

Author: Pierre CLASTRES
Title: *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*
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There are books – few indeed – that resemble Atlantis because of the long gone treasures they are a remembrance of. “Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians” is one of them. By now, the tribe it describes has disappeared, eventually overwhelmed by the Paraguayan jungle; the author of the book has died, still in his youth, in a car crash. Although written only 30 years ago, the chronicle remains the solitary testimony of a vanished world.

One of Levi-Strauss’ disciples, Clastres has been one of the anthropologists with an intense, although brief, fieldwork, work carried out in the jungles of South America, among the most primitive Stone Age tribes in Paraguay and Venezuela. Though one would expect a certain writing style from a student of Levi-Strauss – a cold, scientific tone, an attempt to the well-known neutrality of the observer, Clastres surprises the reader with a warm, personal piece of reading. Written in the first person, the author also analyzing his own reactions to the encounter with this culture, his own interpretations or hypothesis regarding the events while they are taking place, the book is rather interpretive in nature. Still, this does not take away any of the accuracy of the study. On the contrary, it only sweeps away the often pretense of many anthropologists of being able to penetrate the deepest meanings of a culture they have only been in touch with for few months.

The chronicle builds the image of the Guayaki identity: their social structure and organization, habits, way of living, rites, myths and beliefs, all illustrated with real events the author has witnessed. He relies heavily of his direct observation and discussions with the Indians, and less on indirect stories he has been told. It is with outstanding novelist skills that he bonds events, myths and his own interpretations, allowing the reader to construct different interpretations and visions on the facts, yet strongly reasoning his own. He goes from common subjects to delicate ones, approaching probably one of the most sensitive themes regarding primitive tribes: cannibalism. On this subjects, he proves a scholarly maturity of one who can go beyond the reaction his own culture has built in him and understand the whole event in his natural context, environment and culture, with the reasoning and symbolism it has for the ones who practice it, not for the mere witness.

Probably the most touching part of the entire book is the last chapter, called “The end”, in which he relates the close extinction of the Guayaki Indians, symbol of the extinction of an entire continent, due to its encounter to the Western civilization. He puts away the neutrality of the scholar, becoming once again a mere human witnessing the vanish of his kin, no matter how different they are: “When I arrived at Arroyo Moroti, they had numbered about a hundred. When I left a year later, there were no more than seventy-five of them. The others have died, eaten away by illness and tuberculosis, killed by lack of proper care, by lack of everything. And the survivors? They were like unclaimed objects; hopelessly forced to leave their prehistory, they had been thrown into a history that had nothing to do with them except to destroy them. [...] They had no choice; there was nothing to be done. Because of this, they realized that there was death in their souls.”