
Paraguay: The last Ayoreo in voluntary isolation

The Ayoreo live in a zone of their ancestral territory called Amotocodie. Modern maps show it as an extensive area of virgin forest with the geographic coordinates 21° 07' S and 60° 08' W marking its centre, some 50 km to the south of Cerro Leon. They amount to some 50 people, subdivided into various groups. They approach but rarely, a watering place on some farm to drink water and perhaps a farm worker may have seen them from afar. Sometimes, white hunters find their trail in the forest or holes in trees where they have harvested honey. In 1998 a group of six warriors attacked a farm as a warning. On 3 March 2004, one of the groups comprising 17 people came into contact with the surrounding society and settled on the border of their ancestral habitat. The 2002 Indigenous Census of Paraguay does not record them because they cannot be interviewed, because they are invisible.

Throughout the last sixty years all the other members of their people, the Ayoreo from the Bolivian and Paraguayan Chaco, have been forcibly removed from their enormous habitat by missionaries and now survive precariously on the outskirts of modern society, slowly realising that they have been cheated, that they were deprived of the forest where they lived in harmony – and the forest has been deprived of them. The Ayoreo who still continue to live in the forest are some of the last hunters and gatherers of the Latin American continent who have not been contacted and who do not seek contact with modern and enveloping society.

They are nomads in their ancestral territory: they constantly walk through the still large extensions of untouched forest. Their walks are guided by an intimate knowledge of the places and the cycles of the Chaco's fruits and resources. The most decisive resource is water, sometimes abundant in certain places and sometimes extremely scarce in others and depending on the seasons. Other resources are the flesh of animals: they know where to find turtles or wild pigs or armadillos or the flag bear; they know where they can find fruit such as the heart of palm. They know where to find honey. During the rainy season during their walks, they cultivate in appropriate areas. The forest provides everything. Wise self-control of demographic growth, together with constant migration guarantee the continuity of the world in which they live, preventing overuse, deterioration and depletion of their resources.

In this way, no signs of environmental deterioration are apparent as a consequence of their presence. Rather we must acknowledge the contrary: without them something would be lacking in the forest, something related with their vitality and the validity of what we call biodiversity. This suggests that basically, not only them, but all human beings could have had a function in the world's ecosystems, just as every plant and animal has. Perhaps our absence, the fact that we have separated from this way of living harmoniously with the world, has made it weaker. We are missing from our ecosystems. Perhaps finally we humans are not the enemies of nature and the earth, but necessary...if we were to accomplish our function.

The forest Ayoreo still accomplish it. We know from the explanation of the groups or families that were removed or who left the forest to join our modern civilization in our times, in 1986, 1999, 2004, that they define it as a function of mutual protection: the forest protects us, we protect the forest. Humankind as protector of the earth.

Their way of cultivating the land during the rainy season is very expressive of their relationship with the forest and with nature: with the first rains they sow the seeds they have been storing of pumpkin, corn, water melon and beans in natural sandy clearings in the middle of the forest. They barely prepare the soil. Then they continue with their walking and let nature take over. They come back to harvest. According to their concept one has to intervene as little as possible in the workings of nature, just some minimum support, the support to allow it to do better what it does anyway.

They do not consider themselves to be the owners of the world like we modern people who have left our forests centuries or millennia ago, do. According to them, the world is not at the disposal of humans to do anything they want with. On the contrary, the Ayoreo, instead of placing themselves above the world, feel themselves to be a part of it, an integrating and necessary part. This is not only seen from their posture and attitude in their daily lives. This relationship with the world is also expressed in their social structure in a profoundly spiritual way: in parallel with family ties, the Ayoreo on birth and with their surname belong to one of seven “clans,” each clan including a part of all the phenomena existing in the world. For instance in this way an Ayoreo from the Etacore clan becomes a relative for example of the rattlesnake, of the water falling in a storm, of the rope, of the dry season, of the red colour of blood, of the moon when it can be seen during the daytime, of the totitabia bird, etc. All the Ayoreo as a whole are related to everything that exists in the world, and each one, according to his/her surname, lives with the mission of looking after his/her world phenomenon “relatives” in a very special way.

The way they live in harmony with the world is comparable to a couple living in harmony in the best sense: aware of diversity and its importance, conscious of mutual interdependency, knowing that one without the other could not be happy, would have no future, and could not live.

This is part of what the forest Ayoreo, with their cultural, spontaneous and natural way of being, contribute to the world of today: a different and diverse way of being, that not only sustains the environmental integrity of the Chaco forest where they live but also sustains a diverse conscience and presence that, without them, the world would be lacking today.

Presumably they are not aware of their importance to us. When we finally perceive it, we start understanding the significance of their existence, not only for themselves and their environmental habitat, but also for us and our future. Because finally, their attitudes and those communicated by their way of living are those that should inspire our search for new ways of life and of harmonious living if as humanity we want to have a future.

Although they may not know of their importance for humanity, they certainly must feel its weight through their solitude in carrying out their function of protecting the world. They may feel it concretely and in daily things, when heavy machinery disturbs the silence of their territory to fell trees for cattle ranches and to make new entries to take precious wood, and when they feel how the consistence of the world of which they are a part is eroded and weakened.

They still have to feel that our strength is added to theirs, that we have taken up our mission again of protecting their world and ours, everybody's world.

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