
Argentina: The silent genocide of the Mbya Guarani

The Mbya Guarani are an ancient forest people with their roots in the Amazon. In Misiones, a province in the northeast of Argentina, they have 74 communities and a total population of approximately 3,000 people. Their culture is as rich as the biodiversity of the Paranaense forest that they have always used and protected.

Two of these communities, the Tekoa Yma and the Tekoa Kapi'i Yvate, summarize the Mbya Guarani's fierce struggle to preserve their identity and continue living in the forest. Comprising some 20 families, their dealings with Western society only started to be important in 1995. As in many other Indigenous communities, their greatest bastions of independence and cultural safeguard are their women and the Opygua (priest) of the Tekoa Yma, Artemio Benitez. They continue to struggle to make their voluntary isolation from the yerua (white people) understood and respected. But the logging companies, the chainsaws and the Misiones Government's lack of sensitivity continue to harass them.

At present they live within the Yabotí Biosphere Reserve, where they obtain their food, their medicinal plants and building materials from a mosaic of Paraense forest environments, covering 6,500 hectares. Unfortunately their territory coincides with the so-called "Plot 8" and "Plot 7" considered "private property" by their present holders, the Mocona Forestal S.A. company and Marta Harriet (see WRM Bulletin 86). The Mocona Company, with the approval of the Government, recently attempted to enclose them in 300 hectares, representing less than 5 per cent of the territory they presently use to live in. In some way, white people taking over as owners and as governors, have shrunk their territory and their forest in order to expand plantations and the good business of those who call themselves civilized.

Of the total area originally covered by the Mata Atlântica and Paranaense forests, only 5 per cent remains. This loss of biodiversity and continuity is particularly critical in environments where the Tekoa Yma and Tekoa Kapi'i Yvate are located. The lack of natural medicines and food caused by the frantic extraction of trees is threatening their health and their survival. This is of unusual gravity, not only in terms of human rights, but also in terms of demographic criticalness.

The Mbya communities of Tekoa Yma and Tokoa Kapi'i Yvate are the result of long processes of sedentary cycles, preceded by limited migration episodes. These movements have taken place throughout centuries. While the sub-tropical forest evolved, with its own fluctuations due to internal and external causes, one of its species, the Mbya, established successive transitory territories. If the resources available and their use established a good balance and the dreams of their leaders did not advise against it, they settled in the same place for a long time. If some crisis broke up this relationship, or dreams suggested a change, the community migrated, but only to settle with their sedentary features in another more appropriate place.

The life strategy of any group of hunters-gatherers with subsistence agriculture or a long food chain, has specificities that are not well understood by other human groups whose strategy, on the contrary, is based on agro-productive systems with a very short food chain.

In fact, when human populations invented agriculture some 5,000-10,000 years ago, they shortened the old, long food chains. They eliminated the living forms that existed on the soil and then planted, replacing forests or large ranges of pasture lands, by a single protected species. Shortening the food chains and the success of farming and animal husbandry fed the first urban revolution with their surplus, and from then on, massive growth of the human population.

For decades now in Misiones an unequal battle between these two life strategies has been taking place.

On the one hand are the Mbya communities, who are the longest standing inhabitants of the territory. Various communities, among them the Tekoa Yma and Tekoa Kapi'i Yvate, continue to preserve a long food chain strategy. They are hunters, gatherers and fisher-people, with a deliberately reduced practice of agriculture.

On the other hand are the white communities of European origin who very recently entered the Paranaense forest. These groups brought with them a short chain productive strategy, totally different from the one practiced by the Mbya. Instead of living in harmony with the forest, they needed deforested areas to grow their protected species.

The Mbya communities integrated the Paranaense forest over 3,000 years ago without developing the notion of private property adopted by the white population that entered more recently (sixteenth century and onwards). Objectively what happened was that their "total territory" was invaded as from the sixteenth century by white groups, mostly of European origin, who had totally different strategies for appropriating land and for production. This explains the rapid disappearance of the sub-tropical forest, the establishment of short chain agro-productive systems and the multiplication of permanent urban settlements.

While the white people were appropriating space "fixing" private property territories, the eviction of the Mbya generated their underprivileged incorporation into white settlements and fewer chances to live in a traditional way for those who still remain living in the Paranaense forest, such as Yaboti. In this environment, recognized by UNESCO as a Biosphere Reserve, legal and illegal ransacking of their resources continues. This has reduced local biodiversity seriously and in some cases, irreversibly, as it has reduced the Mbya's possibilities of subsisting uniquely from the forest.

For many white people, the success of a culture is measured by grandiose buildings and objects that they produce, and the time they last. For nature, success is measured by the length of time a population, such as the Mbya, have lived in the forest without the forest or the Mbya themselves disappearing. There are peoples whose inheritance is almost immaterial, but this does not mean that they are "less evolved" or "less developed." They are peoples and cultures that have achieved what many of our civilizations have attempted but not attained: to adapt to the environment and to themselves.

The Mbya communities of Tekoa Yma and Tekoa Kapi'i Yvate have the natural right to continue living where they are today for two fundamental reasons: firstly because the area they occupy is what a hunting, fishing, gathering people with small scale agriculture needs, and secondly because that area is part of the mobile territory that their forefathers have used for centuries.

The peoples who have the most right of "ownership" of the forest are those who have lived in the forest as part of it for centuries, without the need to become its owners.

By: Raul Montenegro, FUNAM, UN Global 500 Prize, taken from “El silencioso genocidio de los Mbya Guaraní en Argentina. (O la lucha de la cadenas alimentarias cortas contra las cadenas alimentarias largas)”, e-mail: montenegro@funam.org.ar , <http://www.funam.org.ar> . The complete article, resulting from the joint work of ENDEPA and FUNAM can be accessed –in Spanish- at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Argentina/Mbya.html>