

New words for old skies: recent forms of cosmological discourse among the aboriginal people of the Argentinian Chaco

Alejandro Martín López

Instituto de Ciencias Antropológicas, Universidad de Buenos Aires &
Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas, Argentina
email: astroamlopez@hotmail.com

Abstract. In this paper we discuss the contemporary production of cosmological discourse, especially that concerning celestial space, among the aboriginal Toba and Mocoví communities of the Argentinian Chaco. Cosmology remains essential for Tobas and Mocovís at the present time. However, we shall demonstrate the importance of the emergence of new producers of cosmological discourse related to new actors in the struggle over leadership. We will also take into account the present contexts of discourse—the new interlocutors and communications technologies. Our goal is to understand cosmological terms in the context of the complex relations resulting from the structural subordination of these groups to national society.

Keywords. aboriginals, contemporary cosmologies, discourse, Argentinian Chaco, interethnic contact

1. The Tobas and Mocovíes

The Tobas and Mocovíes inhabit the southern area of the Chaco region in Argentina. They belong to the Guaycurú linguistic group, as do the Abipones, Pilagás and Caduveos. Before the Spaniards arrived they were hunters and gatherers. The Spaniards were not able to take control over the Chaco, but sporadic expeditions took place throughout the colonial period, together with regular incursions by seekers of gold, timber and an aboriginal labor force. In the 17th century the horse was introduced and Mocovíes and Tobas also began to trade cattle, in the context of both peaceful and violent exchanges with the Creole (*criollos*). Several missions were founded among the latter, first by Jesuits and, after their expulsion in 1767, by Mercedarians and Franciscans.

In the late 19th and 20th century, after a bloody military campaign to occupy the Chaco, the Argentine State encouraged the settlement of European colonists. Aboriginals were gradually incorporated into the labor market as brush cutters, harvesters and loggers in mills and farms. The abrupt changes brought about by the expansion of the Argentine State at the end of the 19th century gave rise to several millennial movements, which led to fierce repression. In the 1940s, evangelical cults began to gain influence in the Mocoví and Toba communities. Nowadays, the Mocovíes have a population of approximately 15,700 while that of the Tobas is around 69,600 (INDEC 2004–2005).

2. Main characteristics of Guaycurú social organization

During the pre-Columbian period, the basic organizational structure of these groups was the extended family, mainly matrilineal (Braunstein 1983: 11–19). These were grouped into exogamous bands of relatives, containing between 10 to 70 people. Marriage alliances were arranged within larger units, comprising several bands, which Braunstein calls 'tribes'. These migrated cyclically within a more-or-less fixed territory and gathered

together in times of food abundance, thereby maintaining a degree of linguistic unity. The tribes were political units, linked by a sense of belonging and by historical tradition. But they were very flexible, because the bands were highly susceptible to changes in alliances, and even made inter-ethnic alliances quite frequently.

Politics in these groups is primarily based on kinship. Leadership was exercised on temporary basis, according to need and depending on the circumstances (Braunstein 1983: 18). It was strongly influenced by group consensus and therefore oratorical skills were essential. The high mobility of members within the social units meant that the leaders were subjected to a sort of competition for followers. Two major types of leadership form the opposite ends of a continuum: the political-military caciques and religious shamans. A cacique was expected to be a good hunter and warrior. Redistributive generosity, especially their ability to organize parties, was another essential attribute. Also significant was their contact with powerful entities, not human, who could warn them of dangers and opportunities that could benefit everyone. It was precisely this special ability to relate to such beings, who controlled the resources for life—resources from water and food through to health—that gave shamans their leading position. Shamans, because of their links with the powerful, had the ability to see the ultimate structure of the cosmos and to travel through its various layers.

3. Traditional cosmological discourse

3.1. *Traditional features of cosmological discourse*

Traditional cosmological discourse among Toba and Mocoví was typical of an oral culture in having specific forms and contents (Ong 1996: 40). Oral discourse is not a ‘thing’ on paper; it is an event, a living thing that happens. The structure of oral discourse depends upon sequences of words that are received over time, which people need to remember. Oral discourse occurs in direct interaction, face to face. These interactions are performances that involve gestures, costumes and specific scenarios. This means that what is said is strongly contextualized, adapted to the interests and constraints of the relationship between the speaker and his or her audience. The authority of the narration is established by reference to ancestors, grandparents, and especially mythical beings of the past. Innovations are introduced as different varieties of what is already known (*ibid.*: 48). This is a specific form of historical consciousness, one that—through the use of fuzzy categories and continual redefinition—allows people to make sense of the new by identifying it with the old (Sahlins 1988). These characteristics contribute to the appearance of numerous variants on the same subjects, driven by different producers of discourse, depending on their interests. This leads to sub-traditions. In the case of the cosmological word, such variations will compete as part of the struggle between leaders for followers (Barth 1987). The absence of a canon fixed by writing makes possible these symbolic struggles. (Note that only from our ‘writing paradigm’ perspective does this ‘non-canonic situation’ seem to be an absence: for an oral culture, this flexibility is a resource.)

Guaycurú cosmological discourse, as a discourse about the correct ways to relate to powerful beings, functioned at the same time as a discourse about the correct ways to relate to other humans. For this reason, cosmological discourse is a fundamental mechanism for communicating social values, and plays a very important role in shaping personhood.

3.2. *Contexts of traditional cosmological discourse*

A key concept in traditional cosmological discourse is that of *encuentros* (encounters) between an individual and powerful beings. These occurred during sleep or ecstatic experiences in the solitude of the forest. During these encounters, the individual receives

information about the cosmos and its resources, and is often permitted to travel through certain areas. This is commonly expressed in a song that is revealed to the individual concerned. This individual then, by different mechanisms, informs the others that (s)he has received some wisdom, because this is a source of prestige. This is true even when (s)he does not reveal the contents of this wisdom, which is often secret.

Traditionally, encounters between elders and children in the domestic sphere, generally at night, were other interactions where cosmological discourse was frequently present. Stories and pieces of advice revealed the ultimate nature of the world, through the actions of mythical beings and the social values associated with them.

Adults of working age transmit to young people knowledge about hunting and gathering in the forest. This knowledge is conveyed through stories that often have cosmological content, where 'technical' information is linked to social values and the mythical origins of these values. Given the sexual division of labor, this type of communication follows gender lines. The same applies to the cosmological knowledge transmitted by the elders to girls at the time of female initiation, which is associated with first menstruation. This knowledge concerns their duties as women, restrictions associated with pregnancy and menstruation, and punishments that powerful beings apply to transgressors.

Shamans are specialists in the use of cosmological discourse. When an ill or suffering individual and those close to him go to see the shaman, he develops a discourse about the cosmos and its inhabitants, in order to give a meaning to the suffering condition.

During celebrations, men recited war stories about their ancestors and shamans competed in power struggles. In this context, stories about the origins and the structure of the world were put on show, giving rise to new variants.

3.3. *Restricted access to writing*

Daily interaction with the Spanish at the colonial frontiers, together with missionary activities, put the Guaycurú in contact with Christian cosmological discourse and with the literate world. This contact was intensified after the systematic occupation of Chaco by the Argentine State in the late 19th century. Labor in sugar-cane plantations and timber mills, Catholicism, and the presence of schools were all very important influences. Schooling, which has been growing steadily since the 1950s, remains mainly in Spanish and tends to promote the disdain of indigenous languages and cosmologies. Yet the use of Spanish is often limited, especially among women. Bilingual education is more a mission than a systematic practice, but teacher training related to bilingual education projects has had a huge impact on cosmological thought. The reason for this is that this the training process for indigenous teachers, and the circuit of institutions, events and courses that it involves, have put these indigenous people in contact with a great variety of cosmological thinking.

In 1940 the first evangelical missionaries arrived in the region. This led to the formation of a strong evangelical and aboriginal movement that reinforced the presence of the written word and Christian cosmology, albeit a Christian cosmology countered by a strong process of symbolic resignification[†] and restricted access to writing. The biblical text played and still plays a central role. It was the starting point of the crucial process of transferring the Toba and Mocoví languages into written form. The translation of the

[†] This concept, from Marshall Sahlins, describes the processes by which symbols are transformed through social practice. This results from actions of individuals that put traditional categories into use in specific historic contexts. In this way, individual creativity, the unexpected features of reality, and the fuzzy limits of mythical categories permit the transformation of the meanings of symbols, as a form of mythical conscience that deals with change under the appearance of continuity.

Bible promoted the adoption of a particular alphabet for these languages which froze the meaning of many words and prioritized certain dialects. Biblical translation also involved important discussions about the relationships between aboriginal and Christian cosmological discourse. Bible studies have turned out to be the most important vehicle for the diffusion of writing in the Toba and Mocoví languages.

3.4. *New owners of the discourse*

The traditional mechanisms for access to leadership were first modified by the influence of the Spanish and then by the rising Argentine State. The needs of European and Creole institutions favored the consolidation of 'prestigious lineages' from which the leaders began to emerge. With the colonization of the Chaco in the 19th century, the leaders became the link between the white farmers in need of seasonal labor and the indigenous communities. However, changes in global economic conditions in the 1960s, linked to the modernization of agriculture, meant that these leaders were no longer necessary as mediators. At that time, alternative ways began to emerge of gaining access to leadership. These favored young men, regardless of whether they belonged to prestigious lineages. Evangelical churches, schools, medical facilities, government agencies and NGOs became alternative spaces that provided resources and ways to construct prestige and social networks both inside and outside the community. As a result, young teachers, teachers' assistants, nurses, pastors and politicians positioned themselves as new leaders. Women, in particular, began to have access to much more public visibility than they had had in the past. This access of young literate people to positions of control generates conflicts with the elders who value the traditional paths to, and ways of, leadership.

4. Contemporary cosmological discourse

4.1. *Characteristics of contemporary cosmological discourse*

In the past, the cosmological word was addressed to members of the group itself. The tribe was usually the largest social horizon of cosmological discourse. Nowadays, there are many potential recipients: the Creole from the local or national environment, other aboriginal groups, state agencies, NGOs, indigenous organizations, anthropologists, mass media, etc. In this present context, a particular cosmological system, together with language, is one of the most important badges of aboriginality. This is part of the reason why there is such an interest in conducting cosmological discourse with such a wide range of interlocutors.

Formerly, cosmological knowledge was only transmitted orally, by face-to-face interaction. Today it is often put in writing, which allows it to reach distant interlocutors and even strangers. However, writing and publishing, filming and editing a video, making a radio program or recording a CD or cassette all involve certain technical and financial resources that are not easily accessible to Mocovís and Tobas. Most of these media are in the hands of white people, with whom robust interaction is indispensable in order to access them. The use of these techniques involves a long learning process in the context of the white world, which includes socialization and coming to terms with strange notions of communication.

Many new producers of cosmological discourse appeal to the authority of elders or to direct experience to legitimize their claims; but new criteria of legitimacy are also appearing. One of these is to support the cosmological discourse by citing its alleged similarities to that of other aboriginal groups around the world. Another new criterion of legitimacy is to appeal to the similarities that can be identified between their views of the cosmos and the statements proposed by 'white science'. A third criterion consists of using the attention paid by institutions or personalities of the white world to the ideas of the leader in question.

In the modern world, symbolic struggles reach a wider scale owing to the broader dissemination of the cosmological variants. It is clearly important for the indigenous interlocutors to reach an appropriate level of mastery of Spanish, linguistic conventions, and the social skills that operate in this wider context. At the same time, the permanence of the formats in which today's cosmological discourse must be conducted imposes new boundaries on the strategic use of forgetfulness and fuzziness.

4.2. *Cosmological discourse in contemporary contexts*

The contexts of interaction that produces today's discourse about the cosmos have a wide variety of scenarios. Something common to all of them is the presence of the white world with its institutions and interests, acting as a direct or indirect interlocutor.

In the traditional space of the domestic sphere, hunting and gathering practices still occupy an important place, but this is increasingly limited. Many elders, who have personally experienced persecution over the past few decades, are reluctant to pass on traditional knowledge. Not only is this because their experience shows them the disadvantages of displaying marks of aboriginality in the context of the national society; it is also because the disdain that the white world has shown towards indigenous knowledge does not predispose them to it. At the same time, many young people attracted by the consumer goods of the white world pay little attention to traditional knowledge. In some communities, radio and television have begun to affect the household dynamics of night gatherings. However, encounters with powerful entities still have an impact. In fact, evangelical cults have opened up new spaces and new symbolic resources for the ecstatic experience. During the service many can achieve experiences that were previously assigned to the shamans. However, church leaders engage in exegesis and so gain control of these experiences.

While there are few bilingual teachers and teachers' assistants involved in bilingual education programs, their numbers are growing, and their position makes them highly favored producers of cosmological discourse. With recognition from the State, and with the support of elders encouraged by the wider interest in their ideas, these teachers and assistants are currently the most important intellectuals (in the sense of Goody 1985: 30) generating cosmological discourse among the Toba and Mocoví.

Various development projects promoted by state agencies and NGOs are also places that generate discourse about the cosmos by Tobas and Mocoví participants. One characteristic is that they have encouraged the emergence of a semantic field linked to sustainable development, ecology and harmony, with nature linked in large part to the revived myth of the noble savage. Many of these projects use workshop methods and the collective production of texts (Cravero 2003; Nsoquixanaxanapi 2008). These methodologies have allowed some people the opportunity to speak publicly about these issues who in the past had limited access to this type of intervention, such as young women.

Both the development projects and the field of bilingual education have promoted the idea of 'rescuing' disappearing traditions. This idea strongly permeates the discourse and practices of aboriginal people that participates in these areas. Stories of the elders are collected and recorded with the aim of recreating or reinterpreting traditional practices and exploring the knowledge of past generations. In this reconstruction, it is not only the testimonies of the elderly that are involved but also the creative imagination of the young and the influence of white imaginary about the Indians.

Indigenous rights movements tend to focus their activities on the claims of territorial and cultural rights. These organizations are structurally linked to social movements in the national society. In these institutions, given the importance of cosmological discourse as a mark of aboriginality, the production of cosmological discourse is very often a key

objective. The possession of a cosmological discourse of their own, and of social values linked with it, are important tools in the struggle for autonomy, particularly because they incorporate notions about space and the human that differ from the practices of the Nation State.

Finally, we must not forget that many Mocovís and Tobas participate in anthropologists' research and also work with journalists, historians and artists from the white world. In these contexts they also create a discourse about the cosmos, one that is addressed to the professionals or institutions that the aboriginal people believe are supporting them.

In what follows we will discuss some examples of this new cosmological discourse.

4.3. *Cosmological discourse in churches*

In the past, the ecstatic experiences of shamans were a privileged source of cosmological knowledge. In these experiences the shaman visited different areas of the cosmos, met with powerful beings and established pacts with them in order to gain power. This power was often materialized in the form of songs or powerful objects that were given to the shaman. With the arrival of Catholicism, the worship of saints' images and the Virgin became a point of connection between Christian and pre-Christian experiences.

Evangelical churches are opposed to these Catholic practices, considering them pagan and syncretic. However, these churches opened up other ways of connecting with traditional practices. The flexible and congregational structure of evangelical churches fitted very well with the sociopolitical structure of kinship. Furthermore, the prominent place that was given to ecstatic experiences, music and dance by many of the evangelical churches that established themselves in the region created considerable potential for redefining the significance of past practices. 'Gozo' (joy), the presence of the Holy Spirit, and demonic possession all played a central role in this process. Such concepts provide a basis for cosmological reconfiguration and for the legitimization of religious experiences. These experiences are complex interactions between traditional ideas and biblical cosmologies.

Bible studies promoted by the missionaries are another area of cosmological development. The Toba and Mocoví exegesis of biblical cosmologies is a process of reconstruction: creative interpretation is applied not only to the text but especially to the pictures and illustrations. Preaching is central to the socialization of personal cosmological experiences. For them, the performance of the preacher may lend credibility to his ideas if he can spread 'joy' to his audience. These events also promote the development of a consensus regarding certain cosmological ideas.

Another element is the text itself. It is common to hear biblical references quoted as a source of authority when arguing the truth of a statement about the cosmos. In this sense, the existence of a fixed text (Goody 1996) introduces an extra factor in the adaptation of traditional modes of discourse to changing circumstances. This leads to an increased concern about the contradictions between different types of discourse and various authorities.

Despite the creative redefinition, some people seek to establish which elements of the pre-Christian set of ideas are incompatible with biblical concepts. Missionary activities have encouraged the emergence of concerns of this nature among some aboriginal leaders. In the specific case of astronomy, previously unknown asterisms that appear in the Bible (such as the constellations of Ursa Major and Minor) generate uncertainty. Similar concerns arise regarding the absence in the biblical text of the asterisms that are most important to the indigenous groups, such as the Mañic (the figure of an ostrich with dark spots formed in the Milky Way between the coalsack and Scorpius). These discrepancies between the living sky and the biblical text create uncertainty.

5. Teachers as compilers and cosmologists

The training circuit in intercultural education not only includes teacher exchanges but also a range of courses, workshops, meetings, and cultural and theatrical groups at local, provincial and national levels. An important feature of this social space is the idea among these young intellectuals that culture is a field of identity and power. This is interesting because, to some extent, the process of ‘culturalization’ of ethnic differences by Western academics proved to be an attempt to domesticate the ‘other’. This is the dark side of cultural studies and the politics of multiculturalism that arose in the early 1980s. Political and social inequalities were often hidden beneath the umbrella of ‘culture’. Young intellectuals in these groups quickly recognized that the discourse of multiculturalism opened a place in which they could be ‘an aboriginal person’, but, generally, they did not accept being ‘tamed’. They took advantage of these spaces to brandish their claims about the inequalities to which their people are subjected, taking advantage of the protection this gave them to speak about ‘culture’.

An interesting example is Orlando Sánchez, a leading Toba intellectual. He is connected with the evangelical church, and he cooperated with the Fraternal Mennonite Workers in translating the Bible. He is also one of the pioneers in the production of materials for training bilingual teachers. He has written several texts about Toba history and culture (Sánchez 2004; 2008; 2009), many of which refer to celestial space and include ‘modern’ vocabulary such as ‘ultraviolet space’ and ‘spheres of the moon’. His analysis of the stories relates them to present-day problems of importance such as relations with the ‘other’ and the asymmetry in the relationship between whites and indians. In fact, he suggests that the ultimate goal of science is “[to study] the importance of the word in the appropriation of the world . . . and the understanding between [the] two cultures [Indian and white]” (Sánchez 2004: 5). Analyzing the importance of the sky for the Tobas he indicates that the universe is “like a society, stars and men start from a common order” (*ibid.*: 3). Sánchez identifies traditional knowledge about the stars’ ‘gravitational’ influence on earth as ‘astronomy’. But he says that the Tobas also consider a more direct influence on the physiology of terrestrial beings, whose study he identifies as ‘astrology’. By using this term he identifies the analogous relationships established between the most important asterisms and certain terrestrial beings. The ‘calendar’ associated with these asterisms therefore becomes a tool for contemplating the relationship between the sky and people.

Another interesting example of teachers as new producers of cosmological discourse is Juan Carlos Martínez, a teacher and Mocoví leader. He belongs to a younger generation of bilingual teachers. Deeply committed to the recovery of cultural values and the claims of indigenous peoples, he is an important person in contemporary Mocoví cosmological reflection. He works particularly with young people, not only in the context of their teaching, but also in a theater group. These young people ‘rescue’ the teachings of the elders and reflect them in new and creative materials such as dances and plays based on that knowledge.

Through texts (Martínez 2006) and public actions, Martínez has demonstrated the connection between the Mocoví’s notions about the cosmos and their land claims. In doing so he has emphasized the importance of the relationships between humans and powerful non-human beings in shaping Guaycurú notions of territory. He has used the Campo del Cielo crater field, where there are numerous iron meteorites, as a symbol of those relationships.

This important Mocoví leader is also relevant in relation to the role of new media in cosmological discourse. He is the leading advocate and writer of the first movie

produced in Argentina by an aboriginal community (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X1odIHeRQSU>). It deals with issues related to identity, claims for the rights of aboriginal peoples and the assertion of traditional culture. The Campo del Cielo meteorites (and cosmology in general) play a central role, as we can observe in the title: “The Nation Hidden in the Meteorite. A History of Moqoit People”. This notable achievement was accomplished using a Mocoví script, Mocoví actors and a Toba editing team, supervised by teachers from the Training Center for Filmmaking in Bolivia. In the trailer, some young Mocovís can be seen engaged within schools while at the same time searching for the living testimony of their community’s elders. Martínez himself says that “the real story is not in books. We must return to film and record the elders”. In one scene, a young woman who appears as a bilingual teacher teaches a text in the Mocoví language to her students. Significantly, the text deals with the creation of the world.

6. The public construction of difference

As we have seen, some very close connections exist between the cosmological and political spheres, particularly in terms of the relationships between these aboriginal groups and the non-aboriginal institutions and actors. Two important examples that have occurred recently are attempts to create a Mocoví flag and to ‘formalize’ a Mocoví new year. These initiatives have come about in a double framework. On the one hand, they are closely linked to disputes between different groups and leaders for the representation of ‘the Mocoví’, especially when facing the white world. At the same time, they relate to simultaneous disputes occurring within a complex web of relationships between all the Mocoví groups and many different social networks in the white world.

Sky objects and the spatio-temporal patterns of organization of the cosmos are central to many of the proposed flags. In fact, one of the most popular proposals is formed by a succession of bands that represent different moments in Mocoví ‘history’: black for the ‘dark past’ before the arrival of Europeans (here we see the influence of evangelical preaching), red for the bloody conquest, blue and white for the incorporation in the Argentine state, and finally green, which represents the present and, at the same time, the forest as a symbol of the Mocovís’ own territory. This flag contains a number of important beings: the Sun, the southern cross, the ostrich and the ‘garabato’ (*Acacia praecox Griseb*) flower, which is associated with spring. All of them have great cosmological significance. Other proposals feature similar schemes. The different proposals employ diverse strategies in seeking obtain ‘official’ legitimization, such as identifying political organizations that could put a particular proposal before the City Council.

The development of a flag is part of a process that aims to build, for the white world, a public image of the difference between the two worlds. In the past, local political circumstances have led many communities to conceal their indian identity. The current situation has made it propitious to display certain forms of difference. Hence the attempt, observed in communities in Chaco and Santa Fe province, to formalize a ‘Mocoví new year’. In the case of Mapuche communities (Briones 1994), the construction of a festivity such as this involves remaking tradition and researching a symbol of difference from the white world. The Guaycurús’ annual cycle actually contained many points of celebration, but the notion of ‘new year’ and the choice of the spring festival to represent it clearly displays the influence of the white world in the background. In fact, official recognition by the State bureaucracy has involved setting a date in the Gregorian calendar (September 15). This represents a fundamental change, because traditionally any festival was timed according to a set of signs involving vegetation, animals and stars.

7. Conclusions

Ethnoastronomical studies have typically focused on trying to reconstruct traditional forms of cosmology among various ethnic groups. In doing so, researchers risk making the mistaken assumption that these societies and their astronomical notions were static structures, not subject to change before the arrival of the Europeans. For the same reason, scholars have avoided studying the evolution of the cosmological systems of indigenous peoples after the conquest, especially in the contemporary world, other than in the context of attempts to 'rescue' remaining fragments of traditional universes. Without denying the impact of the conquest and the new dynamics imposed by the accelerated globalization process driven by European capitalism, these societies have never been static. For this reason, the study of their current cosmological discourse is not only important in itself but also helps us strengthen the methodological tools that we need in order better to comprehend the dynamics of cosmological productions and its relationship to struggles for power and leadership.

In this paper we have attempted to characterize the emergence of new modes of discourse among the Mocovís and Tobas. These are related to new actors in the struggle over leadership, new contexts of discourse, new interlocutors, and new mass media.

One general conclusion is that contemporary cosmological discourse among the studied groups should be understood in the context of their subordination to national society. A consequence of the political, economical and social subordination enforced by the State is that indigenous discourse about the nature of the cosmos, too, is structurally subordinated to the dominant society.

This is especially so because of the relevance of the ideas about the ultimate nature of the world in the justification of the value systems. Ethnic opposition between different knowledge about the world fits well in a class opposition. Therefore, the "ethnic" discourse will be identified by an State institutions as a popular discourse, non-academic, irrational, magical, etc.

On the other hand, however, the semantic spaces of the 'cultural' and the 'religious' have acquired relative autonomy in the contemporary global world, based on their 'domestication'. On the understanding that they are apolitical, religion and culture are accepted as places for a difference that does not harass or disturb the world order. The new leaders among the Tobas and Mocovís have noticed this and they actively stand in this field, but they maintain the conceptions of their own societies where the relations between culture and power make cosmology a political matter. In this way, cultural discourse has become a vital component of their political action. As a result of this situation, they make efforts to show their cultural particularities, which have long been repressed by the national State. In consequence, much contemporary cosmological discourse among these aboriginal groups is directed not just at the declared recipients (in most cases the young people of their own ethnic group) but also to another undeclared recipient: the white world.

The cosmological realm remains essential to this new scenario for Tobas and Mocovís. It generates social behavior patterns, as it did in the past. But the relations between heavenly beings and human beings now serve as a model for relations of otherness and power to which these groups are subjected daily in the context of their interaction with the white world.

Many producers of cosmological discourse experience, in different spheres of life, the stress of coexisting with diverse cosmologies and varied sources of authority. For evangelical pastors there is a tension between the knowledge of the elders, the Bible, and knowledge learnt in school. Young women face criticism if they do not accept the traditional role models of women proposed by the social promotion agencies. For students

and teachers, the teaching of science often produces a strong emotional conflict. This happens, for one thing, because of the tensions between the different conceptions about the world that Mocoví and Toba students find themselves encountering. But it also happens because they conceptualize the sky as a powerful and dangerous place. This can promote fear when thinking about, or naming, the sky without adequate protections. Teachers also experience stress in selecting what and how to teach aboriginal students. For political leaders, the struggle for land necessitates bringing into play concepts about territory that are difficult to reconcile with those underlying the state legal system.

Today, among the indigenous peoples in Chaco, different criteria of legitimacy and agents of authority coexist, leading to three very different forms of discourse: scientific discourse, supported by teachers and doctors; biblical discourse, held by missionaries and pastors; and discourse within the family, which relies on the authority of elders. Mechanisms exist among these aboriginal people to deal with the tensions to which these differences lead. These mechanisms are based on the process of symbolic refunctionalization and on the particular plasticity of Guaycurú cosmological systems. Nonetheless, as we have seen, some of these people have strong concerns about contradictions, in part connected with the new paradigms of knowledge brought in by the writing culture. These concerns about contradictions now form an important factor in Guaycurú cultural creativity processes.

References

- Barth, F. 1987, *Cosmologies in the Making: a Generative Approach to Cultural Variation in Inner New Guinea*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Braunstein, J. 1983, *Algunos Rasgos de la Organización Social de los Indígenas del Gran Chaco*, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires.
- Briones, C. 1994, 'Con la tradición de todas las generaciones pasadas gravitando sobre la mente de los vivos': Usos del pasado e invención de la tradición Runa. *Archivo para las Ciencias del Hombre* 21, 99–129.
- Cravero, M. (ed.) 2003, *Lunas, Tigres y Eclipses. De Olvidos y Memorias: La Voz de las Mujeres Indígenas*, Ministerio de Desarrollo Social, INADI, CAPI & Taller de Memoria Étnica, Buenos Aires.
- Goody, J. 1985, *La Domesticación del Pensamiento Salvaje*, Akal, Madrid.
- Goody, J. (ed.) 1996, *Cultura Escrita en Sociedades Tradicionales*, Editorial Gedisa S.A., Barcelona.
- INDEC 2004–2005, *Encuesta Complementaria de Pueblos Indígenas (ECPI) 2004–2005. Complementaria del Censo Nacional de Población, Hogares y Viviendas 2001–*, <http://www.indec.mecon.ar> (retrieved 12/06/2008).
- Martínez, J. C. 2006, El secreto de la tierra. *La Educación en Nuestras Manos* no. 77 <http://www.suteba.org.ar/revista-la-educacin-en-nuestras-manos-n-77-voces-y-luchas-de-los-pueblos-originarios-2523.html>.
- Nsoquixanaxanapi, N. E. (ed.) 2008, *Relatos Qom (Tobas)*, Proyecto Madres Cuidadoras de la Cultura Qom, Córdoba (Argentina).
- Ong, W. J. 1996, *Oralidad y Escritura. Tecnologías de la Palabra*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Buenos Aires.
- Sahlins, M. 1988, *Islas de Historia. La Muerte del Capitán Cook. Metáfora, Antropología e Historia*, Gedisa Editorial, Barcelona.
- Sánchez, O. 2004, *La Vía Láctea—Mañic-Ñandú y Camino. La Cosmovisión Toba*, Chaco (Argentina).
- Sánchez, O. 2008, *Los Toba del Gran Chaco Argentino*, Galerna, Buenos Aires.
- Sánchez, O. 2009, *Da Na'aqtaguec nam Qompi Toba mayi Ima'na Ita'adaic Chaco. Nam Y'a'axat som lquedoxonecpi na Mayipi. Historias de los Aborígenes Tobas del Gran Chaco Contadas por sus Ancianos*, Librería de la Paz, Resistencia.