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Indigenous Knowledge in Post-Pandemic Cultural Tourism: Discussion from Arauco Territories, Chile

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Abstract: In the last two decades, cultural tourism has transformed the aesthetics and the relationship between the actors of the Arauco territories. In the post-COVID context, these transformations could be reinforced, especially considering the actual legal scenario about indigenous rights and the global ecological crisis. In most cases, the indigenous people, with cultural tourism initiatives, highlight their world vision, including the relations with nature. For this reason, we propose to study this scientific problem from the relational ontology perspective. In this study, we describe the situation of cultural tourism in Arauco Province, Chile, where Mapuche people, the Chilean State, and the international market coexist in permanent friction. The main objective is to analyze how the pandemic influenced Mapuche cultural tourism, from the Mapuche cultural perspective and the global conditions for their development. The methods of research mixed historical and ethnographic approaches with a sample of key actors of Mapuche cultural tourism. As results, we can show the Mapuche way of understanding cultural tourism and the new conditions derived from the pandemic and post-pandemic contexts.



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1. Introduction

In the late 1990s, Latin America saw a growing interest in a development agenda which pursued new forms of rural tourism including agrotourism, ecotourism, community tourism, and cultural tourism. These styles are characterized by a stronger emphasis on the local populations' presence, which has been re-conceived on the basis of the ideas of cultural and natural heritage [1]. In this scenario, tourism is one of the activities which has seen the strongest growth in Chile in recent decades, becoming a principal activity in some regions [2].

From a historical perspective, the rise of tourism within the Lavkenche Mapuche territory of Arauco province was directly related to the decline in the coal-mining industry, which had been the main activity of the zone since the late 19th century. In this context, two main tourist attractions emerged in the territory since the early 2000s: Lake Lanalhue and Lake Lleu Lleu [3]. Lake Lleu Lleu is located between hills and beaches surrounded with both native forests and forestry plantations of exotic species. It currently has cabins and campsites, as well as services for agrotourism and Mapuche cultural tourism. Lake Lanalhue also has a wide range of natural sites which are ideal for hiking, observing flora and fauna, kayaking, ziplines, and more activities. In this scenario, we can identify the transition between two types of tourism: the older or more conventional type, managed by non-Mapuche midlevel business entrepreneurs, and the more recent second type, made up of Mapuche groups who seek to carry out ethnic and ecological tourism [3]. The latter type

is characterized by the central role played by the Mapuche population in environmental preservation and the valuation of their cultural heritage. From a product management perspective, they take on a leading role with their knowledge and experience to encourage an intercultural relation between tourists and hosts [4].

The COVID-19 disruption wreaked havoc on tourism due to lockdowns and border closures [5]. It caused a collapse in different areas of the economy [6]. The tourist sector was the most affected, with local communities worldwide kept from their work in this activity [7]. Above all, there were destinations that were unfortunately “at risk”, even after the pandemic [6]. Losses were immense, leading to dire social consequences [8]. The pandemic thus presented an exceptional event for observation and analysis about the future of tourism in native territories, particularly in cases which face constant pressure from the impacts of an extractivist economy and historical conflict against the State. In the case of the Lavkenche Mapuche people, this conflict goes back to the mid-19th century, when the young nation-state of Chile occupied the Mapuche territories—which had previously been respected as belonging to the native tribes—via a military invasion, followed by the imposition of public administration. From the scope of the present study, this action is what consolidated the forced coexistence between modern ontologies, represented by all State military and civil organizations, and the Mapuche ontologies in their territorial diversity¹, represented by people and communities speaking their own language, as well as various intermixed forms in which these ontologies coexist. This forced coexistence conceived within the colonial hegemony of modern ontology is currently expressed in the presence of various Mapuche resistance organizations which reject the presence of multinational corporations involved in exploiting natural resources—forestry, wind power, and hydropower—as well as the State and its development model. According to the analysis herein, Lavkenche Mapuche actors and organizations have been able to resist the economic effects of the pandemic, making it necessary to observe its effects within this framework of dispossession and territorial resistance.

During the pandemic, it was observed that while the Chilean State had a response at the public administration level, there was also evidence that the state of emergency exacerbated indigenous peoples’ marginalization [9]. The town of Cañete, within Arauco province, had high infection levels; in contrast with the town of Tirúa. Interculturality was relevant in the organizational levels to face this problem. Social actors in the southern Biobío Region agreed to organize in order to discuss prevention actions within the territory, given erratic State responses to the crisis [9]. This was expressed in actions which reclaimed autonomy and resistance on the part of the Lavkenche Mapuche people [9].

The purpose of the present study is to examine the effects of the pandemic from the experience of the Mapuche people related to tourism within Arauco province, assuming that their cultural perspective will grant a sense of their particular ontology or life, distinct from those who have observed the process from outside the territory and from other interests and precepts. To carry out this task, a historiographical analysis was done on the development of Mapuche cultural tourism, complemented by interviewing key territorial actors.

Recognizing other ontologies in tourism studies and the associated political and cultural processes contributes to making other knowledge systems and life philosophies more visible in the face of tourism. This is especially valuable to understanding the experience of the pandemic amongst culture-centric tourism initiatives and businesses. It lets us recognize tourism from other epistemological and ontological angles, where indigenous peoples are not only active as part of a dynamic tourist economy, but also within situations which integrate tourist activity in their family economies and lifestyles which have faced marginalization for centuries. The present study is thus doubly important. On one hand, it approaches the impact of the pandemic on Lavkenche Mapuche tourism from the Lavkenche Mapuches’ own perspectives, and on the other, it allows us to know about the experience of Lavkenche Mapuche tourism vis-à-vis the pandemic in a historically underdeveloped territory [10].

The pandemic affected the development of Mapuche tourism, decreasing sales due to border closures and a lack of tourists within Lavkenche territory. In the post-pandemic period, some businesses recovered thanks to the adaptability of people who could sell online and, where possible, open themselves to the public in order to continue promoting tourist routes. However, tourism in this territory was also affected by the conflict between the Mapuche people and the Chilean State, given that the State is considered a promoter of the extractivist capitalist model which has caused ecological crises and stripped away indigenous lands.

Various studies have already considered how the pandemic influenced indigenous cultural tourism based upon the knowledge of it and the global conditions for its development. Daniela Sánchez and Lenin Pachacama analyzed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on community tourism and the ancestral knowledge of communities in Cantón Arajuno, Ecuador [7]. María Soledad Oviedo and Fernanda Olivo examined the situation before and after the pandemic regarding worldwide tourism trends, specifically within Ecuador [11]. Enrique Cabanilla et al. indicated that tourism businesses' recovery periods varied depending on the realities of each sector. The COVID-19 pandemic showed that tourism activities have been fragile and dependent on global contingencies. The most affected area is cultural tourism, rural tourism, or tourism in indigenous lands, considering that these styles had seen sustained growth beginning around 2017 across Latin America, but that these styles were also centered on direct interaction, which was thoroughly impeded. Therefore, in various zones, all local development and drive was halted and many centers had to permanently close their doors [12].

In Chile, emblematic locations such as Easter Island or San Pedro de Atacama had to suspend their activities, leading to a loss of resources for indigenous families [13]. Francisca de La Maza et al. studied the relation between indigenous tourism, crisis, and resilience in the face of the pandemic, describing how indigenous tourism appeared as a political opportunity and a medium through which indigenous peoples could fight for and assert their rights [14]. CIIR & WINTA analyzed the situation faced by indigenous tourism entrepreneurs in Chile in order to generate action proposals during the pandemic period, and particularly for the post-pandemic period [15]. Mapuexpress and CIGIDEN also analyzed the problems faced by indigenous communities during the health crisis regarding State neglect within a pandemic framework [9].

Among the main results presented in this writing, we can consider the history of Mapuche cultural tourism emphasizing the gradual consolidation of the idea of cultural tourism as an alternative to mass tourism. This section considers how local communities became empowered by formalizing their businesses over time, sometimes supported by the growing generation of public projects associated with this activity. We also see the situation preceding the health disaster, where Mapuche tourism is shown to have grown stronger by receiving a large number of tourists interested in ancestral knowledge. Secondly, we can see the difficulties faced by communities which have arisen due to the pandemic. We examine how businesses adapted via an increase in online sales, where people in rural zones had to find a means of subsistence via new methods for offering their products. We describe herein how the historical Mapuche–State conflict is superimposed and aggravates the problems which Mapuche communities had to face within the context of the pandemic. Thirdly, we analyze the recuperation of Mapuche cultural tourism-related businesses in a post-pandemic context. Within this context, the associativity of communities south of the Biobio River is identified as a strategy to respond to the health contingency. People were slowly able to open their businesses and receive tourists, but there were ongoing difficulties impeding their sales, including the historical territorial conflict. We also show that this continual resistance from the Mapuche people is reflected through tourism as well, since it is an activity used as a tool to preserve memory beyond the negative effects of the pandemic. We indicate that Lavkenche Mapuche cultural tourism can be a broad form of cultural and political resistance, since it is centered on the connection maintained with nature. Finally, we present the main conclusions, detailing how tourism has been a form of

resistance which contributes to preserving Mapuche identity based upon the exercise of communicating and sharing cultural elements within their own context. We also show the chain of superimposed historical events, including territorial conflicts and the pandemic, which jointly affect tourist flows.

2. Materials and Methods

The context of this study is Arauco Province, Biobío Region, Chile, composed of seven municipalities: Contulmo, Arauco, Curanilahue, Los Álamos, Tirúa, Lebu, and Cañete (Figure 1). There is a high number of forestry plantations in the province, which in 2013 comprised 67.7% of the area, with a range of 317,624.59 hectares. In 2014, its population was 20.5% rural and 79.5% urban. The most rural municipalities are Cañete (43%), Contulmo (41.8%), and Tirúa (38.6%). In 2013, 20.9% of the population declared that they were indigenous Mapuches (one of 13 recognized tribes in Chile). The municipalities with the most concentrated Mapuche populations are Cañete (39.3%), Contulmo (31.3%), and Tirúa (44.3%) [16].

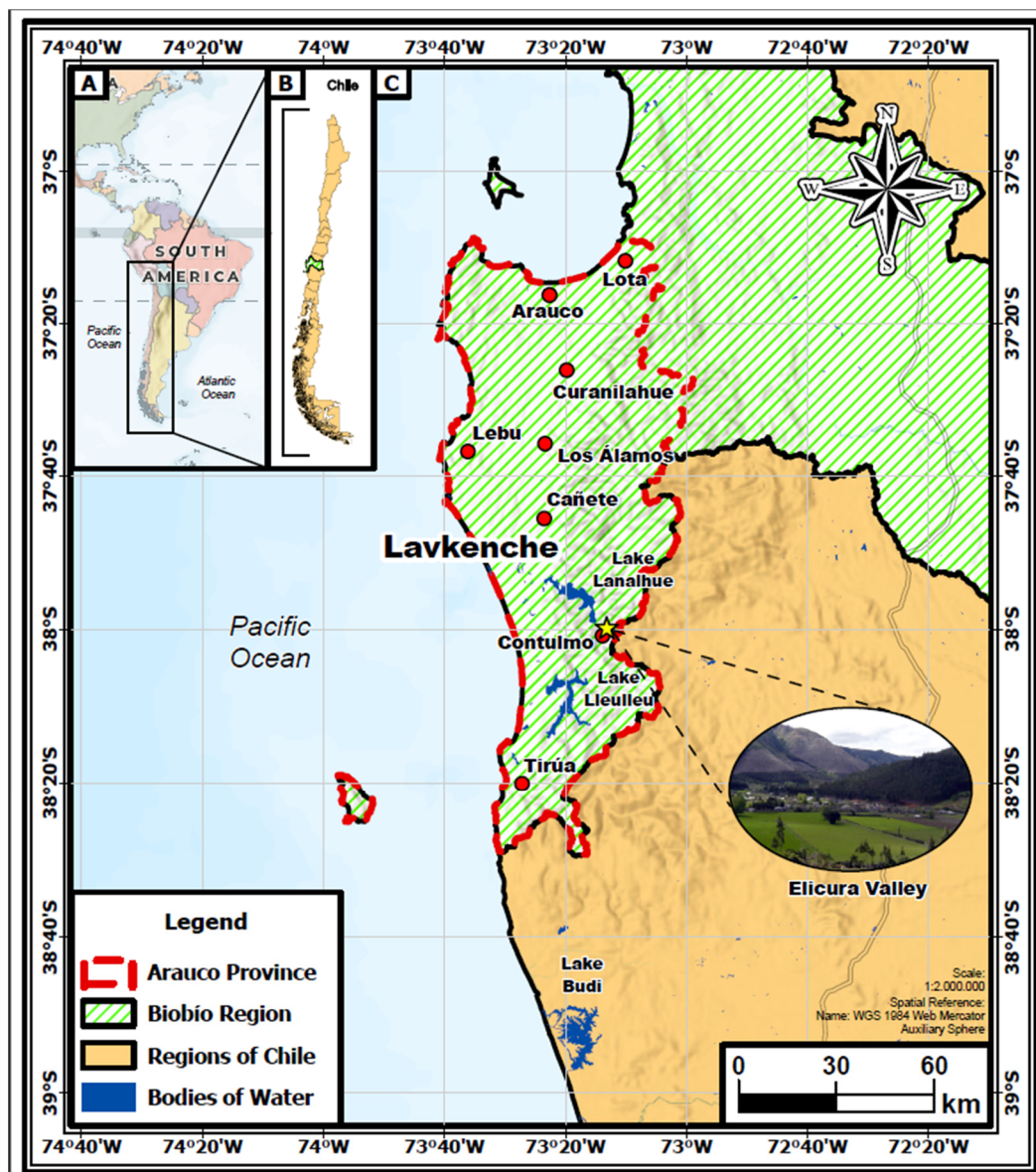


Figure 1. Map of Arauco Province and the historic Lavkenche Mapuche presence. Author: Ignacio García.

The study has a socio-historical, critical, and situated focus, which is a perspective based on the reconstruction of associated events and processes, identifying power conditions from hegemonic State sectors and private companies over the indigenous and local populations inhabiting the territory. In turn, the critical scope of this power over the economic and political dynamics of the context is recognized, making it an ideal focus for studying tourism and its multiple interpretations. The situated character of this focus refers to how the production of questions and discussions is constructed from the territory which is being studied, wherein the researchers live and work.

Qualitative methods were used, integrating secondary source review and historiographical analysis, and applying interviews and situated analysis.

To reconstruct the historical development of Lavkenche Mapuche cultural tourism before and after the pandemic, the present study analyzes the press from the studied territory. The sources used are the local newspapers *La Voz de Arauco*, *Lanalhue Noticias*, and some pages from *Proa al Futuro* and *La Tribuna*. Within all materials, we review the main development stages, beginning with the first initiatives from Mapuche families, their gradual consolidation, and, in particular, the events before and after the pandemic. *La Voz de Arauco* describes the tourism projects which arose around 2001 oriented towards a connection with nature and the declaration of Lake Lleu Lleu, Lake Lanalhue, and the Elicura Valley as zones of touristic interest in order to protect these sectors, which were threatened by forestry companies and other commercial interests. We can also record the creation of circuits around these three sectors which were gradually connected with Mapuche content. *Lanalhue Noticias* was used to observe how, towards the mid-2000s, tourism was more prominently centered on Mapuche culture, identity, and traditions. Its pages also indicate how Mapuche tourism was consolidated by inviting tourists to learn about native culture and worldviews, along with showing some of the main public projects which contributed to developing Mapuche tourism in order to improve the offerings for tourism in the territory. The newspaper *Proa al Futuro* lets us see the first community projects from Mapuche families around the mid-2000s, some oriented towards agrotourism, which sought to carry out recreational activities related to contact with nature. Finally, the newspaper *La Tribuna* helps us study the association between Mapuche tourism entrepreneurs in October 2023 (post-pandemic period) in order to drive cultural exchange and share experiences about the sustainability of tourism.

Seven in-depth qualitative interviews with entrepreneurial artisans of Mapuche origin who worked in tourism networks were also applied. All interviews were individual, apart from a single group interview. A brief profile of interviewees appears in Table 1.

Table 1. Interviewee profile.

Profile	Training and/or Experience	Organization or Network
SM, female, between 30 and 40 years old	Engineer in tourism; works in aromatherapy and therapeutic jewelry via complementary therapies	Cañete entrepreneurial and business network
EA, female, between 40 and 50; AM, DM and FM, female, between 40 and 50	Basket weavers	Ñocha Malen artisans' group
PC, male, between 30 and 40	Artisan	Newen Tañi Trekan artisans' guild
FM, male, between 30 and 40	Tourism route	Nahuelbuta Mapuche Production Corporation
AM, female, between 40 and 50	Artisan	Rayen Voygue Womens' Guild
NP, female, between 30 and 40	Weaver	Mapuche Art and Trade School

Each interview was carried out after obtaining informed consent.

Interview dialogues favored a horizontal approach to local knowledge about the effects of the pandemic on Mapuche tourism within Lavkenche territory. The basis of this methodological approach is to recognize participants as producers of knowledge and protagonists of their story, who are currently making history by resisting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic via tourism. Interviewees speak from their diverse ontologies, allowing them to understand the complexity of the Lavkenche Mapuche knowledge and value systems within the Arauco coastal zone.

An empirical premise of the present study is that indigenous people have been linked with tourism in multiple ways. First, their members are employed in activities related with tourism expansion within their territories, but without being recognized or valued as a people. Second, their lands, natural resources, and cultural resources have been the objective of encroachment by touristic and real estate capital. Finally, tourism has presented itself to them as an activity where they can offer products and services from their own condition as native peoples.

Cultural tourism takes place in Arauco province, meaning that Mapuche communities' cultural practices and products are transformed into merchandise [17], which is also demonstrated by interviewees' profiles and stories. It is thus the third type of link which we want to show, discussing current conceptions about the effects of the pandemic on tourist activity as seen by Lavkenche Mapuche actors.

3. Results

This section presents the history of Mapuche tourism to offer historical context on the effects of the pandemic for Mapuche communities dedicated to tourism within Lavkenche territory, along with showing how tourism entrepreneurs and artisans recovered after the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.1. History of Mapuche Tourism

Based on the analysis carried out with the data gathered, we can identify different moments which we could call a history of Lavkenche Mapuche tourism. Until the 2000s, there was no conceptualization of Mapuche cultural practices as a cultural or indigenous tourist attraction. In this context, where there was tourism, but nothing interested in cultural aspects; Mapuche people were employed to work in Chileans' businesses in cooking and cleaning tasks, among others. Simultaneously, Mapuche communities remained at the margins of the tourism industry, facing high poverty rates along with problems in reproducing their ways of life handed down from generation to generation.

In Mapuche ontology, spirituality is a fundamental underlying dimension directly related with the presence and actions of ancestral authorities, who are tied with a lineage via the *püllü* which travels through the *pewma* or remains connected with generations over time due to blood ties [18]. One member of the Ñocha Malén group described part of their life story connected with *ñocha* grass basket weaving, saying that "I did this work as a girl because my grandmother, my great-great-grandmother started to do the work, my grandmother and then my mom, and then us. It's a chain and I raised my family with this". Another member explained that "back then moms lived with that, it was for survival then". The representative from the Art and Trade School mentioned generational transmission within the family, indicating: "I have my knowledge from my ancestors, from the older generation, my great-grandmother, my grandmother, my mother, my aunts. I was born amidst artisans". For her part, SM stressed that "I started working in aromatherapy with the knowledge my grandmother passed on to me about the benefits of some plants, flowers, or herbs". In all these processes, we can observe the presence of patterns in Mapuche education and the formation of the *che* or person, wherein training is not merely a practical question, but is above all the transmission of a spirit united with knowledge and human beings. In this case, while tourism was not an activity which involved Mapuche people in their identitarian condition and they had been at the margin of tourism as a people, within their communities, they continued reproducing the ontology which granted meaning to

the activity or *kuzaw*—their work as artisans or entrepreneurs—which, according to the interviewees, is now available to face cultural tourism.

According to one person from the Ñocha Malen group, “At first tourism was bad around here, the word tourism didn’t exist”. They added, “Tourism meant the lakes, people coming from outside for the summer, and you could go to the lake and show your work too. For us it was private, we weren’t well received, because we even took our work there and nobody would look at us or our work, they weren’t really valued”. AM also explained that during the 1990s, Mapuche culture “was losing its clothing, its culture, its way of speaking, because there wasn’t any consciousness and people were open to things from outside”.

By early 2001, there were records of tourism projects carried out by the Mapuche communities around Lake Lleu Lleu, offering sustainable tourism where people could see nature, broad landscapes, and culture [19]. Similarly, the Elicura Valley progressively turned into a tourist attraction, with lodgings in traditional *ruka* and the opportunity to enjoy Mapuche food, and to learn about their culture and traditions [20]. Since the late 2000s, experiential tourism has expanded based upon tourism product designs centered on Lavkenche Mapuche traditions, culture, and identity and the Lleu Lleu territory [21]. An interviewee from the Nahuelbuta Mapuche Production Corporation explained that since 2005, there was more discussion of Mapuche tourism, and that as a corporation, they had grown stronger in the subject since 2010. Their goal was to differentiate themselves from indigenous tourism via territorial labels, understanding that at the Latin American level, each community has its own folklore and territory.

In 2006, Mapuche families worked on a community agrotourism project whose core consisted of a group dedicated to innovation in “traditional tourism”, which was able to ensure that Lake Lleu Lleu was administered by “authentic Mapuches” [22]. Within the larger Latin American scene, there was an upswing in responsible, alternative, and sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, community tourism, and agrotourism [4]. At this time, Chile and the wider world saw more promotion of tourism with identity, where indigenous communities could show their knowledge via this economic activity [3]. By 2009, the idea of Lavkenche Mapuche tourism started to be publicly promoted based upon a series of State-driven policies which sought to promote the development of autonomous entrepreneurs. This concept has not been static, since it is signified by different subjects as entrepreneurs in tourism from different territorial zones. In this way, we can also talk about Lavkenche tourism to refer to the initiatives carried out around Lake Budi and the Arauco Province coast [23].

Before the pandemic, the tourist season ran for four months, beginning in November, where domestic and foreign tourist families came to use camping zones and see farming and rural activities, including potato harvesting, bird and pig raising, and orchard care, among others. Mapuche families also sought to create an inn which would offer lodging and typical local foods, along with installing an administration office along the Lake Lleu Lleu shoreline [22]. From this time, ethnic and historical tourism grew stronger, with an increasing emphasis on emphasizing the value of natural attractions in Arauco Province. Between 2007 and 2011, Lanalhue, Lleu Lleu, and the Elicura Valley were declared Tourism Interest Zones, which helped protect these sectors from forestry and mining interests [3,24]. The Elicura Valley, in particular, was transformed into a key sector for Mapuche tourism, leading to the creation of new circuits for showing visitors different aspects of culture, language, history, and artworks [25].

Within this context, Volilchemapu was created in Cañete in 2011 as the first differentiated intercultural experience tour operator. It offered various tourism circuits, primarily within the zones of Contulmo, Tirúa, and Cañete, and was the first tourism operator in Arauco Province to respond to the need for organization within the incipient tourism activities among Mapuche communities, families, and individuals. This tour operator offered mountain treks, birdwatching, native forest exploration, meetings with local communities, horseback rides, and trips to lakes and lagoons [26,27]. These activities were designed and offered as an invitation for tourists to learn about the Mapuche way of life, which meant

that, in some cases, they included lodgings in ruka and fireside conversations with native people. The consolidation of this type of Mapuche tourism has led to a double impact, since it has drawn in tourists, particularly foreigners, and led to the recovery and re-valorization of native practices and customs. In these cases, Mapuche entrepreneurial efforts make tourists become participants in local customs and culture [23].

In 2012, a public tourism development plan was begun at the provincial level seeking to respond to the needs of a new tourist profile, with different consumption habits and greater interaction with local communities. In this way, Mapuche tourism gained a space to move forward on the path of sharing ancestral stories and life experiences, making tourists take part in their culture, gastronomy, and worldview [28].

The year 2015 saw the establishment of the project “Diffusion of Arauco Province cultural tourism” to disseminate Mapuche tourism and improve tourist infrastructure and equipment around Lake Lleu Lleu [29]. Similarly, within the framework of the Laggard Zone Plan (a public investment program for territories with critical poverty and vulnerability index scores) the “Strategic Regional Plan for Historical and Cultural Tourism in Arauco Province” was established in order for Arauco to be recognized as a tourist destination due to its cultural heritage, as well as to propitiate its associativity and social capital by incentivizing tourism projects which generated positive externalities within the territory. These goals were pursued via strengthening publicity channels, strengthening the value of knowledge and traditions, and aspiring to create benefits for 4000 people within the municipalities of Cañete, Contulmo, and Tirúa [30].

In 2017, the National Tourism Service (Sernatur) for the Biobío region and the Laggard Zone program for Arauco province worked on actions to develop and strengthen tourism within the zone, emphasizing Mapuche tourism entrepreneurs. The program “Diffusion and strengthening of the cultural tourism offer within Arauco Province” integrated a series of actions which sought to strengthen cultural tourism within the province [31]. In parallel, during this same period, the “Tourism and biodiversity conservation” project was executed within the territory, which aimed to increase the visibility and articulation of local actors dedicated to tourism centered upon the protection of biocultural heritage within the territories of Nahuelbuta and Mocha Island. Focusing on knowledge dialogues, this project aimed to promote inhabitants becoming key agents for tourist activities which promote and value their cultural heritage and the conservation of biodiversity.

Subsequently, in 2019, eight Mapuche tourism enterprises from the Biobío and Araucanía regions sought a mutual association in a new company called “Rupu Mapuche” in order to boost international tourist arrivals to the territory, along with raising the profile of similar experiences in municipalities including Cañete, Tirúa, Contulmo, and part of Araucanía to take a leading role in the tourism area. This new company sold tourism packages focused on native culture with routes between the zones of Piedra del Águila and Lake Budi. This project was focused on gastronomy, artworks, stories, and sharing locals’ experiences [21]. In general, it was indicated that the Mapuche worldview and having the “purest lake in Latin America”, Lake Lleu Lleu, would become a “unique attraction” where respect for the ñuke mapu would be valued with regard to sustainability in understanding with local entrepreneurial initiatives to generate collective economic benefits for the entire Lavkenche territory [21]. EA, an artisan from Ñocha Malen, mentioned that she focused on tourism, since she received many tourists in her ruka who were en route to the lake and the sea.

During this stage, important transformations were also expressed in forestry companies’ interventions within Mapuche communities’ territories. For instance, the Ñocha Malen group has a working alliance with the large Forestal Mininco company, belonging to the CMPC holding company (Compañía Manufacturera de Papeles y Cartones). In their articulated work, they have begun to innovate in their techniques with ñocha grass, using plastic to produce their products, leading to the creation of “decorative and utilitarian objects which are refined and simple, modern, with touches of color, beautifully woven, with marvelous design and manufacturing”. This type of project or initiative proposes to raise

consciousness about the problems of plastic waste and incorporate the basket-weaving tradition into an attractive and modern product that respects artisans' creativity, leaving them free to place their symbolism within each piece [32].

In this scenario of economic and cultural globalization, and the expansion of sustainable development ideas, multiple actors come into play, with political disputes and power struggles arising over the forms of appropriation and the conversion of local goods into potential tourist merchandise [17]. According to FM, a member of the Nahuelbuta Mapuche Production Corporation, before the pandemic, tourism was "really booming", for instance, at Lake Lleu Lleu. However, while Sebastian Piñera was president, there were increased tensions between the State and some sectors of the Mapuche people who more strongly defended autonomy and territorial recuperation, who also lived within Arauco province. The height of this period of strong tensions was the death of Camilo Catrillanca, which led to a broad response from communities, some with protests and social movements and others with more radical actions: "That also meant that before the pandemic, tourism fell off here in the province, because there started to be recurring arson attacks and people started to be afraid and stop coming into the territory". Mapuche tourism was thus under strong tension due to the conflict. On one side, there was a growing unease amongst tourists regarding visiting the territory. On the other side, there was also an internal debate in the Mapuche world about the role, convenience, and risks of tourism in the process of reaffirming and revindicating territorial claims, where various groups asserting political and economic autonomy strongly questioned some tourism actors due to how the latter worked closely with the government and forestry companies.

3.2. Health Crisis and Increased Associativity Amongst Entrepreneurs

With the arrival of COVID-19, visiting sites were closed down, there were no tourists, and border closures prevented foreign visitors from entering the country [33]. The propagation of the virus created a new scenario for interpersonal relations. Communities faced a vulnerable situation and were practically invisible during the pandemic, leading them to also be affected due to their historical conditions [14].

During the pandemic, tourist operators including Volilchemapu could not continue functioning. This happened not only due to the health contingency, but also because of situations arising from tensions in relations between local communities on one side and the State and private sector on the other side, as reported by the Cañete Chamber of Commerce, Tourism, and Gastronomy. In turn, FM mentioned that during the pandemic, "we were bad off. All the small businesses tanked, everything closed, tourism was the first thing affected nationwide because all the services closed". He also mentioned that the State had no alternative plan regarding this topic, leading him to express: "we were left at the margins, and the Mapuche-State conflict got worse". In particular, for EA, sales were affected by the pandemic and the conflict: "nobody was going around, in this region they were 'making shortcuts', 'cutting wood', and Mapuche people are always the ones affected". PC said that when the pandemic came, "there were restrictions on going to the next town to sell or show our artworks". However, he was unaffected by the pandemic since he learned how to sell online: "I uploaded videos of my work every day, I got commissions from Instagram and other social media. It opened up a broader field, and now I started a company to make it formal and supply myself better".

SM indicated that during the pandemic, there was a considerable drop in families' summer incomes (November to March). Some businesses could no longer function, particularly for women who worked in markets and fairs: "There was a total shutdown in the pandemic, zero contact, so there was no option for you to offer your products". She added: "many people who worked in traditional Mapuche trades, particularly older people, had very little knowledge of social media or doing their work with a phone, Facebook or Instagram, so sales were hard for them". One member of the Ñocha Malen group said: "the pandemic affected us more because arts and crafts weren't a priority. Sales during the pandemic were online, by order, and not in the markets anymore". They added: "tourists stopped coming

because of the pandemic, and also because the territorial problems frightened them, people wouldn't come here anymore".

From their perspective, they received many tourists before the pandemic: "Sometimes we left it open out front and tourists came in to see, we'd sell, but not any more afterwards". In general, the pandemic was "something new" for the Ñocha Malen group, whose members had to learn about using social media, with virtual training provided by Fundación Artesanías Chile about how to sell their products and design new models.

AM indicated that the pandemic strongly affected her due to their storefront closing: "We tried to get out what we had, we tried to sell it on the down-low. We'd connect with our people and sometimes make a sale that way". She also mentioned: "psychologically, we were really bad because we didn't know whether we should open the store or leave it closed, with all the health demands and rules that there were". NP said that she started taking online classes, which made the pandemic no obstacle for her: "I sold online, I'd upload my things. I always used Facebook more than Instagram. The other artisans kept up too. There were problems with the signal because some people live a long way from town, but we found ways to communicate". This indicates that although tourist activities were highly vulnerable to the pandemic, connectivity allowed people to generate resilience to adapt and recover [7].

As lockdown measures decreased, tourism gradually opened up [33]. According to SM, after the pandemic, there was more help, with rising participation in traditional fairs, popular festivals, and recreational activities, which also helped people who learned about entrepreneurs' work online to reconnect with it in person. She also mentioned that after the pandemic, there were more paths on offer for entrepreneurs like herself to take part in artisans' groups and self-manage their activities in parties which were not necessarily centered on Mapuche attractions, including the Chilean national festivities celebrated in Cañete each year. PC said his sales went up after the pandemic and re-stabilized, with currently normal sales for his instruments and silver goods.

3.3. The Post-Pandemic Context and Reopening of Mapuche Tourism in Arauco Province

The crisis scenario revealed a need in Chile for stronger guild associations within indigenous tourism from a public policy perspective [15]. In a post-pandemic context, there were efforts to connect with urban and rural Mapuche tourism entrepreneurs in Alto Biobío, Tirúa, Cañete, and Lake Lanalhue via events organized by Sernatur and the regional government of Biobío. These efforts were made to drive cultural interchanges and share experiences about cultural preservation and tourism sustainability which could help "develop the territory and preserve a culture and identity in parallel with local economic development, promote responsible tourism, and preserve and share the wealth of indigenous traditions". An encounter carried out in October 2023 explored crucial topics for native tourism, including protections for cultural heritage and the vital role for communities in developing authentic tourist experiences [34]. FM said that after the pandemic, there was greater associativity between entrepreneurs and the tourism service, leading to a more solid organization: "Unfortunately, with any kind of investment you want to make in the town the forestry companies are always there. If it's not CMPC, it's Arauco, so we've moved away from this type of negotiations too, and people look for other ways to organize and manage their resources".

Native peoples have generally transmitted their principles of mutual respect and a life in communication with nature via tourism, promoting a balance between the economy, environment, and society. Tourism practices in recent decades have also brought an association with the mission of protecting cultural knowledge in order to project it into future generations [15]. In this regard, PC mentioned: "We're a Mapuche people without recognition as such. Tourists are thankful we can show them part of our culture. They're amazed by the music, the sound, the melodies".

Various perspectives have been observed so far, reflecting the richness of Lavkenche Mapuche socio-cultural systems in Arauco. Traditional perspectives and contemporary

innovations come together in a dialogue about how tourism can become a positive force for cultural preservation and sustainable development [35]. According to Pérez, encounters with tourists and development promoters have re-signified the indigenous worldview. Local identities have taken on a leading role in local, national, and transnational political agendas [36]. Following the crisis, opportunities have been established to create environmental and health consciousness, involving the entire tourism production chain [15]. In this regard, there is a consensus that public support is needed to strengthen indigenous tourism, since it is the economic support for thousands of families with historical sectorial gaps [15]. According to the experience of the Ñocha Malen group, in the post-pandemic context, “in-person forms came back. Artisans got together, they had meetings to see whether they could do markets again, but it took a year longer than what the pandemic did. Artisans started meeting again in the squares to present projects”. FM said that “after the pandemic we started coming up again, open markets started to take place for tourism. People want tourism back now”.

Conflicts with forestry businesses remain, however, and have become more complex in the post-pandemic period due to situations including violence or the water crisis affecting much of the territory occupied by plantations and the neighbors of Mapuche communities. Increasing tourism has raised conflicts with extractive economic activities associated with political and economic power over the territory [37]. SM mentioned in this regard that “you see it when you go to the places from when I was a girl, you’d go and visit and you could gather, like, chamomile or lavender growing free in the countryside. Now you go to those places and they’re full of [exotic] pines, there’s no kind of native plants”. She also mentioned: “There’s spaces to recover flora, but they’re small, and unfortunately the spaces the forestry companies set out are minimal. You see everything full of pines. It’ll never be like it was before. There are very few conservation spaces”. NP said, “Nature is ending, the forestry companies are invading. We walk out the door and there’s trees that aren’t from our land, brought in by others for more lucrative benefits, which is how I say it”. She added that “It’s a topic that affects our own sales. We have the cleanest lake in South America, and people want to see it, but because of what they see on TV people don’t come”.

From a spiritual perspective, FM mentioned that the pandemic was something they saw coming: “The machis [healers] always said that diseases would come along that weren’t from here, that were damaging for children and the elderly, and that’s what happened”. EA added: “As a Mapuche I wasn’t going to get that disease because I was going to be prepared beforehand. I’d keep taking my lawen [medicine] and if I took care of myself, my yerba mate, all the medicinal remedies, and that made me feel good”.

There was also a recognition that spirituality is something which has always been present among indigenous communities dedicated to tourism during and after the pandemic. It is a dimension which is transmitted via their way of doing tourism: “It comes from our being when we connect with our fabric. I bring my knowledge from my ancestors. It’s a magical connection”, said NP, a member of the Mapuche Art and Trade School. A Ñocha Malen group member mentioned that spirituality is always present in the works which they carry out, including the llepu, where, during ceremonies, especially when a machi is present, food such as wheat and beans are given as an offering to the newen or strong spirits of the ñuke mapu. This relation is expressed between human beings and the species of what for modern ontologies would be the plant world or nature. From Mapuche ontology, EA indicated: “As Mapuche we’re very spiritual. We converse with the plant, the lawen, various plants, we kneel to the plant and pray to it, and we receive newen”.

FM mentioned that this spirituality has always been communicated via conversations, wherein visitors are educated about the history of Mapuche society and the relations between spirituality and nature. This relation is represented by the respect and union between human beings and nature, which does not exist separately as with modern ontology. We can also observe that tourism provides a space for environmental and intercultural education which considers a revindication of Mapuche knowledge against the expansion of forestry plantations: “Tourists from Santiago see a forest and say ‘How nice! There’s trees!’, but we

tell them that those aren't forests, they're plantations. A forest is different, it's wetter and it has biodiversity". He continued: "they get a little message that you have to care for what's left, as well as showing how the big extractivist companies have dried out the territory". According to FM, their tourism intends to be a sustainable tourism rather than a mass variety. There is also an intention to be part of an economy where money remains within the territory, considering tourism as a community livelihood and a sustainability strategy.

4. Discussion

Lavkenche cultural tourism has gradually become consolidated via elements including ecosystem protection and connections with ancestors from the spiritual plane. The locations for this tourism conjugate Mapuche identity with spaces which manifest territorialized ontologies, and which seek to remain over time. Artworks and small businesses aim to bring visitors closer to traditional cultural systems and practices. While tourism is an activity with a completely Western origin and form conceived from modern ontologies, the situation of Lavkenche Mapuche tourism shows that, if it is taken and appropriated as an activity for encounters and communicating knowledge, it can contribute to preserving their ontology and sharing it with interested, respectful tourists. In this context, Mapuche tourism is also conceived as a revindication strategy, given that creating tourism based on the presence of biocultural heritage means being able to resist so that the ocean, the lakes, the forests, and the spaces needed for human and non-human life can continue existing. In this way, tourism as an economic activity also places Mapuche communities in an alternative development horizon, considered from the Mapuche ontology of life.

Since the pandemic, cultural tourism initiatives have prevailed based on a growing associativity between small businesses and their ties with the global and national markets. For instance, the Art and Trade School and Ñocha Malen both send their products to the wider world or sell them to national and foreign tourists visiting the zone. Everything indicates that after the pandemic there have been trends towards re-valuing tourism in proximity, far removed from mass tourism, where ethnicity becomes an attraction, integrating and transferring local identities and places to the global tourist market [38]. In these cases, the local population operates as host-entrepreneurs who bring out aspects of their cultural and natural heritage to share with tourists [4].

We can also observe growing State participation in promoting Mapuche tourism. Since the pandemic, this presence has grown based upon public initiatives and projects seeking to strengthen associative ties between entrepreneurs in order to recover this activity, which was strongly threatened by the health contingency. Another notable element is that the Mapuche recovered slowly from the catastrophe, rather than immediately. The number of tourists collapsed with the pandemic, and after the pandemic, this problem continued due to conflicts. Efforts have continued during the post-pandemic period, but with the problem that some small businesses have not been able to overcome the material damages from COVID-19.

Considerably, from this study, it is possible to point out that the events related to the Mapuche–State conflict that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in Lavkenche territory have affected the perception of visitors. This is anchored in the complex history that the Mapuche territory carries, marked by the reproduction of negative prejudices about the Mapuche people and their struggle for their territories. A "negative" image of the Mapuche people has been formed over time unfairly by people who have visited the area looking for traditional tourism, and by those who only consume the media controlled by the political and economic power of the country. This directly affects tourism since, as seen in the interviews, many people have stopped going since the COVID-19 pandemic. Some Mapuche families and tourism initiatives have managed to gradually overcome these negative effects through their own and situated strategies, although prejudices have remained. For this reason, it is important that the discussion of public policies includes this issue, given that it is an economic activity that seeks to contribute to overcoming the territory's backwardness, immersed in a complex historical, political, and ecological context.

5. Conclusions

The pandemic has reshaped the historic development of Mapuche cultural tourism in Lavkenche territory, marking a critical episode in material losses, but which kept domestic cultural production alive. We can also observe how the problems caused by the pandemic and its effects during the post-pandemic period were mixed with the historic conflicts between the State and the Mapuche people, currently intensified due to the expansion of the extractivist forestry model. It is virtually impossible to distinguish the effects of both processes (the pandemic and the conflict) in the outcomes for tourism. In this context, Lavkenche Mapuche cultural tourism is expressed as a response by the State and the global market given the need to integrate indigenous territories into development. However, indigenous peoples adopted and eventually reappropriated tourism in multiple ways, even as a strategy for resistance and re-existence in the face of local political, economic, and territorial difficulties.

The post-pandemic period has been a period of reformulation for tourism activities and of adapting to new ways of understanding tourism with an interest in local things. In the current scenario, tourists seek to leave mass tourism behind in order to connect with nature and know about local cultures in order to learn about their worldviews and the ways in which they care for themselves and their surroundings, and to find other explanations for the crises which affect our planet.

This study was centered on Lavkenche territory, with a focus on local history. There is still a need for studies with Mapuche researchers from the perspective of horizontality and inter-scientific dialogue. It would also be interesting to compare observations with other tourism experiences which are less affected by active conflict processes, and which might have seen other trends during the pandemic, including a reappraisal of places with less traffic, along with proximity tourism. It is also necessary to go deeper into explanations from Mapuche ontology regarding the role of tourism within the framework of the global ecological crisis, which should necessarily be done with specialists from the Mapuche people.

Finally, the present article constitutes a starting point for exploring developments in indigenous Mapuche tourism within other territories, and the various methods for facing the post-pandemic period from their own ontologies and contents.

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Notes

- ¹ Within this diversity, we can recognize the differences in that the Lavkenche Mapuche live on the coast of the Pacific Ocean, in what are now the regions of Biobío, Araucanía, Los Ríos, and Los Lagos. Other Mapuche territorial identities include the Pewenche, who live in the Andes; the Nagche, who live in the drylands of the interior within the current Araucanía Region; the Wentche, residents of the Cautin River valley; and the Williche, who live in the southern parts of the territory, amongst other definitions which have been presented, and which are expressed in the existence of different dialects of the Mapuche language along with variations in sociocultural practices.

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