

Weaving is helping strengthen ancestral knowledge among women and children in Ingapirca, Ecuador

May 4 2022, by Cristina Delgado Vintimilla and Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw



The women and children involved in the Uncommoning in the Andes make up Asociación Ñucanchic Allpa Mamamanta Warmicuna. Credit: Monica Malo, Author provided

In the remote Andean community of El Cisne in Ingapirca, Ecuador, one

of the first things you'll notice is children's laughter. In a courtyard, women gather with their children to trace ancestral knowledge and memories—and they do this using wool.

The alpaca wool that helps them reconnect has been carefully sheared, cleaned and the combed into a soft material that will be easier to spin and work with.

While the practice of spinning and weaving has dwindled in the community, as [other work takes precedence](#), most of the [women](#) gathered here have some knowledge of the activity. They've learned by observing their own mothers, grandmothers, aunts and other adults.

Reviving and helping strengthen ancestral knowledge is one of our goals as researchers and educators facilitating a project called [Uncommoning in the Andes](#). The project is part of the [Climate Action Childhood Network](#)—an international group of educators and researchers who create and experiment alongside young [children](#) and [early childhood](#) educators to generate responses to [climate change](#).

From land dispossession to environmental degradation

El Cisne is a small community located in the highlands of Ecuador's Cañar province. The community has resisted and adapted to waves of change over centuries of colonization. [Land dispossession](#), [indentured servitude](#) and [mass migration to the north](#) hollowed out the community, while [widespread environmental degradation](#) has changed Cañari cultural and social relationships.

Since 2016, Uncommoning in the Andes has sought to foster relationships and create spaces for women and children to reconnect and

reignite ancestral practices. The women and children make up the Asociación Ñucanchic Allpa Mamamanta Warmicuna and they meet twice weekly to talk about their history, the changing present and to reintroduce [traditional practices](#) such as farming and weaving into their daily lives with an aim to create cohesion and an alternative source of economic independence.

This work is slow, deliberate and difficult. The project's weaving sessions attempt to foster acts of care and sharing across generations, as elderly hands guide young ones through the creation process.

Weaving and the climate crisis

Weaving was traditionally done by men in Ingapirca, while women focused on spinning and dyeing the wool. But after the northern migration, women and elders stayed behind with the children and community roles shifted.

Uncommoning in the Andes organized a set of workshops with, Monica Malo, a local wool artisan who accompanied the woman as they remembered what it meant to weave. Passing on that knowledge helps further strengthen their agency as they're now able to pass it on to their children.



Children enjoy visiting the alpacas and enjoy running their small hands through the alpaca's coarse hair. Credit: Monica Malo, Author provided

Education, research and community can play an important role in reinvigorating children's ancestral knowledge that are sustainable and based on a reciprocal relation with the Earth. These relations are [less damaging, less toxic and therefore offer alternative responses to climate change.](#)

The climate crisis isn't affecting everyone equally, and [children in the Global South experience more severe social, environmental and economic consequences.](#) They also have less opportunities to share how

they are creatively responding to the climate crisis since their knowledge is less valued in neo-colonial societies.

Our project is as much about surrounding the next generation with ancestral knowledge as it is about providing spaces that enhance and value women's roles.

Uncommoning in the Andes

Uncommoning in the Andes provides space for reflection, lighthearted commiserating and culture sharing. The women often start by talking about their daily routine—rising well before dawn to take care of the dairy cows. Women and children bring out little stools to milk the cows before the daily milk pick up (between 4:00 a.m. and 6:30 a.m.).

The meetings also serve as a place for oral storytelling, which the children soak up. Women speak of different weaving patterns and what each signifies, about the symbolism sewn into their clothing and the [important role textiles had in ancient ceremonies and transactions](#).

The children accompany their mothers to visit alpacas, running their small hands through the coarse hair. They sit together and watch videos of other women who have organized weaving collectives and are now earning an income from the sale of their creations. These gatherings also include the tradition of the *pamba mesa*, which is similar to a potluck.

The project intends to support the women in creating collectives that resist [patriarchal colonialism](#) which are deeply ingrained in their memory and life. In addition to storytelling and culture sharing, woven throughout every gathering is [Quechua, the Indigenous language](#) spoken by the elders, which some [young women](#) understand and children are becoming familiar with.

Uncommoning in the Andes is just as important for children as it is for women. The children are listening, they're participating and proposing new ideas. One woman's daughter is even learning how to weave at home, a sign that knowledge, once revitalized, spreads and weaves towards the future.

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