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# Towards the City of the Whites

Before the coming of white man, **Chaco was an uncontaminated region covered by forest. Fourteen indigenous ethnic groups inhabited there.** They lived by hunting, harvesting fruits, honey and medicinal plants, free to move from a place to another following the rhythm of seasons and rainfall regime. A complex mythology explained very precisely how to maintain this **perfect balance between nature and mankind.**

**The first colonization took place in the early 30's by a group of Mennonites** coming from Russia. A few years later, Chaco became the theater of a war between Paraguay and Bolivia and a violent smallpox epidemic brought by soldiers killed almost half of the indigenous population in less than a month. At the end of war, Mennonites were well established: they occupied the strategic water access points and built enclosures to mark their own landed properties, developing over time a ranch business model adapt to a semi-arid climate. All at once, **different groups of missionaries arrived in Chaco to spread their own religion and civilization**, and to bring the natives out of the forest. In the late 50's, after twenty years of cultural and territorial resistance, most of the indigenous communities had been baptized and had left the forest to embrace the colonizers' lifestyle

**During the last decade, the rise of meat world market converted the region in one of the most important world producer of cow**, exported mainly in Russia and Chile. Natives have been displacing and dwell onto reservations far from their ancestral territories which have been mostly deforested and intended to the cattle extensive farming. Forced to become sedentary and confined within an "Indian reservation", native communities lost all their traditional livelihoods. Nowadays natives work as laborers for the landowners. **The oral transmission of their own culture has been interrupted** since all their knowledge was strictly connected with a natural world that is disappearing. Without the chance to experience the forestry lifestyle nor shamanism, **young generation are even more attracted by the western costumes** that have been introduced massively in their daily life.

Toward the City of the White focused on the **cultural side effects of globalization**. Expropriated from their owns territories due to the economic interests over natural resources, aboriginal civilizations, ever connected with nature, risk to be extinguished in favor of modernity.





Native children at the edge of the forest. Once nomadic hunters and gatherers, native communities have been displaced into “indigenous reservations” far from their ancestral territories.

Ayoreo Community of Jesudi, PRY





**The Mennonite ASCIM community councilor chat with indigenous laborers on a work break during the daily inspection of the ranch.**

ASCIM is the Mennonite association dedicated to improve natives' living conditions according to the model of cultural and economic development of the settlers. Forest was transformed into a pasture where indigenous work as laborers while the Mennonite Counselor manages budget and staff.

Enlhet community of Campo Largo, PRY





An evangelical priest continues the work of missionaries begun 70 years ago to spread western religion and civilization among the natives.

Ayoreo Community of Jesudi, PRY





**The Missionaries banned shamanism and imposed Christian rituals.**

“In the past we worshiped Satan - now we pray to God,” says the pastor who officiated the marriage of these young natives. But Rosaldo and Elisa, 22 and 20 years old, appear serious, uncomfortable, and sad throughout their feast, an imposed ceremony that doesn’t fit their customs.

Enthlet community of Armonia, PRY





**A native man drinks and watches a dance show during a popular Paraguayan celebration.**

Today's indigenous men are very frustrated. Their ancient values and knowledge do not help them to face and understand the present, so they feel powerless in the face of the collapse of their own civilization.

Radio Pa'i puku Party, Cruce Pioneros, PRY





**Aurelio, 45, knocks down a tree in which he spotted a beehive.**

Traditionally able to gather honey for their own consumption without damaging the trees, the need for monetary income pushed natives to become beekeepers and capture the queen bee inside the trunk, in order to produce and sell honey to the mennonite and paraguayan shops.

Enhlet Community of El Estribo, PRY





**A Mennonite farmer inspects the herds of his ranch, about 5000 ha.**

The meat world market's rise led a "land rush" to produce cow in Chaco. A region once considered unproductive because the climate is extremely arid.

Filadelfia, PRY





**An Argentinean cattleman, hired full-time at a ranch.**

The economic growth of the Chaco has generated an unprecedented influx of migrants: Argentines, as well as Brazilians and Paraguayans, in search of a job move to the Chaco attracted by good wages and a large supply of labor in the agricultural sector.

Neuland, PRY





**A native man works in a ranch. He clears up the weeds to ensure maximum performance of pasture: an informal, daily and precarious job.**

“Working with the natives is very difficult – says a rancher in the Philadelphia area. They are inconsistent and unproductive. You cannot offer them either a skilled job or a regular contract.”

Indeed, in Chaco the natives are employed as laborers during the day, and make up the workforce at low cost and without the worker’s rights that the ranchers need.

Enhlet community of Campo Largo, PRY





**During the dry season grazing becomes scarce in the extensive cattle ranches.**

In the Chaco, the climate is so dry that 1 hectare of cultivated pasture is required to nourish one cow - an area four times higher than that required in wetter areas.

Neuland, Paraguay.





**Women learn how to install a drip irrigation system in order to reduce water's need to agriculture.**

Chaco is a semi-arid region, subject to prolonged periods of extreme drought. Native populations used to overcome water shortage moving freely within the territory and following the rain cycle. Becoming sedentary, natives lost their first recourse to endure Chaco severe droughts.

Enhlet Community of Armonia, PRY





Back from work as farmhands on ranches, native boys meet for football: they wear t-shirts of the great football teams, emulating cool and modern clothing, dreaming of belonging to the dominant culture.

Nivacle Community of Campo Loa, PRY.





**Gerolly, 16, fiddling with the phone while his mother, a community leader, tells an elderly woman how to sterilize water to prevent diseases, especially of children.**

The generation gap that separates teenagers from their grandparents is huge. Although attached to their community, the youth live under the constant shadow of an ancestral culture as much as esteemed as by now distant and unable to offer them a real alternative to the West.

Enthlet Community of El Estribo, PRY





**Western instruments and Pop, Techno or Latino music has replaced the chants and sounds once used for shamanic rituals.**

Music was a very important part of traditional culture. The song was used in shamanic rituals, as in everyday life. The passion for singing and music remained among indigenous youth, although they prefer western instruments and Pop, Techno, and Electric music to the ancestral chants and instruments, which are being lost from use.

Enthlet Community Armonia, PRY.





The protestant pastor goes to the community church every Wednesday for the mass dedicated to women.

At the end of the service, he brings needles and cloth to teach them a few basics of sewing. Indeed, traditionally the native women know how to weave artisan handbags, using colors derived from plants. Because they live semi-naked, however, women do not have any skills in making clothing.

Community Enhlet El Estribo, PRY





**A mother washes her daughter with water collected from the community reservoir.**

The water scarcity obliged the indigenous to a very reduced use. During drought they are completely dependent on the water supplies dispensed by the municipality

Nivacle community of Campo Loa, PRY





Although grew up with the natives standards of beauty, symbols drawn on face and body, girls have adopted the western style of dressing.

They dye locks of hair red, and they use make up on their eyes, lips and nails following the stereotype of female beauty in Western culture. During the night some white men come to visit her, despite the strong protests of the community leader.

Ayoreo community of Jesudi, PRY





*Latinos* street vendors pass weekly to sell food: price is very high and vendors that roam in remote areas are not always well intentioned.

During the shopping, as well as during each visit from individuals outside of the community, the men stay around to protect the women from possible violence.

Ayoreo community of Jesudi, PRY





Edoardo, 30, was called by a local businessman for an informal job: cut a large amounts of timber, which will be directly shipped by truck.

For entrepreneurs, working with indigenous communities can be very advantageous. Dealing almost always with informal or day workers allows entrepreneurs to deal with matters quickly and avoid tedious bureaucracy.

Ayoreo Community of Jesudi, PRY





Catalina e Juditta, 54 and 56, traveled 30 km by foot to reach the nearest Mennonite colony and offer cleaning services to homes.

Ribera Colony, PY.





Deforestation is one of the side-effect of the Chaco economic development. Forest are cut down to create new pasture for breeding.

According to the University of Maryland, the Chaco Paraguayo reached the highest level of deforestation in the world.

Boquéron departement, PRY





Although they are well placed in a globalized economic and trade system, the culture of the cowboy persists among the Mennonite landowners.

They wear a hat and spurs, moving their herds on horseback and capturing calves and bulls with a lasso.

Neuland, PY.





**“In Boquerón 90% of internal revenues come from breeding”, says governor E. Friesen, while loading cattle to be sent to the slaughterhouse.**

“Developing the current model of agricultural production – he continues - the Mennonite colonies showed the economic potential of the region. The only brake for the future could be international laws for environmental protection. In the Chaco the Zero Deforestation Law would completely stop economic development currently underway.”

Neuland, PRY





**A truck driver counts the cattle loaded in the cattle trailer bound for the slaughterhouse.**

The locals call them “cow autobuses ” because of their length. In Chaco the traffic has dramatically increased in recent years, although the roads are still mostly unpaved and poorly equipped.

Neuland, PRY





The community's leader use a container as a dwelling. Since there is no electricity, the wood-fire used for cooking is still on.

Ayoreo community of Jesudi, PRY





Television is an exceptional event for the community, which meets in front of the small screen whenever incomes permit buying gasoline for the electricity generator.

They watch everything: from American television series to the news, from Hollywood films to cartoons, without settling on just one thing. Most of the programs actually are in Spanish, the second national language of Paraguay. But in the community, which has kept its own language, knowledge of Spanish is limited to a few words.

Ayoreo Community of Jesudi, PRY





**Indigenous youth drunk during a Paraguayan popular celebration.**

Being a young native on the Paraguayan Chaco is very boring today. They are caught between a supposed ancient culture that they have never experienced and a dominant culture from which they are discriminated.

Radio Pa'i puku Party, Cruce Pioneros, PRY





Serena 16, swims in the brackish community lagoon. Traditionally semi-naked, new generations do not remove jeans and t-shirt even for bathing.

Enthlet El Estribo Community, PY





“At one time they hunted armadillos, crocodile, birds...Today occasionally we shoot a boar that gets to close to the trail. By now there is less and less game. Men do not venture into the forest and young people neither know how nor want to hunt” says a native burning the boar he just caught

Environmentalists say deforestation, caused by the expansion of the cattle industry, is provoking a serious loss of biodiversity in the Chaco ecosystem.

Ayoreo community of Jesudi, PRY





**Children play behind their community, inside the “indigenous reserve.”**

Ayoreo Community of Jesudi, PY





In the evening, the community of Campo Loa meets to play Tombola, the traditional Italian board game, typical to the Christmas holidays.

The tombola is only one of many cultural influences bequeathed by Italian Silesian missionaries, in Chaco since 1948.

Nivacle Community of Campo Loa, PRY



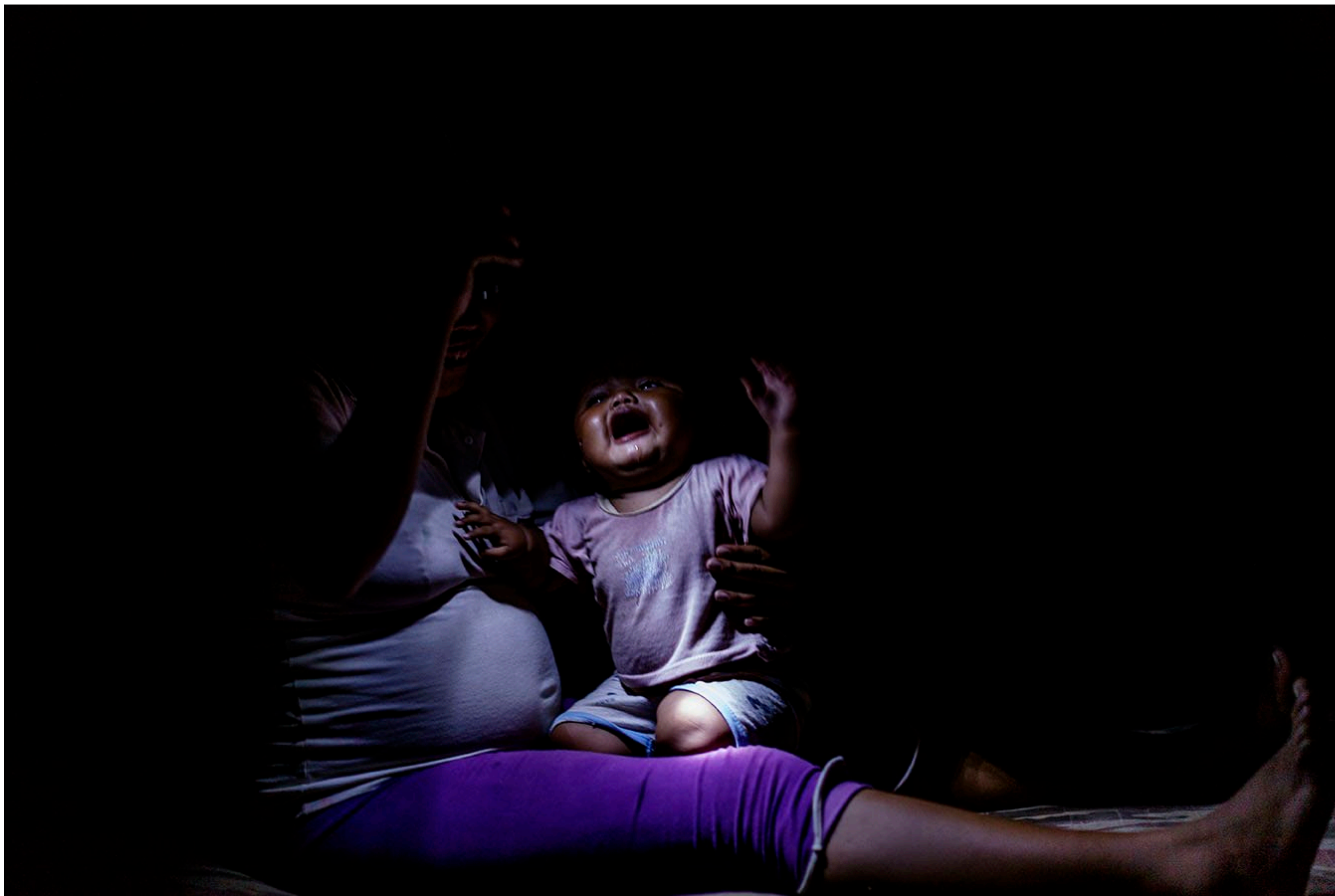


A line of trucks parked for the night along the route TransChaco, the long road that cuts straight across the entire region.

The economic boom has exponentially increased the traffic of trucks transporting cows from ranches to slaughterhouses.

Cruce de los Pioneros, PRY





Eloisa, 16, looks after her little sister before putting her to bed. She left school and get married as she got pregnant.

“In the last few years I have been ill - she says. I always had cold hands and feet, I was sweating, but no one could cure me. Then I saw a white light and a voice told me that to heal I should get married at my age.”

In her community there are many children who tell of divine apparitions, with Jesus and the Holy Virgin.

Nivaclé Community of Campo Loa, PRY





Although they have abandoned life in the forest, where they used to sleep under the stars, women and children continue to lie outside, protected only by mosquito nets.

The brick building is used exclusively as storage.

Ayoreo Community of Jesudi, PRY





**The community comes together every night at the sacred trees to pray the rosary.**

“Children,” explains the leader of the community, “they saw Jesus wrapped in a white light near these trees, which are sacred to us. We come here to pray, we bring holy water to make our prayers effectual.” Illuminating themselves with torches, the faithful accompany the litany with religious chants and guitar.

Nivacle Community of Campo Loa, PY





**Because they do not have any cars, the indigenous communities move on a trailer pulled by a tractor.**

Associations and intellectuals fear that, at this rate of deforestation and economic pressure on natural resources for meat production, indigenous communities and the entire Chaco ecosystem will become extinct in a few decades.

Ayoreo Community of Jesudi, PRY





**Alfred, a Mennonite landowner, visits the ranch with his son.**

“I was born here. My father and my children as well; we are tied to this land. But the current economic boom push people to make money quickly.

The risk is exploiting fertile lands without bothering to maintain them for future generations.” says him.

Neuland, PRY



*“Wake up and look at what I show you!  
Get up and pay attention  
to what is happening in the world!  
Ashes and dust are the future  
of the new generations.  
A cloud of dust becomes visible.  
I want to stop it,  
Thwart it,  
Protect our children against it.  
But the Spirit of the Dust  
Pushes me aside.  
Like a suction, he pulls the children away  
**Towards the City of the Whites.**  
They don’t hear me anymore.  
They paint their faces,  
And their true face becomes darker and darker.  
It was one morning when this happened.”*

Ibegua’ s vision, April 2007, Campo Loro  
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