Who are the Mapuche of Chile?

Contributed by

The Mapuche people are the indigenous people of southern Chile and Argentina. With approximately 500,000 native Mapuche in Chile, the site of the future Mother Temple of South America, they represent the largest indigenous nation in the country. Traditionally centered in the southern regions of Chile, in recent years thousands of Mapuche have begun gravitating north towards urban centers such as Santiago and Temuco.

It is currently estimated that nearly half of the Chilean Bahá'í community is native Mapuche. This is due to a great extent to the Bahá'í Radio in the area, the only radio in the world to broadcast in both Spanish and Mapudungun, the language of the Mapuche. The Radio shares the Bahá'í message of the oneness of humanity and news of God's latest Revelation, as well as serving as a community network and support. Another significant element that has led to the embrace of the Bahá'í Faith by thousands of Mapuche is the inclusive nature of both the Bahá'í and Mapuche way of life. Artemio Escobar Huenun, Mapuche and director of Bahá'í Radio in Chile, explains in a recent interview "We have our religion, the Nguillatun. The Bahá'í Faith doesn't discriminate, doesn't say that to be a Bahá'í, you must leave the Mapuche culture." In turn, the Mapuche worldview is holistic, inclusive, and envisions the earth and the cosmos as a united whole, where everything is kept in balance and animated by the divine spirit.

Culture and Religion

In harmony with indigenous cultures across the Americas, nature and the earth play a central role in Mapuche life and culture. Mapudungun is seen as the voice of the earth in conversation with human beings. The name of the Mapuche people is actually a joining of the words "Mapu" and "Che", and means "People of the Earth".

In his book of poetry entitled, "Se Ha Despertado El Ave de Mi Corazon" (The Bird of My Heart Has Awakened), Mapuche poet Leonel Lienlaf gives voice to a traditional view of the cosmos:

"My heart (mi corazon)

is awakened (esta despertado)

with the Earth" (con la tierra).

These beliefs are expressed most powerfully in the Nguillatun, the Mapuche religion. The Nguillatun is the most important observance in Mapuche religious practice, and is essentially a participatory sacred rite in which the community gathers to offer prayers, to make sacrifices, to honor their ancestors and to receive counsels from the elders. Malu Sierra, a Chilean journalist who has written about the Mapuche people, describes the Nguillatun as "the communal rite celebrated annually in the open air to invoke the favor of Ngenechen, who is the Lord of the people."

"Ngenechen" is a figure central to Mapuche religious belief, and is representative of all of the following: Father and Mother, Grandfather and Grandmother, Young Man and Young Woman. He is described by one elder as "one God with many colors".

"Machis", who serve as healers (and who are mostly women) act as a bridge between the community and the spiritual world. There are also "lonkos", who serve the community as elders, judges, and advisors.

Yesterday and Today

Unique in the history of native peoples in the Americas, the Mapuche are the only people to have resisted encroachment and colonization by both the Incas and the Spaniards. In wars lasting several hundred years, the Mapuche signed agreements with both groups securing their autonomy and land rights. After Chilean independence from Spain in 1810, the Mapuche were subjugated by Chile in the late 1800s. Disease,

starvation, cultural assimilation, and internment decimated the Mapuche population.

From the 1960's to the 1980's, over 100,000 Mapuches have emigrated from the rural south to the urban environment of the capital city, Santiago. Emigration, urbanization and encroachment on Mapuche lands from large scale agriculture, mining and forestry organizations in the south of Chile have accentuated the acculturation of Mapuches into the dominant culture. Poor schools, losses of language, of identity and of their ancestral and communal lands have had negative effects on the Mapuche social structure and way of life.

On a positive note, in recent years the Mapuche have nearly returned to their previous population size, and have made significant advances in strengthening their traditional cultural foundation. The Chilean government has also made initial steps to redress historical inequities, through such things as the creation of Mapudungun classes in elementary schools in the south.

Another recent sign of the resurgence of Mapuche culture includes the opening of the first Mapuche University in Puren. The Mapuche University, run by Mapuches for the higher education of Mapuches, opened this spring. A machi and a lonko both serve on the governing board of the Mapuche University.

Additionally, a recent bilingual publication of four Mapuche poets, edited by Cecelia Vicuna, brings four notable young voices to the English speaking literary scene. Two write from a rural, traditional outlook, and two write in Spanish from a more urban and feminine perspective. Thanks to international publication of a number of Mapuche poets, book reviewers in Chile have hailed these poets as pioneering a new genre of poetry that incorporates a unique oral tradition with the written word.

Conclusion

It is possible to see in traditional Mapuche thought and culture threads of gold: the sacred world of which the material world is a reflection; the communal prayer ceremony in which communal ties are renewed; and the view of the duality of the cosmos in which human actions play a role in maintaining harmony; all threads that make up the tapestry of the Divine Teachings of all the great world religions, and are accentuated by the Bahá'í Faith. The Mother Temple of South America is

hoped to be a beacon of light for these spirit-filled people, providing a safe haven and refuge for their divinely attuned hearts and way of life.