The Ayoreo: the last isolated people outside the Amazon

Close to 150 members of the Ayoreo people in voluntary isolation survive in the Chaco region in the border between Bolivia and Paraguay. Among the signs that evidence their presence are the wholes and marks on trees; tools and huts found; footprints near bodies of water; and abandoned objects. Today, they are threatened by deforestation, the construction of roads, megafires, and the advance of the farm and cattle ranching frontier. Both countries should take measures to guarantee the protection of these peoples’ territories as well as their survival.

By Miguel Lovera and Leonardo Tamburini - July 1st, 2021

The Ayoreo are a people of hunters and gatherers whose traditional territory encompasses more than 30 million hectares of the Gran Chaco region of South America: the northern Chaco in Paraguay, the Bolivian Chaco in the department of Santa Cruz and Chiquitanía. Currently, those who adopted a sedentary lifestyle amount to 5,000 people located both in Paraguay and Bolivia. However, there are still groups living in voluntary isolation.

Most of the Ayoreo were violently forced out of their traditional territory during the second half of the 20th century and were “reduced” to small settlements, where they had to become sedentary to survive. The first encounters were registered in 1711 and 1724, when the Jesuits founded the San Ignacio de Zamucos mission with several local Ayoreo groups. In 1845, an uprising put an end to this establishment. Over a hundred years went by before there were news regarding the Ayoreo. The local group Jnupegosode got close to the Santa Cruz-Puerto Suárez railroad workers in Bolivia.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, people who worked in oil companies came into contact with them in the Paraguayan Chaco. In the 1960s, a systematic search and contact process was initiated to find the Ayoreo. It concluded with their deportation and their reduction to missionary settlements. The last case of contact and sedentarization of isolated groups in Paraguay dates back to 2004.
Evidence and testimonies of those isolated

The presence of isolated groups in Bolivia and Paraguay is known in both countries. In Bolivia, information has been collected methodic and systematically, although it has been difficult to do it on a sustained basis. In Paraguay, *Iniciativa Amotocoide* has conducted a systematic monitoring of isolated groups since 2002.

With the testimony of the sedentarized Ayoreo and the records of the signs of their presence, Iniciativa Amotocoide calculates there are at least ten small groups (or family groups), separated and with communication among them, that continue their nomadic life in the north and west of the Paraguayan Chaco. They are estimated to be between 80 and 150 people and, at least one group, is part of the local people of Totobiegosode. The others are yet to be identified.

In little over ten years, areas and routes used by nomadic groups were identified. The signs registered are varied: wholes left in trees after a recent extraction of honey; clan symbols on tree barks and cacti; tools and huts found in clearings and the delineation of new furrows; shamanic markings warning other groups of their presence or the area that can be reached without resorting to violence; footprints near bodies of water and trails in the hills; and objects left close to settlements as a sign of peace, friendship, or exchange.

Regarding the testimonies, there have been sightings of naked people holding weapons or tools, as well as voices and cries heard by non-indigenous people. One of the most important record is the testimony of elder Ayoreo members who remember relatives who never left the area and that, because of the time elapsed, it is possible to assume they are still alive.

Deforestation, usurpation and risk of contact

The advance of the land clearing endangers both the survival of the isolated peoples and their ways of life. On a daily basis, the Paraguayan Chaco loses close to 800 hectares of forest, which represents the fastest deforestation in the world. The traditional territory of the Ayoreo people is directly impacted by this ecocide and those groups living in voluntary
isolation are the most vulnerable. To this threat, we must add the building of roads, drug trafficking, the missionary groups, mining, exploratory oil drillings, and, of course, climate change. Moreover, the Paraguayan State has not yet formally recognized the existence of isolated groups, and there are no public policies created for their protection.

The advance of the economic exploitation towards their territories means the occupation of areas which are vital for the Ayoreo groups. Agrobusiness is, currently, the main reason for deforestation of the Chaco forest and, as a consequence, the Ayoreo world is being destroyed. Besides the irrecoverable loss of their habitat, this represents an exponential increase in situations that endanger those isolated: forced displacement, disease transmission, loss of food sovereignty, death, undesired contact, and violent encounters with casualties on both sides.

Sometimes, the isolated are considered intruders when they enter private property. Due to the increasing water shortage, they are forced to risk being exposed when they get close to cattle ranches at night in order to extract water from the cutwaters. The same strategy is used to collect salt.

In this context, we should highlight that Paraguay has the highest percentage of land concentration in the world. According to its Gini coefficient (0.93), Paraguay almost reaches perfect inequality. Most estates, cleared due to monoculture plantations or cattle ranching, were acquired illegitimately. The Ayoreo lands began to be usurped during the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) and the governments led by the Colorado Party (1989-2008). Based on privileges granted by the government and legal trickery, the alleged new owners do not acknowledge any right to land previous to the one granted by the States. The conflict usually causes protests and killings, which is the reason why violence is increasing in the area.

At the same time land concentration and deforestation are happening, the isolated Ayoreo still practice their nomadic way of life and walk the same migratory routes used by previous generations. According to their cosmovision, there are no political borders and modern legality does not guarantee land ownership. Their migratory routes are increasingly busy and
fragmented by people, fences, roads, and the facilities of the extractive industries. The consequence is obvious: the occupation of their lands negatively affects traditional practices of the Ayoreo people living in voluntary isolation.

**Fires, roads and forced evangelization**

In 2012, in a hearing before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), it was evidenced that the accelerated growth of the farming frontier in the territories where the isolated Ayoreo live had increased sightings in the Chaco region. That same year, the Bolivian government passed Supreme Decree No. 1286 establishing an area of 536,568 hectares where land protection measures would be applied before conducting interdisciplinary studies. This area was located in the Ñembi Guasu Area of Conservation and Ecological Importance, which is part of both the Kaa-ïya National Park and the Otuquis National Park, within the jurisdiction of the Guaraní Indigenous Autonomy of Charagua Iyambae (bordering Paraguay). However, the studies required by the decree were not conducted and the measures were not implemented.

The most catastrophic event, which affected the roads used by isolated and non-isolated Ayoreo families, occurred during August and October 2019 with the forest fires in Chiquitanía and the Bolivian Chaco. These fires acquired unseen dimensions. According to the Authority of Fiscalization and Social Control of Forests and Land, the surface affected amounted to 3,519,843 hectares, while other sources suggest it reached more than 5 million. The fire impacted mostly the ecosystems defined in the Supreme Decree No. 1286 within the Guaraní protected area of Ñembi Guasu, bordering Paraguay. With this catastrophe, it is possible to assume that the areas where the nomadic isolated people lives have been absolutely modified, causing the decree to be mostly outdated.

The expansion of the road network represents a great impact on the land, with traumatic and irreversible effects on the lives of the isolated groups. An open road is the first step towards a new clearing, the illegal extraction of precious wood, poachers, and speculative developers. If the roads are paved, the impact is even greater. Infrastructure works have negative effects derived from deforestation and the loss of vital ecosystem services for
indigenous and non-indigenous people. To the isolated, it also represents a disruption to the unity of their land, a new reference, and a new obstacle to overcome.

In 2020, a project by the Ministry of Public Works and Communications of Paraguay became news. It would allow the building of a road across Defensores del Chaco National Park and would permanently alter the life of the isolated and the animals of the area. It would be the second heavy-traffic high-speed road to cross the park. According to the project, they are planning bridges and sewers over the streams and over the river Timane. This means it will be considered a national route, which will greatly affect the environment.

Finally, even though it is still considered inadmissible to contact the isolated groups “to save them and teach them the word of Christ”, the missionary action continues during the 21st century. In both countries, the church known as A Nuevas Tribus aims at evangelizing the Ayoreo people, constantly organizing international and intercommunity trips. Consequently, the Ayoreo are forced to deny their cosmovision due to decisions imposed by Christian missionaries, which also represents a form of ethnocide.

**Determinants of genocide**

The violent transformation and usurpation of traditional Ayoreo land force those isolated to abandon some regions. Escaping is always traumatic and carries risks: they may find intruders in the forests and, many times, the invaders carry out manhunts to get rid of them and occupy the land, which is a clear example of ethnic cleansing. The elders who had experienced these situations and who are now sedentarized explain that it is very difficult and painful to try to understand from their cultural perspective what is happening in the forest. Fear of the unknown leads to a state of tension that causes social and individual stress. Sometimes, moving away is not an option so they remain close to the risk area not knowing how long the danger will persist.

The Ayoreo groups living in voluntary isolation are experimenting a worsening of their already difficult living conditions. On the Bolivian side of the border, the Guaraní Indigenous Autonomy of Charagua is considering the option of creating a special category of protected area. It would be an intangible good in order to guarantee the autonomous decision of no
contact of the isolated Ayoreo. The demarcation of an intangible land would mean a double layer of protection and would allow them to recompose a land that has been affected by unprecedented environmental catastrophes. Having access to land is a fundamental condition to avoid contact with the national society.

The different threats described lead to genocide, which is encouraged by the development model and is actively supported by the governments. Those who are part of the State and are responsible for this crime must make it come to an end immediately by implementing different actions: limiting the access of individuals, returning traditional lands to the Ayoreo people, stopping the traffic and the advancement in the territory, and saving the ecosystems affected by the fires. The Paraguayan and Bolivian States have the power to take these measures. Political will is the only thing needed to stop the genocide.

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