
Argentina: the struggle of the Kolla people

The "yungas" are forest lands that spread along the Andes from northern Argentina to Venezuela, and from an altitude of 500 to 3,000 metres, according to their latitude. From the floristic point of view they belong to the Amazonian Domain and their typical formation is the so called misty forest. These mountain forests maintain high levels of endemism and biodiversity, but they are being threatened by increasing deforestation, especially for crop production.

The yungas in Argentina spread in an area of about 50,000 km², part of which in the northern province of Salta. This territory has been traditionally inhabited by the Kolla nation. When the Spanish conquerors arrived in 1540, the Omaguaca, the Zenta, the Gispira and other peoples belonging to the Kolla nation were settled in that region. After centuries of discrimination and struggle -first against the European conquerors and then against the successive governments of Argentina, centralized in Buenos Aires- the existence of indigenous peoples in that country was recognized in 1985 by Law 23302. Today 24 indigenous nations -formed by more than 1,500,000 individuals- live in Argentina. The Kolla occupy the departments of Iruya, Santa Victoria, Los Andes, La Poma, Cachi and Oran in Salta province, as well as part of the neighbouring province of Jujuy, southern Bolivia and northern Chile. It has been estimated that 120,000 people, living in communities or "ayllus", belong nowadays to the Kolla nation.

Conflicts over land tenure rights between the Kolla communities and landowners are frequent. The Kolla of the communities Colanzuli, Volcan Higueras, Isla de Canas and Rio Cortaderas -that sum up 3,000 people- have fought hard for recovering Santiago Estate in the department of Iruya. After resisting the Spanish invasion for more than 110 years, the Kolla lost Santiago Estate to the hands of the invaders. The independence of Argentina was declared in 1810 and the economy of the country grew, but the situation of the Kolla did not improve, since for decades the new owners of the Estate forced the native population to work in agriculture for a miserable salary. In 1946 there was a great reaction of the indigenous peoples, who marched to Buenos Aires to claim for their rights. Two years later, Law 1012 was passed and Santiago Estate was expropriated, but the power of the sugar cane company San Martin del Tabacal was so strong in the region that the Kolla could not recover their lands. In 1950, the Spanish company Manero-Quiroc bought the estate for forest exploitation. Indigenous people were employed to cut down the trees. Their working and living conditions were terrible, but for the love of their land the Kollas resisted. According to Law 24334, put into effect in 1993, the estate was again expropriated, but once again the landowners refused to hand it to their legitimate owners and even continued to remove valuable trees from it. In August 1996 -the Pachamama (Mother Earth) month- the Kolla reacted and occupied the road, obstructing the lorries carrying the trunks. They were violently repressed by the police. But their fight was not in vain. Finally, on 19 March 1997 they officially took legal possession of Santiago Estate. "Our Mother Earth was on our side" stated Festo Chausque, one of the Kolla leaders.

A similar case of conflict is that of the Kolla communities of San Andres, Santa Cruz and Angosto de Parani in the department of Oran who are fighting for the ownership of San Andres Estate. In 1986 San Martin del Tabacal -that became a subsidiary of the American company Seaboard Corporation- donated those lands to the province of Salta to be handed over to the Kolla. Nevertheless, this was

never realized and still in January 1997 the company continued to exploit forests under a special authorization from the Government of Salta. The indigenous communities, as well as Greenpeace Argentina, have denounced this exploitation as unsustainable. To face these abuses, the Kolla communities have sued the company for damages and reclaim the effective expropriation of the estate.

Sources: Festo Cahusque. "Present situation of the indigenous peoples in Salta, Argentina", 1997. Argentinian press.