), they were for a long time a very rare artefact in their homes. Also, because the Wichí make little use of tables they still often sit on the floor, offering a chair as a gesture of respect and welcome to the host. When plastic chairs break, they try to repair them by sewing them back together. They use different techniques to do this, the most common being 'catch stitch' (left photo) and 'whip stitch' (right photo), in both cases with a fishing line. Here, the backrest, which broke exactly halfway, was sewn back together so that the chair could resume its function and its integrity was preserved.



**Photo 13** The reverse side of the seams, made in this case to repair the armrest of a chair, allow us to appreciate the finesse of the work done and the attention to detail. The wire has been cut cleanly to prevent clothes from snagging and the plastic has been punctured at regular intervals to optimise weight distribution and avoid a second breakage. The reverse side of the set is just as important as the set itself.



**Photo 14** To repair plastic, the solution the Wichí men have found is sewing. Once heated, the needle – previously made of wood or bone, now made of metal and widely used by fishermen, but even more so by weavers – has become an essential tool for piercing broken parts. When it is a particularly resistant plastic, the awl is also used. The few mechanics in the region, more or less experienced, do not carry out this type of repair, which they consider to be a trivial DIY job that is not likely to last long, advising instead to buy a new fairing part. Thus, it is the people themselves who take care of this type of repair. distribution and avoid a second breakage. The reverse side of the set is just as important as the set itself.



**Photo 15** The stitching done with the needle technique leaves an everlasting mark on the fairing. Like so many scars, especially when it is a 'catch stitch', they recall the blows received and keep the memory of accidents, falls and shocks that punctuate the life of scooters and their riders. A slip on the sand, a blow from a tree branch or the backlash from a pit in a forest path are all events that can break the bumpers and plastic parts of two-wheelers. It is particularly interesting to note that two types of wire have been used. The fishing wire, which is very common, especially in the communities that live near the main rivers of the region, Pilcomayo and Bermejo. And the iron wire that characterizes the landscape of the contemporary Chaco, crossed by hundreds of thousands of fences that prevent access to recently deforested fields.



**Photo 16** The technique used and the traces that accumulate on the fairing make it possible to carry out a sort of repair archaeology and better understand the social meaning of things (Miloglav 2020). It is actually possible to reconstruct the biography of a two-wheeler by observing its repairs as traces of an accident-ridden past. In the case of this scooter, the owner had to repair broken parts at least three times. Judging by the materials used, the three repairs probably relate to three accidents and it can be seen that he used three different wires: a copper wire, an iron wire and a strip of cloth. While the iron wire can be dated by the presence of rust, and the cloth strip does not usually last long, the copper wire is of particular interest because it attests to the recent electrification of the region. Alternatively, it can be assumed that the iron wire that was initially used broke, and was replaced by this electric wire from which the plastic sheath was removed to make the repair hold. In this second case, the owner would have paid particular attention to his sewing, which he would have maintained over time by changing the wires as soon as they became damaged. Thus, more than the thing, the owner pays attention to his repairs, which he makes sure to renew and maintain



**Photo 17** Without the seams, this mudguard would no longer hold together and it would have long since been abandoned in a dump. Bits and pieces are now lost forever, new fissures threaten the whole structure and points of the scar, now rusted and therefore less strong, have blown out. Despite this, the parts remain together and the integrity of the mudguard is maintained. Also interesting in this photo is the piece of wood that acts as a support for the number plate. The original one probably broke, so the owner managed to repair it with a more suitable material that is easier to find in the surrounding environment.



**Photo 18** A small piece of wood, rusty wire, unused holes, thinner wire. These apparently precarious repairs can hold up for a long time and extend the life of a two-wheeler. The proliferation of materials as well as the drilling of new holes and the consequent abandonment of the previous ones show a desire to make things last more and therefore to cultivate a privileged relationship with them, to monitor their condition and to examine their variations and transformations. (Denis and Pontille 2020). Furthermore, these tinkering repairs and seams made with the only materials available show the “creolization” (Edgerton 2007) of both the techniques and the machine. The Wichí use imported materials, such as wire, to sew up the plastic fairing in a seamstress-like manner that has been passed down for generations. In addition, there is a small piece of wood that is just the right thickness to soften the impact and hold the scooter together. This shows the attention to detail and precision with which they keep the two-wheels running, because it attests to the recent electrification of the region. Alternatively, it can be assumed that the iron wire that was initially used broke, and was replaced by this electric wire from which the plastic sheath was removed to make the repair hold. In this second case, the owner would have paid particular attention to his sewing, which he would have maintained over time by changing the wires as soon as they became damaged. Thus, more than the thing, the owner pays attention to his repairs, which he makes sure to renew and maintain





**Photo 19** Even though the rear light is broken, but still not repaired, the two parts of the fairing are no longer held together and the wire seam does not seem to hold much longer. By definition, the seam is temporary and precarious, especially for two-wheelers that have to deal with roads and paths that make them vibrate excessively every day. Thus, plastic seams are far from being a definitive solution and they rarely mean a restoration of the fairing to its original state. As such, the repair becomes an ordinary, repetitive operation, and forces people to pay constant attention to things.

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