

A photograph of two young Indigenous children standing in a field of tall green grass and small white flowers. The child in the foreground is out of focus, looking towards the camera. The child in the background is in focus, looking directly at the camera. The background features several large, leafy trees under a cloudy sky.

We walk towards the white people

By Giada Connestari/Echo



“The ayoreo word Eami means forest, but it is also a synonym of world. For those who have not seen, it is very hard to understand how much their world has changed with the beginning of modernity” says Benno Glauser, philosopher and activist for the indigenous people in Paraguay.

Before the coming of white man, Chaco was an uncontaminated region covered by forest. Fourteen indigenous ethnic groups inhabited there. They lived by hunting, harvesting fruits, honey and medicinal plants, free to move from a place to another following the rhythm of seasons and rainfall regime. They were semi-naked, slept under the stars and lighted up the nights with woodfire. A complex mythology explained very precisely how to maintain this perfect balance between nature and mankind.

The first colonization took place in the early 30 by a group of Mennonites coming from Russia to escape persecutions of Communist regime. Few years later, Chaco became the theater of a war between Paraguay and Bolivia. A violent smallpox epidemic was brought from soldiers and killed almost half of the indigenous population in less than a month, spreading fear among the natives who retreated further and further into the forest. At the end of war, Mennonites were well established: they occupied the strategic water access points and they built enclosures to delimit their own landed properties. All at once, different groups of missionaries, largely called by the Mennonites, arrived to Chaco to diffuse their own religion, civilisation and bring the natives out of the forest. In the late 50, after twenty years of cultural and territorial resistance, mostly of the indigenous communities had been baptized and had left the forest to embrace the colonizers’ lifestyle.

During the last decade, the expansion of soybean production brought breeders to look for new lands. Low cost, low taxes and lacks of state control led to a new “land rush”, attracting investors to adopt the Mennonites’ cattle ranch business model. Nowadays, Chaco is one of the most important world producer of cow, exported mainly in Russia and Chile. Forest is daily cut down to create new pasture so that the region now hold the world highest deforestation rate. Natives have been displacing and live onto reservations far from their ancestral territories. All their traditional activities have become impracticable because of the biodiversity decline and drought increase. To survive they must work as laborers for the landowners, while their cultural identity is crushed by the pressure of globalization.





























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