

The kove and the karai: a lesson from the Paraguayan Chaco

Christopher Wallis

Reflections of an anthropologist who has lived both with Uamah herders in the Andes and with hunting-and-gathering people inhabiting the lowland forests of the Paraguayan Chaco.

High up in the Peruvian Andes, above the tree-line, above even the bush-line, above the last communities where it is still possible to grow potatoes and native cereals, but just below the snow and the craggy mountain peaks, live small communities of llama and alpaca and sheep herders. Their life revolves around their animals and it is to them that the principle religious festival of the year is devoted; to them and to the spiritual powers associated with their life, indeed with all life. The herders say that the animals have a spiritual origin which connects them both with a spirit world inside the earth and also with the stars in the heavens. The people say of themselves that they have been set on this earth to look after the animals, whose true masters or owners are of a spiritual nature. They see that in many parts of the Andes greed has led to the extermination of the llamas and alpacas and this causes them deep concern, for they believe that the world will exist just so long as there are alpacas and llamas living.

Although these people do not mention God or Christ when they speak of their animals and the spiritual powers set over them, do we not see in their lives a moving prayer of intercession for the whole world? They justify and find purpose in their way of life, not in terms of their own limited aggrandisement, but in the light of their cooperation with the spiritual foundations of this world. And their prayer, rather than being a mouthing of verbal formulas or of magical incantations, is a 'living-out', a live and practical prayer.

Amongst different Indian peoples of the Paraguayan Chaco I have again and again been struck by this living prayer, which is certainly not just a matter of words. Those hard teachings of Jesus about the lilies of the field and birds of the air, about the essence of life and faith, are among them not just ideals to strive after painfully; rather they assume flesh and bones. Amongst these people I have seen what is humility. I have learnt what it means to live without the need to possess things and people. I have witnessed, and sympathised with, their suspicion of all human relations based on power and pride, and have been led to share in their deep trust in the spiritual basis of all life, as opposed to modern Western man's

vaunting claim to supreme control and domination of all forces. I remember one old man saying to me,

The missionaries are so sure that they brought us God and that without their message we would surely have all perished. But I can't believe this. I can't believe that because of the missionaries God loves us. Surely he always loved us? Yes, I know it; otherwise how could it be that we did not all die of sickness? How could it be that, when we cut our hands and feet running in the forest, our wounds healed? Surely God has always loved us!

This points to another profound message. For these people the world is sign, and everything that is and that happens speaks to them of an underlying 'order', with which they are intimately identified. This is poignantly illustrated in the story of a little red-breasted bird, known as *guarásy rýmba* in the guarani dialect of the Tapy'y people with whom I lived. I watched it flitting back and forth from one tree to another, glowing in the sun (literally its name means the 'sun's own creature'), while I sat with a man talking about the history of his people. When I pointed it out to him, he told me its name and story, of which I shall here give a shortened version:

Túmpa Tá'y, the Son of God, Our Great Father, saved his people, our forefathers, from many enemies. There were seven great enemies of God, seven great enemies of our people. One of the seven was Guýra Guásu (the Great Bird). I told you before how he fought with and outwitted Guýra Guásu, leaving his wife Guýra Pú'a all alone to eat raw meat instead of the roasted meat she had been used to. Well, when Túmpa Tá'y with the help of Vúra Jykýta'a (the primal tree), destroyed Guýra Guásu there was great joy and so he invited all the creatures of the forest to a great feast to eat the roasted meat of the dead enemy. Every creature came, not one was forgotten. But there was one little bird who always got up late, so when all the animals set out to the feast, this one was left behind. But when he saw that all had already gone to the feast, he followed, but a long way behind. All the animals were already at the feast and there was meat for each and everyone: each had his portion given him by Túmpa Tá'y, none was allowed to go without. And when they had nearly eaten everything and Túmpa Tá'y was still waiting for the last guest to come to enjoy his share, then, just as the sun was setting, the little bird approached, flitting from branch to branch. When he finally arrived all that was left was the remains of the blood of Guýra Guásu, so the little bird flew there and feasted on the blood. There was only a little left, but the bird was small and his breast

got covered in blood. That is why he is red, that is why he is called *guarásy rýmba*. You see, all the animals had to eat at the feast, even the tiniest.

There are stories about all the wild creatures linking them intimately to the history of this people, reminding the people always of their own history, of the intricate inter-weaving of events, natural phenomena, history and values. Touch one thread and you are led into a bewildering maze, an immense pattern that, although beyond our mental grasp, in some way seems to hold together.

The man who told me the story of *guarásy rýmba* sat many hours with me, teaching me another way of looking at the world, helping me to understand the deep pain that he and his people suffer as they see their life being destroyed by the insensitivity of the *karai* (non-Indians). His pain was increased by being unable to fathom the motives behind the attitudes and behaviour of the *karai*. He constantly questioned me in an attempt to understand and appreciate some good, some wisdom, that might lie hidden in the *karai's* life, but I invariably disappointed him. Still he maintained his hope because we shared a friendship which steadily grew as I admitted my own personal need as well as my people's need to listen to the message of the Indian people; to listen, not just on the basis of an abstract principle of respect, but rather in the recognition of *our* need to change.

This friendship was very important to both of us. To Roque, the Tapy'y man, it meant that the *karai* must also be endowed with a *kove* ('life-soul'), because all that is true and real—as for both of us was our friendship—must pass through the *kove*. The *kove* is given by God and on death returns to God and it is through the *kove* that He communicates to his people, that He teaches them in signs and dreams; it is where true knowledge resides, knowledge of things and of people, and as such it is the agent of true friendship. So, if the *karai* also have a soul, which Roque had doubted because of all he had seen and experienced, then there must be hope that one day they will understand, they will be open to true knowledge penetrating them.

One of the biggest deceptions for Roque, and for many other Indians whom I came to know, has been their meeting with Christianity. When Roque heard the teachings of the Bible he made a connection with the wisdom of his own people and identified what he took to represent the tradition and heart of the *karai*. Over the years Roque has seen that the *karai* do not practise what they preach and this has led him to draw certain conclusions.

In the first place, based on his own perception of wisdom and culture, this state of affairs implies that the *karai* do not really know what they are talking about. As he puts it, it is merely 'head-knowledge' and not 'soul or heart knowledge'. The former anyone can repeat just as he has heard it,

but he does not know it or understand it, because it has not passed through his *kove*. Ironically, Roque is more struck by the ignorance of the *karai* than by his boasting cleverness. Since human life is intimately connected with the *kove*, the knowledge of the *karai* is in a sense dead knowledge and Roque has complained bitterly that western-style education is 'killing the hearts of my people'.

The *karai* have set up an interior barrier that separates them from their inner and true selves, and this explains the contradictions and hypocrisy. The division at the same time implies a rift between man and God, because it is through the inner self, or *kove*, that God speaks to man. Roque finds this condition of the *karai* extremely disturbing and highly dangerous. It makes him (the *karai*) rootless, detached from his origins and in some fundamental way false. It is the falseness, the lie, of the *karai's* way of life that becomes so dangerous, especially since he tries to impose his way on others by force.

Teko, or 'way of life', is for Roque something God-given, a reality abundantly clear when one listens to the histories—the myths—of the people. One of our first more intimate conversations began with a question to me by Roque: 'Can you tell me where your people come from?' I knew from the context that he was not just asking a geographical question, nor a purely historical one. (He said that he had asked others the same question.) I told him what I had learnt at school, but my answer only confirmed his suspicion that the *karai* no longer know their origins. For him there was something radically wrong in this, as his reply demonstrated. He began by emphasising that he and his people *know* (in the true sense) where they come from and this makes for a big difference. Then, for about three hours, he related the histories ('myths') of his people which all led back to Tümpa, Ñande Ru Guásu, 'Our Great Father'. For him God was and is the origin of life, of his people's history and their culture. To lose that sense and knowledge of divine origin seemed to him a dreadful disaster, and he feared that, as the *karai* had somehow lost this knowledge of his own origin, he would now destroy it in his own people. For Roque it is clear that all *teko*, all culture, derives from God, and that each people should be honest to the culture it has been given. In this way may the One Father of All become mutually visible among different peoples; but when a people denies what God has given, refuses to live the way that is peculiarly its own, then it denies itself and its life and falls into confusion.

Roque suspects that the *karai's* determination to impose his own rootless way on others, in particular on the Indian people, is connected with fear, fear of anything different and fear that the way of the Indian people, so long as it lives on, will be a constant reminder of his own betrayal of God and his own true self. Again and again Roque has emphasised the need for mutual respect and warned against the dangers of destroying the other; for in destroying the other you destroy yourself. One image that he uses to illustrate this pictures is of two trees standing close together. You must

imagine the extreme heat of the Paraguayan Chaco, where drought is a constant threat. The two trees, he says, give each other shade and protect each other's roots from the withering rays of the sun. If the leaves of one tree fall, the roots of the other tree will be exposed. From Roque's point of view, the tree that represents the *karai* does not care that the green leaves of the Indian tree have wilted and are falling. The *karai* thinks only of gathering those leaves for himself. But if the Indian tree never blossoms again, then there will be no more green leaves to protect his own tree.

Mutual respect is fundamental and implies not just a distant admiration, but rather an intimate involvement which may lead to mutual strength. To illustrate this, Roque draws on the image of their native string, made from the fibre of the wild-pineapple leaf. The fibre is rolled against the thigh to form a thin thread, then two threads are rolled together to make a tough string. Again, the converse implication of weakness is obvious, where one thread on its own is more liable to snap.

The rootlessness and 'heartlessness' of western culture are deeply disturbing to Roque, and the consequences for his own people are plain to see. It is a sobering reflection that one of the signs of this rootlessness would within our ostensible set of values be considered as a point of strength. This is our addiction and submission to set plans. Again and again, I have found Chaco Indians bemused and bewildered by the *karai* who plans his activities according to a fixed calendar and clock. They see this as simply blind and insensitive, since life, true life, is not governed by these abstract, man-made divisions. All activities should be carried out in accordance with the appropriate conditions, both external and internal to the person or group of persons. And to force yourself or another person to do something when the inner state of the person is not responsive or rightly disposed is, to them, a blatant violation.

It is not surprising, then, that anger against another person is considered one of the worst offences that a person can commit and is liable to cause considerable upset within the social group. Anger against a person, is, in fact, much more serious than what we would call theft. It is quite common for people to take fruit and vegetables from the garden of another and this is not considered wrong or a theft. Much more serious would be a reaction of anger by the 'owner' of those plants against the person who took them. Indeed, when someone takes something from another's garden he should ideally go up to the 'owner' to tell him what he has done, which is a way of expressing thanks, to which the 'owner' should respond by showing his pleasure and offering yet more.

It is clear that these people do not share our concept of property, which has always proved a mystery to them. To seek to own what nature produces is to them an obvious piece of moral sleight-of-hand. Plants and animals have their own spiritual masters or owners, making it impossible for the people to conceive of life and economics in terms of appropriation,

exploitation and domination of nature, as we tend to. It is often said that that the Amerindians are natural ecologists, but this is simply a piece of western intellectual imperialism, making the Indians fit our categories, reducing them to our own mental framework. The Chaco Indians do not base their respect for nature on a rational evaluation of the correct balance between species, or between man and his natural resources. For them the fundamental relationship is not between exploiting man and exploited nature, but between the spiritual forces that underlie all life, as the following Indian story shows:

A Paraguayan hunter was famous for his exploits. He was especially good at hunting the wild pig. He used to climb up a tree near a water hole and wait at night for the pigs to come to drink. He killed many pigs, not just once but many times, until the herd of pigs was much reduced. One night he was waiting for the pigs when he heard a tremendous noise of stomping feet and gnashing teeth. He began to be afraid; it must be a very big herd, he thought. The herd began to come into sight; there were hundreds of them rushing towards the water, and behind them, cracking his whip, came their *jára* (spirit master). It was he who was driving them to the water hole. He came straight up to the tree where the man was hiding and looked up at him angrily. 'It is you who has been killing my creatures so wantonly. Why have you killed so many? Come down at once and face me!' The man shook with fear and could not bring himself to climb down. He was terrified. 'Come down!' said the *jára* 'come down at once! I shall not harm you.' So the man slipped down slowly and stood trembling in front of the pigs' spirit-master. 'This time I shall do nothing to you. You may go, but I warn you never to kill so many of my creatures again. You may kill one or two as you need, but not the great numbers you have killed before.'

On one occasion, two Paraguayan horse-rustlers were caught near an Indian village where I was staying. They had some twelve horses with them stolen from a Paraguayan ranch. One of my Indian companions remarked in disgust to me: 'You see what the *karai* is like, he is so greedy! What would the man do with twelve horses? If we take something, we only take what we need, what we can use.' In a neighbouring village I heard of an Indian complaining bitterly to a Paraguayan teacher for not wanting to share the little rain-water he had collected in a barrel off his roof. 'Who are you', he said, 'to make yourself owner of this water? Was it you who made the rain to fall on your roof?'

For these people most of our claims to property are pure fiction and can only be upheld by force or threats, thus revealing their intrinsic falseness. An English missionary, the first to go among the Enthlit Indians of the Chaco, saw the Indians' failure to assert individual property rights as

a sign of a decadent social order, which he called 'socialism'. He urged the Indians to grow more crops and keep them for themselves instead of sharing the produce with their relatives and neighbours, as is common practice. He even conceived a scheme to 'help' one man, whom he saw as someone who might 'get ahead', which consisted in a joint garden with joint ownership of the produce, so that his Indian associate would not be able to give away any of the crops. The missionary, a man of great insight, who came to doubt many aspects of the work he initiated, has done us and the Indian people the good service of recording the reply of his would-be associate:

What you want is not in accordance with our custom; it is not the way we Indians follow. We are not hard-hearted and miserly like you; we do not keep things for ourselves when others are hungry. We do not like to be tired with hard work in order that we may have big huts stored with things.

Seventy years later I have heard statements of a similar character. To have and accumulate material possessions is an anomaly to the Indian people, who cannot see why the *karai* put so much store by their possessions at the expense of their own people. They cannot understand how in one and the same society some can be rich and others poor. They cannot understand how people can come to identify themselves so fanatically with their material possessions to the extent that they cannot bear to be parted from things, even though they have no use for them.

If the Chaco Indians are suspicious of this kind of possessiveness, they are also wary of power relations and appear to perceive the close connection that exists between property and power. They themselves have tended to avoid all forms of leadership that could lead to a permanent basis for a coercive power. We have already seen the spiritual context in which this attitude is set, where mutual respect is valued much more than power and all is understood with reference to spiritual forces. Traditionally coercive authority or power is tolerated only in situations of conflict with other Indian groups and in the shaman's role as mediator between his people and the spirit powers. However, whenever the powers associated with the war-leader or the shaman are thought to be directed into the social group, rather than out of it, fear and recriminations are liable to arise. And now that external economic, political and physical forces have intruded so powerfully and destructively in their society, the tendency is to put the blame on the shamans and the war-leaders, which causes even more devastating internal conflict. The shamans are blamed for the sicknesses and epidemics and the 'military leaders' are seen to have promoted a new ethic within society, an ethic identified with the *karai* and characterized by the desire to possess, pride in one's possessions, individualism and the refusal to share, and by the resort to force to secure agreement and achieve certain material ends. This characterization is not my own, it is what I have heard from Roque and others, and we cannot fail to see in it a terrible indictment of our own

society.

Although what I shall add here I have never heard explicitly said by any Indians, I am sure that they would have no difficulty in recognizing its content. Both in their social organization and also in their attitudes to life and their environment, the Chaco Indians demonstrate a remarkable flexibility and humility which contrasts radically with the western way. The western way, when set against this Indian way, seems to be based on a profound inner insecurity which arouses a great need among human beings to prove to themselves the contrary, leading to enormous deception. The immeasurability and flux of life becomes an offence to those who cannot tolerate their own weakness, and the consequence is an almost manic determination to chop up reality, life and living into identifiable portions which can be possessed, dominated and manipulated. Mankind's domination of nature, or attempt at dominating it, when seen in this light, assumes another meaning. It would seem that the motivating force is not human achievement and well-being—which can surely in themselves be good and holy—but rather deep fear, humans' fear of their dependence and their desperate and perverse desire to prove themselves otherwise, in other words that they do have power.

If there is any truth in this then it is hardly surprising that we have sought, and continue to seek, to blot out the life and message of other peoples who speak to us on these very issues. I do not wish to imply that the Chaco Indian peoples reveal an ideal society. They have their own tensions and conflicts, and now they are having to cope with the often agonising consequences of meeting western society. And we should not fall into the trap of feeling self-righteous, of thinking that after all it is those iniquitous Latin-American oligarchies and their collusion with the transnationals, etc. that are wholly to blame. We are intimately involved in the destruction of these Indian societies because we participate in the same mental, political and economic structures that are working there. The message of the Indian people to us is not just to go out campaigning against evil landlords and corrupt governments in Latin America, but rather to take a very deep look into our own hearts with the benefit of their eyes. Such looking will surely help conversion.

One thing has deeply impressed me about Roque. Despite all that the *karai* have done to his people, the bitterness of this experience has not made him doubt the truth of the Gospel. Blessed with a freedom towards all things, he has never been tempted to associate the Gospel with the people who brought it: after all, it is the possession of nobody.