Memoirs of Mapuche Women Relatives of Disappeared Detainees in Chile

During the last civil-military dictatorship, the forced disappearances and political executions of members of the Mapuche people must be framed as a continuum of colonial and genocidal violence. Despite the pain, Mapuche families continue to struggle for truth and justice. In September, the anniversary of the coup, an illustrated, bilingual book will be presented that brings together the memories of seven women from Araucania who remember their fallen relatives and embrace a political horizon of dignity and human rights.

By Débora Astudillo Ramos and María José Lucero - June 1st 2023

In Chile, during the civil-military dictatorship (1973-1990) there were numerous human rights violations. The Mapuche ancestral territory, Wallmapu, was no exception: dozens of Mapuche people were murdered, kidnapped, tortured, raped and forcibly disappeared. Their stories and identities have been made invisible throughout history and in the construction of the country’s memory.

These forced disappearances were surrounded by racist and institutional violence, not only against those who were disappeared, but also against their families, mainly women. The state and civil violence deployed in Wallmapu can only be understood from a historical perspective that accounts for the complex relations between the Mapuche communities and the political-economic elites of this territory.

In the case of the Mapuche people who disappeared, these are experiences that cannot be detached from their historical particularity. The Mapuche people have historically inhabited the territory located to the south of what are today the political-administrative territories of Chile and Argentina: Ngulumapu, to the west of the Andes Mountains, and the Puelmapu on the eastern side. During the formation of the nation-states, the usurpation of Mapuche territory took place through colonial and genocidal projects between 1866 and 1885, on both
sides of the mountain range. This process has generated conflicts with the governments of Chile and Argentina to this day.

**Forced disappearances and the absence of peace**

In March 1990, Chile returned to democratic rule. Years later, in 2006, Chilean Carabineros (Police) forcibly disappeared José Huenante Huenante, a 16-year-old teenager who was alone with his neighborhood friends in Puerto Montt. His life had been marked by economic poverty and social inequalities. He was the first detainee to disappear since the return to democracy.

Forced disappearances are a very characteristic tool of terror of the military dictatorships of the Southern Cone. Although the extreme violence and forced disappearances practiced by the military juntas were not exclusively directed at native peoples, they have been part of the continuum of colonial violence against the Mapuche people. In the case of Chile, there are more political executions than disappearances, but in the Araucanía Region, which is part of the Wallmapu, this situation is reversed, as there are more disappeared than politically executed. This suggests a much more acute type of repression than in the rest of the country.

The violence of the military dictatorship impacted the social fabric of Mapuche communities in the Araucanía Region. The Center for Research and Promotion of Human Rights (CINPRODH) in Temuco estimates 171 victims in the region: 51 were Mapuche, all male, of whom 20 were politically executed and 31 disappeared. The uncertainty surrounding their whereabouts and the conditions in which they are found (alive or dead) causes great pain in the families. Some researchers indicate that this is a permanent form of torture due to the withholding of information, the lack of justice, the degrading treatment, and the pain and anguish that is endured over time.

Worse still, the families believe that the spirits of the Mapuche disappeared are suffering underwater, in the rivers or in the sea, as many of these bodies were thrown into the water to make them disappear. In political and cultural terms, the mourning of the indigenous people in the face of absence is different because many families do not have the Christian conception of returning to meet their relatives in heaven or in the "afterlife". As long as the bodies of the disappeared are not found and there is no funeral farewell, the spirits do not rest in peace and the family members cannot hope to see them again.
A book to make memory

Despite the victims' stories of pain and systematic violence, the families continue to resist and build memories from different spaces. Most of them are women: mothers, wives, daughters, sisters, granddaughters and nieces who continue the search for truth and justice for their disappeared loved ones. In this context, they have generated bonds of accompaniment together with other women and family organizations, they have continued with the judicial processes and have insisted on finding the truth. In this way, they also seek to make their stories public and, in so doing, to destigmatize their disappeared and give them dignity through their memories.

To this end, their experiences will be part of a bilingual and illustrated book, coordinated by María José Lucero, as part of her doctoral research in the Doctoral Program in Social Anthropology at the Research Center for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social- CIESAS). The book was written collectively from oral memory, the illustrations are by Cassandra Martínez and the translation is done by Paula Pilquinao, Elizabeth Nuñez and José Ortiz. The work is possible thanks to the support of the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (IWGIA) and the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Chair of the Catholic University of Temuco de la Araucanía.

The book has illustrations that depict both the memories and the remembrances of their loved ones, whether they are working, playing ball, drinking maté or simply smiling. Thus, it not only portrays the pain in the face of multiple violence but also the love and humanity with which the disappeared detainees need to be remembered. The authors are seven women who narrate their memories, full of pain and resistance to the indignity caused by the civil-military dictatorship in the Wallmapu and, above all, of love and resilience to remember those who should never be forgotten.

In one part, Elena Huina, accompanied by her granddaughter, Débora Astudillo Ramos, narrates the memories of her husband and her two disappeared children. Zoila Lincooqueo passed away without having seen justice for her son Nelson, the first disappeared detainee in the region; her testimony is being reviewed by her son Hugo Curiñir Lincooqueo. Mercedes Huaiquiel remembers her husband Don Gervasio, with whom she had seven sons and
daughters. Lorenza Cheuquepán narrates the life of her brother, who disappeared when he was only 15 years old. Finally, María and Cecilia Huenante, aunt and mother of José Huenante, the first person to be disappeared since the return of democracy, give their testimonies.

**Neither forgiving nor forgetting**

The book will be presented in September, 50 years after the military coup in Chile, and aims to commemorate the victims of the dictatorship, but also those who continue to build political horizons around dignity and human rights. The Center for Sociocultural Studies of the Catholic University of Temuco will oversee the presentation, with the participation of the authors themselves, most of them belonging to Mapuche communities near Temuco and Puerto Montt.

Over the years, as the granddaughter of a disappeared person, I have accompanied my mother in the search for truth and justice. Although my uncles and grandfather had their political views, we continue to fight, regardless of those views, now by sharing ideals, visions, and values that focus on a fairer and more equal country. These were also the dreams of our family members. They fought for these dreams and because of that, they are no longer with us. Fifty years after the fateful day when our loved ones were taken from us, we continue to fight for truth, justice, non-repetition, and an end to impunity.

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