



Mapuche culture and its non-decolonization in Chile¹

La cultura mapuche y su no descolonización en Chile

Cultura mapuche e sua não descolonização no Chile

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Abstract

Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, an important culture developed in the central region of Chile: that of the Mapuche, which in Mapudungun means 'people of the land'. They occupied an area between the Maule and Tolten rivers, from the coast to the central valleys. They assimilated the agricultural and sedentary culture and had livestock based on llamas and alpacas, from which they obtained wool for their clothes. They barely developed metallurgy. The Mapuche people are and have always been among the most important indigenous ethnic groups in the country, both because of their social and demographic weight and because of their strong sense of cultural identity, which has historically found forms of resistance and adaptation to the dynamics of border contact with Spaniards and Chileans. In fact, it was never subdued by the Spaniards, and only with the so-called 'Pacification of the Araucanía' did the Chilean army strip them of their best lands and entrench them, which is the origin of the current problem of that ethnic group with the Chilean state that began half a century ago and that will not end until the lands of their ancestors are returned to them; for the same reason it has not yet been decolonized.

Keywords: Culture, Cultural identity, Education and culture, Rural population, Food.

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Resumen

Entre los siglos XIII y XIV se desarrolló una cultura muy importante en la región central de Chile: la de los mapuches, que en mapudungun significa ‘gente de la tierra’: Ocupaba una zona entre los ríos Maule y Toltén, desde la costa a los valles centrales. Asimilaron la cultura agrícola y sedentaria y, además, tenían ganado a base de llamas y alpacas, de las que obtenían lana para sus ropas. Apenas desarrollaron la metalurgia. El pueblo mapuche es y ha sido siempre de las etnias originarias más importantes del país, tanto por su peso social y demográfico como por su fuerte sentido de identidad cultural, que ha encontrado históricamente formas de resistencia y de adaptación a la dinámica del contacto fronterizo con españoles y chilenos. De hecho, nunca fue sometido por los españoles y solo con la llamada ‘Pacificación de la Araucanía’, el ejército chileno los despojó de sus mejores tierras y los atrincheró, lo cual es el origen del problema actual de esa etnia con el estado chileno que comenzó hace un medio siglo y que no terminará hasta que se le devuelvan las tierras de sus antepasados; por lo mismo aún no ha sido descolonizado.

Palabras clave: Cultura, Identidad cultural, Educación y cultura, Población rural, Alimento.

Resumo

Entre os séculos XIII e XIV, desenvolveu-se uma cultura importante se desenvolve na região central do Chile: a dos mapuches, que em mapuche significa "povo da terra": ocupavam uma área entre os rios Maule e Tolten, da costa aos vales centrais. Assimilaram a cultura agrícola e sedentária e, além disso, tinham gado à base de lhamas e alpacas, das quais obtinham lã para suas roupas. Eles mal desenvolveram metalurgia. O povo Mapuche está e sempre esteve entre as etnias indígenas mais importantes do país, tanto por seu peso social e demográfico quanto por seu forte senso de identidade cultural, que historicamente encontrou formas de resistência e adaptação à dinâmica de contato fronteiriço com espanhóis e chilenos. Na verdade, nunca foi subjugado pelos espanhóis e somente com a chamada 'Pacificação da Araucanía', o exército chileno os despojou de suas melhores terras e os entrincheirou, que é a origem do problema atual desse grupo étnico com o Estado chileno que começou há meio século e que não terminará até que as terras de seus ancestrais sejam devolvidas a eles; pela mesma razão, ainda não foi descolonizado.

Palavras-chave: Cultura, Identidade cultural, Educação e cultura, População rural, Alimentação.

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Introduction

As was the case with all indigenous peoples on the continent from North America to South America, they were not only colonized to be converted into enslaved subjects of the English, Portuguese, and Spanish crowns but also to be uprooted from their roots and culturally integrated into the ideas and customs of the conquerors. In this sense, the Mapuche people were an exception, as they were never subjugated. The arrival of the Spanish to the lands that today make up the national territory occurred in 1536 with an expedition led by Diego de Almagro, who arrived, after a long and arduous journey, in the Copiapó Valley. But Almagro did not achieve his goal of establishing himself and returned to Cuzco. In any case, Hernando de Magallanes had already arrived in the national territory in 1520, in the extreme south, crossing the strait that today bears his name, although his arrival was not motivated by a desire to settle in the territory. It was Pedro de Valdivia who finally conquered the territories we now know as Chile. This military man, who held the rank of lieutenant governor, granted by Francisco Pizarro², arrived in the national territory, which he called Nueva Extremadura³, in 1540. Valdivia founded the cities of Santiago de Nueva Extremadura (1541), La Serena (1544), Concepción (1550), Valdivia (1552), and La Imperial (1552), obtaining the title of governor and captain general of the Kingdom of Chile.

Despite numerous battles, the Spanish were unable to subdue the Mapuche⁴ people. The King of Spain then granted them their land, which occupied an area between the Maule and Toltén rivers, stretching from the coast to the central valleys. This territory spanned over 200 kilometers in length and width (Caiceo, 2021). Those who remained there maintained their customs and adopted an agricultural, sedentary lifestyle. They also raised livestock, such as llamas and alpacas, for their wool. They barely developed metallurgy. The Mapuche people have always been one of the most important indigenous ethnic groups in the country because of their social and demographic weight, as well as their strong sense of cultural identity. This identity has historically allowed them to resist and adapt to the dynamics of border contact with Spaniards and Chileans (Memoria Chilena, n.d.1). During the last century, those who wanted to emigrate moved from the countryside to the cities, especially Temuco and Santiago. This occurred after the Chilean army stripped them of their lands in the so-called "Pacification of Araucanía." In this campaign, the Mapuche people were deprived of their best lands and entrenched (Caiceo, 2021). Today, more than half of the "men of the land" live in cities, especially on the outskirts. The loss of their land has led to serious conflict between the state and the Mapuche people for the last 50 years, which will only end when they regain their ancestral lands. Therefore, decolonization is incomplete among this ethnic group, and their incorporation into Chilean culture is not yet definitive (Memoria Chilena s/a2).

This article aims to describe and analyze the history of the Mapuche ethnic group to understand the reasons behind the current crisis between this indigenous people and the Chilean state. The paradigm is therefore eminently qualitative, employing a phenomenological and hermeneutic epistemology (Caiceo, 2018). This approach will be used to describe and analyze the history of the Mapuche people using historical research and primary and secondary sources (Caiceo & Mardones, 1998).

² Governor, Captain General, Adelantado, and Chief Magistrate of New Castile. New Castile was a governorship created in 1529 by the Crown of New Castile in Spain. Command was given to Francisco Pizarro, who led the conquest of the Inca Empire.

³ The territory that Valdivia named Nueva Extremadura in memory of his homeland Villanueva de La Serena, Extremadura, stretched from the Copiapó Valley southward.

⁴ Mapuche means "people of the land" in their language, Mapudungun.

1. Pedro de Valdivia, the beginning of colonization, and the Arauco War

After settling in Santiago, Pedro de Valdivia set out southward in 1546, intending to reach the region where the large Mapuche population was concentrated. He crossed the Itata River⁵ and then the great Biobío⁶, advancing toward Quilacura. There, the Mapuche attacked the Spanish forces in a fierce battle. The Spanish troops retreated and returned to Santiago. In 1550, after returning from Peru, Valdivia returned to the Biobío, camping near the Andalién River in the Penco area. There, the Spanish won a great battle thanks to their weapons. Afterward, they founded the fort of Penco and the city of Concepción. On that occasion, Valdivia treated Mapuche prisoners cruelly, even mutilating them. In March of that year, the toqui Ainavillo attacked Penco with his warriors but was defeated. These Spanish victories enabled the founding of other cities, such as Valdivia, La Imperial, and Villarrica. In 1553, the Mapuche people reacted when Pedro de Valdivia was captured and executed after his forces were defeated by Lautaro⁷ and his troops in the Battle of Tucapel. During this period, there were many battles and skirmishes, and many towns were burned, including the city of Concepción. Despite the tenacious resistance of the Mapuche, the Spanish gradually gained ground. On April 1557, Francisco de Villagra caught Lautaro off guard, and his men killed him before he could enter combat at the Battle of Mataquito. Then, in November of that year, Galvarino was captured in Millarapue and executed on the order of Governor García Hurtado de Mendoza. On February 1558, Caupolicán was captured. He was defeated and taken prisoner by Captain Pedro de Avendaño Gamboa y Velasco at the Battle of Antihuala. Caupolicán was taken to Cañete and executed by impalement. Contrary to the Spaniards' belief, after the deaths of these three emblematic and courageous toquis, the Mapuche people did not surrender. Instead, clashes continued, albeit on a smaller scale, until the Battle of Fort Lincoya, which reignited the Mapuche resistance. Although there was a period of apparent peace between 1565 and 1567 that allowed the Spanish to venture as far as Chiloé, the war was far from over. Although the date of the war's end is a matter of debate, it could be said to have come about after multiple campaigns, fierce battles, raids, and *malocas*⁸, the burning of crops and cities, and agreements and truces (Memoria Chilena, n.d.1). The introduction indicated that the King of Spain finally gave the Araucanians their territory (Bengoa, 1996). With the War of Independence, there were uprisings and parliaments during the new Chilean state; as they did not submit to the new state, after the War of the Pacific, in 1881, the Chilean army invaded the Mapuche territory led by Colonel Cornelio Saavedra, who subdued the Mapuche communities that remained in rebellion with blood and fire. This process was euphemistically called the “Pacification of Araucanía.” In any case, during the 20th and 21st centuries, the conflicts between the two sides have continued due to the state's failure to act on the Mapuche people's demands:

⁵ The Itata River (from the Mapudungún: *üthan üthatun*, meaning “to graze often or abundantly”) is a natural watercourse that runs through the current Ñuble Region, 400 kilometers south of Santiago, and flows into the Pacific Ocean.

⁶ Located 500 kilometers south of the capital, it crosses the Concepción Region and flows into the Pacific Ocean.

⁷ This toqui had served as Valdivia's servant and knew the Spaniards' weaknesses very well; this helped him defeat and kill Valdivia for the cruelties committed against the Indians captured in previous attacks.

⁸ The *malones* or *malón* were surprise attacks carried out by the indigenous people against the Spanish to obtain provisions, destroy farms, and kidnap women and children. These practices were also part of the aggression carried out by Spanish soldiers and were called *malocas*. The kidnapping of women on both sides was a major factor in miscegenation.

After the military occupation of Araucanía, the Chilean state proceeded to incorporate it into national sovereignty by settling it. The auctioning, sale, and illegitimate seizure of land led to the division of indigenous communities, initiating a conflict that continues to this day (Memoria Chilena, n.d.2).

2. Aspects of colonization and current events

Spanish colonization was based on the *encomienda*, which consisted of handing over to a conquistador a group of indigenous people who were obliged to work:

The colonization of the New World resulted in the establishment of institutions that organized governance, exploited new wealth, and expanded Catholicism. One of these institutions was the *encomienda*. Of medieval and Castilian origin and widely used in Europe during the Reconquista in the 15th century, the *encomienda* was adapted to the American and Chilean contexts of the 16th century. In theory, it was regulated according to the provisions of Indian law.

In reward for the military and financial services provided during the conquest, the Crown granted entrusts to the conquistadors.

These corresponded to distribution of Indians, or groups of Native Americans organized through caciques or curacas (Indian chiefs). Each commissioner was authorized to collect taxes from the Indians assigned to him. In exchange, they were obliged to protect and evangelize the Indians, who were considered relatively incapable, or minors (Memoria Chilena, s/a4).

When discussing colonization, it is important to clearly define the relevant concepts. Colonization is the establishment of a colony in a territory or country, usually by violent means. This is what happened when the Spanish arrived in America. The Mapuche territory is an example of this. The Mapuche are an ethnic group that, even today, maintains a spirit of resistance in many communities in present-day Araucanía. Despite the miscegenation and transculturation processes experienced since the conquest, the Mapuche have managed to preserve their identity. The conquest meant an intention to incorporate the Mapuche people into the customs and beliefs of the invaders at all costs. "Transculturation" is defined as "the reception by a people or social group of forms of culture from another, which more or less completely replace their own" (RAE Dictionary).

Given this definition, the question is: What happened in the case of the Mapuche? If we discuss the "non-decolonization of Mapuche culture," it means their culture was not colonized and still maintains its identity. This includes their way of relating to each other, their religious beliefs, their food, their clothing, and their social and family organization. However, this is only partly true because, although many Mapuche people or their descendants live in populated cities such as Santiago, Temuco, and Concepción, there are still communities in the Araucanía region that maintain their ancient customs, coexistence, and beliefs. Many of these communities are in constant conflict with the state, demanding the return of their lands. Some groups have even resorted to violent clashes with police and logging companies that have established themselves in the region. This is the current state of affairs in Araucanía, also known as Wallmapu.

According to population percentages from the National Institute of Statistics (INE) for 2025, based on the 2024 Census, 2,105,863 people identified themselves as belonging to an indigenous group. This represents 11.5% of the total population of 18,480,452 recorded in the census. Of the total indigenous population, 1,623,073 people (8.8%) belong to the Mapuche people, located mainly in Santiago (491,213), La Araucanía (344,445), Los Lagos (232,855), Bio-Bío (146,302), among others. Of these, 381,762 Mapuche people report understanding or speaking Mapudungum.

3. Evangelization and 'education' of the Mapuche people

There were two strong pillars of colonization of the Mapuche culture through which they were forced to abandon their ideas and customs: the usurpation of their lands and evangelization:

The first century of Spanish rule in Chile was marked by violence and destruction. It was a time of endless war to subjugate the native population and impose an imperial model, radically altering the cultural identity of the country's ancient inhabitants. The great Mapuche rebellion of 1598 created a physical border between the Hispanicized central valley and the independent indigenous population south of the Biobío River.

The arrival of the Society of Jesus in Chile in 1593 established a new relationship between the Spanish and the Mapuche people. The Jesuits believed that all peoples carried within them the seed of the gospel. Their conception of mission was based on saving souls through the effective action of missionaries rather than the violent acculturation model imposed in the early years of the conquest (Memoria Chilena, n.d.3).

Specifically, it is clear that evangelization has had an effect over the years, particularly among the descendants of the Mapuche who have intermarried with Creoles. In this sense, one could argue that it achieved its objective over time and that religious "decolonization" continues within a significant part of the Mapuche community. This is although communities in the Araucanía region maintain their ancestral traditions, spiritual beliefs, and memory of their ancestors. During the evangelization process, the Jesuit, and Franciscan religious orders played a fundamental role in creating schools to "civilize" the indigenous people and transform them into good Christians. Some Mapuche people were educated in cities, intending to become educators of their peers. One example is Manuel Antonio Neculmán, the son of a chief, who studied at the Normal School in Santiago and became the headmaster of the first public school in Temuco in 1883 (Donoso, 2008). Neculmán's experience accurately reflects the forced acculturation process that the Mapuche people endured, as well as its personal and collective consequences. Andrés Donoso shares the insights of Pedro Nolasco Préndez (1853-1907), a writer and parliamentarian who knew Neculmán. Préndez's observations are invaluable for understanding the aforementioned process:

In the scrutinizing eyes of Pedro Nolasco Préndez—whose official mission was to document the footprint of the occupying army refunding Villarrica—the tutor Neculmán presents himself as an open book. At a glance, he reveals the deepest keys to his being to his external observer. He is a man without the typical duplicity of the "world," a simple person who possesses the wild innocence of his origins and the goodness of his early evangelization.

Moreover, we believe that the chronicler's opinion contains one of the maxims of nineteenth-century postulates regarding the cultural differences of the so-called "savages." Neculmán was "privileged" with a formal education as a result of a pact his elders made with Chilean military leaders before the occupation. He was publicly "civilized" by the wingka so that, upon returning to his lands, he could "civilize" others like him and transform them into individuals "useful" to national society once the occupation was complete.

At the Normal School, he learned that the fundamental tools for this task were learning Spanish—not without force—reading, and writing, as well as the consequent postponement and denial of his native language. He learned his lesson well because, by the time of Don Pedro Nolasco Préndez's expedition in January 1883, he had supposedly been incorporated into the dominant society through formal education and geopolitical circumstances (Donoso, 2008, p. 28).

A key issue that the Spanish never understood—and that many still do not today—is the Mapuche people's relationship with the land. They have a spiritual connection to it and were a free society without a state structure (Bengoa, 2018). Therefore, taking their land, sending them to communities or reductions, and educating them in the Western way was, without exaggeration, a crime. Historian and anthropologist José Bengoa (2018, p. 40) explains this further:

Chile was founded on the ruins of the indigenous society of the south. It was established through a massacre. This was a densely populated region whose inhabitants had developed efficient systems of coexistence and organization. Productive and social life took place along the banks of the rivers that crisscross the Araucanía region—what we call riverside society.

He later adds:

When the Spanish arrived in southern Chile, the Mapuche were farmers. South of the Biobío River, they had established one of the most prosperous, beautiful, vibrant, and harmonious societies in American history. More than a million people lived along the banks of the Araucanía rivers. (...)

The Mapuche had formed a stateless society. They had no kings or lords. They governed themselves according to tradition and the Ad Mapu, or "law of the land." However, they took great care in their relations with others. This led to the development of what we call a culture of courtesy. Without a state or central government outside the family, they needed social mechanisms to enable coexistence.

They used occasions, places, and ceremonies to reaffirm their friendship repeatedly and permanently. They did not delegate power to anyone. They did not give any authority the obligation to maintain peace among the inhabitants. They themselves were responsible for peaceful coexistence. The Mapuche language is full of concepts and terms related to social life. This is why they met so often. They lived through social gatherings, meetings, religious activities, fairs, and alihuenes. They celebrated marriages, attended burials, and made visits, all of which were carried out with great pomp and style and sometimes lasted for weeks. Mapuche sociability and courtesy replaced the state as an organizing, controlling, and repressive institution. Some of the mechanisms that allowed this agrarian society to emerge in southern Chile before the arrival of the Spanish were sociability, meals, drinks, endless dancing, free sex among young people, and polygamy as a system of political transfers and alliances (Ibidem, p. 50).

The conquest and the "Pacification of Araucanía" changed everything. To determine whether it is valid to assert that the Mapuche people remain "undecolonized" (totally or partially), we must consider the present day, with an emphasis on the 20th century, in terms of the condition of Mapuche communities. To do so, we must consider what occurred from 1883 onward.

After the military defeat in 1881 and the occupation of Villarrica in 1883, Mapuche society underwent internal changes, as did its relationship with the Chilean state and society. The reduction of their territory was the most obvious and central element of the changes that took place. Araucanía was declared state property, and the land was colonized to increase production, similar to that in the central part of the country. The Mapuche were subjected to the rigors of civilization. They were given small plots of land, confined to their settlements, and forced to become farmers. Warriors had to become citizens, and cattle herders had to become peasants and subsistence producers. The Chilean army drastically directed this transition. These were years of fear, disease, hunger, loss of identity, and the formation of a new culture as an ethnic minority within Chilean rural society (Bengoa, 1996, p. 32).

All of this negatively impacted the Mapuche people's ability to freely develop their culture, further undermining their capacity for resistance. Above all, it profoundly affected two of their culture's fundamental characteristics. First, it affected their social relationships. Mapuche society was organized around families and the relationships between them, which was the foundation for everything since they did not have a central state to govern them, as we have already mentioned. Another aspect was the common practice of polygamy, which contrasted sharply with Christian values. Families shared a common ancestor and lived together in groups called lof. These groups were family clans ruled by a lonco, or chief. This change in family structure was traumatic.

In terms of religion, the Mapuche worshiped their ancestors and spirits. They did not have one god but rather several beings from beyond this life, including the *Pillanes*, *Wangulén*, and *Ngen*⁹. In one way or another, all of this took on Christian aspects in the new generations of Mapuche who were incorporated into today's society due to religious syncretism. Currently, most urban Mapuche identify as Catholic or Evangelical, except for those inhabiting the Araucanía region, who maintain their traditional beliefs. Some dispute this, even claiming that there are no longer any "real" Mapuche, only mestizos. Historian Sergio Villalobos is one such person who states that

They are actually mestizo Araucanians with strong white ancestry. It is interesting that there are hardly any studies of Mapudungun by Araucanians; only Chileans and foreigners have written treatises on the subject. It is difficult to understand why anyone would want to waste time, effort, and state funds on this. It is more urgent to intensify Spanish and Chinese education. The world is not going backwards" (2019, n/p).

This has been criticized by others, such as the Mapuche poet Elicura Chihuailaf and the Mapuche historian Pedro Cayuqueo. The former states:

Mr. Villalobos has not matured, and by now, at his age, he should have. Perhaps it would be best for him to retire. It's not worth responding to him because he already has that habit. His views are delusional. It is unfortunate that a National History Award winner is showing young people the worst of superficial, alienated Chile. As a historian, I believe he should know that what he is talking about is the result of violence exercised through an exclusionary educational system. His view of Chilean history and multiculturalism is ethnocentric and biased because Mapudungun continues to be excluded from universities and academia. This is a product of violence (Chihuailaf, 2019, n/p).

The second, meanwhile, states:

It is a language that is widely used in everyday social situations in various territories in the Mapuche area, with fairly recognizable linguistic pockets such as the rural outskirts of Temuco, the Pehuenche area of Alto Biobío, Lonquimay, and Icalma; and the coastal areas of Huapi and LleuLleu, among others (Cayuqueo, 2017, p. 125).

Historian Fernando Pairacán, for his part, notes the following regarding the current situation of the Mapuche people:

⁹ *Pillán*: spirits of ancestors. *Wangulén*: female spirit. *Ngen*: spirits of nature.

At times, the Mapuche movement has lost the aspiration for power that characterized it in its early days. This is due to its lack of unity and that of its scattered self-determined clans, which has often led it to take purely symbolic positions (Pairacán, 2019, p. 88).

4. Some culinary background

As mentioned in the introduction, their customs, especially their cuisine, remain intact. Moreover, merkén, one of their culinary ingredients, has become internationally known. One of the most popular Mapuche dishes in Chile is charquicán, a stew made with potatoes, corn, squash, and meat. There are many recipes for this dish, which some Chileans consider an unofficial national dish. In some versions, seaweed is used instead of meat. The Mapuche use the versatile leaves of the culén, a shrub native to Chile, to make a sweet punch and consider them a natural treatment for wounds. Mapuche cuisine is an art based on transmitting the wisdom of the people from mothers to daughters, which is part of Mapuche education. Women play a central role in this tradition, teaching the value of "local" products and the importance of meaningful cuisine. In Mapuche culture, it's not just the "ingredient" that matters, but the entire process involved (Socias & Soto, 2016). "Mapuche cuisine is a creation, an art, and a knowledge that is not based on recipes, as in Western gastronomy, but rather on the experience of encountering the origin of food. Our cuisine is based on the land, climate, native forest, and water" (Epulef, 2013, p. 4). For this reason, it has remained unchanged from colonial times to the present day."

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Conclusion

Upon concluding the description and analysis, it became clear that some Mapuche people had been decolonized, as the Spanish Crown had desired, thanks in part to the Jesuits' and Franciscans' evangelizing efforts promoting peace and understanding. Among the Jesuits, Father Luis de Valdivia is particularly noteworthy. However, a significant portion has not been decolonized since the "Pacification of La Araucanía" by the independent Chilean state, which resulted in the seizure of land. These groups will continue to confront the Chilean state until they regain their ancestral lands and receive compensation for the damage caused. Culinary customs have also remained unchanged, indicating another aspect of non-decolonization.

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