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► To cite this version:

Léa Génis, Anouck Bessy. ”Heritage” appropriation related to natural objects: new outlooks for ethnoecology?. 1st Young Natural History scientist’s meeting, Feb 2014, Paris, France. , 2014. hal-01234462

HAL Id: hal-01234462

<https://hal.science/hal-01234462>

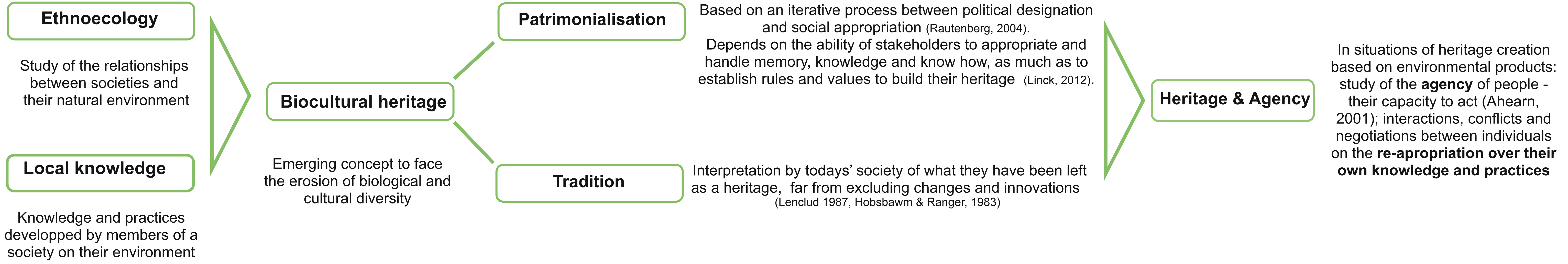
Submitted on 26 Nov 2015

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"Heritage" appropriation related to natural objects: new outlooks for ethnoecology?

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MESCAL - RAMMED EARTH: 2 natural objects associated with bodies of knowledge to be valued



Mescal refers to spirits made from the Agave genus, which production is widely present in Mexico. To make it, more than 43 species with 250 vernacular names are used (Colunga-García Marin et al., 2007), attesting its cultural and biological diversity.

Considered in the past as a common drink from rural areas, mescal is now the subject of a renewed interest in which various actors are taking back and redefining mescal, defended as a Mexican natural and cultural heritage. Mescal producers and their knowledge are in the centre of this patrimonialisation process.



Rammed earth building involves compacting layers of earth into a formwork to create walls (pict.2). Widely used in Rhone-Alpes region before it declined after the Second World War, the technique has turned in the last decades to be promoted by a wide range of actors, from architects and researchers to craftsmen, inhabitants, politics or even materials producers.

In a context of re-appropriation of rural areas and valuation of vernacular architecture, building cultures and local resources, it becomes one of the new issues to comply with "ecological building".

To know when the fermented agave (liquid called "tuba", pict. 4) is ready to be distilled, each producer has its own technique (pict.3).

*You need to have the surface of your bucket full of little pearls, this is good tuba, you can see it's good tuba (prod. 1).
When you hear it boiling, it means it's not ready (prod.2).
Tuba must taste bitter, you feel it's strong, if it's sweet, it means it's not ready (prod.3).
When I feel it bitter, for me, it means that tuba is passed (prod.4).*

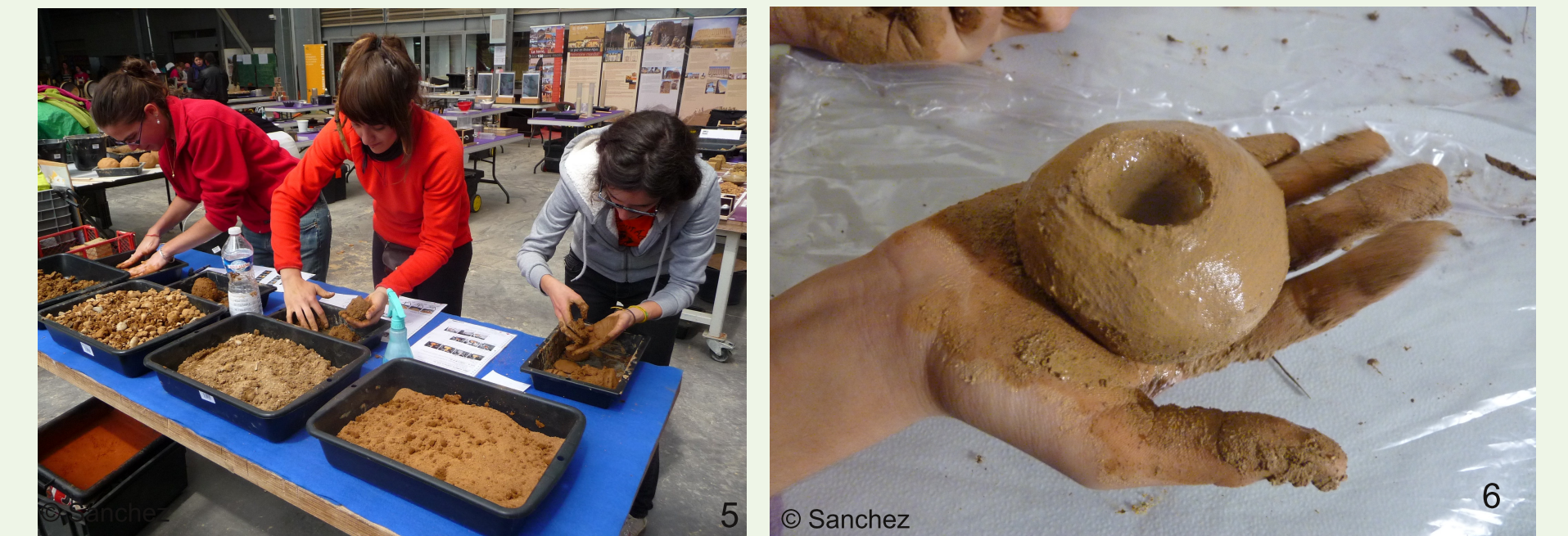
Which knowledge is to be promoted?

Products are the result of a combination of knowledge and practices mostly developed out of normative systems and based on sensory perceptions

Context dependant, complementary and sometimes contradictory statements

Difficulty to define, access and systematize such knowledge

Understand the soil composition to determine what would be a "good earth quality", based on sensory perceptions and empirical tests (pict. 5-6).



Wetness is very important, the earth has to be wet enough, but not too much to be compacted without sticking, and to avoid breaks when drying (archi. 1)

You take some in your fist and press it. When you open your hand, you should have a ball that holds together and keep the trace of your fingers printed without either sticking to your hand neither separating in pieces (craft. 1)

To meet distributor's expectations for a more "authentic" product, mescal producers in Zapotitlan de Vadillo (State of Jalisco) changed their original plastic fermentation container (pict. 7) : they invented a container type in cement (pict. 8), or borrow a technique from others region, the wood barrels (pict. 9).

Why and for whom promote it?

Enhancing tradition to face contemporary issues

Knowledge and practices are the subject of constant negotiations:

Interpret the past

Integrate current expectations and requirements

Between local issues, global perspectives and external pressures

Ready to face the challenges of sustainable development, earth is valued as a material taken from the local environment, available and ecological with low embodied energy, being part of a cycle of life from the ground to the ground (pict. 10).

The raw material itself is shown on the façade, associated with arguments based on aesthetics, heritage, or energy efficiency (pict. 11).



Peasant technique as a sign of quality: from producers to promoters

To control the alcohol level of their spirit, mescal producers cool the mescal and examine the pearled surface of the liquid (pict. 12-13). Some producers use a "venencia" – a tool made out of a piece of reed (pict. 14).

Because the enhancement of producers' knowledge is linked to the growing interest over mescal, bar tenders have learnt this technique and use it during tasting sessions (pict. 15).

Alcohol content and this technique is being the essence of the quality and the norm for a "traditional" mescal.

How to promote local knowledge?

Facing the issues of standardization of non-formal knowledge and tempt to go beyond

Norms :

Formalize the trust relationship in a product and a knowledge
Ensure the permanency of its quality and "authentic" character

Risks on local knowledge:
Homogenization and denaturation
Freezing and limiting innovation

How to find new forms of trust to acknowledge the variability of one's products?

Learning by doing: trust based on social experience and experimentation

The use of workshops (pict. 16) and participative fieldworks (pict. 17) are one way for rammed earth promoters to have people experiment how it does stand, and the intrinsic consistence of the know-how.

The best way to have people understand my way of doing, is to show them that it works, not only to show them indeed, but more to have them do, and have them do something that they will use (craft.2).



Heritage construction

Mobilization of knowledge, embodied in hardly sizeable practices

Rhetoric and practices hybridization, adapted to various audiences.

Conservation of biocultural heritage

Keep the heritage alive

Understand the processes of its construction and maintain their supporting foot based on knowledge and practices

Recognize man's place in the technical, practical and symbolic process of heritage construction, as one of the actors of the construction of natural history.

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