



The Inventions of Elal

Tehuelche People / Argentina

The Tehuelches or Chóneks say that the land of Patagonia was just ice and snow when the swan crossed it, flying over it for the first time. He came from beyond the sea, from the divine island where Kóoch had created life and where Elal had been born. Elal was the one the swan had carried, on his white back, to deposit on the summit of El Chaltén.¹

The Tehuelches also say that the rest of the birds flew behind the swan, that the fish followed them through the water and that the land animals crossed the ocean on each other's backs. Thus the new land was populated with guanacos, hares and foxes. Ducks and flamingos lived in the lagoons, and Andean sparrows, tawny-throated dotterels and condors crossed the naked Patagonian sky for the first time. So Elal was not alone in El Chaltén. The birds brought him food and sheltered him in their soft feathers. For three days and three nights he remained at the summit, contemplating the frozen desert before him, which his heroic lineage would, in time, transform forever.

When Elal started the descent from the mountain, Kókeskhe and Shie, cold and snow, met him. The two brothers who, until then, had dominated Patagonia, attacked him furiously. They were aided by the ice and Máip, the murderous wind. But Elal drove everyone away by banging two stones together, which he had picked up from the ground. This was his first invention: fire. They say that Elal was always wise, that from a very young age he knew how to hunt animals with the bow and arrow which he himself had invented. They say that he drove the

¹ Located in the Andean region of Santa Cruz, known today as Fitz Roy Mountain.

sea away with his arrows so as to enlarge the earth, that he created the seasons, tamed the beasts and ordered life. Furthermore that, one day, he modelled clay statues and thus created men and women: the Tehuelches.

To them, he confided the secrets of hunting, he taught them how to differentiate the tracks of animals, how to track them and how to decoy them. He also showed them how to make weapons and light fire and make warm fur blankets. And he taught them how to prepare leather for the tents, how to make it smooth and waterproof ... and so many, many other things that only he knew.

They say that even the Moon and the Sun are where they are because of Elal, who threw them from the Earth because they did not want to give him their daughter as a wife. They say that the sea grows with the new moon because the girl, abandoned by the hero in the ocean, wants to approach the sky, from where her mother calls her. They also say that there would be no desire, or death, if it were not because, on one occasion, a very long time ago, when men and animals were the same thing, Elal punished a couple of sea lions. Finally, Elal, the sage, protector of the Tehuelches, finished his work.

They say that, shortly before dawn one day, he gathered the Chónek to say goodbye to them and give them his final instructions. He announced that he was leaving, told them not to pay him honours, but asked them to transmit his teachings to their children, and that their children teach them to their own, and so on, so that the secrets of the Tehuelches would never die. And when the Sun was already looming on the horizon, Elal called the swan, his old companion. He climbed onto his back and pointed him towards the fiery East. Then the swan moved away from the cliff, ran a stretch and took flight over the sea. Leaning over the bird that was carrying him, and stroking his neck, Elal asked him to let him know when he was tired. When the swan flagged, Elal shot arrows down and, with each arrow, an island rose up from the water making it possible for the swan to alight and rest. They say that these islands can still be seen from the Patagonian coast and that in some, very far away, where no living being can reach, Elal has his home. Sitting in front of bonfires that are never extinguished, he listens to the stories that the resurrected Tehuelches tell him. They come every once in a while to stay with him, guided by the magnanimous

Wendéunk, who is the tutelary spirit who keeps track of the actions of the Tehuelches, and leads them, after their death, to meet Elal. □

Adaptation courtesy of Aborigin Argentino (2017).

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Comments

The first news that came to Europe about the Tehuelches was brought by the survivors of the Magellan expedition, which would end up circumnavigating our planet. They spoke of the ‘Patagonian giants’, some very big people that Magellan and his men encountered during the winter they spent in the bay of San Julián, in the remote south of the American continent. Apparently, the ‘Patagonians’ –the name given to them by Magellan from *patagão*, or ‘big foot’– were up to 6 feet and 7 inches tall. Taking into account that, until around 1800, the average height of Europeans was 5 feet, it is not surprising that they thought they had discovered a race of giants. However, eventually, the Tehuelche giants would be decimated by diseases like measles, smallpox and influenza, which had been brought to these lands by Europeans, mainly Spanish, following Magellan’s voyage.

But, possibly, the most degrading historical episode perpetrated by Europeans against the ethnic groups of the Southern Cone was that of the ‘human zoos’. In the second half of the 19th century, a German zoologist, a wild animal tamer and entrepreneur named Carl Hagenbeck introduced a new ‘attraction’ in Europe which went beyond the nefarious exhibition of exotic animals. This was the exhibiting of ‘exotic’ human beings. To grow his business at the Hamburg Tierpark Zoo, Hagenbeck organised ‘tours’ of human beings from African, Asian, American and Pacific Islander cultures. Such ‘tours’, took place throughout Europe: Germany, Belgium, France, Switzerland, England, Spain and Italy. They involved kidnapping, forced labour and the obscene exhibition of entire families, who were shown to the ‘civilised’ Europeans as if they were wild monsters.

It is worth noting the case of a Tehuelche family that Hagenbeck kidnapped in 1879. This family was exhibited in Dresden and Berlin,

and after two months was returned to Chile, because the indigenous man, named Pitioche, was suffering from severe depression, according to the records of that time' (Pimentel, 2015, p. 106).

Worse luck befell a family of Selkham (Ona) origin who were abducted by the Belgian whaler Maurice Maître for their display at the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris. Of the eleven people kidnapped – and brought in chains– only six survived after their 'tour' through France and Belgium.

As already highlighted in Volume 0 of *The Earth Stories Collection*, the western worldview, based on cold rationalism, cannot lead to anything other than a ruthless and mechanistic observation and analysis of the surrounding reality. The 'human zoos' were the most extreme and despicable examples of such an approach. But this is accompanied by human greed, to which a science without ethics –a science without conscience– never set limits. This unbridled greed has led to economies trying to obtain benefits from everything that can be found anywhere in the world, a world colonised by powers which boast of being 'civilised'.

Sources

Aborigen Argentino (2017 enero). Leyenda chónék: Los inventos de Elal [A Chónék Legend: The Inventions of Elal]. Available on <http://www.aborigenargentino.com.ar/leyenda-chonke-los-inventos-elal/>.

Pimentel, C. (2015). Monstruos en cautiverio: Fotografía de fueguinos en zoológicos humanos y racismo [Monsters in Captivity: Photograph of Fuegians in Human Zoos and Racism]. *Sans Soleil: Estudios de la Imagen*, 7, 103-115.

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 4b: Transmit to future generations values, traditions, and institutions that support the long-term flourishing of Earth's human and ecological communities.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Principle 4: Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

Principle 12b: Affirm the right of indigenous peoples to their spirituality, knowledge, lands and resources and to their related practice of sustainable livelihoods.

Principle 14b: Promote the contribution of the arts and humanities as well as the sciences in sustainability education.

