



The Two *Machi*

Mapuche People – Chile, Argentina

The *machi* are the religious doctors who live in our Mapuche Nation. They communicate with the supernatural world of spirits and with the Mapu, the land of the Mapuche men and women.

Many years ago, when I was a small child, I went on vacation trips the Mapu, where I stayed as long as I could, whether it was winter or summer. In winter it was the tradition to sit round the fire pit and, while our grandmother was very calmly drinking her *mate*, she told us stories, or *epew*, as we Mapuche call them.

When I was young, my grandmother Suyay –Hope– was invited to a community called Xaixaiko, which was located on the north shore of Lake Kalafkén. There were many waterfalls there, and near one of them lived the machi Aylen Kütral –Ember Fire. Formerly, machi used to visit the waterfall to offer their *pillantún* –prayers. As offerings they would take an animal and a bird in gratitude for the favours granted. *Werkén*, *machi* and *lonko* were consecrated at this waterfall.

Two machi lived in the *lof* –community–, Antü Kuyén –Sun and Moon– and Aylen Kütral –Ember Fire. They were both much loved and respected by the community where they lived. Aylen Kütral was always under the wing of the lonko –boss, head–, and participated in talks, parliaments and important meetings.

They say that, one day, at a meeting of several lonko, the two machi disagreed on various points that were being discussed on how to lead the community to make perfect treaties. All this was in order to

keep their people in peace and harmony. The lonko recommended that Aylen Kütral refrained from contradicting the machi Antü Kuyén, because she was a very powerful machi, a machi of great *newén* – spiritual strength. The lonko said that it would be very difficult for her, Aylen, to bring Antü down.

But Aylen was stubborn in her views and began to figure out how to achieve greater powers, in order to confront this powerful machi. Some of the grandmothers suggested that she bring a black-fleeced lamb and a white-feathered rooster to the waterfall to offer a prayer. In this way, the spirits that inhabited Aylen could reach an untamed force in order to agree to all her requests. But she did not think about the consequences, nor did she think about the possibility of harm to her community.

The lonko realised, late, that Aylen had got what she was looking for, since Aylen had already started a proxy war: a war between two machi. Machi Antü announced to the lof –community– that she was undergoing an invasion of *wekufes* –evil spirits–, among them *chonchones* and *anchimallenes*, who were attacking her machi spiritual strength. Machi Antü felt powerless, but through prayer she rose again like a Phoenix to protect her people. However, Antü soon realised that her family was also being attacked over and over again, from her grandfather to her youngest son, both of whom had fallen ill. So, the machi transformed herself into a shield in order to defend her beloved family, and this was to the point of almost dying.

The fighting between the two machi lasted several years, during which the people in the lof suffered from many diseases, as well as food shortages, droughts and poor harvests. During all those years, machi Antü was unable to help her community as she was having to defend herself from evil spirits.

So, one day, the lonko gathered the *kimche* –the wise people of the community–, the older ones, the *werkén* –messengers– and asked all his *lanmieng* –brothers and sisters:

‘What shall we do, my people? How can will we protect ourselves from these evil spirits that machi Aylen has brought in our lives? She is no longer fit to spiritually guide us as a community.’

So they made a decision. They brought a white horse, a lamb, beans, lentils, wheat and vegetable seeds to the foot of the waterfall, and spent four days and four nights praying to the Chaw –owner of the Earth, of human beings, of the four elements (fire, air, water, earth) and the universe. They presented all these foods and animals as an offering with the sole request of reversing this bad energy, which was harming their *lanmieng* –brothers and sisters– with droughts, hunger and diseases. They also made a *pillantún* –a prayer– for the *machi Antü*.

On the fourth day of prayer it began to drizzle. Everyone screamed with joy, thanking the Chaw, and the *lonko* sent a *werkén* to look for *machi Antü*, who was prostrate and ill in her *ruka* –home. But she was already dressed in all her *machi* attire with her *kultrún*, which is a sacred percussion instrument, a ceremonial instrument made of animal leather and native wood. The *machi*, along with her community, thanked the Chaw for all the favours granted. Finally, the *machi Antü* received, once again, all the gifts that the Chaw, the universe and the Earth give to the *machis*.

Machi Aylen was stripped of her powers and relegated to live in another community, while many young men gathered with white flags, in gratitude for the food and water that fell in abundance. They also, along with the children, women and elderly, hung black flags to attract the rains. All of them gave thanks with their *afafanes*, which is a cry of encouragement used to raise energy:

‘Ayayayayayayayayayayyyyy!’

This energy, or *newén*, was offered at the foot of the waterfall of Lake *Kalafkén*, which lies to the south of present-day Chile, in the Mapuche Nation. It is in my *Wallmapu*, the place where I was born, surrounded by volcanoes, seas, lakes and mountains. □

Adapted by Nandy San Martín, educator, researcher, composer and intercultural performer of Mapuche and Latin American music (2020).

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Comments

If the word 'indomitable' can be applied to any indigenous people of the Americas, this people is, without a doubt, the Mapuche People. Following the arrival of the Spanish in 1536 –following the Battle of Reinohuelén– the Mapuche became a constant problem for the Spanish crown for more than two hundred years.

In fact, this conflict would be referred to as the 'Indian Flanders'. This was because it caused the greatest number of casualties of Spanish troops based in the New World, who lost battles in the open field (Guerra de Arauco, nd). Then there would come a time when the Spanish invasion would desist from continuing their advance beyond the Biobío River, due to the fierce Mapuche resistance.

It was in the 19th Century, when the Chilean government gradually subdued indigenous resistance through legal colonisation. In 1823, they promulgated a law which stated: 'what is currently owned by law by the indigenous people is declared to them in perpetual and secure property' (Nouaille, 2010, p. 778). This was a poisoned gift because, once private property was established and accepted by the Mapuche, what followed was a succession of laws which, little by little, would deprive the Mapuche communities of their lands. Eventually the Chilean authorities put these peoples in the hands of protected settlers and merchants.

Progressively, different governments assimilated the Mapuche Nation into the ways of life of Chilean society, granting legal privileges to only a few of its community members. This was a political strategy that would result in dissent, conflicts and internal divisions between the Mapuche themselves. Slowly, throughout the 19th Century, the original way of life would be degraded, while the Chilean governments took advantage of the division of communal property and its conversion into individual property by continuing to introduce settlers and companies to the area that once had been the Wallmapu, the ancestral lands of the Mapuche (Nouaille, 2010).

The process of destruction of the Mapuche way of life would continue during the 20th Century, with a high point of repression, starting in 1979, with the fascist dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet and the establishment of the neoliberal economic model

throughout the country. While detention on suspicion of activities against the dictatorship in Chilean cities was 6%, with the population of Mapuche communities, arrests rose to 20% (Nouaille, 2010).

A legacy of the Pinochet dictatorship was the introduction of an anti-terrorist law which controlled the Mapuche for decades. It repressed their violent protests, including the destruction of private property such as trucks and machinery belonging to the logging companies that had invaded their territories. In fact, the Inter-American Court has repeatedly condemned Chile for this law (Molina, 2020), while Amnesty International has made its complaint public as recently as May 2018 (Amnesty International, 2018).

It is striking that, with 12.7% of the population being of indigenous origin, Chile fails to recognise the existence of indigenous 'peoples', but rather 'ethnic groups', which prevents any legal status and points to an obsolete conception of the idea of the state (Molina, 2020).

But, at least among the Chilean population, it seems that things are beginning to change. According to an August 2020 survey, 93% of those surveyed among the general population of Chile are in favour of a new constitution recognising the Mapuche. In addition, 73% think that this indigenous people should have official representation in the national congress. At the root of all this is the progressive recognition, among popular sectors of the Chilean population, of their Mapuche origin. Moreover, many Chileans are now proudly valuing their previously hidden ancestry (Molina, 2020).

However, the conflict between the Mapuche People and the Chilean State will last as long as the Chilean economic model continues to be based on the exploitation of natural resources, since a good part of these resources are found in Araucanía, the ancestral Mapuche lands.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 13f: Strengthen local communities, enabling them to care for their environments, and assign environmental responsibilities to the levels of government where they can be carried out most effectively.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Principle 11b: Promote the active participation of women in all aspects of economic, political, civil, social, and cultural life as full and equal partners, decision makers, leaders, and beneficiaries.

Principle 13b: Support local, regional and global civil society, and promote the meaningful participation of all interested individuals and organizations in decision making.

Principle 13e: Eliminate corruption in all public and private institutions.

Principle 16b: Implement comprehensive strategies to prevent violent conflict and use collaborative problem solving to manage and resolve environmental conflicts and other disputes.

The Way Forward: Life often involves tensions between important values. This can mean difficult choices. However, we must find ways to harmonize diversity with unity, the exercise of freedom with the common good, short-term objectives with long-term goals.

