

THE MAPUCHE AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE CHILEAN NEOLIBERAL ECONOMIC SYSTEM

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The Mapuche of Chile are one of South America's most prominent indigenous peoples, not only in terms of their numbers, which fluctuate around the one million mark, but also because of their long anti-colonial and post-colonial struggle and, more recently, because of their resistance to the neoliberal policies imposed by the Pinochet dictatorship and implemented by democratic governments since Patricio Aylwin took office in 1990. Mapuche communities are facing significant challenges from climate change impacts but, as this article illustrates, these impacts, what they mean and how they are interpreted must be understood within a context of traditional Mapuche ideas of personhood, community and worldviews, and the historical legacy of settlement, contemporary resource development, and the Chilean neoliberal economic system. The Mapuche concept of the human being.

The Mapuche, like other indigenous peoples around the world, have developed a deep and profound knowledge of their natural and spatial environment. One first point to note is that, according to the Mapuche kinship system, everyone's personality draws on two hereditary sources that are decisive factors in the human psyche. Firstly, nature or *Tuwun*, the natural environment in which you are born and where your family ancestors remain, associated with a specific landscape and features. For example, the Mapuche of the Andean region behave in their own specific way, with a specific outlook on life and the world. From this perspective, the natural landscape provides energy or strength (*Newen*), which is expressed in a person's manner or way of understanding, interpreting, and informing their particular way of behaving in relation to the world. Secondly, personality is also determined by one's family ancestors or *Kupalme*, an ancestral legacy that reproduces a particular role within society and the community, or *Lof*. This means that the family legacy influences the manner of being and legitimises or delegitimizes a person's status in their social, cultural and political surroundings. In other words, a religious or political leader must have a family past that supports this role and, in this regard, the family legacy reproduces the legacy and memory of, and dialogue with, one's ancestors.

This concept of life (*Mogen*) determines a dialectical relationship between the social world and nature, and its implications may be many, particularly when an imbalance occurs in the environment or the family group. For this reason, the Mapuche ritual seeks to establish this relationship, in constant and permanent

interaction and dialogue with these forces, by means of ritual, discourse, or *Ngulam* (advice), which structures the Mapuche way of thinking (*Rakisuum*).

Environmental changes

The Mapuche ancestral territory has suffered more than two centuries of interference due to the expansion of Chile's capitalist system of production. First indigenous reservations were established and then, soon after, in order to gain control over the Mapuche territory, the Chilean army penetrated the area from 1880-1883 in a military operation euphemistically known as the "Pacification of Araucanía". This led to unification with the Chilean state and the start of the Mapuche people's oppression and internal colonialism.

This state expansion was accompanied by a process of territorial colonization, with the establishment of foreign and *criollo* settlers to whom the occupation's leaders awarded the best lands at derisory prices. They were given wide powers to implement a regional agricultural and livestock production system and incorporate it into the capitalist system of production. This process was characterised by an aggressive economic policy that sought to strip the natural environment bare through indiscriminate "slashing and burning" of the native forest in order to establish cereal crops and, alongside this, to create pasture land for non-native animals. All this was considered essential to the progress and subsequent development of the centre-south region of Chile.

Given the quality and richness of Mapuche land, cereal production (particularly that of wheat) burgeoned, transforming it by the end of the 19th century into "the bread basket of Chile". Agricultural production became so significant that regional producers began to sell on the international market, to places such as California and Australia, where Chilean wheat became internationally known. The state and land-owning power groups quickly sought strategies to increase production yet more, working the lands in Malleco, Bio-Bio and Cautin provinces until they were exhausted, turning them into eroded, desertified areas. Today, the only production potential of many of these lands is as areas of non-native plantations such as eucalyptus and pine. These now represent the country's main national and international produce, with direct implications in terms of the current water crisis being experienced in the region, which is felt particularly by the indigenous communities.

The new economic policy and environmental collapse

In the mid-1980s, following various crises in its economic policy, the military regime opted for a full-blown neoliberalization of the economy. An immediate impact was felt with the privatisation of public companies, followed by state reforms and decentralisation. In no time at all, the system had been implemented throughout the different spheres of the Chilean state and economy. At the same time, other measures were also adopted such as a requirement to divide up the indigenous communities. Decree Law 2,568 required the communities to divide their lands, creating the necessary conditions for placing these lands on the capitalist production market.

In terms of economic programmes in the centre-south region of Chile, the military regime established subsidies for pine and eucalyptus plantations (exotic plants) on lands that were eroded, exhausted and of little productive capacity for agriculture or livestock rearing. This policy was largely to the benefit of landowners and related companies who, making the most of the government backing, quickly took advantage of the economic benefits on offer. In just a couple of years, such plantations had spread over a large part of the Mapuche ancestral territory. In many cases, this expansion caused the communities to become isolated, surrounding and cutting them off, creating a monolithic landscape in Arauco and Malleco provinces, once the regional centre of cereal production. Alongside this, laws were implemented establishing rules for mining and privatising the water system, which would henceforward be controlled primarily by non-indigenous owners.

It was the Water Law that was to cause the most hardship in Mapuche territory because, by privatising water, only a certain number of owners had direct access to use of this resource, given that the water owners had to pay a regular tax to the state. The transfer of this resource to clients created a trade in water, leaving the indigenous communities unable to use or enjoy this vital resource. The Water Law was enacted in 1981 by means of Decree Law N°1,122. Although it has undergone revisions, its negative repercussions continue to reverberate on the region's indigenous communities, in terms of both the rivers, estuaries and underground waters, which today more than ever are determined and regulated by market forces.

Indigenous knowledge and climate change

The Mapuche people distinguish at least four circular spaces in the universe. Each one has particular features of life and each of them has its own attributes and qualities. First there is *Minche Mapu*, corresponding to the area inside the earth. This is the place where fire and minerals exist, such as silver and gold. Dwarf human beings known as *Kofkeche* or *Infunche* also live in part of this area.

According to Mapuche belief, there is a layer of water inside the earth that is connected to lakes and seas. Each lake is connected to the sea or ocean by means of a *Ñe* or marine eye. This partly explains the recent disappearance of two lakes in the south of Chile. As the "eternal ice" has melted, the waters have disappeared, creating much interest and uncertainty among scientific centres of the region and the world.

After *Minche Mapu*, working upwards, we come to *Nag Mapu*, where animal and plant life is to be found. This is also the space that human beings live in, shared with the rest of the living and not "directly" living organisms. It is generally in this *Mapu* (space) that the Mapuche people are to be found, with their "national" identity but also their "ethnic" differentiations: *Pikunches* (people of the north), *Williches* (people of the south), *Lafkenche* or Mapuche connected to the sea (in the Pacific region). On the opposite side to the east are the *Puelche Mapuche* (people of the east) on land that is now Argentina. These territorial differentiations are the most important but we do also find other names used by the people within the Mapuche ancestral territory, depending on the area and the natural landscape.

The third area is *Ragin Wenu Mapu*. This is the area from the earth's surface up to the clouds. It is the place of birds such as the condor and the eagle. It is the space in which storms, rain, snow and tornadoes are unleashed. It is an area of edges and borders, the area that connects the earthly space with the cosmic. These cosmological spaces are interwoven between equal or unequal forces (*Newen*) but all seek to maintain balance in this global interrelationship.

The fourth spatial dimension comprises the *Wenu Mapu*, corresponding to the stratosphere, the planets (such as Mars – *Wenulfe*), stars such as the four stars of the south (*Meli Witran Waguben*), and galaxies (*Yepun*). This area is of great importance to the Mapuche people as it is here that the ancestral spirits are to be found, where they live on after their earthly death. This is expressed in *Pulli*, which is a spiritual force that lives in this space and which can, from here, commence an orbital journey around the earth (*Nag Mapu*).



Mapuches have used various forms of protest against the forestry companies in recent years, such as marches, occupations and hunger strikes. Photos: IWGIA archive



In Mapuche belief, this space is permanently linked to the earth and its phenomena. For this reason, Mapuche ceremonies are in some way or another linked with this power space as it is here that the ancestors watch over the earthly life of their families and Lof.

A few key principles can be inferred from all this in order to conceptualize the changes and transformations taking place in the world. Firstly, in the Mapuche religious and epistemological concept, all visible or invisible matter has *energy* (*Newen*) and thus movement and life. Nothing is static or isolated. This means that environmental problems therefore have to be interpreted in the context of the flux and reflux of energies around the world and universe. In terms of this latter, the Mapuche epistemological concept also assumes that all phenomena have an *interconnection of forces* that link to give sense and expression to their own condition. From this point of view, nothing in the world can be explained by its own qualities because such qualities are closely related to the different forces present in the world, whether they be light, dark, hot or cold. With these principles in mind, global warming is essentially irreversible given that human behaviour change in relation to pollution will not resolve the conjugation of interdependent energies that exist in the world and could only influence a future that it is not possible to clearly predict. Acting on a phenomenon or condition will not change the already historic imbalance being created by the expansion of the capitalist system of production which, in essence, creates pollution and imbalance in the area in which the forces enabling the existence of these phenomena are present.

A third principle present in these relations between the spheres is the fact that human beings do not have hegemonic power over the cosmos or over the forces present in the world in order to be able to give life or grant movement to phenomena or events that take place in the universal or local system. In line with this principle, it is difficult to extinguish or reduce the force of nature as seen in an earthquake, volcanic eruptions or storms that flood and destroy human settlements around the world.

Critical changes facing Mapuche communities

Given the above, it is not possible simply to reduce global warming to a human phenomenon that has occurred in recent years or decades. From the Mapuche point of view, these phenomena constitute a distant behaviour unrelated to the interconnected reality of social life, and which only takes on meaning within

the group and in terms of a sharing of the resources granted by nature and the forces that make it possible. Taking this into consideration, the Mapuche communities are generally faced with the following changes in nature and climate:

Changes in the seasons

The close and interdependent relationship between Mapuche society and its environment has given the traditional leaders a focal point around which to explain the climate change that humanity is experiencing on different levels. One initial area of analysis is the variations the elders are observing in the seasons. For some decades now, the kinds of crops that can be grown have been changing. Not so long ago, the four seasons were clearly and regularly established. Over the course of the last few decades, however, they have become blurred and variable, preventing the seasonal cycle from clearly distinguishing between winter and spring. The rains are unpredictable and their consequences harmful because the rains now come in intense storms causing erosion and the leaching of nutrients from the soil. This causes the disappearance of the surface vegetation, making the lands unproductive. In addition, this situation forces the Mapuche communities to seek technological strategies by which to maintain and achieve the necessary production. The most direct way of doing this is by applying for credit in order to obtain fertilisers and recover the productive capacity of the soil. This does not solve the situation in itself, however, and so the communities end up becoming more and more indebted to the state or financial institutions that provide them with the loans. Thirdly, these climate changes also have serious repercussions on the Mapuche production system, which is characterised by its diversity and cyclical and integral nature in which seasonal production is inter-related in order to respond to the needs for food, trade and market links. Faced with this reality, a fourth consequence arises, which is a gradual proletarianization of the Mapuche labour force, and this is transforming the traditional Mapuche economic system. This means that historic production practices have had to be abandoned and, consequently, the indigenous economy is becoming critically and unequally integrated into the capitalist production system.

Excessive industrial use of water

The processes that are taking place in the region, through the imposition of the neoliberal economic system, have created a diversified system of agro-in-

dustrial production on a global and regional scale. The search for industrial-type production innovations has led to the deregulated incorporation of water, used indiscriminately by these new production systems. The different production initiatives and innovations, such as the pasturing system, large farms and non-native fruit production, demand a high and technified use of water. Despite the previously high water concentrations of the ancestral Mapuche region, desertification is now occurring, altering the natural and historic landscape.

Forest expansion and its roots “sucking the water”

The greatest source of Mapuche conflict with the economic model comes from their confrontation with, and the contradictions of, an external production system that requires a high concentration and use of water for plant growth.

The plantation expansion in the region has similarities and differences with the old colonial plantation systems of the tropical regions of Latin America and the Caribbean. In this case, the system requires

neither a huge supply of labourers nor a large-scale workforce because mechanisation and the sophisticated use of high technology sidelines workers who lack the technological skills and training required by this new expansionist system. Global warming and the rise in temperature means that plants grow quickly and need to draw substantially on underground waters. This has a number of implications. First, plantation expansion has led to water shortages for the region’s Mapuche and peasant farmer population, who now have to rely on the local authorities to distribute water in their areas. Second, plantation development and expansion requires the constant use of chemicals to protect the growing plants. This leads to high levels of soil and water contamination, including the underground waters, estuaries and rivers of the region. This is perhaps the most crucial problem today facing the Mapuche territory in the south of Chile. □

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