



THE GUARDIANS OF THE MOST VIRGIN LANDS OF THE GRAN CHACO

The Ayoreo Totobiegosode are the only indigenous people in voluntary isolation in America outside the Amazon. From Paraguay, as forced guardians of their forest, the South American Gran Chaco, they fight to protect thousands of trees from illegal logging which even continues in the midst of the global crisis caused by covid-19.



oachers, drug traffickers, Christian missionaries, and one of the highest deforestation rates in the world threaten the voluntary isolation of the Totobiegosode Ayoreo people. The Ayoreo, who have been forced from the forest, must overcome the shock of adapting to industrialized society, and furthermore, face the deforestation that never stops.

By just using Google Maps, it can be observed how the Ayoreo ancestral territory, which previously occupied 30 million hectares of virgin forests between Bolivia and Paraguay, is being razed, and replaced by agricultural activities. In 250,000 hectares of forests, species such as the white quebracho, and other centenary Chaco species, are being cut down each year to produce the charcoal that is sent to European and American barbecues, according to studies by the NGO Guyra Paraguay.

"We do not want more contacts, this is useful to us; our habitat continues to exist; we want to be part of neither the clearing, nor the livestock farming. We do not want to be laborers for the ranches, and live in concentration camps," Tagüide Picanerai says, one of the spokesmen for the Totobiegosode Ayoreo, the only one who lives in Asunción, the Paraguayan capital, where he studies at the university to be a teacher.

Tagüide speaks Ayoreo, Guaraní, and Spanish (the last two, official languages of Paraguay), and he is the main link between the Totobiegosode clans, one of the seven Ayoreo subgroups, a people made up of 8,000 people bordering Bolivia and Paraguay. His parents lived in the woods until they were literally forced to leave in 1986. He was born two years later in Campo Loro, a refugee center where missionaries confined different ethnic groups from the Chaco who were exiled since 1970 during the military dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, the longest in South America (1954-1989).

It is night in Chaidí, a name in the Ayoreo language means seat, the village of wooden huts made of Palo Santo and dirt floors. Around 200 Totobiegosode people who were forcibly expelled from their nomadic lives in the virgin forests of the Gran Chaco live there. Violent contacts of loggers, traffickers, and the military have affected all of the original inhabitants of the Chaco from European colonization, but a part of the Totobiegosode Ayoreo have managed to resist, and maintain their way of life until today.

Chaidí also means "refuge" in his mother tongue, because this is where the majority of those who were expelled from the forest by missionaries and the military have been staying in the last 20 years. This community lives in what anthropologists call "a situation of initial contact with the surrounding society," which includes us: journalists, ranchers, loggers, missionaries, residents of the capital, the State, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), sects, real estate, foreign investors.

FACTSHEET

CASE: Ayoreo totobiegosode

LOCATION: Alto Paraguay

SUBJECT / HUMAN RIGHTS AFFECTED:
1- Forest Affairs 1.1- Deforestation

**JUDICIAL/GOVERNMENTAL/
INTERNATIONAL STATUS OF THE
CASE:** in litigation with the
State, and with a precautionary
measure from the Inter-American
Commission on Human Rights

NUMBER OF FAMILIES AFFECTED:
100 approximately

BRIEF DESCRIPTION: The Ayoreo Totobiegosode are the only indigenous people in voluntary isolation in America outside of the Amazon. From Paraguay, as forced guardians of their forest, the Gran Chaco, they fight to protect millions of trees and their own lives.

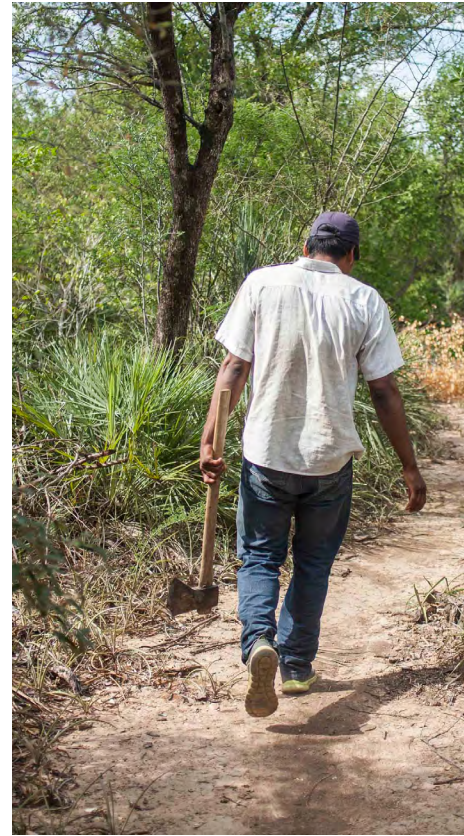
Chaidí is far away in time, and space. After about 500 kilometers of travel from the capital, passing wetlands that parrots, crows, jaguars, anteaters, armadillos and snakes visit, upon reaching the city of Filadelfia, the largest city in the Chaco and the least populated region of Paraguay, there are still two hours of off-road driving remaining on almost a hundred kilometers of muddy roads.

Together with his father and the rest of the adult men in the community, Tagüide, armed with a shotgun and a GPS (global positioning system), patrols the communal lands titled in the name of his people after more than two decades of judicial struggle. At the request of the Totobiegosode Ayoreo, the non-governmental organization, GAT initiated legal-administrative procedures before the Paraguayan government in 1993 for the restitution of 550,000 hectares of virgin forest located in Alto Paraguay department. It is only a fraction of its traditional territory, estimated to be 2.8 million hectares in Paraguay. Ayoreo Totobiegosode was recognized in 2001 as a Natural, and Cultural Heritage (tangible and intangible) by Paraguay, but so far only about 140,000 hectares have been titled, and they are practically the last virgin remnants of the Chaco in the country. They roam the territory brimming with hot air and dry land to document invasions, and to drive out loggers and cattle ranchers who abuse their power by taking forests with their machines, and lands with their fences.

There is less forest each time. More and more trees are falling every day that are neither seen, nor heard in the capitals of the world, but are like earthquakes for people who live in the forest and with the forest, as well as for the flora and fauna of the Gran Chaco, and of all of America. There is less forest every time. Perpetually, there are fewer trees, plants and animals.

During one of their patrols in June 2020, the Ayoreo Totobiegosode group of environmental guards discovered yellow tractors, and bulldozers similar to those used to tear down buildings. In less than 48 hours, those thunderous machines destroyed 800 hectares of forest. An immense area is now covered with tree stumps, and tumbled land, and upside-down roots of centuries-old trees are broken and uprooted. No birds remain. The Ayoreo took photos, and made a complaint to the Prosecutor's Office. As of August, they were waiting for someone from the Public Ministry to even appear to verify the facts, and begin to prosecute the culprits.

The destroyed area is a corridor where the jonoine urasade-Totobiegosode, a subgroup of Ayoreo, Tagüide's direct relatives, his father Porai, and other Ayoreo groups such as the Garaygosode, and Guidaigosode usually travel (or used to pass through). Known so far, the jonoine urasade are the only human group living in voluntary isolation in all of America outside the Amazon Basin. In the heart of the Gran Chaco, living in groups of about fifty people, hunting, and gathering, exercising their right of self-determination, and maintaining their nomadic lifestyle within the forest, recognized by the Inter-American Human Rights System and by the Paraguayan Constitution itself.



A UNIQUE CASE IN SOUTH AMERICA



There are only 120 isolated groups of people remaining in the entire American continent, the majority on the border of Brazil with Venezuela, Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. They know what is out there: armed ranch guards, drug traffickers, and timber smugglers, religious missionaries, and corrupt prosecutors. And they dislike it. Environmental conservation specialists agree with the Ayoreo: their survival depends on stopping deforestation and on securing their land titles.

The Ayoreo are one of the nineteen indigenous peoples of Paraguay, and as has happened with the others, they have become forced guardians against deforestation, in this case, in the second largest forest in South America, the Gran Chaco, shared between Argentina (60%), Paraguay (23%), Bolivia (13%), and Brazil (4%).

This immensely valuable ecosystem is one of the places on the planet with the fastest growth of deforestation. Paraguay was the most deforested country in South America from 1990 to 2015 according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Now, it remains in second position according to the Global Forest Watch (GFW) satellite system. Since 2010, the organization Guyra Paraguay has been monitoring all land of the Gran Chaco Americano (Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia) that have undergone a change of use. As of June 2018, there were 2,925,030 hectares; in June 2020, the loss of forest area reached 33,959 hectares which is almost twice the size of the city of Buenos Aires, and more than three times that of Asunción.

The calculation of the NGO Guyra Paraguay is that around 250,000 hectares of forests are destroyed each year in the Western zone. Around 1,400 hectares per day, about seven trees per

second are felled here, where large landowners such as former Paraguayan president Horacio Cartes, and where Spanish real estate companies such as Grupo San José, or Brazilian real estate companies such as Yaguareté Pora, buy indigenous ancestral lands that have not yet been titled in the indigenous people's favor, and they obtain environmental licenses to remove the forests with neither prior consultation, nor anticipated reparation to the indigenous people communities who claim it.

Until the middle of the 20th century, the Ayoreo inhabited a territory in the north of the Chaco which exceeded 30 million hectares (300,000 km²) in what are now two different countries: Paraguay, and Bolivia. They practically occupied all of the space within the Boreal Chaco defined by the Paraguay, Pilcomayo, Parapetí, and Río Grande rivers.

Up to the beginning of the forced contacts by the surrounding society around 1945 in Bolivia, and a little before 1960 in Paraguay, both this territory and the number of members, around five thousand people, remained unchanged.

“As gatherers and hunters, the Ayoreo do neither try to dominate, nor transform nature, or the world. They are totally dependent on what nature offers them. Consequently, the Ayoreo neither destroy, nor change their environment because their survival is



only possible if the balance of nature is not altered,” as explained by the Amotocodie Initiative studies.

The Totobiegosode knew our society from 1979 through the American evangelical group “New Tribes Mission”, who entered their territory to “evangelize” them by force and, incidentally, transferred them as semi-slave laborers to cattle ranches.

The missionaries still exert influence in their daily life, an obsession of this organization that lasts to this day since it maintains constant visits to the communities, and a place in the area to which it tries to attract the indigenous population under the excuse “of teaching them the word of God”.

Since then, more and more Totobiegosode have been forced to leave the forest, either in violent clashes, or when they had nowhere to go. This is the case of Ingoi Etacori, 40 years of age, and Carateba Picanere, age 70, who both left the jungle in 2004

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when they were found near the edge of a road built by owners of small nearby farms. Etacori still has the marks on the head from the braided hair that the culture of the Totobiegosode dictates to wear. His father and three brothers still remain in the forest, he reminisces, while holding several green parrots as he stands at the door of his wooden hut.

Tagüide sums up the situation with certain words:

—Without land, there is no future; we would no longer exist; we would be threatened with extinction. For the isolated it is even more drastic because they do not want to leave the jungle, and when the machines enter, they are in fear.



THE COLONIZATION OF THE CHACO



The colonization of the Chaco began after the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-1870), in which Brazil and Argentina invaded, and severely weakened Paraguay, which at that time was autonomous and independent, with an economic surplus, and with the highest percentage of literacy in the region. In addition to the millionaire

war riots and the occupation of the country for twelve years, the regional powers forced Paraguay to be saddled with a huge debt to repair damages that could not be paid from the public treasury.

The solution taken to deal with this military extortion was the sale of almost the entire Chaco territory on international stock exchanges. Since then, landowners, and wealthy families from Argentina, Brazil, Spain, England, and even Korea have been buying huge amounts of land without ever considering the opinions of indigenous peoples and the implications wrought upon them.

This is summarized by lawyer Óscar Ayala of the Codehupy, Coordinadora de Derechos Humanos de Paraguay [Paraguayan Human Rights Coordinator], who has been collaborating with the indigenous people of Paraguay to recover their lands for more than two decades. According to Ayala, neoliberalism did not appear in the region in the 1970s, it reared its head in Paraguay in the 1800s.



Ayala explains that foreign capital companies have also seen this region as an area to exploit by logging without restraint, perhaps due to the scarcity of institutional framework and the fragility of protection for indigenous peoples, or to its low taxes, thus, occupying areas of indigenous peoples' domain that are increasingly cornered within this context.

Paraguayan legislation allows, once the environmental license has been granted, to deforest 75 percent of the forest on a specific land, an allowance which, in Lovera's words, does not serve to maintain the continuity of the forest that flora and fauna require:

"Who guarantees that the forest mass is unified? From the legal, and scientific points of view, the licenses are all questionable. The Government of Paraguay has specialized in selling those licenses without critically evaluating them; and by doing so, it has condemned the entire country to deforestation, facilitating the

salinization of all these soils to extreme levels, and forming larger, and larger deserts in what used to be the forest," Ayala denounced sadly.

The pandemic has reached Chaidí, and it is already silently traveling the immense Chaco despite the strict compliance with the isolation that its members have practiced, giving up the sole economic income they have generated in very hard jobs on neighboring farms.

"Luckily, we are isolated from everything."

From the Chaco by telephone, Tagüide concludes, and recalls that what worries them the most now is not the virus, but the beginning of the fire season, largely caused by the uncontrolled burning of grasslands, a practice used by many ranchers although it is still forbidden in times of drought. Due to a lack of control of this burning, the practice remains very common, with a disastrous impact as it spreads. It is hoped they could be isolated again.

