

**THE BUSH, THE PLANTATIONS, AND THE “DEVILS”:  
CULTURE AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE IN THE ARGENTINEAN CHACO**

by

**Gastón Rafael Gordillo**

**A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
Graduate Department of Anthropology  
University of Toronto**

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The Bush, the Plantations, and the “Devils”: Culture and Historical Experience in the Argentinean Chaco.

Doctor of Philosophy 1999  
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Abstract

This dissertation is a historical ethnography of the cultural experience of domination of the Tobas of the mid-Pilcomayo River, an indigenous group of the Gran Chaco region in northern Argentina. I analyze this experience through the Tobas’ cultural construction of “the bush” and “the plantations”: the places which have epitomized their practices since they were incorporated into the political economy of northern Argentina at the beginning of the twentieth century. A central point of this dissertation is that these places are the spatial expression of contradictory experiences of labor (hunting-gathering and seasonal wage labor) and that the manifold, often ambiguous meanings the Tobas associate with them are to a great extent molded through their mutual contrast and opposition. These semantic tensions hinge on experiences of terror and their overcoming, the construction of partial havens from domination, fetishized visions of wealth and poverty, forms of compliance and contention vis-à-vis missionary social control, the internalization and resignification of hegemonic values, and the cultural configuration of fragmentary, millenarian dreams of freedom.

The philosophy of praxis is absolute  
“historicism,” the absolute secularization and  
earthliness of thought ... It is along this line that  
one must trace the thread of the new conception  
of the world.

*Antonio Gramsci,*  
Prison Notebooks (1929-1935)

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In 1987, when I was an undergraduate in anthropology at the Universidad de Buenos Aires anxious to learn what fieldwork was all about, Marcela Mendoza provided me with the possibility of meeting the Tobas for the first time. I will always be most grateful to her for that. Since then, she provided me with countless stimulating insights on

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## NOTE ON PRONUNCIATION

I have transcribed some sounds in Toba, as it is spoken in the northwest of Formosa, as follows. Vowels: *a*, approximately as in English father; *e*, approximately as in English electric; *i*, approximately as in English feet; *o*, somewhat like in English note, but slightly lower; Consonants: *ɠ*, voiced postvelar fricative; *h*, voiceless glottal fricative; *k*, voiceless velar occlusive; *ṅ*, voiced palatal nasal; *q*, voiceless velar occlusive; *w*, voiced bilabial semivowel. This guide is partially adapted from Métraux (1946a) and Wright (1997) and does not cover all the tones of the language.

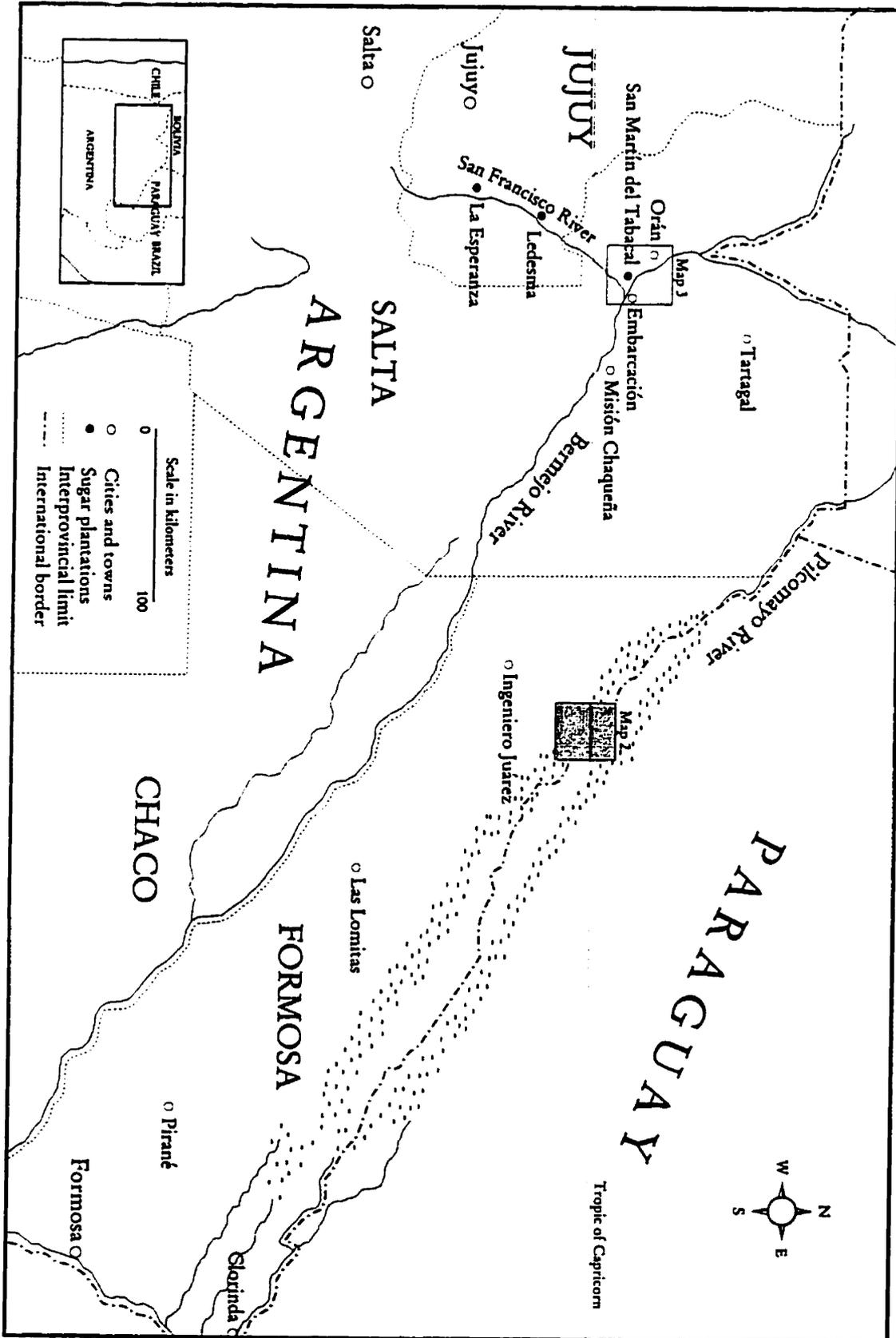
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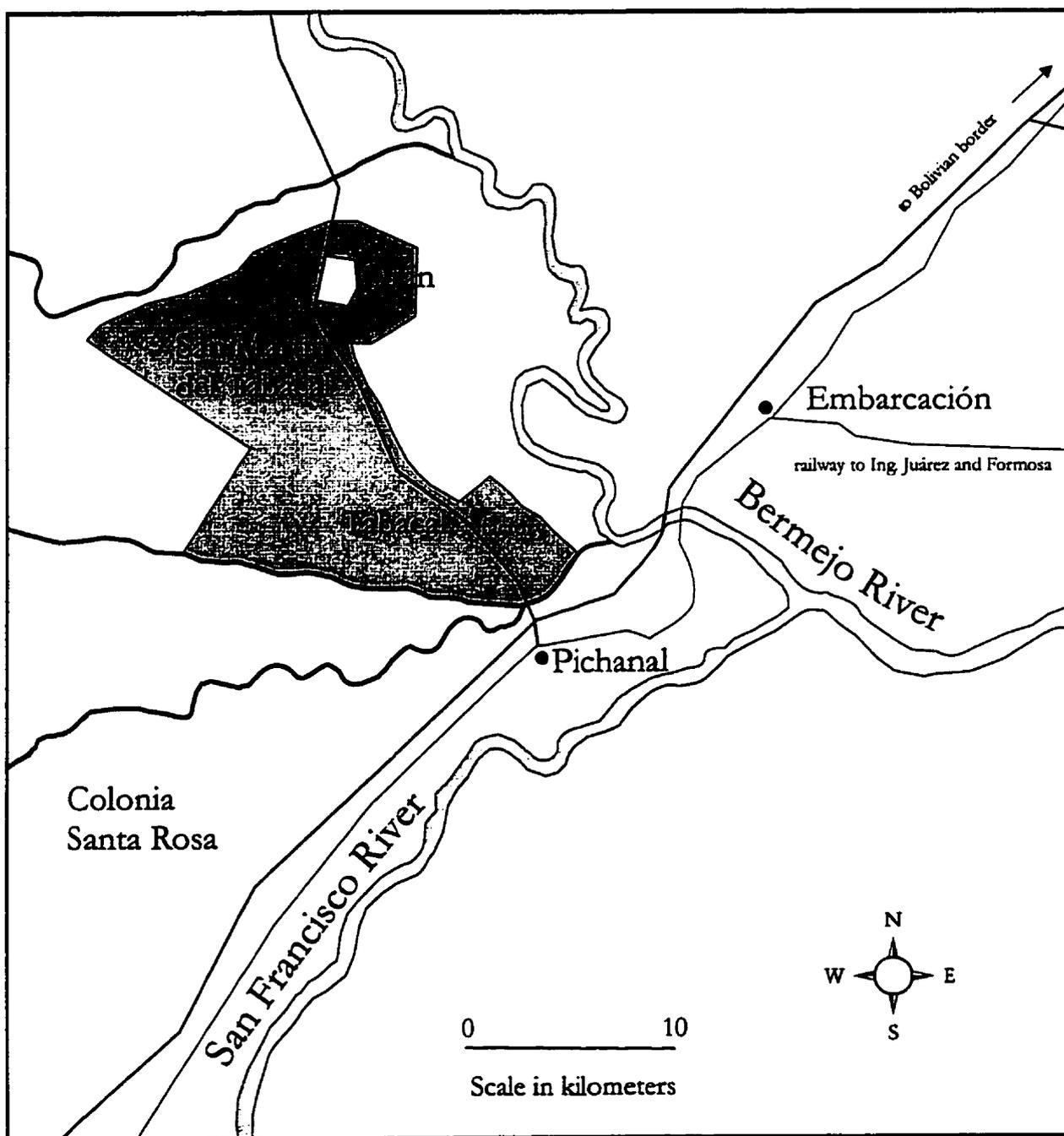
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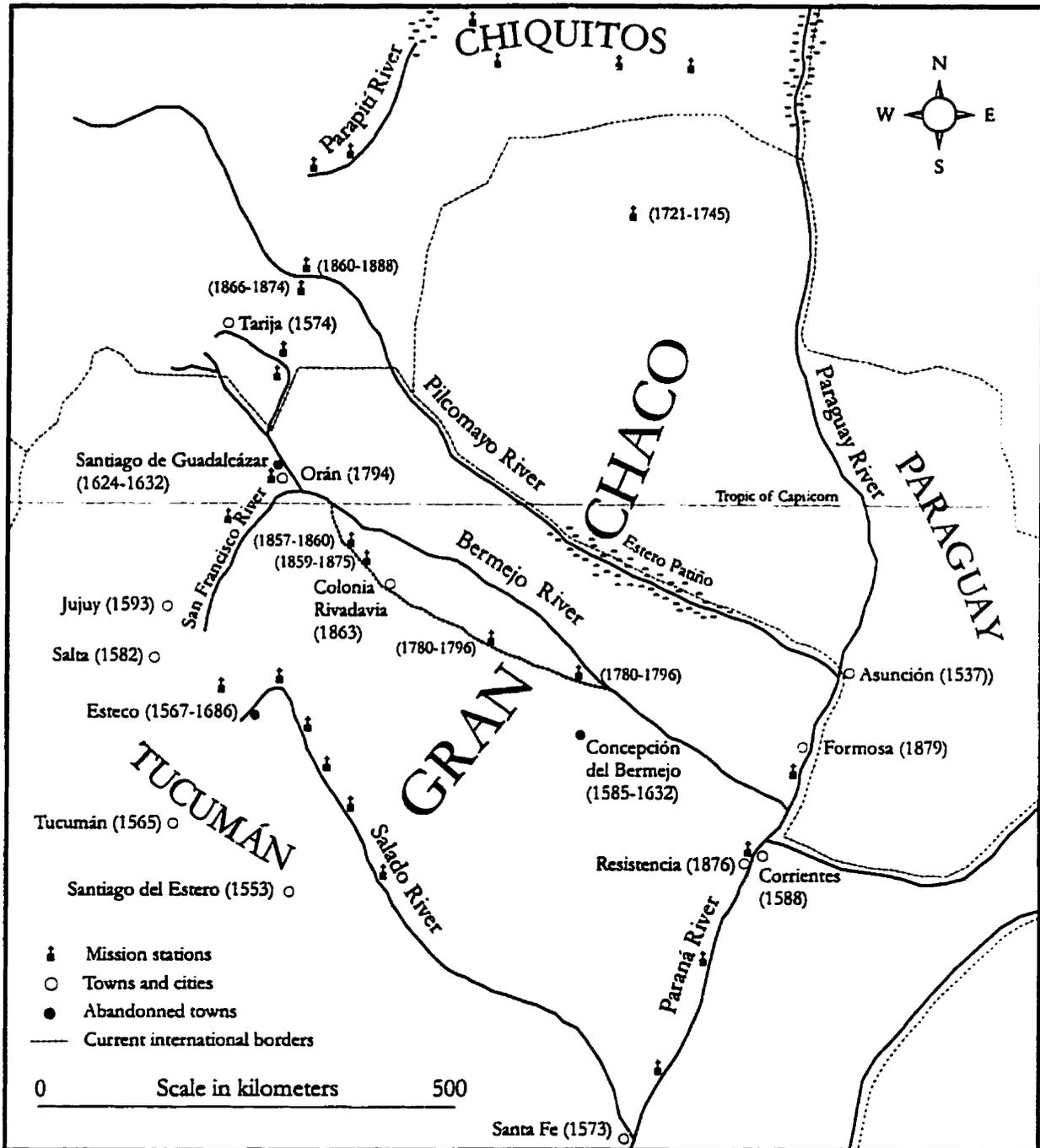
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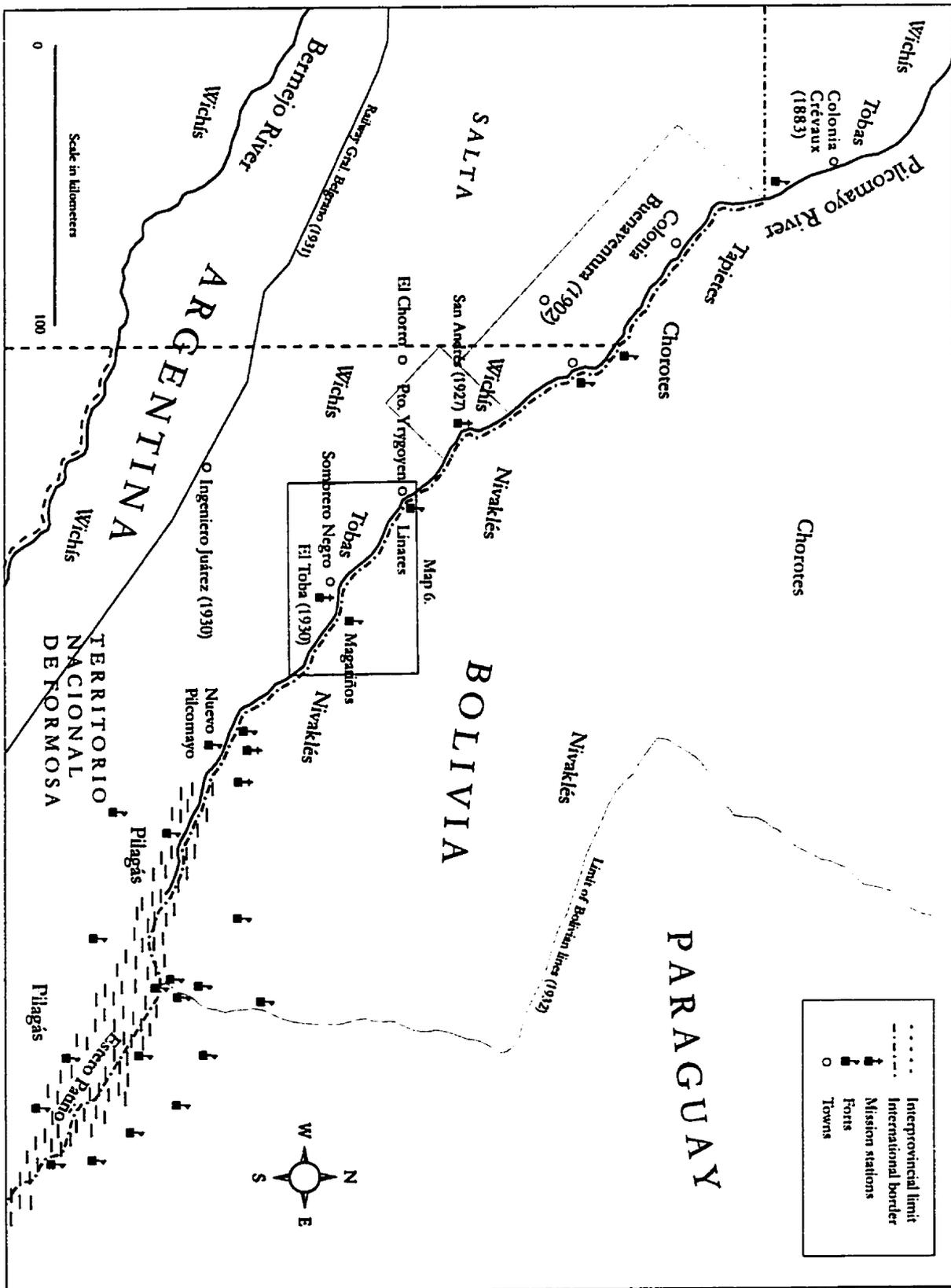


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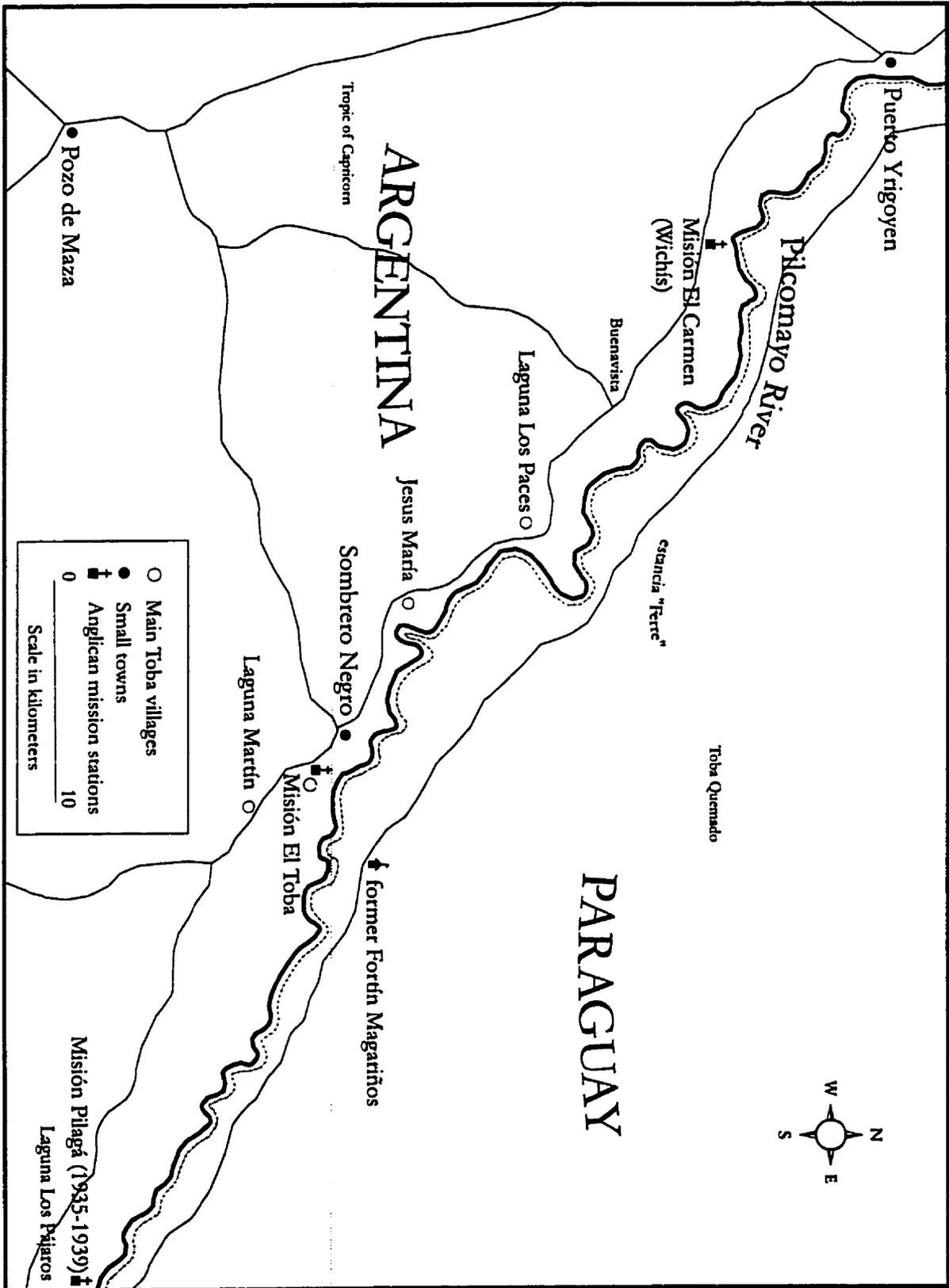


**Note:** This map includes only some of the most important Jesuit and Franciscan missions in the Chaco and its immediate surroundings. Unless otherwise stated, these missions were founded in the 17th and 18th centuries, and by the 19th century (then in the hands of the Franciscan order) most of them were in decline. The frontier in what is now the Argentinean Chaco is here represented in greater detail than in the Bolivian and Paraguayan Chaco.

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MAP 6. Settlements and Toba villages in the area of Sombrero Negro until 1975.



## INTRODUCTION

[T]he dialectic ... is a logical absurdity as long as there is talk of the change of one "thing" into another "thing" ... That is to say, its premise is that *things should be shown to be aspects of processes* ... Thus the knowledge that social facts are not objects but relations between men is intensified to the point where facts are wholly dissolved into processes.

*Georg Lukács,*

History and Class Consciousness (1922)

In his now classical ethnography about the Mbuti of the Ituri forest in Congo, Colin Turnbull presented one of the most well-known descriptions of the meanings that a hunting and gathering people associate with their environment. For the Mbuti, the forest is a place of their own that they know better than anybody; a "good world," "a father and mother" that gives them everything they need; moreover, it is a "god," a "sacred place" with which they feel an intimate spiritual communion. As Turnbull shows in detail, however, aside from living in the forest the Mbuti engage frequently in wage labor—and had been doing so for a long time—in Bantu villages located in the fringes of their lands. The forest and the Bantu plantations, Turnbull writes, represent for the Mbuti completely different domains. The plantations are for them alien, hostile, profane spaces where they have to adapt to Bantu rules and rituals (Turnbull 1961: 14, 92-93, 125, 227, 224-226). What Turnbull does not mention in his account, however, is that *the very contrast* between the Mbuti's experience of autonomy in the forest and of subordination in the Bantu villages is a *source of meaning* about both places. In other words, the autonomy, spiritual communion, and deep acquaintance that they associate with the forest cannot be merely taken as the unfolding of a "foraging culture." Rather, these meanings are also to a

great extent shaped and enhanced by the *contrast* with their experience of domination in the Bantu plantations.<sup>1</sup>

There are certainly many historical and ethnographic differences between the Ituri forest and the Gran Chaco, a vast and mostly semi-arid plains which covers a good part of northern Argentina, western Paraguay, and southeastern Bolivia.<sup>2</sup> This well-known ethnographic example, nonetheless, is a useful starting point for approaching the complex relationship between culture, historical experience, and place among the Tobas who live on the marshes formed by the middle-course of the Pilcomayo River, a subgroup of the Argentinean Tobas also known as “Ñachilamolék Tobas” or “Tobas-Pilagás.”<sup>3</sup> Incorporated since the beginning of the twentieth century into the political economy of northern Argentina as seasonal migrant laborers in distant plantations, this Toba group has simultaneously continued using—in spite of land encroachment by Criollo settlers—important tracts of land in their home territories, where their livelihood is based on fishing, hunting, gathering of wild fruits and honey, horticulture, and herding, closely intertwined with petty commodity production and resources made available by the state.

---

<sup>1</sup> Turnbull (1961: 173) argues that the Mbuti's work in the plantations does not mean an actual subordination but a situation which favors both the Bantu and the Mbuti. However, even though it is clear that the Mbuti kept an important autonomy regarding their decisions on when to return to the jungle, Turnbull's own account shows that the relationship with the Bantu was indeed asymmetrical.

<sup>2</sup> The western and eastern limits of the Gran Chaco are respectively marked by the first ridges of the Andes and the Paraguay and Paraná Rivers. To the north, the Chaco is limited by the hills of Chiquitos, in southeastern Bolivia. To the south, the Chaco plains gradually merge into the Pampas, south of the Salado River. The Gran Chaco is often divided in three large sub-areas: i) the northern Chaco (Chaco boreal), north of the Pilcomayo River; ii) the central Chaco, between the Rivers Pilcomayo and Bermejo, and iii) the southern Chaco, south of the Bermejo River.

<sup>3</sup> In Argentina, the Tobas (Guaycurú linguistic family) encompass a total population of about 30,000, most of whom fall into sub-groupings which inhabit the east of Chaco and Formosa Provinces (see Cordeu and Siffredi 1971; Miller 1975, 1979, 1980, 1995; Wright 1992, 1997; Arengo 1996). The eastern Tobas have been involved in historical processes which are quite different from the ones I will analyze in this dissertation. Besides, the Tobas of the mid-Pilcomayo are culturally and linguistically closer to the “Bolivian” Tobas and the Pilagás than to the eastern Tobas, a link which led Alfred Métraux (1937) to refer to them as “Toba-Pilagá.”

The aim of this dissertation, in this regard, is to analyze the Tobas' cultural construction of the places which have epitomized their experience of engagement in very different, contradictory forms of livelihood: "the bush," *viáq, el monte*,<sup>4</sup> the thorny and thick forest, usually five to ten meters high, which dominates the flat landscape of the interior of the Chaco and captures much of the meanings of the Tobas' practice as foragers; and "the plantations," *nontanqá*, the various "places of work" which have condensed their experience as seasonal wage laborers and are located for the most part several hundred kilometers away to the west, near the foothills of the Andes, and also in the east of the Argentinean Chaco.<sup>5</sup> I will analyze the multiple meanings the Tobas associate with these places as they are molded by threads of contradictions which oppose them and simultaneously make them part of a single social formation. Along these lines, a central point of this thesis is that there is an intimate connection between processes of place configuration and forms of cultural production. As Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997: 35, their emphasis) have argued:

... if one begins with the premise that spaces have *always* been hierarchically interconnected, instead of naturally disconnected, then cultural and social change becomes not a matter of cultural contact and articulation but one of thinking difference *through* connection.

---

Throughout this dissertation, on a few occasions I will use the term "Ñachilamolék Tobas" —"people up the river," as the Pilagás call them— as a means of differentiating them from other Toba groups.

<sup>4</sup> The most standard use of the term *monte* in Spanish is as "hill" or "mountain." However, in many parts of the South American lowlands, "*monte*" means first and foremost "bush."

<sup>5</sup> As I will show later on in greater detail, the Tobas' experience of wage labor has included not only large plantations but also farms and (to a lesser degree) cattle ranches and logging campsites. However, in this dissertation, I will often refer to "the plantations" as a condensation of the Tobas' overall experience of wage labor, especially because they have been the "places of work" most influential in the Tobas' current subjectivity. My distinction between "plantations" and "farms" is based mostly on their different relative size, which makes the former employ much larger numbers of wage workers than the latter (see Knight 1972: 9). In chapter seventeen, I will analyze further differences between the two.

As I will explore in further detail in chapter two, for centuries the social and ethnic contours of the Chaco as a region inhabited by indigenous groups not subjected to Spanish rule were to a great extent molded by the conflictive relationship these groups maintained with the Spanish frontier. But inhabiting the geographical center of the Gran Chaco, the Tobas of the mid-Pilcomayo were immersed in experiences of domination in a direct way only at the beginning of the twentieth century, when due to the pressure of settlers, the terror imposed by the Argentinean army, and their growing participation in labor migration, their foraging practices and social relations became subordinated to a social formation whose “center of gravity” was located far from their lands. In this process, the Tobas were able to create in the bush spaces of partial autonomy, but defined as such by their immersion within the constraining fields of power of capitalism. The bush and the plantations consequently emerged not as expressions of a “dual economy” but of the contradictions which were modifying the social landscape of the Chaco, in a process reminiscent of Henri Lefebvre’s point that “it is only in space that ... conflicts come effectively into play, and in so doing they become contradictions of space” (1991 [1974]: 365).

At the level of everyday practices, the Tobas have constructed the bush and the plantations as “places,” as *practiced spaces* or spaces charged with *social meaning*, mostly through labor practices which stand in tension with one another: hunting-gathering and seasonal wage labor. As David Harvey (1996: 310) has argued:

[P]laces acquire much of their permanence as well as much of their distinctive character from the collective activities of people who dwell there, who shape their land through their activities, and who build distinctive institutions, forms of organization, and social relations within, around or focused on a bounded domain.

Being the product of practices which themselves have to be produced and reproduced through time, the “permanence” of any place is always temporary, “a permanent state of flux” which is modified by changing historical circumstances (Harvey 1996: 261). Consequently, social memory plays a key role in this process of place formation; and as a cultural representation enacted in the present, memory becomes a further means through which the Tobas construct “the bush” and “the plantations” as meaningful permanences. For it is certainly true that “place is space which has historical meanings, where some things have happened which are now remembered ...” (Brueggemann, cited in Harvey 1996: 304).

Due to the crucial role played by the Tobas’ memories and histories in the cultural constitution of “the bush” and “the plantations,” it is my belief that it is not sufficient to simply “situate” the meanings associated with them “in their historical context.” If we understand history not simply as “past events” but as the manifold social forces which have *created and permanently recreate* the present, it is important to plunge as ethnographers into the “deep history” behind the social subjectivity we observe in the field. This is why this dissertation is an historical ethnography as much as an ethnographic history, an anthropological reconstruction of the multiple historical threads which converge into the Tobas’ present to illuminate what their present often obscures from our eyes. This methodology does *not* mean that I have prioritized historiography over ethnographic fieldwork. By contrast, my research has been centered on the meaningful practices of the Tobas with whom I interacted in the field, but from a perspective which aimed at merging their “past” into their “present.” In other words, I have written an

historical ethnography from my own background as anthropologist and ethnographer, but aware that, as Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper (1993: 200) have rightly argued: "... from whatever disciplinary perspective we come from, to be critical thinkers we must all be historians ... and social analysts."

These methodological considerations lead us to the actual circumstances of my research in the field. I conducted fieldwork among the Tobas in their villages in the northwest of the province of Formosa during numerous trips, involving different but closely interrelated research projects, and completing a total of fourteen months of fieldwork. Between 1987 and 1993, my research among the Tobas was molded by perspective in political economy which I would now call "objectivist." As I was moving away from this position, I nevertheless learnt something argued by Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972]: 21): that the deconstruction of the dichotomy between "objectivism" and "subjectivism" can only be truly accomplished when one *starts* by analyzing the "objective structures" and webs of power associated with social subjectivity. In 1995-1996, I returned to the Toba villages to conduct the research for this dissertation and with the aim of merging my previous research experience with the analysis of the "subjective moment" of the Tobas' practices in the bush and the plantations. In June 1996, I also conducted fieldwork for a brief period of time in a farm in the province of Salta where a group of Tobas had migrated for seasonal work. Finally, in August 1997, when I was already writing this dissertation in Toronto, I made a three-week visit to the Toba villages which was important to complete some aspects of the research.

Most of the interviews and everyday conversations were made with Toba men, and I am aware that a female ethnographer working on the same topic would have

reconstructed cultural threads which were relatively invisible to me. However, my analysis often included areas of cultural contention along the lines of gender, and the dozen in-depth interviews I conducted with women of different ages were particularly illuminating for me. As any good ethnographer knows, the richer aspects of fieldwork often come out of informal interactions, and my active participation in every social event at hand and in many foraging trips allowed me to unravel aspects of the Tobas' practices and representations which otherwise I would have missed. For the more historical aspects of the research, my guideline was the Tobas' own memory of their experiences in the bush and the plantations, complemented with countless sources unburied from dozens of libraries and archives in the cities of Buenos Aires, Formosa, Salta, Toronto, and London, in a journey aimed at unraveling the historical nature of the Tobas' "culture" and the cultural nature of their "history." Along these lines, I have analyzed this memory as culturally "constructed" and historically "real," in the sense that it provides forceful, active meanings which inform the Tobas' current construction of place.

These theoretical considerations on "culture" leads us back to the lines by Antonio Gramsci which open up this dissertation and which somehow condense the epistemological basis of my research. When Gramsci (1971 [1929-1935]: 465) argued that the philosophy of praxis is "absolute historicism," "the absolute secularization of earthliness of thought" he was criticizing not only idealism, but also the type of positivist materialism which conceives reality as an "objective" domain independent of human practice—a metaphysical position in which "structure" is conceived almost as "a hidden god" (Gramsci 1995 [1929-1935]: 347). And to apprehend human "thought" in its "absolute earthliness" presupposes to understand it as a *practice* which condenses the

“subjective” and “objective” aspects of human action. And this also implies the dialectical overcoming of the old dichotomy between “subjectivism” and “objectivism,” in a synthesis in which the objectivity of the world cannot *but* be the product of human, subjective practices. In the words of Gramsci (1971 [1929-1935]: 446):

Objective always means “humanly objective,” which can be held to correspond to “historically subjective”... The idea of “objective” in metaphysical materialism would appear to mean an objectivity that exists apart from man; but when one affirms that reality would exist even if man did not, one is either speaking metaphorically or one is falling into a form of mysticism. We know reality only in relation to man, and since man is historical becoming, knowledge and reality are also becoming, and so is objectivity.

Gramsci was certainly not alone in this enterprise. On the one hand, he was recovering the legacy left by Marx himself in many passages of his work, for instance the Theses on Feuerbach (Marx 1966 [1846]). On the other hand, together with Georg Lukács and Valentin Volosinov he was part of a generation of thinkers critical of the positivist standardization of Marxism as a materialist metaphysics and who attempted to recover, from a deeply *historical* perspective, the critical aim of the Hegelian dialectic (which Hegel had resolved in an idealist form): the overcoming of the rigid dichotomies of Western thought (such as “ideas” and “matter;” “mind” and “body;” “subject” and “object”). Even though writing in the 1920s and early 1930s, these authors addressed theoretical questions which are of key importance to current anthropological discussions of the concept of “culture” alternative to the naïve subjectivism of interpretive anthropology and the equally naïve objectivism of positivist materialism. Since some of these questions are particularly relevant in my analysis of the Tobas’ cultural construction

of the bush and the plantations, I will refer briefly to some of them, in particular the problem of the so-called dialectic between “history” and “culture.”

Edward Thompson (1961: 33, his emphasis) wrote long ago in a critique of Raymond Williams that “[a]ny theory of culture must include the concept of the dialectical interaction between culture and something that is *not* culture.” Let us start with this concept of “dialectical interaction.” At first sight illuminating, Thompson’s point nevertheless reproduces a widespread misconception about the nature of the dialectic: that it involves an “interaction” between separate entities in which they “shape each other.”<sup>6</sup> But if that is not dialectics, what then is it? This is certainly not the place to refer to the complex and heated debates about the nature of the concept.<sup>7</sup> But as David Harvey (1996: 48) put it, part of the answer to this question is a non-answer:

Marx chose never to write out any principle of dialectics for a very good reason. The only way to understand his method is by following his practice. This suggests that the reduction of dialectics to a set of “principles” is self-defeating. The dialectic is a practice and not a thing and it is, furthermore, a process in which the Cartesian separations between mind and matter, between thought and action, between consciousness and materiality, between theory and practice have no purchase.

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, this notion of dialectics has become standard in anthropology. Even authors engaged in a sophisticated practical use of dialectics in their own work, such as Jean and John Comaroff, fall into this notion when they happen to *define* the concept (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 28). But as I will point out soon, this is exactly the trick of dialectics: being a *practice* embedded in a not always conscious *habitus* (in Bourdieu’s sense), its *analytical actuality* has more force than any attempt at enclosing it in a “definition.” Expanding this idea of dialectics as a *habitus*, and paraphrasing a point Max Eastman made about Hegelism (Zitta 1964: 203), I am tempted to say that dialectics is like a disease: “you cannot know what it is until you get it, and when you get it you don’t know exactly what it is because you have it inside you.”

<sup>7</sup> Certainly, much of the debate hinges on the legacy of Hegel. Gramsci and Lukács (the latter with a stronger emphasis) clearly advocated a return to the Hegelian roots of Marx’s thought. Engels and to a certain extent Lenin, by contrast, consolidated a positivist interpretation of dialectics removed from Marx’s early Hegelianism. More recently, although from a more sophisticated philosophical perspective, Althusser became the best known representative of this anti-Hegelian trend. See Levine (1984) for an excellent review of the different uses of the concept after Marx’s death.

This point about dialectics takes us back to Gramsci's "theory of praxis" and his conception of social subjectivity as a historical unfolding. And this in turn leads us to the second aspect of Thompson's quote: the relationship between culture and something "that is not culture." At least here, Thompson reproduces something that Raymond Williams criticized with particular force in several parts of *Marxism and Literature*: the old and non-dialectical notion of a *separation* between "ideas" and "practices." Thompson had nevertheless a legitimate concern: that an overemphasis on the "unity" of culture with other realms of society would turn it into a diffusive category: "everything" and consequently nothing at the same time. The clarification of this point is of great importance, because to argue that culture *is not separated* from "other things" does *not* mean that culture "is everything." It is exactly in situations like this that it is *crucial* to *think* about the problem in terms of *movement and contradictions* (and therefore "dialectically," as I ventured to suggest in the acknowledgments). For "culture" is a *moment* in the movement of practice and *should not* be confounded with the movement itself. Because if we simply fuse culture with the whole unfolding of practice —as Maurice Godelier (1972 [1966]: 86-88) warned us years ago— we would be back to Hegel's "Absolute Spirit": a total *identity* between subject and object.<sup>8</sup> It was along these lines that Marx (1970 [1859]: 199, 204-205, his emphasis) exposed his differences with

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<sup>8</sup> Georg Lukács (1971 [1922]: 199) fell into this Hegelian position when he postulated in *History and Class Consciousness* the emergence of the proletariat as "the identity subject-object," in other words as the first subject in history capable of developing an adequate objective social consciousness, a position which he later criticized as metaphysical (see Lukács 1971 [1967]). However, this clearly political use of dialectics does not invalidate Lukács brilliant display of the method in the rest of the book, in which it is clear that for him the dialectics of thought and existence implies to conceive them as *different* moments of a process in motion (1971 [1922]: 204).

the Hegelian dialectic when he analyzed production, circulation, and consumption as *aspects of a single movement*:

Nothing is simpler for a Hegelian than to assume that production and consumption are identical ... The conclusion which follows ... is not that production, distribution, exchange, and consumption are identical, but that they are links of a single whole, different aspects of one unit. Production is the decisive phase, both with regards to the contradictory aspects of production and with regard to the other phases. The process starts afresh with production ... Production *in the narrow sense*, however, is in its turn also determined by the other aspects ... Such interaction takes place in any organic entity.

Taking these ideas back to a concept of culture, this means several important things. Firstly, that the subjective aspect of practice is part of objective forces which are *not* reducible to the former, for social subjects move in a world which is their own “creation” but which simultaneously imposes itself upon them with “full objectivity” (Lukács 1971 [1922]: 142). And the production and reproduction of human life, “social being,” plays a central role in these constraints. It is there that the whole movement “starts afresh;” *not* as a moment which comes “first” and “then” (at some spatial or temporal distance) is followed by “culture,” but as part of a never-ending movement which always has a subjective component (cf. Williams 1977: 61). Human labor, in other words, plays a decisive role in the production and reproduction of culture, not as a crude “economic” phenomenon but as a complex and practical enactment of knowledge, subjective dispositions, intentions, and constraining fields of force. These are forces from which it is not possible to “predict” the meanings people will create out of them, and which are part of a movement in which subjectivity never ceases to inform practice and shape the overall experience of labor, as we shall see in the case of the Tobas.

Secondly, this perspective means that culture is not a “thing,” an arrested product, but a dynamic and creative process. As Raymond Williams (1977: 166) put it: “... meaning is always produced; it is never simply expressed.” The dynamic aspect of this unfolding, in the words of Gavin Smith (1989: 228), makes for “the ongoing and hence perpetually incomplete and negotiable nature of cultural production...” Consequently, culture cannot be accurately analyzed as a coherent “system” or “structure” (see Roseberry 1989; Sider and Smith 1997; Rebel 1989). The deeply historical, dynamic, and practical nature of meanings defies the obsession with “order” characteristic of structuralist approaches to culture and the exoticizing quests for coherent “cosmologies” (see Keesing 1987: 168). As Volosinov (1973 [1929]: 78) wrote about Saussurean structuralism:

Formalism and systematicity are the typical distinguishing marks of any kind of thinking focused on a ready-made and, so to speak, arrested object ... Formal, systematic thought about language is incompatible with living, historical understanding of language. From the system's point of view, history always seems merely a series of accidental transgressions.

This stress on fluidity and dynamism, however, should not lead us to renounce (as some post-modernist authors do) the search for the *patterns* which organize social practice (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 24, 30). And as I will try to show in my own attempt to “make sense” of the multiple ambiguities and inconsistencies embedded in the Tobas’ accounts and representations about “the bush” and “the plantations,” these patterns are the very *contradictions* that give culture its dynamism. As Edward Thompson (1978b: 156) wrote about eighteenth-century English society, including a critical comment about anthropology I cannot but agree with: “[T]he coherence [of culture] (and here I would expect some anthropologists to lay this paper down in disgust) arises less from any

inherent cognitive structure than from the particular field of force and sociological oppositions peculiar to eighteenth century society.”

Along these lines, it is in the midst of social contradictions that culture gains its particular force and that *ambiguity* emerges as one of its crucial components. For culture is more often than not permeated with meanings which are diffuse, imprecise, and not necessarily conscious. Jean and John Comaroff (1991: 29) have rightly argued that the analysis of this often elusive domain is crucial for a critical anthropology:

Between the conscious and the unconscious lies the most critical domain of all for historical anthropology and especially for the analysis of colonialism and resistance. It is the realm of partial recognition, of inchoate awareness, of ambiguous perception, and sometimes, of creative tension: that liminal space of human experience in which people discern acts and facts but cannot or do not order them into narrative descriptions or even into articulate conceptions of the world; in which signs and events are observed, but in a hazy and translucent light; in which individuals or groups know that something is happening to them but find it difficult to put their finger on quite what it is.

Throughout this dissertation, I aim to show that many of the meanings that the Tobas associate with “the bush” and “the plantations” are embedded in this “hazy and translucent light,” and that this ambiguity is the result of the multiple contradictions which shape their practices. Consequently, contradictions should not be simply conceived as expression of social and historical conflicts but also as active *sources* of meanings, often molded along the lines of class, gender, and age groups.

A further theoretical question remains: how do we account for the fact that on many occasions certain meanings do not seem to “fit” the changing circumstances of practice? For a long time, this problem was explained (by idealists and materialists alike) by the “relative autonomy” of culture, a notion often used simply as a useful “warning notice” (Thompson 1978a: 97) but which ultimately reproduces the misleading idea of a

*separation* between instances that are part of a single whole. Clearly, as argued by Gerald Sider (1984: 1), reductionism “cannot be resolved simply by granting culture either more or less autonomy.” Paul Ricoeur’s (1976: 29-30) notion of “inscription,” also used by Clifford Geertz (1983: 31), poses this problem in a more sophisticated fashion. “Inscription” alludes for Ricoeur to the “fixation of meaning,” to the fact that meaning can be partially removed from its immediate conditions of production and consequently cannot be conceived as perfectly fitting practice (see also Roseberry 1989: 45). In Ricoeur’s (1973: 27) words: “the meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, transcends the social conditions of its production and may be reenacted in new social contexts.”

These are important points, but an equally important clarification remains in place. Meanings can certainly overcome their original context of production; but people always enact them in *new practices*: in narratives, memories, and productive social actions. And these practices always submit the original meanings to *new* meaningful contexts. In other words, even though the meaning of an action “can persist in a way its actuality cannot” (Geertz 1983: 31), this meaning never floats in a vacuum of abstract “ideas.” If we agree that “a culture is *lived* and not passively *consumed*” (Thompson 1961: 36) “inscribed” meanings are always submitted to experiences that may challenge and ultimately reformulate them. Consequently, meanings are always open to reformulation, even though this often may be a subtle process constrained by the actors’ previous socialization. Because of this reformulation, an emphasis on the “fixation” of meaning is ultimately problematic, for in the words of Raymond Williams (1977: 39) “... the conversion of the

'sign' ... into either fixed content or fixed form is a radical denial of active practical consciousness ..."

This has important implications not only for any theory of "cultural change" but also in the realm of ideology and politics, because the notion that the "culture" of a group remains somehow "fixed" over changing historical circumstances (a notion recurrent in the ethnography of the Gran Chaco) is ultimately linked with a conservative perspective on society (see Volosinov (1973 [1929]: 23). The transformation of meanings, the challenge to their supposed "fixation," is consequently a central aspect of any political and cultural struggle. In the words of Roseberry (1989: 47):

If culture is inscribed, if meaning can be removed from direct experience, such inscription and removal can never be total. If some meanings produced by the dominant culture seem to connect, or at least not contradict, the experience of ordinary people, other meanings may directly conflict with lived experience. In normal circumstances, that may not matter, or not matter deeply. In less ordinary circumstances, such disjunction may be the focal point for the production of new alternative meanings, new forms of discourse, new selections from tradition or conflicts and struggles over the meaning of particular elements within tradition.

In this quote, we are introduced to a concept which is particularly important in this dissertation: "experience." Over the last decades, this concept has been used in anthropology from a wide variety of approaches. But from the perspective I have been advocating, "experience" cannot be anything but *social* and *historical*. Edward Thompson (1978a: 8, 32-3; 1978b: 150) is clearly the most important advocate of this notion of experience. In his own words:

[E]xperience is a necessary middle term between social being and social consciousness: it is experience (often class experience) which gives a coloration to culture, to values and to

thought: it is by means of experience that the mode of production exerts a determining pressure upon other activities (Thompson 1978a: 98).<sup>9</sup>

Even though Thompson often seems to celebrate experience as something necessarily positive and illuminating, he also plays close attention to the location of experience within hegemonic processes: to the incorporation by subordinate groups of values that are those of the dominant classes. Thompson, nonetheless, does more than that: he also looks at the ways in which people's experiences reformulate those values. As he argued regarding the influence on Methodism on the English working class: "No ideology is wholly absorbed by its adherents: it breaks down in practice in a thousand ways under the criticism of impulse and of experience: the working class community injected into the [Methodist] chapels its own values of mutual aid, neighborliness, and solidarity" (Thompson 1966: 392). This concept of experience does not necessarily entail, as some Marxist critics of the concept have argued, a naïve celebration of human capacities or the repository of truth (as phenomenology tends to do).<sup>10</sup> Rather, the richness of the concept lies in its capacity to make us analyze and understand how the forces of "grand history" become part of the every-day subjectivity of any social group. In the chapters that follow, I will try to show how the meanings the Tobas have created about the bush and the plantations are part of their attempt to make sense of contradictory experiences of control and estrangement over their own practices.

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<sup>9</sup> As Perry Anderson (1980: 25-6, 29) has noted, Thompson (1978: 7) gives in *The Poverty of Theory* a second definition quite different from this, through which "experience" is understood purely in subjective terms: a "mental and emotional response" to events.

<sup>10</sup> This position certainly comes from Althusserian structuralism. For different critical analyses of the concept of "experience" in E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams see, among others, Eagleton (1976: 8, 12), Barret (1976: 60, footnote 32), and Perry Anderson (1980: 25, 79).

The four parts into which I have divided this dissertation can be considered “moments” in a movement which is simultaneously historical, spatial, and analytical, but in which I have often tried to break down—at least to a certain degree—a rigid distinction between places and historical periods. Part I, “Landscapes of Distant Histories,” begins with the current configuration of the various places which are central in the Tobas’ experience, and then goes back several centuries to the processes which gradually led to the incorporation of the Tobas into the plantation economy of Salta and Jujuy and their clashes with the Argentinean army in 1917. Part II, “A ‘Sanctuary’ in the Bush,” focuses on the Tobas’ experience of Anglican missionization, which began in 1930 as a direct result of their previous experiences of terror with the military and gave a new, complex twist to their practices unfolding in the bush and the plantations. In part III, “Skeletons in the Cane-Fields,” I analyze the Tobas’ contradictory experiences of exploitation, death, terror, abundance, sexual “excess,” and resistance in San Martín del Tabacal, the plantation which concentrated most of their labor migrations between the early 1930s and late 1960s. Part IV, “Until the End of the World,” takes us back to the Tobas’ home territories and their cultural construction of “the bush” as a relative haven from experiences of exploitation and social suffering. I analyze this manifold, often contradictory unfolding as it is molded by the Tobas’ past experiences in the sugar plantations and by the current reformulation of the tensions in which their practices in the bush are inserted. This reformulation includes new but shorter experiences of seasonal wage labor, the missionaries’ retreat from the area, the growing “poverty” associated with foraging, the increasing presence of the state in their lands, and the existence across the border with Paraguay of “another,” very different bush.

**PART I:  
LANDSCAPES OF DISTANT HISTORIES**



ONE:  
LANDMARKS OF MEMORY

In the past, there was no bush.  
*Enrique* (1996)

The process of place formation is a process of carving out “permanences” from the flow of processes creating spaces.  
*David Harvey,*  
Justice, Nature, and the Geography of  
Difference (1996)

When we left the village, the sun had not emerged yet from the forested edge of the horizon. In a few minutes, still immersed in a soft luminescence, our bicycles took us to the relatively open bush of the village surroundings. The ground was at points relatively free of vegetation, except for the cactuses and algarrobos, five to six meters high, which were all around us. After a while, the *monte* became thicker and the trail was at times like a tunnel carved out in a mass of thorny vegetation. We reached *la picada*, a perfectly straight trail opened for oil exploration in the 1980s by the then state-owned, now privatized, oil company Y.P.F. (*Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales*). Four to five meters wide and able to accommodate a pick-up truck, *la picada* looks like a giant and clean knife cut made in the very heart of the bush, extending, with exasperating precision, straight towards its very dissolution into the Pilcomayo marshlands, on the horizon, where we were going. Roberto, a Toba man in his thirties, was pedaling quietly in front of me, and his back —with his rifle hanging on one side— was now clearly outlined against a world saturated by three homogeneous and clearly defined masses of color: the whitish dust of *la picada*, the blue of the morning sky, and that overwhelming green presence which seemed to engulf everything on our sides: *el monte*.

We arrived at the outskirts of a Toba village inhabited by about 150 people and paid a brief visit to Enrique, a man in his early sixties whose house was surrounded by forest on two sides. He invited us to have a *mate* —a kind of “tea” widespread in Argentina— and after a few minutes of conversation, he started talking about the times of “the ancient ones,” the *toiéts* —“*los antiguos*” in Spanish— the Tobas living before the arrival of the Criollo settlers and the British missionaries.<sup>11</sup> At one moment, he pointed to the dense bush that surrounded us and told me:

This isn't like it was before. In the past, when there were no cows, there were no Criollos, there was no road ... All this is dense bush now. But they say that in the past there was no bush. All this was open country. There was thick bush only at the edge of the grasslands. There were grasslands up to Pozo de Maza [20 kilometers into the hinterland]. If you wanted to eat ostrich, you chased them galloping on horseback, with *boleadoras* [throwing balls].

Enrique was relating what many other people had told me before: that in the past, when the Tobas were still an independent and warlike group, “there was no bush.” For the bush as the Tobas know it today, a thorny forest which dominates the landscape with an overwhelming presence and captures strong but manifold meanings of partial autonomy, was created by the same historical forces that transformed them into a dominated people living under conditions of poverty. And as such, it is a place saturated with the Tobas' own history.

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<sup>11</sup> The substantivized adjective *toiéts* (f. *toijíl*) has a stronger sense of time distance than “old people,” *yagaikáchigi* (m.) and *yagáinadipi* (f.). Still, some people occasionally refer to their ancestors by the latter term. *Toiéts*, pretty much like “ancient” in English and *antiguo* in Spanish, gives an idea, as Mariano, a man in his fifties put it, of “much older.”

## The Bush

Until the first decades of the twentieth century, the Tobas' territory on the banks of the Pilcomayo River was covered by wide grasslands which extended 15 to 20 kilometers into the hinterland. Old people argue that back then, usually because of the cloud of dust rising on the horizon, it was possible to see people coming from a very long distance. Even though these grasslands intertwined with tongues of thick bush, it was only towards the interior of the Chaco that the forest became the dominant feature of the landscape. The first strip of forest, ten to twelve meters high, was formed mostly by algarrobos (*Prosopis alba* and *nigra*), vinal (*Prosopis ruscifolia*), chañar (*Gourliea decorticans*), and tusca (*Acacia aroma*). Farther into the hinterland, tall hardwoods, some of them up to fifteen meters high, dominated the *monte*: quebracho colorado (*Schinopsis lorentzii*), quebracho blanco (*Aspidosperma quebracho blanco*), urundel (*Astronium balansae*), palo santo (*Bulnesia sarmientoi*), palo mataco (*Prosopis kuntzei*), as well as chagüar at the ground level (Morello 1970: 44-46; Castañeda Vega 1920: 65).

On the margins of the Pilcomayo, the predominance of grasslands was to a great extent the result of periodical fires, provoked by natural causes and by the various indigenous groups which inhabited the area: Wichís, Chorotes, Nivaklés, and Tobas, either to send messages, for hunting purposes, or as a weapon in warfare. Since grasslands are very resistant to fire and trees are not, these fires put strong limits to the advance of the edge of the forest towards the Pilcomayo (Morello and Saravia Toledo 1959: 18; Morello 1970: 37). The first Bolivian and Argentinean explorers to the mid-Pilcomayo marveled at the sight of the wide *campos* (prairies) of the region, which they saw as full of economic potential for cattle herding. As a result, many called the region "the Pampas of the north"

(Asp, quoted by Astrada 1906: 65; Castañeda Vega 1920: 7, 65). Looking for pastures for their cattle, the first Criollo settlers arrived in the Pilcomayo coming from Salta in 1902 and founded what was known as Colonia Buenaventura (150 kilometers upstream from Toba territory; see map 5). In just a few years, the Criollo presence brought decisive transformations in the landscape. Firstly, the coexistence between settlers and indigenous groups meant the gradual end of the fires which sustained the reproduction of the grasslands (Morello and Saravia Toledo 1959: 77; Morello 1970: 38). Secondly, cattle roamed freely in a wide area, depleted the grass, and therefore eliminated it as a potentially inflammable material. The cattle also ate large amounts of edible wild fruits (especially the fruits of algarrobo, tusca, and mistol) and thus increased, through defecation, the spread of seeds of trees. As grasslands became scarcer and cattle became more dependent on wild fruits in their diet, the pace of the advance of the *monte* increased (Morello and Saravia Toledo 1959: 20, 76; Morello 1970: 34, 39).

By 1919, the grasslands in Buenaventura had been very seriously depleted. The areas closest to the river had become strips of sandy soil totally devoid of grass (known as *peladares*) and in a few years the forest had become the dominant feature of the region. Rafael Castañeda Vega (1920: 21, my translation; see also 11, 49) wrote in 1919:

The *campos* of the Pilcomayo ... are totally covered by forests of quebrachos, algarrobos, palosantos ... and other minor species, with the exception of small patches of grasslands disseminated here and there in the middle of thick forests. According to the references of the settlers, ten or fifteen years ago not everything was *monte* like now: close to the river ... everything was a wide grassland, sprinkled every now and then with big patches of forest.

Around that time, the presence of settlers in the Tobas' territory was more recent and as a result the transformation of the landscape in the area was still in a preliminary

stage (Castañeda Vega 1920: 64). Yet, 20 years later the *monte* had taken over most of the area and the grasslands had almost disappeared.<sup>12</sup> In 1939, a staff member of the Anglican mission which was founded in 1930 among the Tobas near Sombrero Negro wrote: “The old Indians remember when all this area was subtropical grassland without trees —they could see for miles across the flat land” (Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 68).

Almost 60 years later, in the mid-1990s, many adult Tobas had a very similar recollection of the landscape of the past. Even though most of them never saw those grasslands, they often contrast the “open country” of the past with today’s “bush.” This particular memory, together with the historical experience of the Tobas as seasonal laborers who visited very different and distant places, makes *viáq, el monte*, a term with multiple, overlapping meanings. These meanings depend on the context in which people use the term and therefore on the different contrasts which differentiate the “bush” from other places.

Firstly, the Tobas’ usage of the term “the bush” is still shaped by the memory of the “open country,” *nónaGa*, or *campo* in Spanish. Thus, on many occasions they use the term “the bush” *only* to refer to the thickest sections of forest, formed by a very dense ensemble of trees and ground vegetation where visibility is considerably reduced. And they call the areas where the ground is relatively free of vegetation “open country,” even though they are to a great extent covered by trees as well (the Criollos call this area *monte*

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<sup>12</sup> In 1939, a former prairie located twenty kilometers inland, an old hunting ground of a Toba band, had become an arid area covered by scattered trees (Métraux 1978 [1939]: 63). Closer to the river, the trail leading to Sombrero Negro, a Criollo village settled in Toba territory around 1914, was then surrounded by a dense forest covering a sandy soil (Métraux 1978 [1939]: 63). Around that time, further down the river from Sombrero Negro, in the area of Misión Pilagá, there were still some open areas with grasslands (Arnott 1934: 491; Métraux 1978 [1939]: 65). But the bush was already taking over a good part of the region as

*ralo*, “sparse bush”). For instance, the Toba village deepest in the hinterland —15 kilometers away from the Pilcomayo marshes— is located on a strip of land where trees and other plants are separated a few meters from each other, without much ground vegetation in between. For an outsider, the area looks pretty much like the rest of the region: a monotonous, dark green *monte* covering a semi-arid soil. Thus, in my first trips to that village in the late 1980s, I was surprised to hear the Tobas refer to that area as “open country,” when all I could see around us was what I thought to be a quite convincing *monte*. Only after numerous forays deep into their territory, either hunting with them or riding a bicycle in narrow trails, I learnt that there is indeed a very sharp difference between the thickest section of the *monte* and its more open areas. Moreover, I also learnt to distinguish exactly where one ends and the other starts. The Tobas often refer to this thick section of the bush as *viaqádaik* (*ádaik* being a suffix for “large”) *monte grande* in Spanish, “large bush” (or simply *náuge*, “closed” or “thick”). And they often refer to the more open areas of the bush also as *nonakapiGát*, a term which could be roughly translated as “a place with areas of trees and open country.”

In other circumstances, when people want to emphasize the *contrast* between the forested landscape of the present and the open grasslands of the past, they use the terms “bush” and “open country” in a very different sense: to refer to *different historical moments*. In these circumstances, the Tobas talk about “the open country” only to refer to a landscape which has now disappeared. And “the bush” becomes a term which condenses all the landscape of the present, and which consequently includes not only the thickest

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well. Already in 1933, the Pilagá chief Lagadík remembered with nostalgia the times when the river banks were free of forests and covered only by open savannas (Métraux 1937: 389-390).

areas of the forest (*viaqádaik*) but also the more open areas (*nonakapiGát*). For instance, I was in the village located in a relatively open section of the forest, which people often refer to as “open country.” Segundo, a man in his late seventies, was telling me about the times of “the ancient ones” and this time he said while looking around us: “Before, all this used to be open country. Now, it’s dense bush.”

The Tobas use the term “bush” —*viáq, monte*— in another, even more encompassing sense. It is a meaning as social and historical as the previous ones, but which more clearly relates to their experience as foragers holding partial autonomy in their home territories and as seasonal wage laborers who have migrated to very distant, different lands. In this broader sense, “the bush” alludes to their homelands, to a place of their own where they feel relatively safe and which is defined by its contrast to other places: especially, to *nontanqá*, the different “places of work” (*nontáq*, “work;” ‘a, suffix for place) which have dominated their experience of wage labor for almost a century, and secondly and more recently, to the towns of the region, especially Ingeniero Juárez. In this broader sense, *viáq, el monte* includes within its boundaries not only both the thicker and the more open areas of the bush, but also the villages and the Pilcomayo marshes. For instance, Eduardo, a man in his early forties who is a public employee, expressed this encompassing meaning of the bush while we were sitting in his house and told me: “At least over here we have a good health, there’s no crime, there’re no planes crashing. At least we live a quiet life, because this area where we live is bush.” It is often in this latter sense that I will refer to the term “bush” in this dissertation: as a spatial metaphor which captures the Tobas’ practices and social relations in their home territories as they are

defined by their tension with other places, and which often engulfs within its semantic weight other meaningful “permanences,” like the villages and the marshes.

### **The Villages**

From the place where I was sitting, sharing a *mate* with Enrique and Roberto and talking with them about the grasslands of the past, I could see part of the village we had just arrived in. On the one hand, the village was clearly delimited from the surrounding *monte*; it was in a relatively open place, on an almost white soil depleted of grass by the action of goats, with domestic animals (hens, pigs, goats, sheep) wandering around, and with clear visual signs of social activity. On the other hand, the village was partially confounded with the bush, and many of the *ranchos*, dwellings made mostly of adobe bricks and straw, were partially or totally obscured by trees.

Most Toba villages are formed by either one, two, or more exogamous webs of extended families distributed in clusters of households (units of consumption and residence) which usually occupy adjacent places. These clusters are irregularly scattered around a core of public buildings: the primary school, the Anglican church, and in the largest villages the dispensary and the buildings of the *Instituto de Comunidades Aborígenes* (ICA), the indigenous agency in the province of Formosa. These webs of extended families recognize a common linkage with one of the old semi-nomadic bands, and their exogamy is defined by the implicit prohibition against marrying *laqáya* (siblings and “first cousins”), *laqáya*’s children (*yolé* [f.], *yolék* [m.]), and the *laqáya* of ego’s parents (*yahódo* [f.], *tehóko* [m.]). Since descent is bilateral and consequently there is no defined system of descent which privileges any one genealogical line, what brings extended families together in the same

village is usually a strong leadership (as we shall see).<sup>13</sup> This pattern usually marks the spatial configuration of the village, and the “center” is often occupied by the households of the politically dominant extended family.

In 1995-1996, the Tobas formed ten rural villages, some of them the recent result of secessions from other villages, which included a total population of about 1,300 (excluding 200 people who live in the town of Ingeniero Juárez). The three largest villages had 600, 220, and 150 inhabitants, and the rest were populated by less than 100 people. Since many Tobas still rely on foraging for their livelihood, their everyday forays in search of fish, game, honey, or wild fruits make the villages just one aspect of the environment which the Tobas construct through their practices. The fluidity of the boundaries between the villages and the bush can be seen in the fact that, due to the collective ownership of land and the fact that (unlike agriculture) fishing, hunting, and gathering do not require a fixed place from which to practice them, the villages have a very flexible structure. Thus, the composition of each village is altered quite often and whole households (sometimes nuclear families) move in and out, usually following the lines of kinship. The fact that most people live in rudimentary *ranchos* which can be built up in a few days certainly facilitates this mobility. Even though many people move as a result of conflicts, usually hinging on accusations of sorcery, this has also become a practice aimed at optimizing the possibilities of reproduction in conditions of extreme poverty, a topic to which I will return.

Most villages are scattered along the right edge of the Pilcomayo marshes, at least a few kilometers away from the level reached by water in the flooding season (December-May) (see map 2). Due to the abundance of fish, wild game, and bee hives, the marshlands

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed analysis of kinship terms among the Tobas see Mendoza and Browne (1995).

are a central point of reference for the Tobas, and most of their foraging expeditions take place deep inside it or in its surroundings. In spite of this, the marshes often seem to be engulfed by the semantic weight of the bush. The marshland, like the bush, is also a relatively new place immersed in the memory of what that area was not like in the past.

### **The Marshland**

Full of *mate* and having rested for a while, Roberto and I said good-bye to Enrique and his family and continued our ride towards the marshes. We went back to *la picada*, followed it for a few hundred meters, and then took a tiny trail to our left that was carved out in the *monte*. We soon reached the remarkably clear line which separates the white, sandy soil of the hinterland from the green grass at the marshes' edge, which marks the water level reached during the last flood. We were now surrounded by ground vegetation of bright shades of green, which contrasted with the darker, dustier colors of the hinterland. The trees were more and more scattered and soon we were able to see the wide open spaces ahead. In a few minutes, we were surrounded by a landscape which I always found as beautiful as bizarre. All around us, towering over a very green land of grass and shrubs, there were countless numbers of dried, standing dead trees, ten to fifteen meters apart. Those scattered figures extended in all directions towards the horizon and many of them were standing in the shallow waters of the marshes. That landscape was the testimony of the sections of *monte* which once covered the area and which was drowned by the same floods which brought an end of the river.

Due to the enormous amount of sediments carried from its Andean sources and to the very low gradient of the Chaco plains, the Pilcomayo has always been a river prone to

changes in its course. This pattern of change was even more recurrent farther downstream from Toba territory, in its middle to lower course, where there is a wide depression with almost no gradient. There, the Pilcomayo turns into a widespread and changing network of streams and marshes which, known since the eighteenth century as the Estero Patiño, was the nightmare of ten generations of European explorers. In the 1970s, probably due to the deforestation of the Andean slopes, the sedimentation of the riverbed increased, causing greater changes in the Pilcomayo course. Late in 1974 and early in 1975, in the region inhabited by the Tobas the first wave of annual floods saturated the riverbed with sediments. The riverbed literally turned into a bloc of mud, and when the last wave of floods arrived in March, the water overflowed the banks of the river and inundated a wide area.

The flood destroyed the Toba villages —all of them located near the banks of the river— and two other very important places in their history: misión El Toba, the mission station founded among them by British Anglicans, and the Criollo town of Sombrero Negro, located three kilometers upstream (see map 6). The flood brought dramatic changes in the landscape. The Pilcomayo ceased to be a river, *the* river which had been a central landmark in the Tobas' experience. With the old riverbed filled up with sediments, the waters of the Pilcomayo formed a wide network of streams and swamps south of the old course, over five kilometers wide in the summer, which merged with the marshes which started downstream, known today as *bañado* La Estrella (successor of the old Estero Patiño).

When the waters receded a few months after the flood, the mission station, Sombrero Negro, and the Toba villages had been all covered by several meters of *enlame*:

a thick layer of muddy sediments. Only the zinc roofs of some of the buildings emerged above the solidified mud. The Tobas and the missionaries returned to the station and tried to recover whatever of value was left. The mission, however, was to be abandoned forever. In the following years, subsequent floods covered with *enlame* what was left of the buildings. The *monte* soon covered the rest. Twenty years after the floods, in the mid-1990s, there were no marks left of either misión El Toba or Sombrero Negro. The sites are now in the middle of thick, dry *monte*, located several kilometers north of the marshes. Only experienced Toba hunters who foray across the marshes towards the borderline with Paraguay are able to recognize the sites which were once so central in their everyday life. Segundo, who went to that area a few times, told me:

It seems that it all changed. The house of the missionary was totally covered ... Sombrero Negro was screwed. The store of the Criollo, covered by a lot of *enlame*. A tractor, underneath. When the water went down, we searched for the tractor. It was below ... The mission was finished off. Only the corrugated iron came out, above the *enlame* ... Now, all that's *monte grande*. I got out of there once with my pants torn to pieces. Really thick, not like before ... Now, there're many *bobo* trees. It's very thick. *Monte* ... Besides, there's no water there, for two *leguas* [leagues] it's totally dry.<sup>14</sup>

Nowadays, the Tobas see the floods of 1975 as a key turning point in their recent history, and refer to the period prior to the flooding as the times “when there was a river.” The generations who got to know the *ñachi*, the river, in person express an open nostalgia for those days, centered on the image of abundance of fish. In 1996, Pablo told me about the days previous to the flooding: “It was nicer, much nicer. People didn't suffer. We always ate fish ... All sort of fish came, when there was river.” Fifty-seven years earlier,

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<sup>14</sup> One *legua* is about 4.5 kilometers. Most adult Tobas calculate distance this way.

in July 1939, at the peak of the fishing season, a mission staff member wrote about that abundance: “the river is so full of fish that standing on the bank one can see fish leaping up all over the surface” (Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 73). Around that time, visitors at the mission station were very impressed by “... the very strong smell of fish which emanated from these people” (Saint 1936: 177, my translation). Even though fishing is nowadays central in the Tobas’ livelihood, the formation of the marshes, *ndép, el bañado*, meant the end of collective fishing, the only male practice which implied collective forms of cooperation. Fish spread in a wide network of shallow streams and swamps which did not allow for the organization of fishing teams, and fishing became since then an individual and less productive practice.

Consequently, the disappearance of the river implied for the Tobas an increase in the semantic and practical importance of “the bush.” The marshland is not as close to the Tobas’ everyday experience, as embedded in their daily practices, as the river was, even though most people live not far from it, obtain plenty of resources from it, and prefer it to the dry and dusty hinterland. But the Tobas had the Pilcomayo River “right there,” right near their villages. Men, women, and children took baths often several times a day, and men set out to fish day and night. Nowadays, because of the annual flooding, most Tobas live at least a few kilometers away from the edge of the marshes. Most of their fresh water comes from drilled wells, and fishing expeditions require either a long walk or a bicycle ride, which become longer when the marshes recede during the dry season. In these circumstances, nowadays the Tobas’ most immediate spatial reference is the bush which surrounds their villages.

A further consequence of the floods of 1975 was that the lands which used to be their home are today located on “the other side,” *laheGó, la banda*.

### “The Other Side”

For the Tobas, *la banda* includes all lands which extend across the marshes, even into Paraguayan territory. In the mid-1990s, two decades after the flooding, most Tobas tend to see those lands as a contradictory, liminal place. On the one hand, several generations of their ancestors inhabited those lands, and any person over 30 remembers them well. As a result, people somehow still see those lands as a place of their own. On the other hand, the landscape across the marshes has been radically transformed by the flood and has little resemblance with the places where people used to live. Furthermore, nowadays those lands are only inhabited by Criollo settlers.

The semantic ambiguity embedded in *la banda* has another important component. For even though the Pilcomayo River has disappeared as such, the international borderline between Argentina and Paraguay is still there, creating an invisible but powerful dividing line. The lands extending between the marshes and the old course of the river are still Argentinean territory, but the area is relatively isolated from Argentinean villages (especially during the flooding season) and the Criollos who live there maintain regular links with the Paraguayan *estancias*, cattle ranches, which began occupying those lands after the Chaco War between Paraguay and Bolivia (1932-1935). The Tobas also see those *estancias* as part of “the other side,” and groups of young men go there often either to work or, because of the greater abundance of wildlife, to hunt iguanas to sell their skins. Moreover, when the river-as-borderline still existed as such before 1975, *la banda* was a

synonym to the Paraguayan bush. Once the floods forced the Tobas to resettle their villages further south, the bush of Paraguay stopped being “right there,” opposite to their villages and the mission station. With the marshes extending to the south, the Paraguayan bush became for the Tobas a relatively distant place; but it is still a place people talk about often. Because the Tobas see this “other bush,” nowadays sparsely inhabited, as the last refuge of the wild animals and extraordinary creatures which were once part of the world of the “ancient ones” and are now hard to see in their own lands, due to the “noise” caused by Criollo settlers, vehicles, and the oil exploration conducted in the 1980s by YPF. Whereas the places which stretch across the marshes mark a limit with another country and with a landscape reminiscent of the past, in the opposite direction, towards the hinterland of the central Chaco, a dirt road connects the Tobas to the places which contributed to the demise of “the ancient ones.”

### **Paths to Distant Places**

The Tobas’ first important point of reference in the hinterland is the small town of Pozo de Maza (population ca. 700), located 25 kilometers away from the marshes. The small pond where Pozo de Maza now stands used to be the farthest point inland that Toba bands reached in their forays into the hinterland. Nowadays, “Maza” is also the southern limit of the area which the Tobas recognize as part of their own familiar locality. This town is the head of the municipality with jurisdiction over their villages and is consequently the main point of reference for local politics, “*la política*,” as well as the main public employer of Tobas, Wichís, and Criollos. In Pozo de Maza and in several villages in the area, there is an important Wichí population with which the Tobas interact

quite often. Like themselves, the Wichís are “*aborígenes*,” the term nowadays used in the area and in general in Argentina to refer to indigenous peoples. And in spite of the cultural and linguistic differences which separate them, this common identity as *aborígenes*, as *paisanos*, strengthened as we shall see by common experiences of domination, shapes much of the terms of their interaction.

From Pozo de Maza, a dirt road cuts through extremely dry, thick *monte* to Ingeniero Juárez (population 10,000), 70 kilometers to the southwest of the Toba villages. Able to accommodate large trucks, but often impassable after heavy rains in the area of Pozo de Maza, this road was constructed in 1984, after YPF struck oil in Palmar Largo (over 70 kilometers to the northwest of the Toba villages). Before then, the only connection to Ingeniero Juárez was a rough trail cleared in the heart of the bush. Until the late 1960s, most Tobas used that trail only when they were recruited by the contractors of San Martín del Tabacal and other sugar plantation located more than 300 kilometers to the west, in the provinces of Salta and Jujuy. For this reason, in the mid-1990s the Tobas’ memory of this old trail is strongly associated with their experience of wage labor. Angélica, a woman in her late fifties, told me while pointing to the road which lay 50 meters away from us: “In the past, this was just a trail, there was no road. Just a trail, for horses ... When they came from *ingenio* San Martín to take the people out, people went on foot ... up to Maza. If there was no truck there, on foot up to Juárez.”

Ingeniero Juárez is the political, administrative, and economic center of the west of Formosa. Consequently, it is the Tobas’ most important point of reference in the region. Since the floods of 1975, a group of about 200 Tobas lives in the outskirts of the town in what is known as “Barrio Toba,” usually keeping close ties with the relatives who live “in

the bush.” A railway line passing through “Juárez” and inaugurated in 1931 took several generations of Tobas to the sugar plantations of Salta and Jujuy and in particular to San Martín del Tabacal. When this plantation mechanized the harvest in the late 1960s, farms located in eastern Formosa and in the western edge of the Chaco (Salta) began recruiting the Tobas by truck, by way of a dirt road built in 1965 which runs parallel to the railway.<sup>15</sup> Today, these roads are the main means by which the Tobas leave “the bush” to go to distant “places of work.”

### **The Bean Farms**

It was already daylight when Jorge, the contractor in charge of the farm, turned his pick-up truck off the main road and made it cross the entrance of the farm. I had met him the previous day in Embarcación, a dusty town located on the green foothills of the Andes, at the western end of the railway line coming from Formosa and Ingeniero Juárez. Since we left the town in his truck before dawn, Jorge had been telling me almost non-stop about the details of the bean harvest. He seemed to be flattered by my “academic” interest in his work; but I think he found it bizarre that I knew the Tobas who were working for him. Once inside the farm, the truck followed a road bordering the bean fields. We passed a group of young men who were walking to their work site and I recognized, with an strange excitement, two or three faces.

A few minutes later, Jorge parked the truck near a rudimentary store, the *proveduría* where the Tobas obtained their *mercaderías*, packaged food and other staple goods. When I stepped out of the truck, some Tobas who were coming to talk to Jorge

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<sup>15</sup> This is the national road No. 81, which in the mid-1990s was being partially paved.

recognized me and smiled with clear signs of surprise. In a few seconds, I was shaking dozens of hands. Some of them were people I had seen only a few times; others were friends I knew well. I was both excited and shocked to seeing them in such a different place from their villages in the now distant *monte* near the Pilcomayo. I was now in one of the farms the Tobas had told me a lot about, but which I had never seen with my own eyes. Since I was coming from their villages, some people asked me right away news from home, from their relatives. After a while, I asked them how they were doing. They told me that Jorge was “a good *patrón* (boss)”. I noticed that they interacted with Jorge with confidence and that the young men in particular seemed to enjoy his frequent sexual jokes. They also told me, however, that a few weeks earlier another contingent of Tobas had had major problems with an abusive contractor in another farm. They had dropped him and were now working for Jorge. We were chatting between the bean fields and a long strip of thick forest, where they and scattered groups of Criollo workers had built up their *campamentos* (“campsites”) with poles, corrugated iron, and large pieces of nylon sheeting. A few hundred meters to the west, across the paved road which connects Embarcación to Tartagal and the Bolivian border, I could see the foggy, densely forested hills which mark the definite end of the Chaco plains.

Even though most of the Tobas working on the farm were single men and women or young families with their little children, there were also a few men and women in their late forties and early fifties. Thirty years earlier, when they were teenagers, thick forests covered all that area and those bean fields now in harvest simply did not exist. Still, in those days the area of Embarcación was not unfamiliar to them. They used to pass by that town on their way to San Martín del Tabacal, only 20 kilometers to the west and near

Orán, at the mouth of the valley formed by the San Francisco River, as it runs almost parallel to the western edge of the Chaco to meet the Bermejo River.

### **San Martín del Tabacal**

I had been to Orán four days before arriving at the bean farms. I had arrived at dusk, coming from the city of Salta, and the following morning the air was moist and foggy. A compact mass of low clouds crawled down the slopes of the hills to the west of the cane-fields, which extended in all directions and surrounded Orán like a green sea. It was June 1996, 27 years after the Tobas had worked in San Martín del Tabacal for the last time. The plantation had undergone major changes since those days. Once a thriving symbol of the economic and political power of the sugar oligarchy of the province of Salta, in the 1980s San Martín del Tabacal was seriously indebted to public and private banks. In 1991, the plantation's debt crisis reached its peak and five years later, just when I happened to be visiting there, an American company, the Seaboard Corporation, was about to purchase 60 % of the shares. The Patrón Costas family, the original owners of the *ingenio* (sugar plantation) retained four percent of the shares.<sup>16</sup>

Thirty years earlier, San Martín del Tabacal had started a mechanization scheme which led to a sharp reduction of the labor force. This meant the end of the recruitment of the Tobas and consequently the end of a cycle of labor migrations which every year, for over seven decades, took several generations of Tobas from the Pilcomayo River to the San Francisco Valley and back. Years after the mechanization, some Tobas went to the

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<sup>16</sup> See *Página/12* (22/5/1996) and *El Tribuno* (4/9/1996).

*ingenio* to visit the place where they had spent such a significant portion of their lives.

Horacio, a man in his late fifties, told me about a trip he made sometime in the late 1980s:

I don't know what year it was, '86 or '89. I went to the *ingenio* San Martín to see. I was watching. It's not like before. It changed already. Now, there's machinery working. The places where we used to live aren't there anymore. Only cane, cane-fields. The *lote* where we lived, the *lote* called Magdalena, is an orange grove now ... In the past, you could never get to see [the dam at] Vado Hondo, but now you can see it from the distance. That used to be *monte*.

I took the local bus to the town of Tabacal, the headquarters and site of the factory of San Martín del Tabacal, located a few kilometers away from Orán (see map 3). While I watched through the windows the cane-fields and those low hills covered by clouds, I kept wondering about “*los cerros*,” “the mountains.” In the countless interviews I had conducted with the Tobas, *kahogonaGá* —“*los cerros*”— were a recurrent image in their description of the *ingenio*. People talked about them as an imposing presence overlooking the cane-fields from the west. To my frustration, all I was able to see that hazy morning were hills obscured by clouds; and they did not seem particularly impressive to me. I remember asking myself over and over again: “So, are those hills *los cerros*?”

I got off the bus at the entrance to the headquarters of the plantation, marked by an imposing portico formed by four arches. Behind them: the town of Tabacal, built in an homogeneous (almost quaint) recreated Spanish colonial style. A few hundred meters behind the arches, the chimneys of the factory were pumping out imposing columns of white smoke. Reminding me of the power and simultaneous fragility of ruins of vanished empires, I looked at the big letters on top of the arches: “*Patrón Costas, año 1920, Mosoteguy.*” As I entered these arches and walked towards the factory, passing by huge

trucks waiting in line to deposit their load of cane in the entrails of the mill, I felt I was going back in time, to those days when hundreds of Tobas, men, women and children got off the train at Tabacal, stood near those very arches, and waited to be distributed to their *lotes* by the small trains which cut across the cane-fields.

The factory was more impressive than I had imagined: a dark, enormous building with several thick and tall chimneys saturating the air with a mixture of smoke and industrial noise. I could not stop thinking about the Familiar, the deadly “devil” which dwelled in the basement of the factory, the *diablo* some Tobas claim to have seen with their own eyes (as we shall see). Separated only by a street, a large colonial-style mansion faced the factory. In the garden behind a fence, there was a discrete statue of the man who used to live there: Robustiano Patrón Costas (died 1965), the co-founder and for several decades head administrator of San Martín del Tabacal. Impressed by the spatial connection between the factory and the mansion, I could almost “see” Patrón Costas and the Familiar having their rendezvous —as the Tobas had told me— in the underground tunnel connecting the two places. While I was standing near the factory, watching, taking notes, taking pictures, I began chatting with a Criollo man in his late sixties. Born in Santa Cruz de la Sierra (Bolivia) and now retired, he had worked for years in the plantation as a tractor driver. At one point, I asked him about “the Familiar.” He pointed to the factory and said with a very casual tone: “There it is. Five days ago, one of the *trapiches* (mills) broke down. People think that the Familiar’s hungry. It has a contract with the *patrón* to get people every year. Maybe it broke the *trapiche* to complain, in order to get a man.”

Later in the morning, the air had warmed up and the clouds were now dispersing. I had been in Tabacal for about three hours, and I was about to enter into the cane-fields,

which start right across the arches and the road. I noticed that the sky was sunnier and I looked once again to the west. I clearly remember my shivering. There they were: towering, imposing mountains which dominated a clear valley now liberated from clouds. Images cascaded into my mind, intertwined with fragments of accounts by the Tobas: the *payák*, the “devils” coming down from those ridges to spread diseases and death among the workers; the terrifying cannibals who came from behind those mountains down to the cane-fields; the fabulous but unreachable treasures hidden in their heights. I always believed, and I still do, that the old notion of *Verstehen* (“understanding”) is based on the naïve assumption that a supposed (and much desired) subjective communion with “the other” can overcome different social, cultural, and class experiences. But that morning, while I was looking at those enormous mountains fused with the sugar-cane fields, I could not stop feeling that, somehow, I was closer to understanding what the Tobas had been telling me for a long time.

**TWO:  
HEAVEN AND HELL**

The Demon said ... "follow me with the assurance that I will take you to places where you will live free from such an evil people [the Spanish]..." The Demon thus ... set out for the province of the Chaco, to where most of that numerous group of people followed him ... [And] the wretched are there until now, buried by the darkness of infidelity ... and that is why that province is inhabited by so many people ...

*Pedro Lozano,*  
Descripción Corográfica del Gran Chaco  
Gualamba (1733)

Every time the Indians talk about their lands they use the most magnificent expressions, like when we talk to them about Paradise ...

*José Cardiel,*  
Recuerdos del Gran Chaco (1780)

Early in the twentieth century, the site where San Martín del Tabacal now stands was covered by jungle. The most important settlement in the area was San Ramón de la Nueva Orán, founded by the Spanish in 1794 as the most forward settlement of that area of the Chaco frontier. A few decades before the foundation of Orán, the lower area of the San Francisco Valley was under the control of various indigenous groups of the Chaco. In the same area, the only significant Spanish settlement had been the town of Santiago del Guadalcázar, founded in 1624 and abandoned in 1632 due to indigenous uprisings. For a long time then, the Spanish only used the mouth of the San Francisco Valley as an area of passage of their military expeditions heading towards the interior of the Chaco, the vast plains which extended east of the Andes and whose inhabitants were not subjected to their rule. Coming down from the mountains which centuries later would cause terror among the Tobas, Spanish troops from Jujuy used to enter into the thick forests of the lowlands.

One of these expeditions will be the starting point of the central point of this chapter: the reconstruction of the historical processes which, between the Spanish Colonial era and the rise of the Argentinean nation-state, contributed to shaping cultural imageries about the bush of the Chaco as a haven from domination.

### **“Thick Forests Which Serve Them as Hideouts”**

In 1673, Angel de Peredo, the Spanish governor of Tucumán, organized a large military expedition against the *indios infieles*, “infidel Indians” of the Chaco. Troops from the cities of Cordoba, La Rioja, and Jujuy converged to the interior of the Chaco from different points of the frontier. Governor Peredo departed from the town of Esteco, on the Salado River, at the time the most onward Spanish settlement into the Chaco (see map 4). He reached the River Grande or Bermejo from the southwest and from there he dispatched groups of soldiers “in order to take the infidels out of the thick forests which serve them as hideouts, where ... they hide with their families” (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 217, my translation). The troops from Jujuy, meanwhile, descended from the mountains to the mouth of the San Francisco Valley and from there reached the Bermejo River “looking for infidels, who escaping to the river Grande found other [infidels], who were fleeing from the soldiers dispatched by the governor” (ibid.: 217). When the campaign was over, the Spanish troops had captured 1,800 “infidels.” The Spanish took the captives to Esteco, where governor Peredo distributed them as serfs among the men who had participated in the campaign: “And all the soldiers and corporals were so anxious to have Indians serving them, that they judged that all the prisoners were not enough to award their merits ...” (ibid.: 229, see also 217, 230).

The campaign of Angel de Peredo was one of the many *entradas* made by the Spanish in order to obtain serfs and slaves among the “*indios infieles*” of the interior of the Chaco. These expeditions expressed a central feature in the history of the region: the attempt by the Spanish to subject the labor of indigenous groups to exploitation, but in a process in which many of these groups relied on vast and thick forests to escape the enslaving raids and also to resist them. This contradiction between experiences of exploitation and autonomy focused on different places would anticipate processes which would unfold in a different way centuries later, when the whole Gran Chaco was fully incorporated into the dynamics of capitalism. But already then, the bush emerged as the spatialized condensation of the social contradictions which were molding the social landscape of the region. Expressing this tension, in 1784 the Jesuit missionary Martin Dobrizhoffer (1970 [1784]: 124) wrote: “This is the face of the province called Chaco! which the Spanish soldiers look upon as a theatre of misery, and the savages as their Palestine and Elysium.” During the first stage of the Colonial period, in a background characterized by an effective indigenous armed resistance, this dialectic was molded by the attempts of the Spanish to take their labor force “out of the bush” and by the indigenous groups’ simultaneous construction of the forests of the Chaco as “their old freedom.”

### **The Early Colonial Period: Encomienda and Warfare**

In the Chaco, the Spanish came across a very heterogeneous social and cultural landscape, the result of an old process of mingling of population streams and cultural influences from the Pampas, the Amazon basin, and the Andes (Métraux 1946b: 210).

Most groups, the descendants of the first waves of peoples which inhabited the Chaco, shared a hunting and gathering economy. The exception were the Chanés and Guanás (Arawak) and the Chiriguanos (Tupí-Guaraní), slash and burn agriculturists who arrived into the Chaco at a later stage. These different indigenous groups, rather than being “internally homogeneous and externally distinctive and bounded objects” (Wolf 1982: 6), were engaged in a dynamic process of conflictive interaction, fusion, and fission well before the arrival of the Europeans. In the fifteenth century, this dynamic was molded by the migrations of the Chiriguanos to the western edge of the Chaco (from what is today southern Brazil) and by the powerful presence of the Inca empire along the eastern slopes of the Andes. At the time of the arrival of the Spanish in the Chaco in the sixteenth century, the Tobas were divided in different sub-groupings which inhabited the lower and upper sections of the Bermejo and Pilcomayo Rivers. The Tobas belonged to one of the linguistic families comprising groups with a foraging tradition, the Guaycurú, which also includes the Pilagás, Mocovíes, Mbayás (today Caduveos), and the now disappeared Abipones and Payaguás.<sup>17</sup> In chapter three, I will discuss at length the particular historical configuration of the Toba sub-grouping I am concerned, and the way in which this group was shaped by the processes here discussed.

Until the mid-sixteenth century, the northern Chaco was for the Spanish the main gateway from the Atlantic to Chiquitos, one of the eastern edges of the Inca empire. As a result, even though the Gran Chaco had no gold nor silver, its terrain was mostly semi-

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<sup>17</sup> Aside from the Guaycurú, the linguistic families that descend from the first inhabitants of the Chaco are: Mataco-Mataguyan (Wichí, Nivaklé, Chorote, Maká), Maskoi (Maskoi, Lengua, Sanapaná, Angaité), and Zamuco (Chamacoco, Ayoreo) (cf. Métraux 1946b). This list does not include the numerous groups which have disappeared due to the Spanish conquest.

arid and thorny, and its indigenous inhabitants were hostile to their forays, the region became among the first in South America to be explored by the Spanish, especially once Asunción was founded on the Paraguay River in 1537 (see map 4). Even though these early forays across the northern Chaco to Chiquitos did not provide the Spanish with silver, it did provide them with large numbers of serfs and slaves (Gott 1993: 155; Susnik 1971: 7-11). A member of one of these *entradas* to the Chaco wrote in the mid-sixteenth century that they had captured “up to twelve thousand people counting men, women and children, who must be our slaves, in this regard I have got for myself fifty people, men, women and children” (Ulrico Schmidl, quoted by Susnik 1971: 9, my translation).

The attempts to subject the labor of the population of the Chaco were especially important in its western frontier, the province of Tucumán, where the Spanish had founded in the late sixteenth century a series of towns: Santiago del Estero (1553), San Miguel del Tucumán (1565), Esteco (1567), Tarija (1574), Salta (1582), and Jujuy (1593). Esteco, founded on the Salado River, was for more than a century the most advanced Spanish post in the frontier and among the first settlements in the Chaco where the native population, especially the Lules, was subjected to the institution of *encomienda* (cf. Lozano 1989 [1733]: 98, 111; Gullon Abao 1993: 36).

The *encomienda* was a type of servitude imposed by the Spanish in Latin America especially during the early colonial period, through which an *encomendero* was granted rights over the labor of a specific indigenous population. This population was obliged to provide him with a certain quantity of unpaid personal services and with an annual quota of goods or cash. At least formally, these labor services were strictly regulated and the

*encomendero* did not have rights over the lands of his subjects,<sup>18</sup> and was also obliged to guarantee their “education” and evangelization (Rutledge 1987: 84-89). In Tucumán, however, *encomienda* was a highly exploitative system of unpaid personal services, which made it a “hybrid” between feudalism and slavery (ibid.: 89-91; Rosenzvaig 1986: 50-57).

In the Chaco, the attempts by the Spanish to impose *encomienda* faced a firm resistance. Even though along the Salado River various groups were subjected to servitude, important centers of *encomienda* like Concepción del Bermejo (1585-1632, founded deep into the Chaco) and Santiago del Guadalcázar (1624-1632) had to be abandoned due to widespread indigenous rebellions (Zapata Gollán 1966: 27-29; Gullon Abao 1993: 37; cf. Kersten 1968 [1905]: 20). Moreover, by the mid-seventeenth century various indigenous groups had acquired the horse and some Guaycurú groups, most notably the Abipones and Mbayás (inhabiting the southeastern Chaco), developed a “horse complex” which significantly strengthened their military capacity. From then on, the attacks on Spanish towns and settlements increased, as well as the looting and rustling of cattle and horses, and the social organization of some of these groups was shaped by the violent relationship with the frontier, consolidating strong leaderships and a rank of equestrian warriors. The Chaco thus became for over two centuries a violent and unstable frontier in which various indigenous groups used the forests of the interior both as a stronghold from where to launch quick and sharp raids and as a haven from enslaving raids, military expedition, and missionization attempts.

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<sup>18</sup> However, on some occasions the granting of *encomiendas* was also accompanied with *mercedes de tierras* (distribution of lands) (Rutledge 1987: 86).

### “Trackless Woods for Fortifications”

Throughout the seventeenth century, the number of *indios encomendados* in the province of Tucumán, including those subjected at the edges of the Chaco, decreased sharply due to the high mortality rates and to the flights back to the Chaco (Rutledge 1987: 92, 96-99; Gullon Abao 1993: 53). The best known case of massive flight to escape servitude was that of the Lules, who at the beginning of the seventeenth century fled massively beyond the Salado River (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 98; Métraux 1946b: 227; cf. Gullon Abao 1993: 53). Facing a serious shortage of laborers, the authorities of Tucumán organized several expeditions to the interior of the Chaco, formed by Spanish and *indios amigos*, intended to a great extent to “chase Indians.” The expeditions of Peredo in 1673 and Andino in 1679 were among the most important forays carried out with this purpose (Zapata Gollán 1966: 40-41; Gullon Abao 1993: 51; Castro Boedo 1872: 167). The campaign of governor Esteban de Urizar in 1710, the largest military campaign to the Chaco to be launched during the Colonial period, also provided the Spanish with numerous serfs (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 401).

However, the thick bush of the Chaco posed a serious obstacle to these attempts to reproduce a declining labor force, for the very existence of wide, thick forests continued nourishing permanent flights (cf. Lozano 1989 [1733]: 230-1; 274; Gullon Abao 1993: 53; Zapata Gollán 1966: 40). The *indios*, Father Pedro Lozano wrote, “... flee to the thickest forests, which we well know are impenetrable for armed Spanish” (1989 [1733]: 226, my translation; see also 205, 333). Consequently, the bush of the Chaco became for the indigenous groups a fabulous haven where they had “trackless woods for fortifications, rivers and marshes for ditches, and plantations of fruit trees for storehouses”

(Dobrizhoffer 1970 [1784]: Vol. I: 124). The historical accounts of that time are very revealing of some of the meanings which the indigenous groups associated with their experiences as serfs or slaves and as foragers holding autonomy in the interior of the region. Father Pedro Lozano (1989 [1733]: 274) referred at length to the following remark made by a Chiriguano chief to his followers in 1690:

... we can still show you the scars of the wounds made on us by the whip; they made us work day and night without any compassion in order to fill with our sweat the bags of our merciless masters, and the payment for so many fatigues was the mistreatment, the cruelty, the insult and what hurt our hearts the most, the contempt we were subjected to.

In the other extreme of the Chaco, near the banks of the Paraná River, the Abipón cacique Ychoalay expressed in 1748:

Lo! Crowds of Abipones and Mocabios, made captives by the Spaniards, are dragging out a life of slavery, bitterer than any death. Numbers united to us by the ties of blood, and ancient alliances, banished from their country, dispersed in miserable corners of cities and estates, subject to the power of others, and oppressed with labour, now mourn and are consumed with grief (Dobrizhoffer (1970 [1784] Vol. III: 137).

As part of this experience, the indigenous groups were perceiving the Chaco woodlands as a place of freedom and well-being where they were able to escape from slavery and death. Along these lines, the Abipones:

... were strongly attached to their native soil, a soil abounding in delightful fruits and wild animals, and fortified with so many lurking-holes; and ... dreaded the vicinity of the Spaniards with as much anxiety as servitude, having learnt that the one was often the occasion of the other (Dobrizhoffer 1970 [1784] Vol. III: 263).

This view of the bush as a haven from the Spanish was also shaped by the missionization taking place in the edges of the Chaco, led by the Jesuits until 1767 (the

year they were expelled from the Spanish territories) and from then on (with less success) by the Franciscans.<sup>19</sup> Father José Cardiel (1920 [1780]: 375) wrote that when the “Indians” of the missions talked about their lands in the Chaco “they use the most magnificent expressions, like when we talk to them about Paradise.” In numerous cases, the “*indios*” regarded the missionaries as disguised agents of the Spanish *encomenderos* and often perceived the mission stations as places associated with servitude (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 139, 243, 261, 272, 283). Thus, in the decade of 1710, at the Jesuit mission of San Esteban de Valbuena, on the Salado River, a Lule chief urged his followers:

to abandon the *reducción* [mission] and what they called captivity and to return to their woods where they would enjoy their old freedom and live healthy and strong, not like in Valbuena, where due to a certain epidemic they were dying and coming to an end ... (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 411).

These missionization attempts and the military *entradas* set to capture serfs and slaves did not reach the middle course of the Pilcomayo River in a direct way. Located at the very heart of the Chaco, forming large swamps along its course, and inhabited by groups hostile to any attempts at exploration, the Pilcomayo posed for centuries formidable obstacles to the Spanish expeditions which set out to explore its course. Consequently, this region emerged as one of the most important indigenous havens in the

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<sup>19</sup> In spite of many unsuccessful attempts, the Jesuits established an important number of missions on the edges of the Chaco: on the Salado River, in Chiriguano and Chané territory further north, in Chiquitos (the northern edge of the Chaco), and on the Paraguay and Paraná Rivers. Even though many of these mission stations were short-lived, they played a very important role in the consolidation of the frontier. Since the missions employed the indigenous labor in different activities —especially cattle-raising, the economic base of most missions— in the long run they also helped to facilitate the integration of indigenous peoples into a labor force for the Spanish (Gullon Abao 1993: 155, 347). After the expulsion of the Jesuits, most missions were either abandoned or began a period of decline.

Chaco. And this contributed to nurturing the image of the Pilcomayo and its inhabitants as the most remote and unknown in the Chaco. As Lozano wrote in 1733 (1989 [1733]: 59):

The other nations which are in the center of the Chaco towards the Pilcomayo are not that well known, because the Spanish greed has frequented them less often, maybe because of their poverty, or maybe because of the harsh and swampy lands, which do not let foreign footsteps go through them that easily ...

Still, the groups of the Pilcomayo were not “untouched” by the pressure exerted by the Spanish. By contrast, their relative autonomy was nourished and molded by the very conflicts which were affecting the edges of the Chaco. Until the first half of the seventeenth century, for instance, the Chiriguano used to raid the upper Parapití and upper Pilcomayo Rivers in order to capture serfs and sell them to the Spanish (Susnik 1978: 136). In 1685, when the troops led by the governor of Tucumán Antonio de Vera y Mujica reached the Bermejo “in neither bank of the river there was any person, for with the news ... that the Spanish were coming they all had retired to the Pilcomayo” (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 254). The large campaign led by Urizar in 1710 forced many groups to retreat to the interior of the Chaco, a process which most probably pushed some groups to the central Chaco and the Pilcomayo (Susnik 1978: 133). Around that time, the Spanish of Tucumán regarded the mid-Pilcomayo as the haven of the “Tonocotés,” a group of agriculturists which had fled to the interior of the Chaco escaping servitude in the sixteenth century (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 172-173; Métraux 1946b: 228).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Even though the accuracy of this “legend” has been contested, it is certain that the mid-Pilcomayo was a region beyond the reach of Spanish enslaving expeditions and had consequently become a haven for indigenous groups fleeing the frontier. The possible whereabouts of the Tonocotés has been the object of various debates. See Kersten (1968 [1905]: 81-84), Susnik (1978: 132, 137), and Métraux (1946b: 228).

Aside from these pressures, the groups of the Pilcomayo were part of the trading links which connected most edges of the Chaco. Trade was fueled by the very process of looting, servitude, and missionization, and as a result it was more developed among groups located close to the Spanish frontier, like the Abipones and Mocovíes (Palermo 1986; Dobrizhoffer 1970 [1784] Vol. II: 5; Vol. III: 16-17, 30; Gullon Abao 1993: 63). But at least by the early eighteenth century, as noted by Father Gabriel Patiño in his expedition to the Pilcomayo of 1721, the groups of the middle course of the river had acquired horses, sheep, and cow leather through warfare, looting, barter with other indigenous groups and direct trips to the Spanish frontier. Patiño, for instance, wrote that the Tobas he came across “approach the frontier of Salta through the Bermejo” (quoted by Arenales 1833: 26, see also 23-25, 26, 27). Even though back then these groups maintained an important autonomy, part of their social dynamic was being influenced by this trade and by the arrival of groups fleeing the frontier, and this probably enhanced the state of “inter-tribal warfare” which later on European explorers described as characteristic of the region of the Pilcomayo. In the longer run, these groups were to be deeply affected by processes which were then beginning to unfold in a distant place: the San Francisco Valley.

### **The First Cane-Fields**

In the eighteenth century, the relations of production in Tucumán experienced important changes. The *encomiendas*, already in decline since the seventeenth century, were abolished by the Spanish Crown in 1720 (Rosenzvaig 1986: 77; cf. Gullon Abao 1993: 31, 92), and since then they were gradually replaced by haciendas based on cattle-

raising and in some places the cultivation of sugar-cane. These haciendas were units with little capital, aimed at local markets, and which relied on the exploitation of indigenous labor but along new, less extra-economic, forms of coercion. The San Francisco Valley became one of the areas of the frontier where these incipient forms of wage labor became most apparent. By 1756, the Spanish had “semi-pacified” the valley and haciendas such as San Isidro (1760) and San Lorenzo (1779) were in a few years cultivating sugar-cane (El Tribuno 2/9/1980; Gullon Abao 1993: 120-121; Rutledge 1987: 108-109). In 1794, the foundation of San Ramón de la Nueva Orán further strengthened the Spanish presence in the valley. Back then, the haciendas of the area had very rudimentary techniques of production and employed a small group of black slaves, Criollos, and “Indians” from the two missions of the valley: San Ignacio (1756), among Tobas, and Zenta (1779), among Wichís. They also hired *indios infieles*, especially Wichís who came voluntarily from the interior of the Chaco to barter skins and work and were paid in kind as part of an informal “agreement” with the cacique (Gullon Abao 1993: 283, 294, 306, 334; Rutledge 1987: 109-110; Teruel 1994). This indigenous labor force, however, was unstable and “unreliable.” The forests of the Chaco still provided them with abundant sources of livelihood and the flights of Tobas and Wichís were common (Gullon Abao 1993: 284).

In the decades following the Wars of Independence from Spain in the 1810s, new sugar-cane haciendas emerged, among them Ledesma (1830) and San Pedro (1844). By the mid-nineteenth century, aside from permanent Criollo workers, these haciendas employed Chiriguano from the Bolivian Chaco and Wichís and Tobas from the Bermejo River (Rutledge 1987: 133; Burucúa 1974: 534). In 1833, José Arenales (1833: 45-46, my translation) wrote:

The semi-barbarians Indians of the frontiers ... go every year to the haciendas to help in the works, requested by the proprietors. In the haciendas San Pedro, Ledesma and San Lorenzo between 700 and 800 Indians are employed, and in equal proportions in the others; thus, those who attend may be no less than 1,500; but they are very lazy; they work in disorder and do much harm to the economy that must reign in the establishments; some sacrifices are indispensable to keep them happy in their endless demands.

In the 1830s, the upper Bermejo became the wedge of Criollo colonization into the interior of the Argentinean Chaco, an expression of the dynamism of the changing relations of production of the frontier in Salta. Deprived of their lands and exploited both by the hacendados and the settlers, some Wichís of the area retreated to the interior of the Chaco “where they could live better, in complete freedom and far from our contact” (Uriburu 1873: 105-106, my translation). Those who remained in the area found temporary refuge in (short-lived) missions founded on the Bermejo River by Italian Franciscans between 1857 and 1868 (Gobelli 1916; Teruel 1995). But in 1863, shortly after the foundation of the town of Colonia Rivadavia on the Bermejo, the Wichís launched a widespread rebellion, triggered by the land encroachment and the exploitation they were being subjected to by the settlers. The repression unleashed by the national guard and the militias was brutal, and hundreds of Wichí men, women and children were slaughtered (Uriburu 1873: 106-107). For many Wichís, the bush of the interior of the Chaco became the only place where they could avoid extermination. In 1872, Emilio Castro Boedo (1873: 228, my translation) met in the Bermejo a group of Wichís who had fled Rivadavia. They told him: “the Christians deceive us a lot; they kill us, they chase us, and make us flee to the bush where we live like poor things ... naked and starved to death if we don’t hunt ...” The massacres of Rivadavia in 1863 were an anticipation of the way

in which the rising Argentinean nation-state was going to deal with one of the last indigenous strongholds within its territory.

### **Assault on the Chaco**

After the decades of civil warfare and unrest which followed the Independence from Spain, in the 1850s and 1860s Argentina finally emerged as a unified nation-state with growing links with the world market. By then, the expansion of the “productive” frontier and the consolidation of sovereignty in border areas became among the top priorities of successive federal governments. This involved the final assault on the two last indigenous strongholds in the country: Patagonia and the Chaco. By then, the new Argentinean elites regarded the two regions as “deserts,” as places devoid of “Civilization” and with enormous yet dormant economic potential (Arengo 1996; cf. Wright 1997). But they were “deserts” inhabited by numerous indigenous groups which had yet to be “pacified.”

The final conquest of the Chaco started with a series of campaigns in the southern Chaco in the 1870s and gained momentum in the early 1880s. In October 1884, the Minister of War himself, Benjamín Victorica, led the most important military campaign ever launched in the Chaco. The *campana al Chaco* encompassed the coordinated movement of 1,500 men —three Regiments of Infantry and two Regiments of Cavalry—who converged to the middle course of the Bermejo River, coming from Salta, the north of Santa Fe, and the villages of Resistencia and Formosa (on the Paraná and Paraguay Rivers). After numerous battles and skirmishes with the Tobas and Mocovíes of southern Chaco and with several Wichí groups, the army killed hundreds of warriors, took

thousands of prisoners, and captured an enormous quantity of horses, cattle, and sheep. By December 1884, the campaign was over and all major objectives had been accomplished. The forests of the interior of the Chaco had been for the first time deeply penetrated from several fronts at the same time, many groups had been defeated or disbanded, and many important caciques had been killed or captured.

However, the 1884 campaign did not mean the complete “pacification” of the region. The central Chaco, between the Bermejo and the Pilcomayo, had been mostly untouched by the army, and therefore many indigenous groups fled north of the Bermejo to the Pilcomayo (Scunio 1972: 296; Departamento de Guerra 1889: 238, 273; Ministerio de Guerra y Marina 1891: 279). Once a line of *fortines* (small forts) was established along the Bermejo and the bulk of the troops returned to their bases, there were new armed clashes and skirmishes (Scunio 1972: 292, 298; Ministerio de Guerra y Marina 1891). The capitalist looting of the southern and eastern Chaco, however, had already started.

### **Wedges of Capitalism**

At the time of Victorica’s campaign, capitalist investments in the Argentinean Chaco were still scarce. Back then, timber production was the most important activity, involving *obrajes* (logging campsites) spread along the western banks of the Paraná and Paraguay Rivers which employed indigenous laborers and Criollos from Corrientes and Paraguay (Iñigo Carrera 1983; Arengo 1996). The first agricultural colonies with European immigrants (Resistencia, Avellaneda, and Las Toscas) had been established just a few years before, between 1878 and 1880, in the southern Chaco (also on the Paraná River) (Maeder 1967). And in Salta, the Criollo settlers and hacendados around Colonia

Rivadavia had for the most part little capital and little capacity to absorb large numbers of indigenous laborers.

The legal parameters for the expropriation of indigenous lands had been set up in 1876, by a federal law through which huge tracts of lands in the humid regions in the east of the Chaco and on the Bermejo River were distributed to capitalist investors and speculators (González 1890: xii-xiii). By 1889 —while the military were slowly consolidating the “pacification” of the southern Chaco— 5,600,000 hectares of land in the federal territories of Formosa and Chaco (created in 1884) had been distributed to just 112 estates: *i.e.* an average of ca. 50,000 hectares per estate (González 1890: xiv-xv). Since at the turn of the century most concessions became unproductive *latifundios* held by speculators, the government passed new laws with the aim of encouraging the emergence of small and mid-size productive units (Iñigo Carrera 1983: 10, 49-51, 58). This massive expropriation of lands was aimed not only at providing lands for estates and settlers but also at forcing the indigenous groups to become their cheap labor force. The governor of the National Territory of Formosa wrote in 1905:

[The most] efficient and secure means of civilizing the Indian and incorporating him into production and labor [is]: the advance of colonization and the gradual narrowing, by the settlers, of the desert. Once the civilized man has entered, he will expel [the Indian] from his present possessions, where he finds easy means of subsistence and then he will have no other choice than to surrender entirely to labor, without any monetary cost for the state (Luna Olmos 1905: 59, my translation).

As part of this process, in the southern and eastern Chaco several Toba and Mocoví groups became part of a landless proletariat. Other Tobas and Mocovíes settled in Franciscans missions (Laishí and Tacaaglé, founded in 1901) and in state-sponsored *reducciones indígenas* (Napalpí and Bartolomé de Las Casas, created respectively in 1911

and 1914), where the state intended to turn them into agriculturists and disciplined seasonal laborers (Arengo 1996). Other groups remained in small parcels of federal land left in the interstices of private estates. Cornered in small tracts of land, for these Toba and Mocoví living in the eastern and southern Chaco, hunting, fishing, and gathering became marginal activities, occasional reminders of a what “life in the bush” had been like in the past.

This expansion of capitalist relations of production, however, had a very different expression in the western Chaco and especially along the banks of the Pilcomayo River, where the Ñachilamolék Tobas lived. This area of the Chaco was still little explored, had not been “pacified” yet, and most of its lands were semi-arid and consequently less attractive for direct investment. Thus, these lands remained for the most part property of the province of Salta and of the federal government in the National Territory of Formosa (which became a province only in 1955). Even though the indigenous inhabitants of this region still had access to the bush and the river, they were already feeling the military pressure coming from the south and also the growing demand for their labor.

### **From Haciendas to Ingenios**

In the second half of the 1870s, the haciendas of the San Francisco Valley began modernizing their technology. In 1876, Ledesma imported steam machines from England and two years later (though on a lesser scale) San Pedro and San Isidro followed it (Rutledge 1987: 134-135, 160). In 1882, a young English engineer named Roger Leach — brought by Ledesma to supervise its new steam machines— formed in 1882 a society which turned hacienda San Pedro into a modern company called “Ingenio La Esperanza,”

which started functioning in 1884. Roger Leach brought his five brothers from Britain and in a few years “the Leach brothers” took control of La Esperanza and became the leaders of the sugar industry in Jujuy (Rutledge 1987: 161). Both in Jujuy and Salta, the haciendas turned into *ingenios*, the term used in northern Argentina to designate highly capitalized sugar plantations: solid productive units administered by a centralized company, encompassing sugar-cane fields and a sugar-processing factory (the *ingenio* proper), and hiring large numbers of wage workers.<sup>21</sup> In the 1880s, the modernization of the sugar industry was greatly encouraged by federal credits and tariff increases on imported sugar and later by the arrival of the railway in Salta and Jujuy. By 1892, there were four large *ingenios* in the San Francisco Valley: Ledesma, La Esperanza, and La Mendieta in Jujuy, and San Isidro in Salta (Rutledge 1987: 157-159, 161, 186).

In the 1880s and 1890s, the growing expansion of the sugar plantations greatly increased their demand for laborers. Since in many parts of the Chaco the indigenous groups still relied on the resources provided by foraging, the *ingenios* had to resort to a combination of economic incentives and extra-economic coercion to recruit their labor, a coercion often based on a close cooperation between their contractors and the army. In 1873, for instance, the military head of the frontier in Salta began organizing the recruitment of *brazos* —“arms,” the widespread, objectifying, and mutilating metaphor used to refer to indigenous laborers— which lived “outside the frontier” (Uriburu 1873: 107). He wrote that “the *indios* should be regimented to put them in condition so that they do not flee into the desert,” something which “would cause the death of the industries ...”

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<sup>21</sup> In the province of Tucumán, the term *ingenio* is often restricted to the sugar-mill, for many of the *ingenios* of this province do not own the cane-fields from where they obtain their cane.

(Uriburu 1873: 107). After Victorica's campaign of 1884, this militarized recruitment gained strength especially along the Bermejo River (Schleh 1945: 332; Ministerio de Guerra y Marina 1886: 580.) However, since the demand for laborers was on the rise, recruitment also began including the Chiriguano of the western edges of the Bolivian Chaco. In the 1890s, the largest *ingenios*, Ledesma and La Esperanza, also began targeting the Pilcomayo River, by then the last indigenous stronghold in Argentina.

### **“Places Where You Will Live Free”**

Probably nobody expressed better than the Jesuit Father Pedro Lozano the image of the Chaco as a huge indigenous haven vis-à-vis experiences of domination. In the eighteenth century, Lozano popularized a “legend” then widespread in the province of Tucumán: that before the arrival of the Spanish there were no “Indians” living in the Chaco. As Guillermo Furlong (1938: 9) reasoned two centuries later: “Those impenetrable jungles, inhabited by terrible beasts, covered in wide areas by unhealthy marshes, could not be the ordinary ‘habitat’ of any Indian.” According to Lozano (1989 [1733]: 56-58), a few years before the arrival of the first Spanish from Peru, “the Demon” warned the native inhabitants of Tucumán that they were soon to be invaded by strangers who would deprive them “from their land, their women, their children, and even from their own freedom ...” The only way of avoiding slavery, so “the Demon” told them, was to flee to the Chaco:

“I say, then, that the only remedy you can imagine to evade ... such a hard and terrible servitude ... is to abandon your land ... Then ... follow me with the assurance that I will take you to places where you will live free from such an evil people ... There, you will not lack anything to live with as much comfort as you have here ...” The Demon thus finished his reasoning and ... turned suddenly into a furious hurricane, which set out for the province of the Chaco, to where most of that numerous group of people followed him ...

[And] the wretched are there until now buried by the darkness of infidelity, with no hope of getting out until God feels sorry for them; and this is the reason why this province is inhabited by so many people, the more people the farther one moves away from the lands of the Spanish ...

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Tobas of the mid-Pilcomayo were about to be finally pulled out of the “darkness” of the Chaco; not by the agents of Christianity Lozano may have envisioned but by the impetus of secular and profit-driven plantations. The experiences resulting from the Tobas’ immersion into the forces of capitalism gave a new and complex twist to the old tension, as “cultural” as it was “material,” between exploitation and autonomy in the history of the Chaco. As part of this twist, and inverting missionary historiography, it was outside their home in the Chaco that the Tobas were to discover, for the first time, the most evil and terrifying faces of “the devil.”

### THREE: TRACKING DOWN “THE ANCIENT ONES”

In the past there was nothing, absolutely nothing.  
There was no Juárez ...; there were no Criollos;  
only the poor *aborígenes*.

*Felipe (1996)*

#### Snapshots of Memory

Early in 1996, I arrived with my bicycle in a small village located near the Pilcomayo marshes and I paid a visit to Gervacio, a man in his early forties who is actively involved in local politics. We chatted for a while about casual issues, and then he started remembering how the Tobas used to live when there were “only *aborígenes*” living on the banks of the Pilcomayo: before the arrival in their lands of the contractors from the sugar plantations, the Criollo settlers, the military, and the British missionaries. Capturing many of the contradictions embedded in the Tobas’ memory of “the ancient ones,” he told me:

They didn’t have a place where to stay for good, poor things ... They were mean, the ancient ones, they only thought about war. So many men died in this land where we live! So many were those who died! Here, they defended the land, they defended it, defended it. That’s the history of the ancient ones. Now, it’s peaceful around here; not in the past. Now, we don’t endure anything. Not the old ones, they were tough, they had their spirit. That’s why they knew when somebody was coming, through the birds. But now, who knows how to do that? Nobody, I think. Not even the *pioGonáq* [shamans]. Now, the *pioGonáq* have no knowledge whatsoever; they aren’t like the ancient ones ... In the past, there were spirits which were strong, which helped the people (*el pueblo*). What a strength that people had! I think that now there’s nothing left of that.

In the Tobas’ memory, the times of the “ancient ones” ended with the foundation of the Anglican mission station in 1930 and stretch back to a blurry past which —like in most hunting-gathering groups— dissolves, without reference to genealogies, into a

distant and undetermined horizon. The Tobas' recollection of actual historical events begins to take shape, and only among some of the elderly, with processes taking place probably around the late 1890s. Beyond then, people's references about past events are sometimes merged with mythical stories about major events (like a big fire or the origin of women) and "cultural heroes" like *uaiakaláchigi* ("fox") and *kakadeláchigi* ("carancho") who provided the Tobas with their basic cultural goods. In this chapter, I will analyze historical processes involving "the ancient ones" which are nowadays blurred in the Tobas' memory, especially regarding their constitution as a separate ethnic entity vis-à-vis other Guaycurú-speaking groups. I will blend the narrative of my analysis with features of "the ancient ones" which emerge from the Tobas' current social memory and from the earliest documents written about them at the turn of the century, right before they were incorporated into the expanding capitalist frontier of northern Argentina.

Nowadays, most Tobas remember the *toiéts*, "the ancient ones," with an ambiguous mixture of proximity and distance. The *toiéts* were certainly their own ancestors, their own people; but they were also part of a very different and definitively gone world. Most people usually talk about their grandparents as "them," "the ancient ones," as if the few generations which separate them form in fact an insurmountable gap.<sup>22</sup> Along these lines, as part of this sense of break with the past, the current generations of Tobas call themselves *dalaGaikpí*, "the new ones," *los nuevos*. The distinction between "ancient ones" and "new ones" is part of a single movement, in which the features of one

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<sup>22</sup> Even men and women who were born before 1930 —and who as a result have a distinctive bodily mark of the *toiéts*: pierced ear lobes— talk about themselves as the "new ones," and refer to the *toiéts* as "them," or exemplified in a generic individual male, *toihek*, "the ancient one."

group are defined in contrast to the other. As a result, when people talk about “the ancient ones” they usually contrast them to themselves, “the new ones,” and vice-versa. This dialectical construction of the past is inescapable to the social memory of any social group. But among the Tobas it has been strongly shaped by the internalization of their long experience of exploitation, missionization, and immersion into state-run institutions, and by their simultaneous attempt to give positive meaning to their ethnic identity. These circumstances have contributed to making the Tobas’ memory of the times of the *toiéts* a dynamic and contradictory one.

In many cases, incorporating values which attribute negative connotations to the practices of the “wild Indians,” the Tobas remember the times of their ancestors in negative terms, both in moral sense and in the sense of absences. Hence, they see “the ancient ones” as a warlike, violent, and merciless people, fond of “vices” and “ignorant” of the material goods, manners, and religious values which define the current generations of Tobas.<sup>23</sup> Emiliano, a man in his mid-fifties, recalled in a grave, almost solemn tone, how their ancestors lived like in the past:

The *aborígenes* were fighting just among them, among all the poor. Poor ancient ones ... There was no bed, just the floor, just the leather of a wild pig (*rosillo*). They slept there, there was no blanket ... The water was pouring into the hut. People were sad ... I was sad, thinking, very bad the ancient ones. They suffered when it rained ... We, the new ones, we know chairs, we know something, something. Not the ancient ones, they were bored. Very bored. They were sad. Since we’re new ones we know beds, we know public health, we know chairs. Not in the past. We knew nothing.

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<sup>23</sup> See Arengo (1996) for a similar memory among the Tobas and Mocovíes of Napalpí, in the province of Chaco. However, as we shall see, the Tobas of the Pilcomayo also have positive and proud appraisals about their ancestors, something which in Napalpí seems to be relatively absent.

On the other hand, in many occasions the Tobas invert the negative and positive terms of the opposition and see the *toiéts* in a different, more positive light. This usually occurs when people point, directly or indirectly, to their current experience of domination and poverty. Thus, it is very common to hear the Tobas complain that “the new ones” are “flabby,” *cholaGaikpí* (“*flojos*”): mediocre hunters and gatherers who are “forgetting” the “bush food” (honey, fish, wild fruits, game meat) and are dependent on “store-bought food” (pasta, rice, corn meal, *yerba mate*, sugar) and the resources of “the government,” a situation makes them socially and physically weak. Along these lines, people inevitably praise the independence, autonomy, and strength of the *toiéts*. They remember them as superb hunter and gatherers who did not need the goods of the *dokohé* (the whites) and whose solely reliance on “bush food” made them the epitome of health, physical strength, and bravery. As we have seen in the case of Gervacio, the Tobas intertwine references about either the negative or positive features of the past almost permanently and with remarkable ease, depending on the social circumstances in which they speak. And this situation creates a recurrent ambiguity in their memory. Along similar lines, Segundo, a man who was born in the 1920s, told me about “the ancient ones” in a dialogue we had on a hazy morning of late 1995:

The ancient ones knew nothing about dates, days, nothing. Silly. People had the ears pierced with a hole like this, big. And they had a headband tied in the head. Not anymore. They didn't know the cows, they just killed them. They didn't know shotgun, nothing ... [A few minutes later, I asked him] *Are young people still good foragers?* Not anymore. The ancient ones, indeed. They used to be in the bush all day long. Not the new ones. The new ones are most weak. The ancient ones were fishermen, plunging into the river. They looked like a *kodípe* [a variety of duck], going into the water like this.

In the complex construction of the times of the “ancient people,” and as some of the quotes reveal, the Tobas often emphasize that they were permanently at war with other indigenous groups. At least until the late 1920s, the Tobas’ main enemies were the *tegaGaikpí*, the Nivaklé bands from across the Pilcomayo, and to a lesser degree the *damakapí*, the Wichí groups which roamed south of the river in the hinterland. By contrast, the Pilagás, the *tainhík*, “the people down the river” were the Tobas’ closest allies, with whom they often joined forces to fight the Nivaklés. As Pablo, a man in his early seventies put it: “Poor people, the old people. All day, all night, they couldn’t sleep in peace. They were fighting all the time.” Certainly, the Tobas argue that one of the most important things they learnt from the missionaries was “to live in peace” and “to love our brothers;” nevertheless, many men show a subtle fascination at the fighting skills of their grandparents and describe them in detail and with vivid gestures. Enrique told me about the hierarchical status of their old enemies and about the superb fighting skills and utter cruelty of the “ancient ones”:

When they attacked the enemy ... there were no dead Tobas. None. A few had a wound, like this. They were strong, they say. They used to attack the *tegaGaikpí* here, in Toba Quemado [today Paraguay]. They say they attacked the people there, many *tegaGaikpí*. The strength of the *tegaGaikpí* was almost the same as the Toba strength. But they say that the Tobas always won. Almost, almost the same. But those who were the weakest, were the Wichís. They were easy to kill [laughs] ... There was a kid like this [he pointed to his two year old grandson], they grabbed him, and pierced here [in the tendon] with a knife. And they hanged him from a tree. And the poor thing was left there: “Ay, ay!” Che, that people were most brute! [laughs].

Warfare, people remember, was sometimes related to the use of the resources of the river. Thus, when the Nivaklés stopped the flow of fish with fishing fences, “the ancient ones” organized raids to destroy them. And the Nivaklés did the same when the

Tobas made their own fishing fences. Many other times, Toba warriors attacked their enemies' campsites with the purpose of capturing sheep, weapons, and captives (women and children), or simply to increase their prestige through the acquisition of scalps, *lakaiklóok*. In any case, warfare usually consisted in brief skirmishes which engaged small parties of warriors. These confrontations were preceded by drinking parties of *latagá* (*aloja* in Spanish, a beverage made out of fermented algarroba or honey) called *nimatáq* and restricted to men. Nicacio, a *pioGonáq* in his eighties, got to see those parties when he was a child. We were once eating honey together from the same plate, and he told me after pointing to the honey-leaking pieces of hive we were sharing:

Ooh! The ancient one, he liked to get drunk with *aloja* of honey. Drunk, then they maybe fought one another. Very mean, the ancient one. That's the way the ancient one was. He was very skillful, when he made *aloja* ... It wasn't like wine, which someone buys ... The ancient one didn't buy. He went to the bush ... Many people looking for honey ... Then, they cut two *yuchán* trees. Then the *aloja* was brewing. Then, they went to fight all the people. Most fierce.

Another feature which emerges in the Tobas' social memory is the wandering habits of "the ancient ones," who covered a wide territory in their foraging forays. As Nicacio told me: "After two weeks, they changed campsite." Early in the twentieth century, the Tobas were organized in several semi-nomadic exogamic bands which relied on fishing, hunting, gathering of wild fruits and honey, horticulture on the humid banks of the Pilcomayo, and herding of sheep (usually a booty from the Nivaklés and raised for wool). In the 1990s, the Tobas remembered a total of 14 different "groups of the ancient ones," most of them named after an animal which expressed a distinctive feature of the

group.<sup>24</sup> These groupings refer to the bands which existed at the time of the foundation of the mission station in 1930 and also to other groups which had by then disappeared and merged with others. Under the leadership of a *haliaganék*, a powerful shaman and a prestigious warrior, these bands formed campsites whose size and structure were flexible; they ranged from a few extended families in the season of highest scarcity of natural resources (August-September) to larger villages at the peak of the gathering season (November-December), when some bands got together to carry out joint *nimatáq*, *aloja* drinking parties. During the peak of the fishing season, between May and late July, most bands settled on the Pilcomayo and men fished in groups with individual nets.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the turn of the century, the “history” of “the ancient ones” becomes a blurry, imprecise territory, in which, as Felipe, a man in his late sixties put it: “There was nothing, absolutely nothing. There was no Juárez, there were no Criollos ... only the poor *aborígenes*.” But what was the content of that history, beyond that edge where current memories dissolve into the mist of “deep history”? Because of the lack of historical documents on the region before the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, we know very little of the Tobas of the mid-Pilcomayo before then. However, from linguistic and genealogical evidences and the scattered historical documents available it is possible to conjecture that this group was, to a certain extent, a product of the complex displacements

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<sup>24</sup> Some people also explain this association between bands and animals on the eating preferences of each the group. In this regard, this classification does not represent a “totemic” system (in which the members of the group acknowledge an ancestry with the animal their group is named after). These 14 groups were (the suffix *pi* means group of people): *pioGodipí* (“dogs”), *pehodipí* (“ants”), *mañiGodipí* (“ostriches”), *kilikipí* (“parrots”), *uaiaGakapí* (“foxes”), *kodaGipí* (“wild pigs,” of the rosillo variety), *kedokpí* (“tigers” [jaguar]), *loleGadipí* (“antas”), *helkaikpí* (“iguanas”), *peGadipí* (“horses”), *chiyadipí* (*chiyadi*: “urine,” for these people “urinated close to their houses”), *molahapaGaipí* (a group which had “mules which died for not defecating”), *uakaepí* (“wild pigs,” of the majana type) (see Gordillo 1992: 75-77; and Mendoza 1998).

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed reconstruction of the old Toba bands and their foraging territories see Mendoza (1998).

of groups triggered by the pressures coming from the Spanish and later on Bolivian and Argentinean frontier.

### **The Footprints of “the Ancient Ones”**

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Spanish chronicles are full of references to the presence of “Tobas” from the foot of the Andes to an imprecise location further down the mid-Pilcomayo.<sup>26</sup> These “Tobas” were already then clearly differentiated from the Tobas of the lower Pilcomayo and the Bermejo River, which today constitute the bulk of the Toba population in Argentina.<sup>27</sup> “Toba,” “forehead” in Guaraní —due to the custom of the Toba warriors to shave their forehead— was the name that the Chiriguanos gave to this group of the upper Pilcomayo, and the term became later on customary to refer to this Guaycurú sub-group in different parts of the Chaco. Even though these sub-groups, like all Guaycurú groups, call themselves *qom* (“people”), all of them incorporated the term “Toba” to refer to themselves.

The correlation between the Toba groups mentioned in these Spanish chronicles and the current ethnic boundaries in the Pilcomayo is, nonetheless, complex. Most of these early references allude to what came to be known as “Bolivian” Tobas, who inhabited for a long time a good part of the upper course of the Pilcomayo in the Bolivian

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<sup>26</sup> For instance, in his expedition to the Pilcomayo in 1673, Armenta y Zarate reported that upon entering the Chaco from Tarija he faced the firm armed resistance of a Toba group (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 218-9). In 1690, when Fathers Arce and Valdolivas were attempting to explore the Pilcomayo from Tarija, the Chiriguanos warned them that further down they would be attacked by “the Tobas” (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 263). In 1721, while navigating the Pilcomayo from Asuncion, Father Patiño came across, probably not far from Chiriguano territory a group of Tobas which attacked his party and forced him to return (Arenales 1833: 25-28).

<sup>27</sup> According to Susnik (1978: 130; 1981: 35, 185), the Tobas of the upper Pilcomayo arrived there following the course of this river, a migration which may have begun early in the sixteenth century.

Chaco and had an early and conflictive relationship with the Spanish frontier. But problems arise when we want to include into the historical picture the Tobas I am focusing on in this dissertation, who nowadays live as a distinct group from the “Bolivian Tobas” about 200 kilometers down the Pilcomayo River, in the west of the province of Formosa. Were these two Toba groups also separated at that time? Were they then more closely related, or even part of a sole group? The lack of historical documents and the ambiguities in the few existing ones introduces an unavoidable component of speculation in the answer to these questions. Still, these two Toba groups have very close linguistic and social-cultural ties, something which puts them —together with the Pilagás, with whom, except for some minor differences, they share the same language— in a group clearly differentiated from the eastern Tobas.<sup>28</sup> Besides, genealogical analysis conducted by Marcela Mendoza (1998) shows important past links between the “Bolivian” Tobas and some bands of the Ñachilamolék Tobas. This linguistic and genealogical evidence suggests that at a certain time both Toba groups were in close contact or were even part of the same group and that later on a cluster of bands separated, moved down the river, and formed a new grouping in closer contact with the Pilagás of the area of the Estero Patiño. In fact, some documents seem to support such a hypothesis. Whereas from the early chronicles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it is not possible to distinguish different Toba sub-groups between the mid and upper Pilcomayo, a different picture emerges in the mid and late nineteenth century. Thus, the expeditions which then pushed

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<sup>28</sup> The Finnish ethnographer Rafael Karsten did fieldwork among the Bolivian Tobas and in 1912 he met the Tobas from further down the Pilcomayo in the sugar plantations of Jujuy. He wrote about the latter: “[they] have the same culture and speak roughly the same dialect as the Bolivian Tobas;” he also noted that they kept kinship links (Karsten 1970 [1923]: 6-7). Today, the Tobas of western Formosa argue that while they

farther down in the Pilcomayo, led by Acha and van Nivel in 1844 and Thouar and Campos in 1883,<sup>29</sup> reported that downstream from the “Bolivian” Tobas, separated by other indigenous groups and right before the Estero Patiño, there was another “Toba” group relatively independent from the former.<sup>30</sup> Even though it is not possible to know the exact reasons of the split or the displacement of the latter further down the river, these movements were probably associated with conflicts emerging from the Bolivian and Argentinean frontier and the warfare which existed among the different groups of the Pilcomayo.

Most hypotheses regarding the ethnic origin of this Toba sub-group have stressed their linguistic and cultural links with the Pilagás rather than with the “Bolivian” Tobas, especially after Alfred Métraux’s confusing reference to the first two as “Tobas-Pilagás” in his ethnography of 1937.<sup>31</sup> It is beyond doubt that at least by the end of the nineteenth

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can easily communicate with the “Bolivian” Tobas and with the Pilagás, they have problems understanding the Tobas of the east of the province of Formosa and of the province of Chaco.

<sup>29</sup> The Bolivian government also sent the expeditions of Magariños (1843), Gianelli and Rivas (1863), Paradiz (1875), and Rivas (1882), but none of them reached the Patiño marshes (Gordillo and Leguizamón n.d.).

<sup>30</sup> At that time, there was much debate about the actual whereabouts of the expedition of Acha and van Nivel. Due to the imprecise and exaggerated tone of van Nivel’s report —and also to the difficulty in identifying landmarks in the changing and marshy landscape of the Pilcomayo— it is not totally clear whether or not this expedition did reach the Estero Patiño. However, by comparing the diaries of the different expeditions it is clear that at the time van Nivel had pushed farther than the rest of the Bolivian explorers. Van Nivel reported that, as he advanced along the Pilcomayo, he came across: “Tobas, Matacos, Notenís, Chorotés, Guisnei, Tapietés, Calacalás, Pelús, Opás, Octoyás, Norotés and Tobas of the Great Lagoon” (Van Nivel 1845). It is also possible, however, that the “Tobas of the Great Lagoon” were actually Pilagás.

<sup>31</sup> The term “Toba-Pilagás” seems to have been first used to refer to this Toba group by Erland Nordenskiöld (1912: 18) in his publication of 1912. In 1923, Rafael Karsten (1970 [1923]: 6-7) referred — in passing and in a confusing manner — to the Pilagás as a “Toba tribe” and then as “Toba Pilagás.” Later on, John Arnott, a British Missionary working in the 1930s in the Pilcomayo, used the term in the title of two publications of 1934 (1934a; 1934b). Métraux used the term “Toba-Pilagás” in the title of his ethnography of 1937 (*Etudes d’ Ethnographie Toba-Pilaga*) and in several parts of the text, and implied that many of his observations and descriptions were valid both for the Tobas and the Pilagás (who were then living close to each other, due to an attack by the army on the latter). Even though Métraux (1937: 174) stressed the similarities between the two groups, he also pointed out that they regarded themselves as *different* groups. In the end, the use of the term “Toba-Pilagás” has brought more confusion than clarity.

century this Toba group was intermarrying with the Pilagás and making alliances with them to fight the Nivaklés. And it is also clear that this alliance was constructed (among other factors) on the basis of a linguistic familiarity. However, to my mind, these alliances and kinship links were more an *ad hoc* result of the recent contact between the two than the expression of the “Pilagá origin” of this Toba group.<sup>32</sup> Firstly, the strong identity of the latter of being “Tobas” and distinct from the Pilagás is to my mind a clear support for this.<sup>33</sup> Secondly, at the beginning of the twentieth these two groups had some distinct social features which put further doubts to the hypothesis of a “recent split” from the Pilagás.<sup>34</sup> The close linguistic ties shared by “Bolivian” Tobas, Ñachilamolék Tobas, and Pilagás suggests nonetheless that all of them are descendants of a same Guaycurú sub-group.

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Even though Arnott and Métraux allude with this term to *both* groups —Tobas and Pilagás— as part of an *ethnic ensemble*, when describing their actual cultural practices, Arnott often alludes *only to the “Pilagás”* and Métraux *only to the “Tobas.”* Métraux’s publication of 1937 includes data especially from the Tobas at Sombrero Negro, and therefore the term “Toba-Pilagás” was later on used by other authors to refer *only to the Tobas and not to the Pilagás*, something which Métraux had then not intended. It is noteworthy that Métraux abandoned the use of the term “Toba-Pilagás” altogether in future publications and referred instead to the Pilagás and the Tobas as separate, though related, groups (see Métraux 1946a; 1946b).

<sup>32</sup> Luis De la Cruz (1991) has put forward the tentative hypothesis that this Toba group might have split from the Pilagás and acquired a different ethnic identity because of the presence of a Nivaklé group early in the twentieth century in the area of the Patiño marshes, in between the two groups. Even though De La Cruz convincingly shows that at that time there was a Nivaklé group occupying lands between the Pilagás and the Tobas, several problems remain unsolved. Firstly, the presence of the Nivaklés does not necessarily prove that the “separation” between the Tobas and the Pilagás was caused by it. A second problem with this hypothesis is, to my mind, that it is not clear why a separation such as this would be enough to create a new ethnic identity as “Tobas” of a people who until then considered themselves “Pilagás.” The more precise earlier reference to this Toba group, that of Astrada in 1903 (1906: 122-126), leaves no doubt about their identity as “Tobas.” And in the 1930s Métraux witnessed that the Tobas made it clear that they considered themselves as a different ethnic group from the Pilagás. De La Cruz acknowledges that his hypothesis is just tentative and that further research is needed. Other ethnologists, however, based merely on linguistic parallelisms, consider the Ñachilamolék Tobas “a Pilagá sub-group,” a hypothesis which is totally at odds with the current ethnic identity of both groups.

<sup>33</sup> Métraux wrote: “The Indians of Sombrero Negro regard themselves as Toba” (1937: 174); “These Indians claim the name of Toba and regard themselves as different from the Pilagá” (1946a: 10).

<sup>34</sup> For instance, the Pilagá villages had a “club house” where single men met and spent the night, a structure that (aside from the Nivaklés) was unique in the Chaco (Palavecino 1933: 534; Métraux 1937: 383; 1946b: 269-270).

Whatever the details of the historical configuration of this group, we know that at least by the late nineteenth century the Ñachilamolék Tobas were already living in the area they inhabit today, controlling the right margin of the Pilcomayo between the sites of Buenavista and Laguna Los Pájaros and also roaming into the northern Chaco up to Toba Quemado (see map 6). It was there that several Bolivian, Argentinean, and European explorers had the first recorded face-to-face interaction with “the ancient people.”

### **“Bold and Smart Indians ... of Rude and Virile Features”**

In the 1880s, the exploration of the Pilcomayo River, for centuries associated with an aura of mystery nourished by the failure of numerous expeditions, was encouraged by an event which shocked the elites of Argentina, Bolivia, and France. In April 1882, the renowned French explorer Jules Crévaux and most of his crew were killed by the “Bolivian” Tobas of the upper Pilcomayo, shortly after they started navigating the river with the aim of reaching Asunción, in Paraguay. The governments of Argentina and Bolivia sent various expeditions aimed at finding his body and possible survivors and at consolidating their geopolitical agendas in the Chaco. The expeditions sent by Argentina, led by Luis Jorge Fontana in 1882 (with a steamship from the lower Pilcomayo) and by Rubecindo Ibazeta in 1883 (by land from the Bermejo river) did not get to enter into the territory of the Ñachilamolék Tobas. But Ibazeta clashed with indigenous groups repeated times up the river and the former surely learnt about these battles.

In 1883, the Bolivian government sent a larger expedition formed by 110 soldiers and officers led by Daniel Campos and the delegate of the French government Arthur Thouar (Thouar 1991 [1891]: 77). It is from the diaries of members of this expedition that

we have the first, though brief, direct depiction of the Tobas of the mid-Pilcomayo. On October 10 1883, after one month of journey and at the edge of “impassable marshes” — where, according to Thouar, van Nivel had pulled back in 1844— the expedition encountered a Toba group which was clearly separated from the “Bolivian” Tobas (Thouar 1991 [1891]: 96-98, 100; Campos 1888: 152-159; Paz Guillén 1886: 51). These Tobas faced the expedition fully armed and in warfare painting and two horsemen “of bold and singular stance” faced the vanguard of the column (Campos 1888: 153).<sup>35</sup> A member of the team wrote: “They could not be more intelligent; they asked with pride what we were looking for in foreign territory” (Paz Guillén 1886: 51). According to Campos (1888: 153), these horsemen told the explorers, through their translator: “that we should back off from their territories, for it would be reckless to fight against them, who are many and brave.”<sup>36</sup> However, in Campos’ account, the Tobas changed their attitude as soon as they saw the arrival of the rest of the soldiers: “we instantaneously gained their friendship ... [and] the chiefs gave us their arrows as sign of submission and friendship” (Campos 1888: 153; cf. Thouar 1991 [1891]: 96; Paz Guillén 1886: 51). Even though these Tobas were in less direct contact with the frontier than the “Bolivian Tobas”, they were affected by it. A member of the expedition wrote: “They told us about some Argentinean populations that they know with their names a bit adulterated. They have beasts with Argentinean marks and [marks] from the missions of San Francisco de Tarija” (Paz Guillén 1886: 51; see also Thouar 1891 [1891]: 97; Campos 1888: 120-121,

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<sup>35</sup> Campos referred to this group as “Indians.” However, for Thouar they were “Tobas” (1991 [1891]: 96). Paz Guillén mentioned that this tribe “is totally different from the one we left behind” (1886: 51).

<sup>36</sup> This reaction is to my mind a further confirmation that these Tobas had not have yet a previous contact with the expedition, and that as a result formed a group different from the Tobas from up the river. The

153,156-157). The explorers also found Criollo “renegades” who were living among Tobas and Wichís as full members of the group (Thouar 1891 [1891]: 97; Campos 1888: 120-121, 153,156-157; Paz Guillén 1886: 53).<sup>37</sup> The expedition moved on, and after going through all sorts of hardships it reached Asunción del Paraguay in mid-November 1883. It was the first time in the long history of the conquest of the Gran Chaco that an expedition was able to connect the Bolivian Andes with Asunción along the Pilcomayo River.

One year later, in October 1884, the Argentinean government launched its large military campaign to the Chaco and put a further pressure on the Pilcomayo by pushing several groups to the north of the Bermejo. Shortly after, in 1885, troops led by Lieutenant Colonel José Gomensoro reached the Patiño marshes and sustained several bloody clashes with the Pilagás (“Orejudos”) of “cacique *Emák*” (La Nación 1885: 354; Ministerio de Guerra y Marina 1886: 567-569), an event which must have been regarded as serious threat by all the groups of the area, including the Tobas.<sup>38</sup> Since then, the number of civilian and military expeditions to the Pilcomayo increased noticeably, even though only a handful among them was able to reach the heart of the Pilcomayo and therefore the territory of the Tobas.<sup>39</sup> In 1898, the Spanish Enrique Ibarreta passed by Toba lands

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Bolivian Tobas had attacked the expedition one week earlier suffering heavy casualties (Thouar 1891 [1891]: 90-91; Campos 1888 142-146).

<sup>37</sup> Thouar wrote that the following day the expedition had another encounter with the “Tobas,” who helped the expedition cross the river (Thouar 1891 [1891]: 97-98). However, the diaries of Campos and Paz Guillén suggest that they were actually Wichís (Paz Guillén 1886: 53; Campos 1888: 156-162).

<sup>38</sup> The fact that the Tobas were then in contact with the Pilagás, and that some old men remember —though in an ambiguous manner— *Emák* as a cacique “who fought the military,” may suggest that some Toba warriors participated in these clashes.

<sup>39</sup> Among the expeditions to the Pilcomayo, the most important ones were those led by Feilberg (1884), Thouar (1885), Storm (1890), Page (1890) —with the military forays of Bouchard (1890) and Candiotti (1890/91) sent in their rescue— G. and A. Sol (1890), Uriarte, Cansio and Garcete (1900), Fric (1903/04), Luna Olmos (1904), Lange (1905), the Schmied brothers (1906-1907), and Krausse and Ayala (1906 y 1908). The most important expeditions which departed from the upper Pilcomayo were those of Ibarreta (1898) —in whose rescue Monteros (1899), with a steamship, and Bouchard (1899), by land, departed from

coming from Bolivia with a handful of companions in small boats, but later on he was killed by the Pilagás. It was only 20 years after Campos and Thouar that new explorers produced further written accounts about the Tobas. And these accounts show that the Tobas still maintained an important autonomy but that they were increasingly seduced by the commodities coming from the thriving and violent capitalist frontier.

The first of these accounts on the Tobas comes from the expedition of Domingo Astrada in 1903, which followed the course of the Pilcomayo on horseback from Buenaventura to Asunción. On July 15, 1903 Astrada (1906: 122-126) met the Tobas in their current territory, when they were under the leadership of caciques Santiago, Zarco, and Taaché, who are today well remembered by the oldest Tobas. Like Thouar and Campos before him, Astrada was struck by the Tobas' "pride"; he described them as "bold and smart Indians, with a strong and uneasy glance, of rude and virile features ..." (1906: 122). The Tobas seemed more acquainted with the "Christians" and their goods than 20 years earlier. Aware of the fire power of the expedition and also of the possibility of obtaining valuable commodities from it, the Tobas tried to manipulate that situation to their convenience. Astrada (1906: 122, 125) wrote, with a touch of irony: "[they said that] they are very nice, very unfortunate (*muy desgaciados*), and good friends of the Christians, a situation ... which it is necessary to reward, and here comes the moment of the gifts, and everyone of them is a bag of needs." Moreover, the Tobas tried to use Astrada for their political and military advantage: they proposed him to join them in their fight against the Nivaklés and "... to take from them everything they have —cows, horses,

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Formosa— Astrada (1903), Acha (1904 y 1905), Hermann (1907) and Nordenskiöld (1909). Most of these expeditions only explored sections of the river (see Gordillo and Leguizamón n.d.).

and sheep— and distribute it right away in equal parts. They talked like that for a long time, with courage and confidence, and I might say, with insolence” (Astrada 1906: 124).<sup>40</sup>

Two years later, in November 1905, Gunardo Lange met the Tobas on his way up the Pilcomayo from Clorinda. He noted among them a similar eagerness to obtain manufactured goods while keeping a detached pride. For a while, ten Toba men helped Lange and his crew to push their boats up against the current; however, they soon dropped them and disappeared. Lange (1906: 65, 64) wrote in his diary with signs of frustration: “Those Tobas would work only in exchange of shirts, an item which was already scarce”.

He also added:

They dress better and are more open [than the Nivaklés], having been in more contact with Christians, but as a result they are more corrupt and mooching than the probably less civilized but more charming Sotegáis [Nivaklés] ... Many Toba Indians live on the banks; they like cloth with lively colors for their clothing, and make a good effect in the landscape, with their feathers and red shirts (Lange 1906: 63-64, my translation).

In those days, the Tobas already relied on an increasing number of commodities not produced by themselves; not only pieces of industrially-designed clothing but also firearms, pieces of iron, and tobacco (Astrada 1906: 124; Lange 1906: 64).<sup>41</sup> They were obtaining some of these goods through barter and warfare with other groups of the Pilcomayo. But some Tobas were also acquiring them by traveling to a distant place located to the west, right near the mountains.

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<sup>40</sup> Astrada wrote that the Tobas wanted to fight the “Pelós or Chorotes” (1906: 124), but the Tobas were certainly referring to their old enemies, the Nivaklés who lived down the river (cf. De La Cruz 1991).

<sup>41</sup> The Tobas and the rest of the groups of the area grew tobacco by themselves, but they liked the stronger tobacco of the whites (see Nordenskiöld 1912).

#### FOUR: THE DIALECTIC OF TERROR

All the people were scared ... They wanted to  
kill them all.

*Patricio (1996)*

Our Indian of the Chaco feels horror at the  
military uniform; when he sees it, he escapes  
right away to the *monte*.

*Juan Mc. Lean,*

Informe sobre exploración al Chaco (1908)

The first decades of the twentieth century stand as a particular moment in the Tobas' current social memory. This memory includes events of which most living Tobas have no direct experience, but which they nevertheless recreate through oral accounts they have heard from their parents and grandparents. Besides, the old men and women who were children in those days often talk about their direct recollection of those experiences, and the youngsters and children who happen to be around usually listen to them in respectful awe, as if they were looking through a hazy window to a very distant and different world. In this chapter, I will analyze the memory of those decades as it hinges on the Tobas' first migrations to the sugar plantations and the conflictive arrival of the Criollos and the army in their lands. I will look at this memory as a representation whose semantic force lies in the tensions which unfolded in a complex dialectic of terror triggered by the Argentinean army, a dialectic which in the 1990s still informed in strong way the Tobas' cultural construction of the bush and the plantations. By "terror" I mean a form of domination associated with intense fear and horror, usually fear of death (cf. Perdue 1989). As I aim to show, even though in the Chaco terror was partially aimed at disciplining a still rebellious labor force, it was simultaneously an unfolding deprived of

rationality and drowned in its own vertigo (cf. Taussig 1987: 128). I will look at this process as a dialectic of terror unfolding in two intertwined, contradictory movements: i) the military's own terror of the bush as an important (but complexly mediated) component of their readiness to unleash terror among the indigenous groups, and the simultaneous attempt by the latter to use the bush as a haven from that terror; and ii) the articulation of this process with the Tobas' contradictory spatial movement between their home territories and the sugar plantations, which they perceived at different moments as temporary refuges from the military. These processes reached their climax of violence in the second half of the 1910s. But the contradictions which fueled them began to unfold about two decades earlier, with the Tobas' first migrations to "the mountains."

### **Journeys to the Mountains**

When in the 1990s I asked the Tobas about the "first time" that "the ancient ones" went to the *ingenios*, they usually gave me a standardized recreation (without recognizable characters) of the arrival of the *waidomá*, their own modified version of the Spanish word "*mayordomo*" (the contractors from the *ingenio*), as it occurred earlier in the century. In 1996, Mariano, a man in his late fifties, told me about that "first migration" I asked him about:

They say that two *waidomá* came, but they came with cattle ... They brought like 50 cows ... Then, the people went there on foot. But they weren't hungry, for there was meat, there were cows ... When people arrived at some place, they rested there, and they slaughtered four cows ... When they rested for two days, or three days, they went on again. But they went on foot.

The indigenous groups of the Pilcomayo began migrating to the sugar plantations around the early or mid-1890s.<sup>42</sup> When Domingo Astrada met the Tobas in 1903, one of them told him he had been at “Lelesma” (Astrada 1906: 109). By 1905, various explorers had reported that Wichís, Chorotes, Tobas, and Pilagás of the Pilcomayo had been in the *ingenios*, in some cases several times (see von Rosen 1904: 13-14; Luna Olmos 1905: 46, also 35, 47, 49, 58; Astrada 1906: 105, 109, 142; Lange 1906: 55). In the Pilcomayo, this recruitment seems to have been initially organized by “Indian hunters,” many of them *indios* who knew the region well (cf. von Rosen 1904: 13-14; cf. Lange 1906: 55). By the 1910s, these “Indian hunters” had been replaced by large and well-organized expeditions sent directly by the *ingenios*. These *mayordomos* took with them a great number of “gifts” and tobacco (a very valued commodity in the region) which were key to reach an agreement with the cacique and to close *la conquista*, “the conquest,” the customary military metaphor used to refer to the recruitment of indigenous laborers (Niklison 1989 [1917]: 63, 117; Vidal 1914: 23-24; Beck 1994: 165).<sup>43</sup>

Since the Tobas were not as yet pressed to migrate by the direct threat of the army and the settlers, the possibility of obtaining firearms, horses, pieces of clothing, metal tools, and tobacco must have played an important role in their decision to go to the plantations. But in those years, they only migrated on an irregular basis. In the early 1910s, for instance, an administrator of La Esperanza wrote about these Tobas: “they

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<sup>42</sup> To my knowledge, the earliest clear evidence comes from a 1898 letter by Manuel Olascoaga (a member of the border commission with Bolivia) in which he informed President Roca that in his trips to the Pilcomayo (in Salta) he had crossed “a migrant mass of workers.” A.G.N., *Archivo Roca*, Legajo 155. Carta de Manuel Olascoaga al General Julio A. Roca. I am grateful to Vanesa Harary for this reference.

<sup>43</sup> This term was customary at the time in other parts of the lowlands of South America and alluded to the process of “attracting to work and civilization the savage tribes” (Taussig 1987: 23, see also 26, 28, regarding “*la conquista*” during the rubber boom in the Putumayo).

seldom come in for the sugar harvest” (Muir 1947: 229).<sup>44</sup> Due to the dangers of the long trip to an unknown region, it is also likely that only young warriors led by a *haliaganék*, a headman and shaman, participated in the first migrations (Mendoza 1998), a pattern which has been noted among other groups of the Pilcomayo like the Nivaklés (Niklison 1989 [1917]: 120). The journey on foot to the San Francisco Valley took up to two months, and during the journey the *mayordomos* fed the Tobas with cattle brought by them (cf. Niklison 1989 [1917]: 64). The Tobas remember that “the ancient ones” followed the Pilcomayo upstream, then crossed the interior of the central Chaco (passing through the small Criollo villages of El Chorro and Los Blancos), and then followed the Bermejo River up to the mouth of the San Francisco Valley. People also argue that on their long march across the hinterland the *toiéts* usually had skirmishes with Wichí groups: the *damakapí* (“heron people”) and the *viágahik* or *montaraces* (“bushmen”). Across the Bermejo, in the village of Pichanal the Tobas boarded a train that would take them, in a few hours, to Ledesma or La Esperanza. To the west, behind the sugar-cane fields and the thick forests which still covered most of the valley, the Tobas could see the imposing mountain ranges of the Andes. They called the place where the plantations were *kahogonaGá*, “the mountains.”<sup>45</sup> In fact, the semantic weight of those ridges was so strong that the Tobas usually use the term *kahogonaGá* to refer to the sugar plantations themselves, even though they also call them *maik lacháqa*, “the place (or home) of the sugar cane.” *Koláq kahogonaGá*, “let’s go to the mountains,” was the expression that

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<sup>44</sup> These Tobas were *Ñachilamolék* Tobas because Muir describes them as having their lobes enlarged by wooden disks. At that time this was the only Toba group which maintained this practice.

<sup>45</sup> *KahogonaGá* also means “thunder,” and among the Tobas of eastern Chaco *qasogonaGá* is a powerful figure which unleashes storms and thunders and is also associated with the Andes (Miller 1975: 481; Wright

several generations of Tobas would say for decades to their immediate kin when the *waidomá* arrived to take them to the sugar plantations.

### “They Didn’t Know What a Month Was”

The current memory of the first migrations to *kahogonaGá* often hinges on the estrangement, discovery, and learning that “the ancient ones” went through in those days. The first aspect of that experience involved becoming familiar with a place which was totally alien to them. Mariano told me about the first reaction of “the ancient ones” vis-à-vis the mountains: “All the people were looking [at the mountains], but far ... very high, very high ... That’s what people were afraid of ... Because it seems that it was not made out of earth. Let’s say, it was like a stone (*ká*), a big stone. There’re no trees. Then, *kahogonaGá*.” But what people emphasize the most about those days was their ancestors’ confusion at being in contact with goods that were totally alien to them —pants, sugar, *yerba mate*, corn flour— and the misinterpretation which resulted from this. Furthermore, as part of the opposition between “new ones” and “ancient ones,” and enhancing the distance separating the current generations from the *toiéts*, some people find the memory of those experiences particularly amusing. When the Tobas recall these stories, they usually cannot avoid smiling, with a sort of tender compassion, at the “ignorance” of “the ancient ones.” For instance, Enrique told me:

When he got paid, the ancient one didn’t like pants, only cloth. Because he didn’t like it, he said his legs would turn black [laughs]. That’s what he said ... He didn’t like to eat flour because he’d turn white, he said ... He didn’t eat sugar, he didn’t drink *mate*, because he said his mouth was going to turn black. He didn’t drink *yerba [mate]*, because he said that’s

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1997; see also Tebboth 1943b: 176). Among the Tobas of western Formosa, the closest equivalent to this figure is *wosáq*, “rainbow,” also associated with storms but not with the mountains.

murk from an animal ... Then all that food, corned beef, *picadillo*, he threw it away ... And then, someone [a Toba] learnt how to drink *mate*, to make food with flour ... Some old woman cooked the flour, and mixed it with sugar [laughs]. *You mean she poured flour and sugar in boiling water?* Yes, yes, sweet! [laughs]. I'm serious. I got to see my grandmother. She made food with sugar [laughs] ... She ate it all. Like food, but sweet.

Nowadays, people remember that “the ancient ones” learnt something else aside from commodities. As part of the division of time brought by capitalist labor discipline (Thompson 1993: 352), they learnt about the existence of “weeks,” “months,” and “Sundays.” Patricio, a man in his early seventies, told Marcela Mendoza in 1994:

They didn't know what a day was, what a week was, that on Sundays people don't work. Little by little people were learning. The *patrón* gave them advice. And the people were starting to get an idea of what the end of the month was ... The *patrón* of *ingenio* Esperanza said: “we're going to work until the month of November, and then we'll let you go.” They didn't know what a month meant, but they worked.

And work they certainly did. Early in the twentieth century the Tobas and the other *aborígenes* of the Chaco constituted the bulk of the seasonal labor force of the expanding plantations. La Esperanza and Ledesma employed together more than 5,000 adult *aborígenes*: Wichís and Tobas from the Bermejo and the Pilcomayo and Chorotes, Pilagás and (later on) Nivaklés from the Pilcomayo. This seasonal labor force was complemented with Chiriguano from Bolivia and some “Coyas” from the Argentinean and Bolivian highlands (Payne and Wilson 1904: 37, 43; Vidal 1914: 28; Conti, de Lagos and Lagos 1988: 11; Biale Massé 1973 [1904]: 89; Niklison 1989 [1917]: 107). The permanent work-force was formed by Criollos, the standard name given to the non-indigenous rural population of northern Argentina. In 1913, the total number of workers of all the plantations of Jujuy was 12,100 (Vidal 1914: 19).

Many of the conditions of labor and forms of payment were similar to the ones which existed decades later, and which I will analyze in detail in chapter nine. But unlike what would happen from the 1930s on, earlier in the century the Tobas and the rest of the *aborígenes* worked cutting cane, cutting-off leaves and top-ends, and carrying the cane to the small Decauville train which took it to the factory. Women worked together with men, usually carrying the cane cut by their husbands (cf. Niklison 1989 [1917]: 72; Payne and Wilson 1904: 38; Biale Massé 1973 [1904]: 90). In those years, women formed almost half of the indigenous labor force, a percentage of female participation in a workforce which was then among the highest in Argentina (Lagos 1995: 135, 142). When in the 1990s the Tobas remembered the work of “the ancient ones” at *kahogonaGá*, they often emphasized their strength. Ernesto, a Toba teaching assistant in his mid-thirties told me in 1995:

In the past, the Tobas were those who endured the work the most ... More than the Chulupíes [Nivaklés] and the Wichís, who maybe quit work. The owner of the *ingenio* liked them a lot ... The *antiguos* were most resistant. They worked all day long. At five in the morning they were already up, until noon, and then from one up to six in the afternoon ... At five in the morning they've already picked up their tools, until six in the afternoon. But they were tough, no way around it, they were strong for work.

In the early 1910s, a British administrator at La Esperanza described the Tobas in colorful detail, reflecting like Ernesto (but from a bourgeois point of view) a subtle fascination for a proud “muscular, athletic-looking mob”:

The Tobas have the lobes of their ears distended with great wooden rings. When not working they wear extraordinary costumes of odds and ends of old uniform jackets with a length of gay-coloured cloth tied round their waists as a kind of skirt. Those who don't possess hats wear a gay handkerchief around their heads. They are a muscular, athletic-

looking mob. I don't know why, as they are horribly lazy and will only work at all if paid by results (Muir 1947: 229).<sup>46</sup>

At the beginning of the century, Ledesma and La Esperanza concentrated much of the social and cultural contradictions of the development of capitalism in the frontier of the Chaco, mounted on a class and ethnic kaleidoscope which made them a source of images of alterity with surrealistic overtones. Many Europeans who then visited the San Francisco Valley wrote that they were "startled by the incongruity of things" in the plantations (B. Grubb 1911: 86-91; see also Huret 1988 [1911]: 36; Muir 1947: 224, 228; Nordenskiöld 1912: 4). This "incongruity" was especially apparent at La Esperanza, owned by the Leach brothers and administered mostly by English personnel. Near thousands of "half naked savages" living in huts made out of cane leaves, one could see "servants ... tennis courts, a swimming bath, a squash court, ice, bacon, white-skinned Englishwomen and children ..." (Muir 1947: 224).

In those days, several visitors noted the estrangement that the "Indians" were experiencing in a place of such contrasts. On Sundays, the Englishmen at La Esperanza used to play polo matches, and the British missionary Barbrooke Grubb (1911: 91) wrote in 1911: "I thought it remarkably strange one day, while watching a polo match, to see little bands of Chaco savages passing along and gazing wonderingly at this strange game of the English." Sometime in the early 1910s, the President of Argentina Roque Sáenz Peña visited La Esperanza. The Leach brothers organized a very particular parade in his honor:

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<sup>46</sup> Around that time, only the Ñachilamolék Tobas still enlarged their ear lobes.

A big parade of the Indian tribes was arranged on the polo ground. Several thousand of them turned out, the majority in full “war paint,” and made a most picturesque scene. They danced and yelled, waved their spears and bows, and beat tom-toms in the wildest excitement, though they hadn’t the least idea of the identity of the black-coated gentry in whose honour the parade was staged (Muir 1947: 268).

In the midst of experiences such as these, the Tobas worked until November and early December, when the *zafra* (harvest) finally came to an end. It was the time of the final payment, or *arreglo grande*, a moment in which “the Indians are in a hurry to return to their lands of origin ... One can note the haste to leave the *ingenios* and reach the trees charged with fruits” (Niklison (1989 [1917]: 91)

#### **“The Protective Shade of the Bush”**

In 1909, while Erland Nordenskiöld was staying at a Nivaklé village on the Pilcomayo, a group of people returned from their journey to the *ingenios*. Nordenskiöld (1912: 6, my translation) noted the wild excitement caused in the village by the public display of the commodities brought from the plantations:

[T]hese trips to the “country of wonders” exert a great attraction to them. I have witnessed, at an Ashluslay [Nivaklé] village, the return of those who had been working at the mills. It happened in the midst of very strong ovations. All the inhabitants of the village went to receive them; the old women, singing, led them to the huts they had left ... They displayed everything that they had brought: old rifles, uniforms, sugar, matches, powder, mirrors, adorned military caps, aniline colors, etc., things all of these that looked extraordinary to the other Indians, who were also no less in wonder at the stories they were telling about the trip. It was not less amazing, for these Indians, than what the story of an earthling coming back from a trip to the Moon would have been for us.

The Tobas were most probably going through similar experiences, when those who migrated to *kahogonaGá*, loaded with numerous goods, re-encountered the rest of their peers in the Pilcomayo. In 1914, Toba men brought from La Esperanza horses, shotguns,

horse-riding gear (reins, saddle, saddle strap, bit), hats, ponchos, and cloth (Zavalía 1915: 136-148). Outside the *ingenios*, numerous merchants bartered some of those goods for Winchester and Remington rifles, “war weapons” which the military wanted at all means to stop the “Indians” from obtaining (Niklison 1989 [1917]: 95-96). In the 1990s, the Tobas remember that “the ancient ones” used those arms mostly to fight their old enemies, the Nivaklés and the Wichís. In 1995, Mariano told me:

At the *arreglo*, they gave [the Tobas] arms, bullets. Then, they came on foot ... with horses, with clothes. When they got to the place of the Wichís ... right there they attacked them, they shot them. The cacique was there, they shot him and he died. They say that they left him hanging from a stick, right there ... Then, there was no missionary. They weren't quiet, only war.

The return of the Tobas and the other indigenous groups to their lands deep into the Chaco, where they were beyond the direct control of the plantations and the army, posed important problems for the plantations. Firstly, these groups formed a cheap but not totally “docile” labor force, and in certain circumstances they turned the firearms earned at the *ingenios* against the labor recruiters. In February 1913, the Pilagás of Laguna Concentración, in the Estero Patiño, killed and beheaded ten *mayordomos* from Ledesma and La Esperanza “who on other occasions had exploited them, fooling them treacherously, and had sent them back to the desert naked and starving” (Rodríguez 1927: 16-17, my translation).<sup>47</sup> Secondly, these groups went to the sugar-cane harvest on an irregular basis only. Groups which migrated one year usually did not do it the following

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<sup>47</sup> All references to this event mention that this was “a Toba” group (Rodríguez 1927: 16-17; Niklison 1990 [1916]: 47-48; Muir 1947: 265; Rosenzvaig 1986, vol. 2: 207-208). However, this incident took place in Laguna Concentración, located in the Patiño marshes in Pilagá territory. The Tobas, for their part, do not remember such an incident. In those days, it was not uncommon for explorers traveling in the area to take the Pilagás for Tobas and vice-versa, for they looked much alike and spoke basically the same language.

year and as a result the *mayordomos* had to launch long forays in search of new groups (Zavalía 1915: 37). As a labor inspector put it: “The Indian does not go spontaneously to the plantation. It is necessary to go and look for him to the very heart of the jungle, where he has built his unstable campsites” (Vidal 1914: 21). And since these groups continued hunting and gathering in flexible bands, they were not always easy to locate. According to the administrator of Ledesma:

The operation of bringing Indians from the Chaco presents many obstacles ... We have to search them in March, for once the gathering of algarroba is over, the tribes separate and disperse in all directions, looking for other food, and under such conditions it is difficult to find them again (quoted by Niklison 1989 [1917]: 110).

The problems of recruitment became so serious that in 1914, an inspector from the Department of Labor wrote that whereas in 1910 Ledesma and La Esperanza recruited between 4,500 and 5,000 male *indios*, that year the number had declined by half (Vidal 1914: 28). Even though in the following decades the recruitment was gradually regularized, in the long run these problems contributed to the gradual replacement of the Aborigines of the Chaco for other, more “efficient” workers as cane-cutters (cf. Beck 1994: 182-183).

The first decades of the century were then characterized by a tension between the *aborígenes*' attempt to maintain a relative autonomy in the bush while obtaining valuable goods in the plantations and the administrations' attempt to turn them into a more “reliable” labor force. And their home lands acquired new dimensions in this process. Inspector José Elías Niklison (1990 [1916]: 47, my translation) referred to the contradictory experience of place entailed by these migrations:

... those numerous *peonadas indígenas* ... between March and June cross the roads of the desert in long and miserable caravans of men, women and children, in a painful procession towards the sugar estates of the North, to return to the protective shade of the bush, once the *zafra* is over, sick, naked and starving.

The “protective shade” of the bush, however, was facing new strains, linked to the growing pressure exerted by the Criollos and the army. The Criollo colonization of the Pilcomayo began in 1902, when Domingo Astrada founded Colonia Buenaventura on lands granted by the federal government, located 150 kilometers up the river from Toba territory (see map 5). With a stream of settlers moving in with their cattle from Colonia Rivadavia attracted by the wide grasslands of the Pilcomayo, Colonia Buenaventura grew rapidly.<sup>48</sup> In the following years, as the grasslands were being depleted by the growing number of cattle, the colonization moved on to the southeast, getting closer to Toba territory. Many settlers also started occupying lands across the river, and developed a close interaction with the troops of the Bolivian forts which were being founded along the Pilcomayo. The presence of the settlers increased the level of tensions in all the area. In Buenaventura, the settlers “negotiated” with the local caciques the terms of their presence and set aside tracts of land for the exclusive use of the *indios* (Astrada 1906: 26-27). Skirmishes, nonetheless, were on the rise in all the area.

Consequently, since the army had not a direct presence in the area yet, in September 1911 the Argentinean army launched a campaign to the Pilcomayo, led by

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<sup>48</sup> The region of Rivadavia was going through a deep crisis due to the degradation of the soil for overgrazing, the decline of the town of Rivadavia (caused by the change of the course of the Bermejo in 1877), high tax pressures, and the sale by the Salta government of vast tracts of land to powerful landowners in 1888 (Astrada 1906: 4, 21). Between 1902 and 1906 the government granted more lands to the colony. By 1906, a census showed that the colony had 2,007 Criollos with about 72,500 heads of cattle, 14,500 horses, and 34,300 sheep and goats (Astrada 1906: 163).

Colonel Enrique Rostagno, with the additional aim of securing the control of the borderline with Bolivia and Paraguay. The campaign lasted for two months and involved four Regiments of Cavalry which covered different areas, including Toba territory. The troops seem to have faced no armed resistance and according to the official report by Rostagno (1968 [1911]: 21) “not a single shot was fired, even though we have encountered more than 8,000 Indians in the beautiful lagoons of the mid-Pilcomayo.” One of the reasons of this lack of resistance lay in the fact that the military had already caused widespread death and terror among several groups of the region.<sup>49</sup> Rostagno himself noted in passing that the “*indios*” they came across were “very afraid” of the army (1968 [1911]: 33). This was a process whose theater was the bush, and which involved, in a very different way, both the military and the indigenous groups in a complex dialectic of terror. For *el monte* was a place which terrified the military and contributed to making them unleash havoc among the *indios*, and which at the same time provided the latter with some protection from the horrors unleashed by the military.

### **“A True Hellhole”**

For the Argentinean military, the thick and thorny *monte* of the Chaco was the naturalized condensation of the savagery they were fighting against. The bush, like the jungle in the colonial frontier, “comes forth as the colonially intensified metaphor for the

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<sup>49</sup> The mass slaughter caused by the army in the Chaco was in contradiction with its official discourse, which for the most part stated that the conquest of the Chaco should not be “a war of extermination,” but rather a “pacific conquest” aimed at incorporating the Aborigines as wage laborers (see Molinari 1949: 4; Rostagno 1968 [1911]: 32-33; Iñigo Carrera 1984). The numerous cases of “deviation” from this policy cannot be rationalized as a calculated attempt at guarantying the discipline of the new labor force. Even though terror was part of a larger process of incorporation of these groups into the political economy of

great space of terror and cruelty” (Taussig 1987: 75). The military’s fear of the *monte* was certainly the horror of savagery; of the unseen, the overwhelming presence of the Indians’ absence, the permanent suspicion that the *indios*, “protected by the density of the forests, constantly watch our movements” (Departamento de Guerra 1889: 229; cf. Taussig 1987: 78). Thus, according to an officer deployed between the 1910s and 1930s in the Patiño marshes:

The jungle-like desert ... put to the test the insuperable human conditions of the Argentinean soldier: fighting in wide marshes ... [where] the stealthy whisper of the jungle causes vertigo in spirits which are not used to this immensity. These peculiarities of the jungle [are] the hardest, and the most distressing in the Patiño marshes, with its atmosphere charged to the point of asphyxiation, which depresses the spirit with that terrible darkness ... while watched by lurking Indian warriors ... (Golpe 1971: 127, my translation).

The *monte* was for the military the bodily extension of the “Indians” into the landscape; it was the *indios*’ most daring “ally” and the military’s most feared “torment” (Molinari 1949: 11-12). For this reason, the army always tried to engage in battle in open spaces: “It was indispensable to get the *indios* by surprise in the open and to prevent them from entering into the *monte*,” for “inside the dense *monte*, the rusticity of the *indio*, his ability to make use of the elements to hide his presence, provided the savage with an undoubted superiority, even in the case of a parity in number” (ibid.: 77-78). At points, the bush acquired a life of its own: it became a living, fetishized enemy which had to be “dominated” together with the Indians: “[the soldier] will dominate *el monte*, or will die in it” (Da Rocha 1937: 75). This experience made the bush a threatening but also an evil place, which resonates with imageries about the Chaco which go back to the Spanish

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northern Argentina, in many cases mass slaughter was against the most basic logic of capitalist accumulation and involved unarmed “Indians” who were regular laborers in the *ingenios*.

period: "... the torrid heat, the poisonous reptiles, the beasts, the desolation, and the death in a monotonously green desert, made of this fierce environment ... a true hellhole ..."  
(Molinari 1949: 11).

This terror of the bush and savagery was a crucial moment in the terror, death, and destruction which the military unleashed in the Chaco. As Taussig (1987: 133; see also 1993: 65) wrote regarding the agents of colonial violence in the Colombian Amazon: "The terror and torture they devised mirrored the horror of the savagery they both feared and fictionalized." For the military deployed in the Chaco, their own fear of "the mischievous and treacherous" *indios* was inseparable from their readiness to unleash havoc and death among them. Molinari (1949: 129) could have not expressed this moment of the dialectic of terror in a more transparent way:

Many times the circumstances forced the military to "take advantage" ("*ventajear*") of the *indios*, eliminating them before they could do the same with them. There was no other alternative if one did not want to leave "the bones whitening in the sun," and [the military] saw themselves forced to carry out an act of inhumanity which in other circumstances would have revolted our condition of civilized people ... It was impossible to be contemplative and doubtful with the mischievous and treacherous *indio*...

In the 1880s, troops stationed in the Bermejo and in Formosa had launched several attacks against groups of the Pilcomayo. The bloodiest were probably those led by Ibazeta (1883) and Gomensoro (1885). The latter reported that his troops killed "two caciques, one *capitanejo*, and 227 Indians" (Ministerio de Guerra y Marina 1886: 567-569). Gomensoro also took with himself the head of an important Pilagá cacique as trophy (La Nación 1885: 354). In the following decades, there were many more bloody encounters. In 1890, for instance, a young English zoologist met an officer of the Argentinean army in

the lower Pilcomayo and wrote about him: “He had had, he said, thirty different commissions in the Chaco and not one with less than a hundred Indians killed. His stories of cutting wounded men’s throats and ripping up women who tried to protect their nearest and dearest were extraordinarily cold-blooded ...” (Kerr 1968 [1950]: 161-162). In November 1902, right before the foundation of Colonia Buenaventura, over 150 Wichí men, women, and children who were returning from *ingenio* Ledesma to the Pilcomayo were detained by a group of soldiers and executed at Nuevo Mundo (Salta); only 18 managed to escape from the massacre (Astrada 1906: 38; see also Gauffin 1966: 120-122).

In the wave of violence which was engulfing the Chaco, the bush became for the *aborígenes* one of the few places where they could find a partial protection from the army. On the one hand, the *monte* allowed the warriors to launch a “guerrilla” warfare of ambushes in a familiar terrain mostly unknown to the soldiers. On the other hand, because of the superior firepower of the military, the bush gradually became for them, rather than a stronghold from where to launch attacks, a defensive refuge from where to avoid extermination. Juan Mac Lean (quoted by Beck 1994: 62) wrote in 1908: “Our *indio chaqueño* is horrified by the military uniform; when he sees it he escapes right away to the *montes*.” In 1903, Wichís who were then living on the Pilcomayo farther down from the Tobas told Domingo Astrada (1906: 147): “The Christians kill us, take our women and children away from us, that is why we have come to live to these retreats ...” Because of this, the indigenous campsites (*tolderías*) were always set at the edge of thick bush, so that the approach of the military could be detected in advance, something which the latter saw as a major obstacle in their attacks (see Departamento de Guerra

1889: 193). In the event of an attack, women and children fled into the bush while the fighters tried to face the *milicos* (military). A Wichí recalled decades later: “This was very sad, for the women were in the *monte* alone; they didn’t think of the *bichos* [wild animals] for they were afraid of the *milicos* ...” (Asociación Cultural Taiñi, n.d., my translation).

For this reason, when the first Criollos led by Astrada began settling the Pilcomayo at the end of 1902, they found an indigenous population which was very aware of the terrifying power of destruction of the army. As a result, aside from engaging in small skirmishes, most of them were reluctantly willing to accommodate to the new balance of power which was being imposed in the interior of the Chaco. The Tobas were one of the exceptions.

### **“They Didn’t Know There’re Cows”**

When in the mid-1990s the Tobas remembered the arrival of the first Criollos in their lands, they often stress that “the ancient ones” “didn’t know” those large animals which were now roaming in their territory (a trope of “ignorance” to which I will return). Emphasizing how “ignorant” the *toiéts* were, Patricio told me:

The poor people didn’t know the Christians, they didn’t know cows. There was a [Criollo] person entering in Campo Alegre, there, there was a person who had cows. Then the people *mañigodipí* [the band of “the ostriches”] saw a cow and killed it. [They thought] “It seems it has no owner.” The next time, when they killed a cow again, then the owner of the cow got closer and shot the Toba people. And the Tobas shot him back, and hit him in the leg ... It was over, and they made an arrangement. Poor people, ignorant, they knew nothing. They didn’t know there are believers; they didn’t know there are cows.

The first Criollo settlers arrived in Toba lands around 1910. By 1912, most probably favored by the fact that part of the Tobas were temporarily away at the sugar plantations, settlers had established a *puesto* called San Antonio in their lands. Two years later there were several Criollo families living in Sombrero Negro, Laguna Los Paces, and Laguna Martín (Torres 1975: 34; Mendoza and Maldonado 1995: 13). After the military campaign led by Rostagno in 1911, the army had founded a small *fortín* in Nuevo Pilcomayo, a cluster of huts guarded by less than ten men, 60 kilometers to the east of Toba territory. Around that time, the Bolivian army founded *fortín* Magariños, across the river from Sombrero Negro. Consequently, by the mid-1910s tensions in the area were on the rise. The Tobas charged the new settlers heads of cattle for the use of pastures and on many occasions simply “hunted down” their cattle, something which caused occasional skirmishes. Small groups of soldiers regularly patrolled the area from Nuevo Pilcomayo (downstream) and Desmonte (upstream), usually to chase down Criollo cattle robbers (Molinari 1949: 95, 97). And the bush became the contradictory theater of these first interactions between Ñachilamolék Tobas and military. In January 1915, three officers on patrol from Buenaventura to Nuevo Pilcomayo got lost in the bush in Toba lands. One of them would recall late: “We realized that we were lost, the *monte* looked all the same, dense, impenetrable” (Molinari 1949: 122). A group of Tobas finally saved them, but even then the soldiers thought that they were going to be murdered at any minute (ibid.: 125, 121-126).<sup>50</sup> The same year, a tense encounter in Laguna Martín between the band of the Toba cacique Coronita and a few soldiers led by Lieutenant Luis Videla almost provoked an armed clash (Molinari 1949: 185-189). These tensions reached their climax between

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<sup>50</sup> See also: A.G.E., *Legajo 4137, Legajo Personal del Mayor Solé, Juan Laurentino*.

the end of 1916 and the beginning of 1917. According to Rodas (1991: 58) and Mendoza and Maldonado (1995: 26-27), upon the return of a group of Tobas from the sugar plantations, they killed a *puestero* and burnt down his house because of a disagreement on the heads of cattle he was supposed to “pay” them. This led to a series of violent clashes with the army which occupy a particular place in the Tobas’ social memory.

### “It’s Them Who Died!”

In March 1917, two Regiments of Cavalry converged into the area. The 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Cavalry, about 100 soldiers strong, arrived from Salta with wagons with weapons and provisions. The 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment, with 50 soldiers and officers, came from Formosa and was joined by 25 armed settlers (Torres 1975: 53, 55). Ronaldo, a man in his seventies, recalled that when *los antiguos* saw the military coming, the women, the children, and the elderly hid in the bush: “One day, a cloud of dust appeared high [in the sky]. That was the troops of the armies. But we already had a place where all the women, kids, and old people hid: *los grandes montes* [“the thick bush”]. Only the big warriors were left” (quoted by VV.AA. 1993: 53). When in the 1990s I asked the Tobas why the *koikolék*, the military, came, most replied that they did because “the ancient ones” were killing cattle, in a way which emphasized their naïveté vis-à-vis the rules of private property of the Criollos. Mariano told me: “They denounced that the *anciano*, when there was a cow, when he saw it, he killed it right away. That’s why ... The *anciano* thought that they were from the *campo*, from the bush. But there was an owner. There was an owner.”

The Tobas remember that their grandparents clashed with the army twice. In Laguna Martín, the site of the first encounter, the “ancient ones” were attacked by the troops from the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Cavalry. The second combat took place in Sombrero Negro, where the 5<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Cavalry attacked the most important Toba *toldería* upstream (Torres 1975: 55; Rodas 1991: 59).<sup>51</sup> In their reconstruction of the battles, the Toba men merge the different clashes into a single narrative, which points to events which are relatively independent from each other: the “birds” telling the *pioGonáq* that the military were coming; the cacique wounded “in the leg”; the two girls (some say boys) kidnapped by the *milicos*; the capture by “the ancient ones” of the wagons carried by the soldiers; the moment when a Toba *haliaganék*, with a precise shot from his Winchester, killed the officer in charge of the troops, the “Teniente Videla,” who in fact was the second in command of the 9<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Cavalry (Torres 1975: 53; Rodas 1991: 59).<sup>52</sup> As part of this collage of images, men emphasize the fighting skills of the *toiéts*, especially their ability to hide and crawl undetected in the bush. Ernesto was telling me about the battle with the military, and said:

While they were in the bush, hidden from the rest, they were watchful, listening ... Then they hid in the bush, and those who were going to fight were in front of the military... Then, they fought the military ... For instance, there was a tree like that [he pointed to an algarrobo], and the combatants hid there ...

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<sup>51</sup> A brief reference in the personal file of one of the officers involved in the battle, suggests that there was a final clash with the group of cacique Zarco in December 1917, when troops were sent “to eject the Toba Indians from the territory encompassed between Nuevo Pilcomayo and Pescado Negro, banks of the Pilcomayo.” A.G.E., Legajo 14775. *Legajo Original del Tte. Coronel Videla, Luis H.*

<sup>52</sup> However, Lieutenant Videla’s personal file in the A.G.E. shows that he survived the battle. He retired in 1953 and died in 1967. A.G.E., Legajo 14775. *Legajo personal original del Teniente Coronel Videla, Luis H.* Videla had by then been deployed in the area for several years and was an officer “known for his severity” (Da Rocha 1937: 106-107). According to Da Rocha (1937: 107), back then the “Indians” of the Pilcomayo hated Videla so much that they had many stories in which they had “killed” him.

But what I always found most striking in their accounts was the depiction of the outcome of the fighting, totally at odds with the version of the battle which has become dominant in the historiography of the region. Rodas (1991: 59) quoted a Criollo who participated in the second battle in Sombrero Negro, and who described how the Tobas fled to the *monte fuerte* (*monte grande*) to avoid extermination:

For a moment the Indians resisted the guerrilla, but since they saw that they were dying by the score, they started fleeing to the river, which was 400 meters away from the *toldería* and towards the ravine la Palometa, where there was a strip of *monte fuerte* ... Many got to reach the other side of the Pilcomayo, but those who fell in the fight were more; others took the direction of the *monte fuerte* which is south of Palometa.

In the mid-1990s, however, most Tobas claimed —with startling conviction— that their grandparents killed an enormous amount of soldiers and defeated the army suffering almost no casualties. Take, for instance, these three men in their sixties and seventies, whom I talked to about the clashes independently of one another, and whom at points seemed to emphasize their identity as “*aborígenes*” over that of “Tobas”:

*Did any ancient one die?* Nothing, nothing! 60 military died. *Aborígen*, nothing. One was injured, shot here [he pointed to his leg]. But it healed (Segundo).

More than 200 of the army died ... *What about the Tobas?* Not even one Toba died. [The soldiers] almost caught a little old man. But they didn't see him, because he was beside a large *yuchán* tree ... (Mariano).

Many soldiers died. Like 1,000, or 1,500. *What about the Tobas?* Nobody died. Only a very old woman; she couldn't escape from the hut. The Criollos say that like 2,000 *aborígenes* died, but no, nothing. It's them who died! (Agustín).

The Tobas acknowledge that the “ancient ones” had to cross the Pilcomayo River to Bolivia. But they did so, most agree, only because they ran out of ammunition. Moreover, their retreat did not change the status of their victory. After Mariano told me

that the Tobas crossed the river, I asked him: “*So, who won then?*” He looked a bit surprised at my question, and said: “The Tobas won.”

The Tobas’ confident reconstruction of the battles of 1917 was always a sort of a puzzle for me in terms the complex conjunction of memory, historical experience, and the blurry contours of “truth.” And it provides a sharp contrast to other indigenous groups of the region, like the Wichís and the Pilagás, who remember openly the murder and terror that the military caused among them (see for instance VV.AA. 1994: 12, 18-20, 36). But the memory that most Toba men have of these clashes with the army, a memory not based on their own experience but transmitted to them by their parents and grand-parents, is not about terror. It is not about soldiers killing Tobas. Rather, it is about Tobas killing soldiers, and plenty of them. It is certainly tempting to emphasize the “subjective” components of memory when the narrative includes what seem to be “improbable” events (Smith n.d.). Memory is always a representation made in the present, which hinges upon clusters of meaning important for those who remember (Fentress and Wickham 1992; Portelli 1997). And the memory of the battle seems to condense for current generations of Tobas strong meanings of resistance and pride. Ted Swedenburg (1991: 156) has argued that social memory often becomes “one front in the battle over hegemony.” In our case, and more so than in other areas of their memory, the Tobas’ recollection of the battle certainly challenges dominant accounts on their own history and the nature of their incorporation into the Argentinean nation-state. Moreover, it provides a counterpoint to the ambiguity which characterizes much of their memory of “the ancient ones,” and brings to the fore values of resistance, defiance, and pride which terror aims at suppressing. But it does it from a paradoxical position, which downplays the amount of suffering brought

by the state and by doing so undermines its own potential to turn pain into a critical political force. In my experience with the Tobas, only once somebody pointed to the horror unleashed by the army. One morning in May 1996, Julián, a man in his late forties, told me:

There's a place, *kodagi lakaegó* [the head of the *majana* wild pigs], it has no name in Spanish. My old man used to say that there, the military reached the ancient people, where they used to hide. There, it seems that the military got the people. There, a lot of people of our ancient ones died. There're other old men who say that the ancient people didn't die. But that's a lie. Many died, when the military came.

The complexity of the production of social memory certainly defies an objectivist opposition between “true” and “false” accounts. Each in a different way, the Tobas' accounts about the battles point to the experiences of horror which in the 1910s were transforming their lives forever. Julián's, certainly, does it in a more “transparent” way. But the other people's emphatic stress on their “victory” and the negation of their status as victims (“it's them who died!”) reminds us of the point made by Michael Lambek (1996: 246) that “... the smoother the story [remembered] the more evident that it is the product of secondary reworking.”<sup>53</sup> In other words, the unambiguous memory of the “victory” indirectly unmask the threads which in those years were shaping the Tobas' experiences. It is partly through the memory of the events which followed the clashes with the army that we can reconstruct the various moments of the dialectic of terror in which the Tobas were then inserted.

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<sup>53</sup> I would add (and I know Michael would agree) that this “reworking” is inescapable to any memory.

### “All The People Were Scared”

In the 1990s, people agreed that after the battle some Tobas stayed for a while at the Bolivian fort of Magariños. Other Tobas seemed to have dispersed in different directions. But in the end, they all moved down the Pilcomayo to the territory of their allies the Pilagás, in the Patiño marshes, north of the town of Las Lomitas. Most importantly, the Tobas temporarily stopped migrating to the sugar plantations. For several years, so people remember, “the ancient ones” lived off hunting, fishing, and gathering, and occasionally selling skins and furs to itinerant merchants. In 1995, Mariano told me about those days:

Toba people were fishing, selling skins, *curiyú* boas, changing [them] for shotgun. Some to the direction of Lomitas, some to the direction of Formosa. Not in Lomitas, for the army lived there. There was no work in Formosa. They just lived. There was no clothing; there was food, fish, ostrich.

Living in hiding “in the bush,” however, was not enough to guarantee a protection from the army, which had by then *fortines* all over the region. Besides, the Tobas needed to obtain commodities which had already become important in their social reproduction. In this regard, the battles with the *koikolék* led to a new twist to the complex dialectic tying up the bush and the plantations. For that violent experience in the heart of their own territories strengthened the Tobas’ perception that, in those new circumstances, only those who had an invested economic interest in their survival could protect them from the military: the owners of the sugar plantations. In the 1990s, several people argued that their ancestors were able to return to their lands and to reassume the migrations to *kahogonaGá*

because of the mediation of Robustiano Patrón Costas, the owner of San Martín del Tabacal, the newest sugar plantation in the San Francisco Valley (founded in 1920). By 1921, this twofold return had already taken place.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, several people were specific in the fact that Patrón Costas wanted to protect “the Tobas” from the military’s attempt “to kill them all.” In 1996, for instance, Ernesto imitated what, according to him, back then the contractors sent by Patrón Costas told the military: “No! How come you’re going to kill them! ... They’re working people! With them we work in the factory and we have sugar, everything!”

Nonetheless, this was only a moment in the dialectic of terror which was unfolding in the Chaco, because the plantations were places in which the administrations could protect their workers from the army but in which, simultaneously, they submitted them to harsh forms of repression. In fact, in the first decades of the century the *ingenios* had troops deployed in the area with the explicit purpose of curbing any unrest caused by the “wild Indians” (Payne and Wilson 1904: 45; Muir 1947: 231-234; Niklison 1989 [1917]: 48). Consequently, the plantations became for the Tobas a temporary refuge from the terror unfolding in their lands but also places where they experienced terror in a direct way. In the 1990s, several old men told me that before the arrival of the missionaries in 1930, several times the administration threatened “to kill them all,” often because of individual assaults on foremen. This time, in contrast to their memories of the battles, people made it clear that “the ancient ones” were terrified of the soldiers. Mariano, for instance, recalled that after one of these incidents “people quit work, because they were

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<sup>54</sup> That year, R. Lehmann-Nitsche (1925: 187) met the Tobas in Ledesma and heard from them about their “bloody” clash with the army and their recent return to their lands.

afraid, because the soldiers wanted to kill them all.” Patricio told me a similar incident which began when a Toba shot an abusive foreman, according to him without killing him.

As a result:

The following day people didn't work, and the *patrón grande* arrived ... *patrón* of the personnel, his name was Guillermo ... He called the *lenguaráz* [translator], he took him to the front ... The *lenguaráz*' name was Tigre, *Kedók* ... Guillermo hit the *lenguaráz*. He threw him three times from a ravine. He threw him from a height like that algarrobo. All the people were scared ... They wanted to kill them all. They took them to the *ingenio*. Because the factory had a chicken wire (*alambre tejido*). They stayed there. They wanted to kill them all ...

That night —Patricio went on— while the *patrones* were deciding whether or not “to kill all the Tobas,” most people managed to escape. They hid in the thick jungle which covered the hills of the area and from there they reached the Bermejo, crossed the river, and fled back home to the Pilcomayo.<sup>55</sup>

### “They Thought That They Wanted to Kill Them”

By then, the threat posed by the military was an over-reaching presence, which recognized no sanctuaries, no spatial boundaries. In their home territories, this threat was heightened by the tense coexistence with the Criollos, who after the events of 1917 had consolidated their presence, moving in from the now overgrazed and overpopulated Colonia Buenaventura. By 1920, Sombrero Negro had 79 inhabitants, a store, and a national primary school (Torres 1975: 33-34; Mendoza and Maldonado 1995: 31; Alsina 1995: 216). Most Criollos lived in poverty in scattered *puestos* spread out in the bush,

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<sup>55</sup> According to Patricio, the Tobas who remained in the ingenio were finally “forgiven” by the *patrón* because the foreman had not died, and they continued working until the end of the harvest.

owned only a few cattle (aside from a small number of sheep and goats), and looked after the cattle of better off settlers.<sup>56</sup> Some Criollos hired Tobas on an irregular basis: to build up *ranchos*, corrals, fences, chop wood, or carry water (usually paid in kind), and purchased skins and furs from them.

Since the lands of the region were the property of the federal government, Tobas and Criollos shared the same tracts of land. The settlers were always a minority in the region and had their cattle roaming freely in the bush, and consequently the Tobas were able to continue reproducing their foraging practices. But this reproduction was now constrained by the acquisition of new goods and tools, a land encroachment which did not exist in the past, the subsequent decreasing productivity of foraging, and the growing need to migrate to the cane-fields. As we have seen in chapter one, the presence of free roaming cattle brought radical changes in the landscape of the region. The grasslands which used to cover most of the banks of the Pilcomayo were soon depleted, and with the interruption of fires thick *monte* began covering the old savannas. Besides, cattle often broke into the Tobas' fields, spoiled their crops, and ate large quantities of valuable wild fruits in the summer. On an irregular basis, for their part, the Tobas continued killing cattle. This overall tension triggered some incidents in which some Criollos and Tobas were killed, but the experience of 1917 definitively curbed any attempt on the part of the Tobas to launch an armed rebellion. During the 1920s, Toba warriors organized some raids against their old enemies, the Nivaklés and the Wichís, and captured their last scalps. But the

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<sup>56</sup> The cattle raised by the Criollos of the Pilcomayo was regularly sent in herds to Embarcación, in Salta. Part of it was purchased by ingenio La Esperanza and the rest was sold in Salta, Tucumán, and northern of Chile (Silva 1996 [1916]: 4; Castañeda Vega 1920: 9-10). Due to the few existing means of communication, then the Criollos kept much stronger ties with Salta than with the settlements in the east of Formosa (Silva 1996 [1916]: 2, 10; Rodas 1991: 61).

tension were also on the rise across the river, where the Bolivian troops had increased their presence and the perspective of a war with Paraguay over the northern Chaco seemed now a feasible possibility.

The Tobas' migrations to *kahogonaGá* continued, in spite of the threats looming over the plantations. In 1929, a group of Tobas was also hired for a few months in the construction of the railway between Formosa and Embarcación, to do the clearings where the railway line was to be extended. In 1996, Marcelino, a political leader in his late fifties, remembered that when "the *ingeniero* Juárez" and other contractors came to look for them, the Tobas were distrustful:

The *contratistas* came, from the railway ... They called the people and talked. The name of the *ingeniero* was Juárez. Then, the *ingeniero* ... brought many meters of cloth, like a gift, to the caciques. He talked all the time, and then it seems that they realized: "It seems that they want to take the people." But they didn't want to go out. They thought that they wanted to kill them. But they didn't. [One said] "Maybe they take the people to work." A chief then said: "All right, I go, I go." Then, people went, quite many.

In this particularly tense historical conjuncture in the Tobas' experience, a group of white-skinned men arrived at the banks of the Pilcomayo, 80 kilometers upstream from their lands. The Tobas had seen them before, in the last stage of their journey to *kahogonaGá*, at a place called Misión Chaqueña, on the Bermejo River. What they did not know is that those *gringos* had been thinking about them for a long time.

**PART II:  
A "SANCTUARY" IN THE BUSH**



**20, JOHN STREET .  
THEOBALDS ROAD, LONDON W.C.1**

**FIVE:  
“A CALL TO THE CHURCH OF CHRIST”**

It was very bad, before, when there was no missionary ... Everybody wanted to kill the *aborígenes*.

*Tomás (1996)*

... it appears that their idea of the mission is first and foremost a protector.

*H. Grubb and A. Leake,*

An Account of a Visit to the Tobas (1929)

**A Letter from Spaniard Harbord**

In August 1851, Captain Allan Gardiner, of the British Royal Navy, was dying of starvation, scurvy, and exposure on the beach of Spaniard Harbour, Tierra del Fuego. For months, he and six companions had been trying, without success, to attract the indigenous groups of the area to pursue missionary work among them. Out of provisions, facing harsh cold weather and the Natives' indifference, Gardiner seems to have longed for distant, warmer lands, and for less elusive objects of conversion. Sometime before he died, early in September, he wrote a letter addressed “to the Toba chiefs of the Pilcomayo River”:

This letter comes to you with greetings. Our country which is called Great Britain, lies far, very far from yours ... Our God, whom we serve, has made us great and happy, and we desire to see all nations as great and happy as we are. Our God ... is the only true God ... He has given us a Book in which we are taught all that He would have us do ... We have sent this Book to many other nations ... Why should the Toba nations be the last to receive this Book? It grieves us to think that you are still ignorant of it ... Let two of our people visit you, let them dwell with you securely until they have learned to speak to you in your own language ... We are your friends, though you know us not ... Farewell, captains, and all the Toba nations. May you be ever happy. Your foreign friends (quoted by Young 1905: 207-208; see also 26-27, 138).

Seventy-nine years later, in late October 1930, two young British missionaries from the South American Missionary Society, the society founded by Gardiner, departed from the Selva San Andrés mission station on the Pilcomayo River. They headed to the

southeast, down the course of the river, to set up an Anglican station among the Tobas. They planned to live with them, learn their language, and teach them about “the only true God.” As we shall see in chapters to come, the mission founded by these two men would have a deep influence on the meanings the Tobas associate with the bush and the plantations. In order to fully understand this process, it is important to refer to the arrival of the first British missionaries in the Argentinean Chaco and to their close connections with the English-owned cane-fields of *ingenio* La Esperanza.

### **Missionaries in the Cane-Fields**

In 1844, five years before his death in Tierra del Fuego, Captain Allan Gardiner had founded in England a small missionary society called The Patagonian Mission (Makower 1989: 20). Even though the society initially focused most of its work among the indigenous groups of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, in 1846 Gardiner made a trip to the Bolivian Chaco during which he paid a short visit to the “Bolivian” Tobas of the upper Pilcomayo. His short experience in the Chaco, and in particular his fascination with the Tobas, proved to have a strong influence among his followers.

In 1864 the Patagonian Mission became known as the South American Missionary Society (SAMS) (ibid.: 21). In the following decades the society increasingly focused its attention on the Gran Chaco. In 1889, a member of the society, Barbrooke Grubb, started missionary work in the Paraguayan Chaco among the Lenguas, and a few years later he started considering the possibility of extending the work of the SAMS to the western edge of the Chaco. In 1898, knowing that the sugar plantations of the San Francisco Valley were visited every year by thousands of “heathen Indians,” Grubb made

his first indirect inquiry to the Leach brothers, the owners of La Esperanza, “as to the possibilities and advisability of starting mission work on or near their estate” (Hunt 1912a: 22-23). The project was postponed for several years, but in 1911 the first group of British missionaries, among them B. Grubb, finally started working near the plantation.

The arrival of the SAMS in the Argentinean Chaco took place at a time when the British economic and political influence in Argentina was particularly strong. As a result, the missionaries’ Protestant agenda of evangelization was carried out in a relatively favorable context, something which would eventually change in the decades to come. At La Esperanza, the Leach brothers gave Grubb enthusiastic support and granted him “more than he either asked or expected” (SAMS 1911: 83). They provided the missionaries with “a most suitable station” free of charge near San Pedro (ibid.: 83), from where the latter paid regular visits to the indigenous encampments at La Esperanza. Grubb’s plan was to gain the trust of the “Indians” so that the missionaries could later on travel with them back to their home territories and set up a mission station there. Since around that time the plantations’ administrators were concerned with the difficulties of recruiting groups living in semi-nomadic bands, the project to settle them in stations was strongly encouraged by the owners of La Esperanza, and became closely tied to their own interests. The missionaries were aware of this:

The opportunities [of founding mission stations] are numerous and remarkable. The Government, as well as private firms, now realize that the Indians are a valuable asset to the labour supply, competition being very keen to secure their services, and endeavours are even now being made to settle them upon reservations, where they can be more easily governed, and where the missionary could have a permanent station and brilliant prospects of evangelization (Hunt 1913a: 62).

In November 1912, a group of British missionaries set off for the Pilcomayo, aiming to follow a group of Nivaklés; “then they would make for a point where two men from Messrs. Leach would be stationed, to recruit and receive Indians for the next crop” (Hunt 1913c: 94). By 1913, the missionaries had already made various journeys along the Bermejo and the Pilcomayo Rivers (Hunt 1926: 45; 1933: 274-275). In December 1914, B. Grubb founded the first Anglican mission in the Argentinean Chaco, Misión Chaqueña (also known as Algarrobal), on the Bermejo River, about 40 kilometers west of Embarcación, in lands donated by the Leach brothers (B. Grubb 1915: 42). Even though the beginnings of Misión Chaqueña were difficult, in a few years “[t]he Mission and its work became the theme of conversation among the thousand of Indians that passed along the road to the cane-fields ...” (Hunt 1933: 293).

### **“The Tobas Are On The Road!”**

On their way to *kahogonaGá*, the Tobas used to stop in Misión Chaqueña to barter goods at the mission’s store (SAMS 1924: 64). In the 1990s, Patricio recalled what his father had told him about those stops: “Then, they arrived at Misión Chaqueña ... They stayed to rest. They didn’t say anything. The missionary asked them questions, but the only thing they said was that they were Tobas.”<sup>57</sup> In April 1927, a young missionary named Alfred Leake arrived at Misión Chaqueña from Britain. One of the first things that caught his attention was the “tall and proud” Tobas who, coming from the Pilcomayo, passed through the mission:

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<sup>57</sup> Interviewed by Marcela Mendoza in April 1994.

[Alfred Leake] remembered vividly the thrill of the words heard once in his early days at Algarrobal: “The Tobas are on the road!” Sure enough that very day he had seen his first Toba, striding through the mission compound as if he owned the place, and soon, while the scattered Matacos kept well out of sight, hundreds of them, tall and proud, had come streaming past, on their way to the cane-fields (Makower 1989: 73).

Soon after Alfred Leake’s arrival, the missionaries at Misión Chaqueña saw good possibilities of founding a mission on the Pilcomayo, in an area located about 80 kilometers upstream from Toba territory, in lands donated by an American businessman (SAMS 1928a: 40; Makower 1989: 63). After a preliminary trip to the area, in early November 1927, Alfred Leake and Colin Smith established the new mission station among Wichís (Makower 1989: 62-65). It was named Selva San Andrés, literally meaning “San Andrés jungle” (later on known simply as “San Andrés”) (see map 5). A few months later, the missionaries received the visit of groups of Tobas “anxious to hear about the mission.”

#### “The ‘Ancient Ones’ Looked for a Missionary”

Today, the Tobas argue that when “the ancient ones” learnt that the British missionaries had founded a station among the Wichís, the most important *haliaganék* had a meeting and decided to request a mission for themselves and to send a delegation to San Andrés. In 1995, Tomás, a man in his late fifties, told me:

The people couldn’t live in peace. There was a missionary ... He came from Salta. First, the Wichís, they already had an Anglican missionary. Then the *caciques*, the *capitán* [indigenous leader in the plantations] they had a meeting, to see how the people could have peace. The ancient ones looked for a missionary to see if they could live in peace. Then, the Toba people went to look for them. They went all together, *capitán*, *cacique*. They were thinking that they were very tired, always fighting the other *aborígenes*. Then [at San Andrés] the missionary put them all together. He arranged a meeting with all the poor *aborígenes*. The missionary said ... that they came from far away, from England.

The first deputation of Tobas arrived at San Andrés in early June 1928. Several weeks later, a new and larger group arrived: “the great chief of the Tobas, accompanied by fourteen lesser chiefs and nearly 200 followers ... arrived and formally made their request for a mission be started among their people” (Hunt 1933: 328). According to missionary reports, the Toba chief Choliki told the missionaries that he knew that the mission was “not out to make money or breed cattle,” and that he was especially concerned for the education of their children at a school (SAMS 1928b: 100; Hunt 1928: 119). The missionaries noticed, however, that the Tobas were requesting a mission “not ... because they were anxious to hear the Christian message, but because they wanted support in the face of ill-treatment and interference from ‘the whites’” (Makower 1989: 72).

At that moment, the SAMS had neither the funding nor the staff required to open a new station and the Tobas were told that the fulfillment of their request would take some time. But the missionaries were extremely pleased by the Tobas’ request. When Barbrooke Grubb, then in Great Britain, learned about it, he wrote shortly before his death: “We have long been drawn to them, and they seem to have been in a wonderful way drawn to us. The fierce, hated Tobas ... truly, it is remarkable ... it is of God” (quoted by Hunt 1933: 328-329). The missionaries were also fascinated by the Tobas’ looks, which they depicted with subtle erotic overtones:

... what a call to the Church of Christ. Here is a request from one of the noblest and finest of the Indian Tribes of the Gran Chaco; the Tobas, the fierce warriors, the splendid hunters, the fearless speakers, the merry dancers of the Chaco (Hunt 1928: 119-120).

They looked amazing, the Tobas: tall, dignified, some in traditional dress including feathered head-dress, long hair, beads and bushy anklets of ostrich-feathers; some in a

weird collection of army tunics and other Western finery; one despite the heat, in a complete airman's leather combination suit he had picked up somewhere (quoted by Makower 1989: 72).

In spite of the missionaries' warning that their station could take some time, a constant stream of parties began pouring into San Andrés, and the Tobas' expectations on the mission seem to have been on the rise: "Deputations continued to pour in at fairly regular intervals, sometimes seeking protection, sometimes asking advice, but always anxious about their own mission." (SAMS 1931: 38). In May 1929, Alfred Leake and Henry Grubb finally set out to visit the Tobas in their own territory on horse-back to explore the possible location of the future station. Large and excited crowds of Tobas welcomed them:

Crowds of Tobas, on foot and mounted, came with us everywhere; at every village everyone wanted to shake us by the hand. There was shouting and the singing of a welcome song all the time. Of course we did not know then a single word of the complicated language ... and when we first listened to the conglomeration of sounds, we wondered if we ever would (H. Grubb 1965: 17).

A few months later, Grubb and Leake reported in the *South American Missionary Society Magazine* that Sombrero Negro would be the best location for the new station.

They also wrote:

But let there be no misunderstanding regarding the Tobas' desire for and enthusiasm after a mission. What is it they want? ... it appears that their idea of a mission is first and foremost a protector. Harassed off the land their ancestors roamed over, pressed into service on the distant cane-fields, threatened by their white neighbours, they seek a champion to plead their cause and to fight their battles, and they look to a "mission" to do it (Grubb and Leake 1929: 95).

In 1995, Mariano remembered that Alfred Leake, “Alfredo,” volunteered to be in charge of the new mission. According to him, “Alfredo” told his colleagues: “I can go; I’m going to live among them; I’m going to help the people.” Mariano smiled and added: “They say that Alfredo raised the Bible and that they were happy, the *gringos*.”

**SIX:  
“A KIND OF SANCTUARY”**

I dreamt ... [that] I was taken to the mission. The missionary said: “What’s wrong?.” [I said:] “Those people over there want to hurt me.” [The missionary said:] “If they want to hurt you, we’ll chase them, we’ll burn their houses down. Nobody will hurt you.”

*Kedók (1933)*

They seem to look on the mission as a kind of sanctuary.

*Olive Leake,*

Toba Mission Staff Notes (1932)

**“Happy, the People!”**

In the mid-1990s, the foundation of the mission in 1930 was for the Tobas the most clear turning point in their history. In their eyes, it was neither the first migrations to *kahogonaGá* nor the arrival of the Criollos or the battle with the army in 1917 which marked the end of the times of “the ancient people.” Rather, those times came to an end only with the arrival of “Alfredo.” Nicacio told me about that moment, which he witnessed as a boy, while raising his right arm and making quick and sudden exclamations:

And the missionaries came. Happy the people! Some sang, some had little flags. Happy, the people. They arrived. Enrique spoke Mataco very well, and Alfredo also spoke Mataco. My dad, he understood Mataco ... They said: “Let’s go an have a service, all the people.” But a lot of people! A lot! ... Happy the people, they had a God now. Yes. They didn’t fight anymore ... All brothers, Chulupí, Mataquitos.

Nowadays, the Tobas remember the arrival of Alfred Leake as the beginning of a new era of peace. On the one hand, internalizing decades of missionization through which their past was condemned as violent and heathen, some people emphasize that with the

mission their grandparents “stopped killing other people.” Tomás told me in 1995: “They sent [a missionary] to the people so that they lived in peace, so that they didn’t fight with others who are also poor ... With that, the people lived a quiet life, they didn’t go to fight. Then, they went fishing, they didn’t think about killing other people ...” On the other hand, in other circumstances this image of a new era of peace is more clearly articulated as a protection granted by the missionaries from previous experiences of terror. A few months later, Tomás told me, this time shifting the emphasis on who was to blame for that violence: “It was very bad when there was no missionary ... Everybody wanted to kill the *aborígenes*.”

In this chapter, I will analyze the first moment of the manifold and contradictory movement tying together the mission and the bush. This was a moment in which the emergence of the mission as “a protector,” enhanced by the terror which still in the 1930s the army was unleashing among other groups of the region, gave new meanings to the Tobas’ previous experience of the bush as a partial refuge from the military. This takes us, first, to the social, economic, and cultural dynamics created by the mission station.

### **“We Went to the Mission to Listen”**

Alfred Leake and a fellow missionary settled misión El Toba late in October 1930, three kilometers downstream from Sombrero Negro, in a clearing located between the river and “a dull uninteresting forest” (SAMS 1937: 54). For several months, they lived in tents but by the end of 1931 “the place began to assume something of the happy atmosphere and bright appearance of a Mission station” (Leake, quoted by SAMS 1931: 39). The first stage of missionization among the Tobas was further consolidated by the

fact that between 1932 and 1936 they were not recruited by the plantations, due to serious conflicts they had in 1931 at San Martín del Tabacal (O. Leake 1936: 126). Thus, for four years the Tobas stayed in their lands in direct interaction with the missionaries.

At first, evangelical work faced the initial obstacle of the missionaries' lack of knowledge of the Toba language. However, in a few years Alfred Leake and other missionaries became fluent in it, and aside from giving the services in Toba they also started translating fragments of the Gospels. In 1933, the Swiss ethnographer Alfred Métraux (1933b: 207, my translation) visited the mission at Sombrero Negro and wrote:

There is nothing more picturesque than to watch a Sunday holy service on the banks of the Pilcomayo. The listeners, with the face painted and the head adorned with feathers, pay careful attention to the sermon. They seem to have gathered for a war council and not to have come to listen to the word of God. It is difficult to say to what extent they participate in the rituals, but there is no doubt that the holy service is for them a feast expected from one week to the other with impatience.

Aside from evangelical work, considered by the missionaries to be the most important, the mission was organized around three other "departments": "educational," "medical," and "industrial," following a pattern prevalent in the rest of the missions of the South American Missionary Society (SAMS 1933: 38). Schooling was a major concern both for the missionaries and the Tobas. By 1933, the school at El Toba had 90 student and the same year Métraux (1933b: 206) wrote that "the eagerness of the Indians for reading is extraordinary" (cf. SAMS 1933: 38-39). The medical treatment provided by the missionaries was also of great importance, for a good part of the Tobas' trust in them seems to have lain in their healing powers: "All missionaries whatever their qualifications are expected to be doctors to go into the wilds. The Indians would have no further

dealings with a missionary who refused to give some sort of help to one who was ill" (H. Grubb 1965: 50).<sup>58</sup>

The presence of the mission implied a spatial rearrangement of the semi-nomadic pattern of the bands. A group of bands settled near the station, in what became the most important Toba village, "well within sight and sound" of the missionaries (Grubb 1933: 41). The rest of the bands formed villages spread along the river, in sites located in some cases more than 25 kilometers away from El Toba. The most important of these villages were Laguna Los Paces, Jesús María (upstream from Sombrero Negro), and Laguna Martín (downstream) (see map 6). The new villages attracted clusters of extended families coming from different bands and maintained much of the flexibility of the old band organization. Henry Grubb (1933: 41) reckoned in 1933, when the total Toba population probably hinged upon 700 or 800, that the number of Tobas living in the station varied between 200 and 400, "the numbers varying from time to time." This variation in numbers suggests that many people were moving back and forth between the mission, the rest of the villages along the Pilcomayo, and the bush.

By 1933, the mission had grown considerably. It consisted of a three-roomed house, a large school, and another building divided into store and dispensary. The station became a social, religious, and economic center which strongly shaped the social dynamic of the other villages. The Sunday service at El Toba was the most important event connecting them. As Tomás put it: "Since Alfredo had teachings, and we lived in Jesús María, on Saturdays we went to the mission to listen." Thus, every Saturday afternoon a

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<sup>58</sup> Most missionaries, however, had only a basic training in first aid. Back then, in the Anglican missions of the Pilcomayo, only Colin Smith at Selva San Andrés was a professional physician.

large number of people converged into the mission, on foot and on horse-back and donkey, in order to attend the service the following day. They also went to sell and buy goods at the stores of the mission and Sombrero Negro, which became the most important source of manufactured goods in the region. In Sombrero Negro, the Tobas used to sell skins (iguana, boas), furs (wild cat, jaguar) and feathers (especially rhea), commodities which were then in high demand and paid in kind: usually cloth, salt, flour, and ammunition. The mission store also became an important source of commodities. The missionaries provided the Tobas with irregular work through the so-called "industrial department" of the mission, which involved construction of buildings, a carpentry workshop, and fetching loads of wood or water; besides, they employed some women as house servants (Leake 1933: 69; 1935: 28; 1942: 23; Price 1933; Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 26). The missionaries also encouraged the commoditization of handicraft production by women, which they bought at the mission's store in exchange of goods and then sold either in Salta or Buenos Aires (cf. Makower 1989: 121; Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 99).

In spite of these forms of petty commodity production, during the first decades of the mission (and while they were not away in the sugar plantations) the Tobas lived mostly off fishing, hunting, gathering, subsistence gardening, and herding. Once the migrations to "the mountains" reassumed in 1936, the social dynamic of the mission was deeply shaped by the long absence of most men and women of productive age. On the one hand, the mission played an important role sustaining those Tobas who stayed home during those months, and many people did irregular work for the missionaries or simply begged them food (cf. Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 93, 117, 164). On the other hand, most

services of the mission, especially schooling and church services, were severely affected (Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 85). For those who stayed in their villages, fishing was the most important subsistence activity, especially in the peak of the fishing season (May-July). In those months, several extended families went with their horses to sites on the river where fish was plentiful, and formed a campsite for several days or weeks, where men fished day and night with individual nets, *uanadanaGát* (a depth net) and *heélaGae* (a surface net), either in groups or individually.<sup>59</sup> Carlos, a man in his sixties, told me in 1996 about those fishing expeditions:

In the past, people brought a lot of fish with the horses ... Our custom was to go to a pool in the river (*remanso*): "Tomorrow we're going to go to the *remanso*, there", like the distance from here to Pozo de Maza, Vaca Perdida [20 and 10 kilometers respectively]. Then, we all went on horseback. When we returned ... Ooh! We caught everything! Surubí, pacú, dorado! Ooh! Happy the people!

In those years, extended families also carried out prolonged foraging expeditions in other moments of the year and to different corners of their territories. And even though these campsites were made with the explicit purpose of foraging, they also became part of the complex, often subtle, politics of social control, accommodation, and contention associated with the experience of missionization, as we shall see. But in those early years, the mission station became for the Tobas, first and foremost, a sheltering place.

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<sup>59</sup> The *uanadanaGát* net is formed by two flexible sticks of up to three meters long and tied from both extremes. The *heélaGae* is made with two rigid sticks tied only from one edge. Many times men fished individually, but the most productive technique was collective fishing, especially at the peak of the fishing season (May-July), when the water was low and the fish plentiful. Collective fishing involved two groups of fishermen playing complementary roles: young men with *uanadanaGát* nets advanced from upstream, capturing fish and slowly pushing the rest of the fish towards older men, who waited forming a line across the river and holding *heélaGae* nets. In those months, the productivity of fishing allowed the Tobas to store large quantities of fish (previously roasted and dried in the sun) in straw sacks (*lōki*) and extracted large amounts of fish fat (stored underground in clay pots or leather bags) in order to be consumed in the "hunger season" (August/September).

### “A Kind of Sanctuary”

During the first years of the mission the Tobas referred to the missionaries as *kadetá*, literally “our fathers.”<sup>60</sup> *Kadetá*, however, became also the customary translation for “God.” Referring to this twofold meaning of *kadetá*, Alfred Leake (1933: 67) wrote: “Probably in the beginning of the work this helped tremendously in smoothing over the many problems encountered.” However, the missionaries themselves seem to have ended up discouraging the use of *kadetá* as equivalent of “missionary,” feeling uneasy with such close association between themselves and “God” (cf. Makower 1989: 85-86). As Segundo once told me: “We used to say ‘missionary’ in our language ‘*kadetá*,’ ‘they’re fathers.’ Not anymore. Only God is our father.” It would be misleading, however, to regard this translation as a sign of the Tobas’ initial belief in the “god-like” character of the missionaries—a type of cultural construct which has become the object of a recent debate in anthropology (see Obeyesekere 1992; Sahlins 1995). The Tobas regarded the first missionaries as human beings; but certainly as very powerful ones. Grubb (1931: 88) wrote: “we are looked upon as a species of super witch-doctor.” According to Alfred Leake (1933: 67):

In the first early days we were asked to do many and varied things: from casting a spell on a witch-doctor in order to cause his death to the recovery of stolen articles: from driving out all Argentinean settlers occupying Toba territory to causing it to rain; and these and other incidents soon brought the realisation that in the eyes of the Indians, we were endowed with many strange and wonderful powers.

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<sup>60</sup> Some people argue that back then they were also called *paagén taanagáik*, “teachers.”

The Tobas' view of the missionaries as powerful, leading, protective figures was intertwined with the role they were playing vis-a-vis the armed institutions of the state. In the early 1930s, the Argentinean military were still engaging in clashes with the Pilagás and with some Nivaklé bands (which sometimes crossed the Pilcomayo into Argentinean territory). And the level of tension caused by the threat of the army was very high among all the indigenous groups of the area, the Tobas included. By then, the massacres committed by the *milicos* had created widespread terror among these groups, and in many villages "consternation was general and great at the sight of a military uniform" (Makower 1989: 110; see also Métraux 1933a: 204; 1937: 171; Saint 1936, part II: 244).

In this regard, the Tobas found in the Anglican mission what they were looking for: an important institutional protection from the army and the settlers.<sup>61</sup> In 1932, for instance, the Tobas of two villages upstream who had conflicts with the Criollos moved in mass to the mission fearing an attack by the army. One of the members of the mission staff wrote: "They seem to look on the mission as a kind of sanctuary" (O. Leake 1932: 93-94). The news of this protection soon attracted further requests for missionization: "Scarcely a quarter passes without our having to report a deputation of natives asking us for a mission in their district" (Grubb 1933: 42). By 1932, the Pilagás, the Tobas from Laguna Blanca in the lower Pilcomayo, and even a group of Tobas from the Bermejo had visited El Toba asking for a mission (Grubb 1933: 42; Arnott 1933: 6). When in December 1932 Alfred Métraux arrived in the area of Descanso (Estero Patiño), a group

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<sup>61</sup> The same applied to the Wichís. At Selva San Andrés, a missionary wrote: "Several entire villages have moved down to join our people here ... all prompted by the desire to shelter under the wing of the Mission, on account of alarm due to various military movements ..." (C. Smith, quoted by SAMS 1933: 35; see also Métraux 1967: 171-172).

of Pilagás decimated by an epidemics of smallpox which the military had contributed to spreading, thought that he was a missionary coming to protect them from the army: “Convinced that I was an English missionary, they had celebrated my arrival like the beginning of a new era, an era in which they would be protected from the vexations of the Argentinean military authorities” (Métraux 1937: 172, my translation). In 1935, a Pilagá group which had temporarily moved to Paraguayan territory due to repeated clashes with the Argentinean army, arrived at Sombrero Negro looking for protection (Arnott 1936: 68-70). Since the total population of El Toba grew from 500 to 1,000, the missionaries decided to found a separate station for the Pilagás further downstream. Misión Pilagá was founded in October 1935, about 35 kilometers to the south-east, on Laguna Los Pájaros (Grubb 1936: 8; Makower 1989: 81-82). In the following years, both misión El Toba and misión Pilagá became the temporary refuge of groups of Nivaklés harassed by the Paraguayan military (Leake 1934: 116; Tebboth 1939: 96; cf. Métraux 1978: 65-66).

In the second half of the 1930s, in spite of the missionary presence, the tensions in the area seem to have increased. In October 1938, a boy going from misión Pilagá to El Toba was shot dead by five Criollos, and Tobas and Pilagás were ready to take revenge with their own hands. The missionary then in charge, Alfred Tebboth, sent for the policemen in Sombrero Negro and tried to mediate in the conflict. In these circumstances, troops of the army arrived at the mission:

It was bad enough having the claims of the police on our attention, but when owing to false rumours of a Toba uprising, soldiers appeared on the scene, we had to tread warily, for some false step on the part of the Toba would have meant their massacre and the end of the mission (Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 58-59).

In the mid-1990s, some Tobas remembered the incident well and argued that the *milicos* “wanted to kill all the people.” All agreed that the missionary, however, interceded with the “Lieutenant” and thus was able to avoid bloodshed. He was basically able to convince this officer that the Tobas were already “civilized.” Mariano told me his version of the incident, pointing out, paradoxically, that the missionary told the lieutenant that “he had to kill just one”:

Soldiers came from far away, I don't know, maybe from Buenos Aires, and they wanted to kill all the people ... The missionary ... right there he talked to the Lieutenant. [He said]: “What is it? ... How come you want to kill? You've got to kill the one who's guilty! That's the one you've got to kill, but just one.” That's what he said ... The missionary was already there, he stopped the war ... The Lieutenant asked the missionary: “What is it that you teach? What is it that you bring?” [The missionary answered]: “I just teach them so that they don't fight. I make a little school.” Then, right there [the Lieutenant said]: “Let's see. What is it that the pupils sing?” Then, they sang the anthem right there. And then the man was happy, clapping his hands. Then, the man wasn't angry, he left them. The missionary had many permits from Buenos Aires.

Soon after this event, one of the missionaries went to Formosa to meet the Governor of the Territory of Formosa to discuss the tensions between Criollos and Tobas. He had a “nerve-racking experience,” Dora Tebboth wrote, “in trying to convert the prejudices of the Argentine military and other authorities to the truth that the Tobas are a peaceable tribe of Indians” (1989 [1938-1946]: 62, 60).

This incident and the Tobas' current memory of it, expresses important aspects of the complex and tense relationship between the British missionaries, the Tobas, and the institutions of the Argentinean state. The Tobas were being immersed into the social-political symbols of modern Argentinean state-nationhood, paradoxically, by a British and Protestant institution like the South American Missionary Society. In this regard, the Anglican missionaries had taken over tasks which in the eastern Chaco were being carried

out by the Argentinean state through *reducciones indígenas* aimed at turning the aboriginal groups into “civilized citizens” (Arengo 1996). In the 1930s and 1940s, while the old British influence was being replaced in Argentina by the emerging domination of the United States and the armed forces were experiencing a growing anti-British nationalism, the relationship between the British missionaries and the state-run institutions became particularly tense.

The Anglican missionaries were not only citizens of a foreign and powerful nation, but also Protestant in a mostly Roman Catholic country. Moreover, they worked among people regarded as potentially rebellious and who still had to be turned into “citizens”; and they did right near a “hot” international border, shaken in the early 1930s by the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay (as we shall see). And unlike the state-sponsored *reducciones* of the east—in 1924, one of them was the site of one of the bloodiest massacres in the recent history of the Chaco—the missionaries provided the Tobas with an important protection from the violence of the army.<sup>62</sup> These tensions were further heightened at the local level by the Criollo settlers, who usually saw “*los gringos*” as protecting “*los indios*” in detriment to their own rights.

In this conflictive situation, while the missionaries protected the Tobas from the abuses of the military they also had to legitimize their actions vis-à-vis the state through a demonstration of the success of their civilizing project and their commitment to the symbols of Argentinean nationhood. Thus, when military or important civilian visitors

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<sup>62</sup> In 1924, hundreds of men, women, and children (Tobas and Mocovíes) were killed by the local police in Napalpí (province of Chaco) in the midst of an indigenous movement with millenarian overtones. Napalpí was one of the most important *reducciones* organized by the federal government (see Arengo 1996: Cordeu and Siffredi 1971).

arrived at the station, the missionaries usually made the children of the school sing the Argentinean national anthem in front of them (see Saint 1936: 176; Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 37), exactly what Mariano remembered they did when the military arrived at the mission in 1938. The missionaries also took pains to show to visitors that in the school they were following “the official programs” as much as possible (Saint 1936: 176). These efforts, however, were not enough, and in 1944-1945 the authorities of the National Territory of Formosa demanded the cessation of all Protestant teaching to the Aborigines, claiming that the constitution of Argentina stated that the latter should be taught “Roman Catholicism” (Makower 1989: 127; Grubb 1945: 16-17). When Alfred Leake was notified of the ban, he wrote a letter to the Tobas in the sugar plantations to let them know about it: “What a stir it made! The Toba who received the letter was so upset by the news that he and his wife came home a month before time. He says that the tribe is finding it hard to sleep for thinking about the threat to the mission” (Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 187).

The missionaries had to keep a difficult balance between the trust the Tobas had in them and the enforcement of the laws of the state. Thus, they mediated in conflicts with the settlers, handed over Toba offenders to the police, and in some cases started legal actions against Tobas denounced by their peers,<sup>63</sup> a type of situation always full of potential conflict (cf. SAMS 1933: 39; Makower 1989: 87). These conflictive mediations became for many Tobas a source of ambiguity about the actual role played by the missionaries, but they do not seem to have caused widespread negative reactions among

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<sup>63</sup> See A.H.F. *Expedientes Judiciales, Cajas Aborígenes*: “Causa: hurtos reiterado, contra el indígena ‘Caradura’, denuncia de Don Guillermo Alfredo Leake,” Sumario No 5/950.”

them.<sup>64</sup> After all, the missionaries provided them with an institutional, collective protection which went beyond individual offenses.

This protection was so important that in the station where the Anglican missionaries were not able to halt the abuses by the army, it proved fatal to the very survival of the missionization. This was the case of the mission closest to El Toba: misión Pilagá. In January 1937, the military captured nine Pilagás from the mission on a hunting expedition, disarmed them, and shot them. Only two survived. This massacre severely undermined the Pilagás' confidence in the missionaries, in spite of the complaints by the latter to the military and civilian authorities of the region (Arnott 1937: 112-113; Cox 1939: 82; Makower 1989: 111-113). Moreover, some Pilagás blamed one of the missionaries for the murder: "You told the soldiers to shoot our tribesmen! ... You are a witch-doctor and bewitch our people" (quoted by Arnott 1937: 113). After a gradual decline, at the end of 1939, the mission at Laguna Los Pájaros was abandoned and the Pilagás returned to their old territories to the southeast.<sup>65</sup>

In El Toba, by contrast, the missionaries were successful in the construction of the mission as a sheltering place, and this protection became strongly embedded in the Tobas' subjectivity. As early as in 1933, Kedók, the "key informant" of Alfred Métraux told him about a dream in which he fled to the mission escaping from his enemies. Merging Kedók's experience at the mission with a still fresh memory of warfare, in the dream the

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<sup>64</sup> For instance, in 1933, after handing over two Tobas who had murdered a Criollo, one of the missionaries wrote: "Thanks to God this was accomplished without losing the confidence of the other Indians" (SAMS 1933: 39).

<sup>65</sup> Further factors contributed to the demise of this mission: the lagoon on which the mission was located had dried up and the missionary in charge, together with many other young missionaries, went back to Britain to fight in World War II. However, the missionaries acknowledged that the massacre of 1937 played a decisive role in the decline of the mission (cf. Arnott 1937: 112-113; Cox 1939: 82; Makower 1989: 111-113).

missionary told him: “If they want to hurt you, we’ll chase them, we’ll burn their houses down. Nobody will hurt you” (quoted by Métraux 1937: 190).

This protection included not only the Argentinean army but also the military forces of the other *states* which had a presence across the river. At the beginning of 1934, the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay (which broke out in 1932) involved in a direct way the area opposite to Sombrero Negro and misión El Toba, when the Paraguayan troops began a sweeping westward offensive along the Pilcomayo. The Bolivian forts on the river started to fall one after the other. In early January 1934, the Paraguayans took *fortín* Esteros (opposite to Nuevo Pilcomayo) and days later there were important clashes close to Magariños, the fort located opposite to El Toba (Fernández 1967: 56, 65; Estigarribia 1969: 127). Even though these battles did not affect the Tobas directly, in the 1990s people remembered the fighting and the bombings shaking the opposite bank, only a few hundred meters away from their villages. Segundo, who was a boy at the time, remembered in 1997 that the bombing was so intense that he wanted to escape to the bush. In a context in which the mission, due to its very nature as a “civilized” space, was seen as a potential target of the contenders’ bombs, the bush suddenly regained its old protection (and its old risks) as a “wild” space removed from the control of the *dokohé*. Segundo told me:

There was a plane coming from above. I felt very strongly the bursting of those arms. I was very little, and I was most scared. Night and day, night and day ... I was scared and I wanted to go deep inside the bush. But my mom and my dad wouldn’t let me. They caught me, [and said] that I shouldn’t go to the bush, that there were mean animals and that I would die.

The Paraguayan army captured Magariños on February 9, 1934 (Fernández 1967: 56, 65). The fighting continued further up the river and a tense calm gained the area. Even though the following year the war ended with the victory of Paraguay, the most serious conflicts involving the Tobas would happen later on. In April 1937, the Tobas engaged in a series of clashes with the Paraguayan soldiers, triggered by attacks by the latter on men who crossed the river in order to fish or hunt, and several Tobas were killed (Leake 1937: 127; Tebboth 1938a: 41; 1938b: 113). For several months, the Tobas' access to the river was seriously restrained and fishing on the other bank was avoided all together. Alfred Leake (1937: 127) wrote: "People went to the river in fear, and men were seen to be going fishing with a net in one hand and a gun in the other." In the midst of this tense situation, the missionaries used their influence to protect the Tobas, and after several unsuccessful attempts at mediation, they were able to temporarily halt the clashes: "following a letter written by Mr. Grubb to the Major in charge, the Indians are now unmolested ..." (Leake 1937: 127-128; cf. Arnott 1937: 113). However, in December 1937 there was a new skirmish with further casualties. It was only in 1938, when a new officer assumed control of the Paraguayan troops of the region, that the Tobas were formally allowed to cross the border to forage. The missionaries were notified of the news by the new Paraguayan officer himself (Tebboth 1938b: 113).

This aspect of the experience of the mission reinforced and simultaneously gave new meanings to the Tobas' previous experience of the bush as a haven from threatening forces.

## New and Old Havens

As we have seen, the bush had provided the Tobas with a partial protection in their first experiences with the military. However, after the clashes of 1917 it was clear that the army was able to spread its destructive power even in the deepest hideouts of the Chaco. In this regard, the foundation of the mission station brought an important reformulation of the old protection associated with the bush. On the one hand, the mission was a place clearly *separated* from the bush, organized along a clearly different set of values, rules, and practices. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the mission as a refuge lay *in its very differentiation* from the bush. It was its very constitution as a neatly bounded “civilizing” place administered by British missionaries which halted the action of the military. On the other hand, this protection went beyond the mission’s physical limits. The mission station was a place clearly *immersed* in the bush, which sprinkled the surrounding forest with a protective shade which mingled with the old quality of the bush as a sheltering place. In special events such as the Chaco War, when some Tobas felt that the mission could become a potential object of attack, the bush regained part of its old flavor as a safe place familiar to them and alien to the military. But the bush became a haven in another, new sense. For the mission station was for the Tobas not only a “sanctuary” from the military but also a place subjected to everyday forms of surveillance and social control. And this contradictory process turned the bush into one of the few places where they were on their own and “free” from the missionary presence.

**SEVEN:  
“IN THE BUSH, YOU CAN DO ANYTHING”**

... the gambling which often took place between the opposing teams in a hockey match ... and the immorality associated with some of their dancing were banned on the mission station.

*Henry Grubb*

The Land Between Rivers (1965)

In the bush, you can do anything: chew coca, drink *aloja*, sing ...

*Segundo* (1996)

In the 1990s, most adult Tobas remembered Alfred Leake as a man with very strong zeal to make their ancestors abandon the “old ways.” Many argued that when “Alfredo” first arrived he was not like that: he just wanted “to watch” the *pioGonáq* and “the customs of the old people”; he “took pictures” and “took notes,” without interfering with them. However, at a certain point, so the Tobas remember, “Alfredo” changed his attitude and started a firm and systematic campaign against these practices. When I listened to the Tobas telling me detailed stories about Alfred Leake’s eager attempts to suppress shamanism, drinking, dancing, and singing, I usually noticed a subtle but persistent ambiguity in their accounts. At an explicit level, for most Tobas “Alfredo” was certainly doing the right thing. He was *the* missionary, the one who was protecting them, who was guiding them into a new and confusing world about which they knew little. Most Tobas would probably agree that “Alfredo” wanted to suppress those practices “for their own good.” As Tomás put it: “Alfredo defended us ... from all the vices.” At the same time, however, in most accounts people usually maintained a *cautious distance* from the depiction of the missionary’s actions. That is, most people portrayed the Tobas chased by

“Alfredo” as passive, resigned, even naive victims of the missionary’s rebukes, as if (so my interpretation goes) they were expressing a repressed sympathy for those who were not allowed to perform what, after all, were just their “old customs.” In this chapter, I will analyze how the social control imposed by “Alfredo” and the other missionaries triggered a complex process of “conversion,” ambiguous accommodation, and resistance which shaped in very important ways the constitution of the bush as a place of autonomy.

### **“Alfredo Didn’t Like It”: Or the Cultural Politics of “Conversion”**

In April 1939, Alfred Métraux arrived at misión El Toba coming from misión Pilagá and the missionaries gave him a cold welcome. At dinner, Alfred Leake told Métraux (1978: 77, 78) that he and his colleagues regarded ethnographers such as him as “supporters of paganism” who “bounce upon people” and “ransack past old things.” In his personal diary, Métraux described Leake as “a madman,” “a fanatic.” He also wrote: “I’m astonished at the fanaticism of Leake, who says that the social work accomplished at the mission doesn’t count at all, and only sees the conversion of the Indians to Christ.” In other Anglican missions of the Pilcomayo, Métraux was equally struck by the “fanaticism” of the British missionaries. In San Andrés, a missionary talked to him about the “perseverance of darkness” and “the devil” as if he were —so Métraux wrote— “a monk of the Middle Ages” (1978: 78, 79, 80).<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> These critical observations about the British missionaries come from Métraux’s personal diary, which was published after his death. It is interesting to note that they are totally at odds with the accounts that Métraux published about the Anglican missions of the Pilcomayo during his life. For instance, in a brief piece of 1933 (right after his first journey to the area), he took pains to emphasize the respect that the missionaries showed towards the native customs and the positive climate that prevailed in the missions (Métraux 1933b). This attitude probably comes from the fact that, overall, Métraux considered that the missions played an important social role *vis-à-vis* the military and the settlers, for whom Métraux frequently expressed an overt

Like the Jesuits working on the fringes of the Chaco in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (cf. Lozano 1989 [1733]), the first Anglican missionaries working in the Argentinean Chaco considered that the major obstacles to evangelization were “the rulers of the darkness of this world” (SAMS 1933: 38; Leake 1933: 67; Grubb 1965: 7). Thus, indigenous practices thought to be in contradiction with the Gospels were considered to be inspired by “the Devil,” “Satan,” or “the evil one” (Grubb 1948: 15; 1965: 7; SAMS 1933: 36) and treated accordingly.

In the Tobas’ memory, the primary targets of Alfred Leake’s actions against “the Devil” were clearly the *pioGonáq*. Indeed, shamans were for the Anglican missionaries the most serious obstacle to evangelization (SAMS 1949: 25-26); moreover, they were regarded as “Satan’s chief weapon” (SAMS 1935b: 121). Besides, the missionaries knew that by performing healing practices themselves they were “competing” with the *pioGonáq* and that consequently their own success and prestige as missionaries depended upon undermining the social and symbolic power of the latter.<sup>67</sup> In the 1990s, people agreed that every time “Alfredo” learnt that the *pioGonáq* or other people were doing things that “he didn’t like,” he went directly to their houses to make them stop doing it. Eduardo, a man in his early forties who became a committed member of the Anglican church, told me about the general attitude of “Alfredo” towards the *pioGonáq*:

I got to see that a bit, that’s why I remember. They say that that man controlled the people a lot, because there was *brujería* [sorcery]. At night somebody who was a *pioGonáq* was

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antipathy. Nevertheless, his 1939 diaries show that the personal uneasiness he then felt towards some of the missionaries dated from his first trip to the area in 1933.

<sup>67</sup> As Leake (1933: 68) wrote: “Medical work is in many ways the most difficult, because of the opposition of the witch-doctors. This work has to be carried on with great caution, for the witch-doctors, although rarely openly hostile, are quick to lay at the door of the missionary any serious sickness or death.”

singing, then the missionary went to look for him ... He went to talk to him so that he left that custom.

The target of these actions included not only the *pioGonáq* but also people who were performing practices “inconsistent with the Gospel” (Grubb 1965: 18). One of them was the *dónagan*, an individual singing (of both seduction and grief) that men performed at night with a *poketá* (gourd). Mariano told me that “Alfredo” emphasized the connection between this singing and “the Devil,” and that he used to tell them: “that ... singing, is the singing of the Devil. So I don’t want you to sing. You must sing with the word of God. We go with that. That’s much better.” Julián, for his part, told me about this singing:

At night people sang. At four in the morning, they also sang. The singing is called *dónagan* ... *Did Alfredo like it?* No, he didn’t like to listen to it. If he listened to it from the distance, then he got up at night; he brought a flash light. He didn’t want them to sing. In the end, it seems that they dropped everything, everything.

The *nomí*, a collective dancing carried out in the evenings, and the *nimatáq*, the male “drinking feast” associated with the brewing of *aloja*, was regarded by the missionaries as “a prelude to immorality” (Leake, quoted by Makower 1989: 67) or “Satan victories” (Grubb 1965: 57). Like in Selva San Andrés (SAMS 1933: 35; Métraux 1967: 171), they were explicitly banned at the mission station. Henry Grubb (1965: 18) wrote:

As we got to know the Tobas better, we found that some of their customs were quite inconsistent with the Gospel and the way of life we preached. We had not the least desire to turn them into imitation foreigners, but the gambling which often took place between the opposing teams in a hockey match and brought great hardship upon the losers, and the immorality associated with some of their dancing, were banned on the mission station.

Several Tobas remember a particular event in which “Alfredo” broke to pieces the carved log of a *yuchán* tree where some Tobas had brewed *aloja* for a “drinking feast” (*nimatáq*). Mariano, for instance, told me:

The celebration of *los antiguos*; that’s called *nimatáq*, when all the people got drunk ... Then Alfredo took the members of the church ... [and] arrived where the man was doing *nimatáq* ... The missionary said: “What you’re doing, you’re not going to do it anymore. You can’t do it because I’m with you. Now, I’m going to pour it all away and cut the *yuchán*.” “All right,” said the man, “All right, I don’t say anything.” Then they called the missionary from the church with an ax and they broke everything to pieces. Then, there was nothing left of all that the *anciano* was doing.<sup>68</sup>

The missionaries’ attempt to restrict “the customs of the old people” also included the *polké*, the “hockey” game practiced by most groups of the Pilcomayo which some missionaries regarded as “a satanic practice” (Métraux 1978: 81). As Diego, a man in his mid-sixties, remembered: “When the missionary arrived ... [he] ordered that we shouldn’t screw around with that, because he didn’t like it. He first watched. Somebody got hurt, the foot, the head, it bled. That wasn’t good.”

These forms of social control included the condemnation of “vices” like the chewing of coca leaves—which the Tobas acquired at the sugar plantations and from the Criollos—and smoking (Makower 1989: 106; Saint 1936: 177) and the weekly “inspections” in the village after the Sunday service: “It was a visit, but it also was something of the nature of an inspection—if things weren’t clean enough, the family

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<sup>68</sup> In one of his reports, Alfred Leake referred to what seems to be the same event, and the sharp contrast between his account and that of Mariano tells us something about the uneven processes of cultural production involving the different social actors who lived in the mission. Leake (1933: 67) wrote: “On one occasion we came across a small drinking party ... and the drinkers acted more after the manner of small children caught in an act of disobedience than grown men. They said the beer was not a good thing to drink, and poured it away and went so far as to ask us to break up the gourd in which it was brewed.”

would be told to sweep up!” (D. Leake, quoted by Makower 1989: 123). Mariano pointed to this zeal to keep cleanness when he remembered that “Alfredo” once arrived at the house of a *pioGonáq* who had been drinking *aloja*: “Alfredo said: ‘It’s stinking here ... It’s stinking here! You don’t have to live here. You have to live over there ...’ The missionary always went to see those who did bad things, those who didn’t obey.”

These types of surveillance practices, together with the image that “Alfredo” was endowed with special powers, seems to have led the Tobas to respect him to the point of being afraid of him. Alfred Leake was aware of this and wrote in 1933: “One of the things that struck us before we had been long with the Tobas ... was their apparent fear of incurring our wrath ... [A] Toba will rarely if ever disagree with a missionary to his face ...” (1933: 67). Pablo told me about the way in which some people reacted to the interruption of a drinking party by “Alfredo”:

People were drinking *aloja*. When don Alfredo saw them from afar, he went where the people were ... And the people didn’t want to be contrary to Alfredo, they didn’t want to be against the missionary. People simply went away, they hid. They didn’t want to say anything in front of the missionary ... They didn’t want to get into trouble.

The daily presence of “don Alfredo” as *kadetá*, charismatic leader, teacher, and “super witch-doctor,” as a authoritarian and paternalistic figure who protected the Tobas from external threats, gradually undermined the Tobas’ initial resistance to adapt to the new values of “religion.” In November 1934, four years after the foundation of the mission, the first Toba converted. In about four weeks he was followed by 16 men “all of whom prayed, confessing their sins, claiming salvation through Christ and asking for the indwelling presence and help of the Holy Spirit” (Makower 1989: 80). Even though some

of them later “fell away” in the following six months over 250 people converted (ibid.: 80). Two years later, in November 1936, the first tobas were baptized (O. Leake 1937: 38). By then, some Tobas had constructed at their own initiative “prayer huts,” *tamnaGaiki*, in order to gather and pray among themselves, both in El Toba and other villages (Price 1934b: 142; SAMS 1937: 59). In a few years, several Toba “evangelists” went to pray to the other villages on a regular basis (Tebboth 1938a: 41; 1938c: 146; Leake 1939: 85).

This “conversion” to Christianity involved much more than a changing religious identity (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 250-251). It was part of a more embracing historical transformation, intertwined with the experience of terror with the army, the growing presence of the settlers, and the migrations to the sugar plantations. The subjectivity so being shaped was far from fitting the religious canons that the missionaries might have regarded as “ideal.” Alfred Leake was well aware of this. In 1937, he lamented that many Tobas did not appear to “have entered really deeply into the things of God” and that women were “particularly unresponsive” (Makower 1989: 81). Decades later, when he had retired in England, Leake sent a tape to the Tobas in which he remembered those frustrating moments and told them that they were initially “tough” to convert. In August 1997, after the tape had been replayed at a Sunday service, several people repeated this phrase to me, “the Tobas were tough,” with a smile in their faces, amused at the conservatism of their grandparents.

Nonetheless —to borrow an expression from Jean and John Comaroff (1991: 251)— the “long conversation” with the missionaries was having a deep cumulative effect among the Tobas. It was a “conversation” which involved not simply a “circulation” of

messages but also forms of cultural production embedded in daily practices, and which in the long run reformulated much of the meanings of the Tobas' everyday life.<sup>69</sup> In 1939, when Alfred Métraux visited Sombrero Negro for the second time, he hardly recognized the mission he had seen six years earlier. He wrote in his diary that at the service, instead of the Tobas with painted faces and feathered heads (1933b: 207), he found "dressed" Tobas singing "boring" psalms "without beauty":

*I' m going to the Mission, which I hardly recognize: two new buildings have been built ... The Tobas live now in huts with walls plastered by mud, grouped inside an enclosure. The village site has changed and has expanded ... I go to a service at the same little church that I loved so much. I don't find any of the impressions of the past. The Indians are now dressed, and the songs they sing are without beauty: the boring psalms. They are engaged in their masquerades (concentration, head resting against arms), exactly like the people at Algarrobal. The sermon is way too long, but the Indians appear to listen to it with attention (Métraux 1978: 64, my translation).*

The missionaries themselves also noticed that, even though many Tobas were abandoning the "heathen ways," they lacked the "enthusiasm and vigor" of the old days. The same year of Métraux's second visit, Alfred Leake (1939: 86) wrote with a paradoxical sense of nostalgia similar to the one expressed by the Swiss ethnographer:

*It is strange perhaps but the old fiery zeal, which was so evident in the heathen days in the frequent speeches of the chiefs as they harangued their people, and the enthusiasm and vigour shown by the witch-doctor as he practiced his craft, or by the young men as they took part in the old tribal dances, seems to be almost entirely absent from their testimony as Christians.*

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<sup>69</sup> This "productive" conversation, as could not be otherwise, also transformed the missionaries' subjectivity. As noted by Jean and John Comaroff (1991: 54), this aspect of evangelization has been usually overlooked in anthropology. In our case, the analysis of the Anglican missionaries' own "acculturation" goes beyond the scope of this work. Suffice is to say that the missionaries at El Toba were clearly fascinated by many of the Tobas' practices. Thus, some of them seem to have imitated (consciously or not) some of the "Tobas' ways," like fishing in the river, hunting, tattooing, eating "bush food," horse riding, among others.

The ambiguity which today overflows people's memory of "Alfredo" leads us not only to the ambiguity which pervaded the early experience of missionization but also to the everyday forms of contention it conveyed.

### **Ambiguity and Contention**

As we have seen, the mission became for many Tobas a complex, contradictory place which mingled the protection from the military and the promise of a new era with daily forms of social control. Somehow condensing the ambiguity resulting from this twofold process, in 1935 a visitor to El Toba noted: "In general, the adult Indians profess a respectful submission not exempted of a certain distrust towards the reverend missionaries ..." (Saint 1936; 178, my translation). Along these lines, even though at first the Tobas called the missionaries *kadetá*, "our fathers," they ended up using a more generic term to refer to them: *dingolék*, "the gringo people," a term which rather than kinship, proximity, and reverence (*kadetá*), emphasizes cultural and linguistic distance.

At first sight, two broadly defined groups of Tobas stood in tension with each other: those who became committed "believers" and those who rejected the missionaries' ways. Simultaneously, a large number of people seemed to have been trying to engage with the missionaries while maintaining a certain distance from them, to domesticate and harness their resources (like material goods and services) while critically rejecting their order and discipline (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 247). This ambiguity probably led a missionary to write: "The Tobas as a tribe are very erratic, embracing with enthusiasm new movements, then gradually falling off" (SAMS 1937: 59).

A story gathered among the Tobas by Métraux (1946a: 135) about the “trickster” *uaiakaláchigi* (“fox”) brings to light other ambiguous meanings associated with the early experience of missionization. For this story is basically a parody of the missionaries, in which fox-the-missionary fools the people:

Fox pretended to be a man from God. He sent a man to gather the people. They made a house like the one we are sitting in, and built a big staircase at each end. Fox sang and sang. All the Indians gathered. Fox went down to greet them. He had taken the shape of a man so nobody recognized him, and everyone thought he was a man from God. When the people asked him for something, he divided up a big cheese. He also gave them a big sack of corn to be shared among themselves. The people were very pleased. When they asked for *mate*, he gave them horses' excrement. As the people were ignorant, they took it for good *mate*. Fox climbed to his house again and sang. The people stared at him. Fox threw among them the value of seven pesos in nickels. People believed in him and thought he was a missionary because he was throwing away money. He told them “Come and work here, make a big village. I shall give you clothes.”<sup>70</sup>

This story is very significant, for it reflects the fact that many Tobas saw the missionaries mostly as a source of material goods, something of which the latter were partially aware (cf. SAMS 1937: 54-55; Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]). As to the distribution of money, Métraux (1946a: 136) rightly noted that “... it expresses only a secret wish on the part of those who would like nothing better than to have the missionaries spread coins among them.” And the fact that fox-the-missionary was basically fooling the Tobas and lying to them (from a position of spatial and social asymmetry) condenses part of the confusion existing in the minds of many people as to the exact character of the missionaries (ibid.: 136). In chapter nineteen, I will return to this image of the “riches” associated with the mission station.

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<sup>70</sup> The story ends when Carancho, *kakadeláchigi*, discovers fox and reveals his true character as an impostor. As a result, the people cut fox into pieces and burned him so that he could not lie anymore (Métraux 1946a: 136).

Even Tobas who were committed “believers” were not free of ambiguities. The missionaries occasionally suspected that many “faithful” Tobas had “converted” mostly to please them or obtain some type of benefit (cf. Leake 1933: 67-68; SAMS 1935a: 87). When Métraux (1978: 60) visited El Toba in 1939, he noted that the attitude of many people during the service seemed to be that of an affected concentration, very similar to the one he had observed in Misión Chaqueña among the Wichís (1978: 64): “During the prayer, men cover their head against their arms or keep the head low. They give all the impression of a great concentration. It seems to me, however, that it is more fictitious than real ...”

Feeling that their power and prestige were being undermined, the staunchest opponents of the missionaries were the *pioGonáq*, and at first some of them launched unambiguous forms of resistance against them. However, in the 1990s most people argued that “Alfredo” was too powerful for them to cause him any harm. Mariano told me the following story about several *pioGonáq* who “died” struck by lightning when they attempted to kill him:

Alfredo didn't want the *pioGonáq* to sing ... And the *pioGonáq* got angry. They ... got angry, but they were scared ... Maybe because they had already seen that Alfredo had power ... Well, there was a *pioGonáq* ... He wanted to kill Alfredo that night ... There was like a light, coming out of the door of Alfredo's house ... The *pioGonáq* had seen it. The other *pioGonáq* were close to Alfredo's house ... And some of them were touched by lightning, and they died. *Why was there a lightning?* So that all the devils couldn't kill Alfredo. *Did Alfredo send it?* Well, he was begging, begging, begging ... When he was praying, he begged so that they didn't get him ... Then, God gave it to him. *Did God protect Alfredo?* Yes, he did. Then all the devils went away ... They couldn't. All of them died ...

Nicacio, himself a *pioGonáq*, told me that “Alfredo” once resisted the *pioGonáq* who wanted to kill him by “tying up with a chain” the *payák*, the evil spirit or “devil”

which provides the shaman with power. He added that “Alfredo” prevailed “because he had the spirit of God.” However, since the *pioGonáq* also participated in some of the benefits of the mission, they also seem to have adopted ambivalent attitudes, even though maintaining a critical distance from the missionaries. For instance, in the village of Laguna Martín, three kilometers downstream from El Toba, people continued singing and dancing for a longer period of time than at the mission and the *pioGonáq* there were among the staunchest in their opposition to the mission (cf. Tebboth 1938a: 41). Mariano remembered in 1996 that Carancho, a famous *pioGonáq* of Laguna Martín, continued singing and dancing “because the missionary was far away.” However, these *pioGonáq* rarely defied the missionaries openly (cf. Leake 1933: 68) and their dissent often came to light in their interaction with the Toba preachers. In 1938, for instance, one of these *pioGonáq*, while drunk, threatened to kill a Toba evangelist with his rifle “unless he desisted from visiting his village to preach the Gospel” (Tebboth 1938c: 146). These Tobas who were critical of evangelization, nonetheless, also benefited from the mission: after all, the *dingoléek* protected them from the army and the settlers and provided them with valuable resources. Dora Tebboth captured this ambivalence when she wrote that the people of Laguna Martín “have moved just far away from the mission not to come regularly to church, and yet near enough to hear local gossip and to sell any handiwork they make” (1989 [1938-1946]: 106).

The experience of missionization became an arena swept by complex processes of social control, resistance, and accommodation. In the midst of these processes, the Tobas were able to maintain some of the practices censured by the missionaries, most noticeably shamanism, even though the experience of missionization has reformulated the way it is

enacted and the meanings it conveys (as we shall see). Some everyday practices at odds with strict Anglican standards like coca-chewing, wine-drinking, and smoking persist until today, but the missionaries have been quite successful in inculcating that they are “vices” with negative connotations.<sup>71</sup> In spite of this, in the long run many of the practices of “the ancient ones” were abandoned.

By 1933, the Tobas had destroyed, according to European ethnographers, all the scalps taken from Nivaklé warriors (Métraux 1937: 180, 396; Rydén 1980 [1935]: 1). At the mission, people stopped practicing the *nimatáq* (“drinking feasts”) soon after the arrival of the missionaries, but years later people were still holding them in Laguna Martín (Leake 1931: 52; 1933: 67; Tebboth 1938a: 41). Even though in the early 1940s, the missionaries reported that there was an increase in drinking of *aloja* and a general resurgence of “immorality” (Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 170, 134), in the long run this practice was abandoned altogether. The Tobas conducted the *nomí*, the collective round dance, in the mission for a few years, at least when Alfred Leake was away (Every 1933: 126; Rydén 1980 [1935]: 4). In other villages, people continued dancing for several years, but this practice was eventually abandoned there as well. The *nomí*, nonetheless, was reproduced in a totally new social context, far from the missionaries’ reach. For several decades, the Tobas carried it out only at the sugar plantations, where it acquired new meanings of “excess” and “freedom” in a context of exploitation, alienation, and terror (as we shall see in part III). The constitution of the mission as a place where the Tobas saw

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<sup>71</sup> The Tobas, however, see smoking as a light and tolerable “vice.” Some Tobas who are committed Anglicans smoke brand tobacco when they can afford it.

themselves unable to carry out many of the practices into which they had been socialized, had an important influence on the way they experienced the bush.

### **“In the Bush, You Can do Anything”**

Men and women were continually moving between the mission and the bush in search of food, firewood, and other natural resources, and this permanent movement enhanced the contrast that was being created between the two places. And as part of their own subtle forms of dissent with the missionaries, the Tobas turned the bush into a haven from the “sanctuary.” There was only one other place where they were also able to put limits on the missionaries’ surveillance: the sugar plantations. Nonetheless, the experiences behind the construction of these two domains as places free of missionary control are utterly different. In the bush, unlike in the plantations, this autonomy was enhanced by their daily practice of productive activities over which they exerted a direct control, and which they conducted in a familiar place.

Firstly, the bush became the “natural” place where people who were being subjected to “Alfredo’s” rebukes could hide from him. Pablo, a person uncommitted to Anglicanism, told me that the people who were afraid of the missionary’s censure simply escaped to the bush:

People were drinking *aloja*. When don Alfredo saw them from afar, he went where the people were ... People simply went away, they hid ... *Where did they go?* Over there, to the bush, to the fringe of the bush. They hid for a while ... The people went away, the people escaped.

Along similar lines, Mariano told me about the desperate escape by Miguel, a *pioGonáq* who was drinking *aloja* and who did not want to be reprimanded by “Alfredo”:

He was drinking, Miguel. And then his woman was looking at the road —“Look! Here comes Alfredo!”— And then the old man got up and fled as if he was an animal. He didn’t use the little door of the house, he left through the other side, through the wall, but ... it was a hut, *toldería* ... Since he was a *pioGonáq* ... he was with the darkness. He saw that the missionary was like light. He didn’t want to see the light ... And he was afraid, he went to the bush ... He ran into the bush.

The bush was not only the shelter for people on the run but also the place where the Tobas could perform those very practices censured by the missionaries. Alfred Leake reported in 1933: “In the first hot season drinking-feasts were held very quietly or in hiding in the forests away from the villages. On one occasion we came across a small drinking party behind a rough bush fence” (1933: 67). These practices also were carried out when entire households set off to conduct foraging expeditions, which as we have seen could last for several weeks or months. These foraging parties were usually formed by “... an Indian leading carrying a gun, followed by his womenfolk bearing their string bags containing a very few necessities slung on their backs ... whilst the children seated on donkeys bring up the rear” (Tebboth 1936: 154). Located far from the mission and from the rest of the villages, these foraging campsites, *nemacháqa*, provided an ideal opportunity to carry out unmolested those practices censured by the missionaries. The latter certainly looked at these campsites as a hindrance to their evangelical work. In 1938, for instance, the Tobas carried out a particularly massive “return to the bush” and quite a large number of people abandoned the mission. Alfred Tebboth (1938b: 113-114), one of the missionaries, wrote:

Just recently there has been a return of the Indians' natural nomadic spirit and quite a number of them have already left us to return to their old haunts of the days before the Mission. This is a pity, for we are not able to visit them as we would like, owing to lack of staff right now. Only the keenest Christians among them return for the Sunday morning service.

Four years later, in 1942, this "return to the bush" seems to have reached a critical level. Dora Tebboth complained that "spiritually" the Tobas had reached "a low ebb" and that there was "a return to witchcraft, dancing, immorality, coca-chewing, stealing, cow-killing," which she associated with the fact that for seemingly "insignificant reasons" the Tobas moved away from the mission (1989 [1938-1946]: 134). The missionaries lamented not only these massive retreats of the Tobas "to their old haunts," but also the shorter foraging trips they carried out just for a few days. Both types of forays affected the attendance at school and at the religious services; furthermore, according to the missionaries they undermined the very religious "enthusiasm" of the Tobas (cf. O. Leake 1937: 38; Leake 1940: 9); as one of them put it: "more often than not, other duties, such as fishing and fruit-gathering, are given first place by the unconcerned when the Gospel is preached" (Arnott 1938: 21). The "call of the forest and the river" was also seen as an important obstacle in their attempt to impose "work habits" among the Tobas:

On the whole, they have proved rather disappointing workers, and not yet become keen on regular employment. The river and forest call them before they have been at work very long, and they cannot settle down after this call has come, until they have spent a few days in roaming about the forests in search of food or in fishing in the river (SAMS 1933: 39).

Nonetheless, the missionaries had their own ambiguities on this issue. They understood the economic importance of these foraging expeditions and some even regarded fishing, hunting, and gathering as part of the Toba traditions that could be

preserved (cf. Leake 1940: 8; Grubb 1965: 18-19; Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 140). Regino, a man in his sixties who was for many years a “non-believer,” told me that “Alfredo” did not oppose these foraging campsites “for at that time there was nothing. He knew that the people looked for food.” Moreover, Nicacio told me that “Alfredo” enjoyed eating “bush food” and that he encouraged people to continue doing so, for —he used to tell them— “that’s the food that God made for the poor.” Still, these long foraging expeditions were for the missionaries practices that they somehow distrusted. Aside from taking people from the school and religious services, these *nemacháqa*, “*campamentos*,” became the temporary refuge of those who wanted to sing, chew coca leaves, and drink *aloja* undisturbed. Segundo told me that those who were “into vices” used to participate in these foraging expeditions very often, “because deep inside the bush, you can do anything: chew coca, *aloja*, sing ... look for a *yuchán* to make *aloja*.”

As part of this close association between the bush and practices at odds with the missionaries’ teachings, Regino told me that when he was a “non-believer” he lived in the bush for prolonged periods. He recalled his past experiences in the bush while we were standing right outside a church packed with people who were listening to the Anglican bishops of the region, and while I was desperately trying to write down everything he said in my notebook:

Before I became a believer, I was always in the bush, foraging. I liked it that way, wandering, hunting in the bush. Since then, up to now, I’m with this religion, for 33 years. *After you converted, did you continue doing these campsites?* Not anymore, because all that’s gone. When I wasn’t a believer maybe the vices always kept me going [to the bush] ... drinking wine, chewing coca. *You mean, the vices made you keep on going to the bush?* Maybe that’s why. Maybe that’s the reason why I liked to go out. Because of the vices. *What did you do in the campsite?* We always stayed, like that, in the bush. Then, we had to look for a place where it was possible to hunt any animal. That’s the way it was. *How long did you use to stay there for?* Maybe one month, or two months. Because there was

nothing. There were no jobs like there are now. These new ones already have a little job. In those days there was nothing. Then, you had to go out and make a campsite. You had to stay there. *Did you go with your family?* Yes ... but we were always fine. Nothing happened. I didn't mention the spirit of God at all ... No thinking about praying ... I never said thanks to God.

Later on, Regino told me that he first thought about "converting" when, while in a campsite deep inside the bush, he looked at his face in a small mirror. He was impressed by what he saw: long, thick dirty hair, a dirty face, a long beard; the true picture of a *viágahik*, a *montaraz*, a "bushman." I then told him: "it sounds like your beard was just like mine." His reply was as quick as it was intense and took the conversation back to the serious point he was trying to make: to emphasize the connection between "the bush" and "the vices." Regino stared at me and told me: "But you're not chewing coca!"

In this active process of cultural production the bush was charged with multiple and overlapping meanings. For the Tobas who wanted to have a respite from the missionaries' surveillance, the bush became a place of "freedom" where it was possible to reproduce "the good old things" of the past. At the same time, for the "believers" the bush became a space which, while providing for their daily livelihood, was associated with "vices" and "sinful" practices. Moreover, like in the case of Regino, for some "converting" to Christianity was tantamount to "dropping the bush." However, this "conversion" did not imply a rejection of all that the bush represented as a place of autonomy; rather, it implied renouncing the bush as a "heathen" place removed from the moral values taught by the missionaries and constructed in opposition to them.

The field of cultural production created between the bush and the mission was not restricted to these two places. Rather, it was part of a wider set of social relations and

experiences which for decades had absorbed the Tobas into the plantation economy of the San Francisco Valley. Consequently, the meanings of the bush as a haven and a place of their own and the meanings of the mission as a “sanctuary” and as place of social control were also being shaped in a deep manner by the Tobas’ seasonal experiences in the cane-fields.

**PART III:  
SKELETONS IN THE CANE-FIELDS**



**EIGHT:  
“THE PROMISED LAND”**

What it is hard for me to understand, and fills me with admiration, is how you have been able to accomplish such a magnificent work with a mentally inferior human element.

*An English traveler,*  
on San Martín del Tabacal (1946)

San Martín del Tabacal was ... the Biblical miracle of the promised land.

*Ernesto Aráoz,*  
Vida y obra del doctor Patrón Costas (1966)

The memories of their labor experiences at the sugar plantation are a recurrent theme among the Tobas, men and women, who are over 50 years old. Many casual conversations with them at one point or another trigger on their part an anecdote, an event, a comment about the years they spent in *kahogonaGá*. Being part of a pattern of labor migrations which was interrupted in the late 1960s, but which stretches back for decades to the time of the “ancient ones,” the *ingenios* weigh in the memory of the older generation of Tobas like a haunting collection of images which seems to conjure their hallucinatory power, to surpass their capacity to make sense of it. The *ingenio* was a place which was central in the constitution of their own identity and which is central today in their reconstruction of their own sense of history: a history wrapped up in a seemingly never-ending tension between “the mountains” and home.

The sugar plantations which at the beginning of the century dominated the first experiences of the Tobas were, as we have seen, Ledesma and La Esperanza. In the decade of 1930, this situation had changed significantly. Parallel to the missionization which was transforming the Tobas’ lives in their own villages, their labor migrations

became deeper and deeper immersed into the orbit of San Martín del Tabacal. This plantation had already recruited the Tobas several times in the 1920s. From the 1930s on, and except for a few migrations to Ledesma in the early 1940s, most of their migrations focused on “the *ingenio* San Martín.”<sup>72</sup> Consequently, the Tobas’ current memory of *kahogonaGá* is deeply connected to the particular spatial configuration of Tabacal.

### “The All-out Struggle Against Nature and Men”

The polo matches that the Leach brothers used to organize at La Esperanza, right near the sugar-cane fields, were not restricted to the Englishmen who directed the plantation. Young members of the aristocracy of the province of Salta also participated in these matches. Prominent among them was a young lawyer named Robustiano Patrón Costas (Aráoz 1966: 35). Born in Salta in 1878, Patrón Costas would become one of the most important and active political figures of Salta and Argentina during the first half of the twentieth century. He would also become the cofounder and head of San Martín del Tabacal, one of the most powerful sugar plantations of Argentina, and also a central figure in the Tobas’ current social memory.

In 1908, Robustiano Patrón Costas and his brother bought lands, then covered by jungle, in the area of Orán, on the Bermejo River. In the following years, in association with Pedro Mosoteguy, they continued purchasing lands in the area, and when the railway reached Orán in 1916 they decided to start the cultivation of sugar cane (San Martín del

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<sup>72</sup> Since 1927, the recruitment of indigenous laborers was supervised by the *Comisión Honoraria de Reducciones de Indios*, which was part of the Ministry of the Interior. In 1931, San Martín del Tabacal received a formal “authorization” from the *Comisión* to recruit the Tobas of Sombrero Negro (Beck 1994: 182). However, these controls were rarely put into effect, and in the 1940s Ledesma and San Martín del

Tabacal S.A 1946). In 1918, Patrón Costas became the director of the collective society formed to run the new *ingenio*, called from then on “San Martín del Tabacal.”<sup>73</sup> One thousand men were then employed to clear the jungle in order to turn it into sugar-cane fields. The factory was installed and started milling cane from the first harvest in July 1920. Patrón Costas (1966 [1934]: 57, my translation) remembered years later: “The all-out struggle against nature and men had started.”

San Martín del Tabacal became soon a paradigmatic symbol of the “progress” accomplished in the wilderness by a successful entrepreneur. The plantation was: “... the first trail of progress opened in the thick jungle of the *Chaco salteño*, which in a few years would make the Biblical miracle of the promised land” (Aráoz 1966: 27, my translation). Unlike La Esperanza,<sup>74</sup> San Martín del Tabacal was an entirely Argentinean company. Furthermore, due to the political ascendance of its administrator, it was the plantation most closely tied to the dynamics of class struggle in the region and in Argentina as a whole. By the time he founded San Martín del Tabacal, Robustiano Patrón Costas was already a prominent political figure; he was national senator for Salta and had previously occupied key positions in various provincial governments of Salta, including that of governor between 1913-1916 (Luque Colombres 1991: 71-75). But it was in the 1930s that he became more influential in the national political arena. In September 1930, a military coup overthrew the democratically-elected government of Hipólito Yrigoyen and Patrón Costas emerged as a staunch and leading supporter of the new regime. With

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Tabacal were competing to recruit the Tobas regardless which plantation had the appropriate “permit” (Leake 1941).

<sup>73</sup> A.H.S., *Protocolo del escribano público W. Uriarte*. Salta, 19 de julio de 1918, fojas 469-473, and *Protocolo del escribano público Carlos Figueroa*, Vol. 3. Salta 11 de agosto de 1934, fojas 601-603.

<sup>74</sup> In the following decades, however, La Esperanza would be purchased by Argentinean businessmen.

the coup, the traditional land-owning elite recovered part of its old power, which had been threatened by the rising politicization of the working and middle-class. The sugar barons of northern Argentina were particularly favored by the new *de facto* government. The world crisis had lowered the international price of sugar and the government protected the sugar industry by increasing the taxation on imported sugar (Rutledge 1987: 187-188). Thus, the plantations enjoyed a favorable context which allowed them to experience significant growth, especially after 1935 (cf. Bisio and Forni 1976: 12).

This expansion was led by San Martín del Tabacal, which had already grown considerably in the second half of the 1920s (Bisio and Forni 1976: 14-15). In the 1930s, the political ascendance of Patrón Costas strengthened the leading position of this plantation. He was elected senator for Salta in 1931 and provisional president of the Senate in 1932 (positions for which he was reelected in 1937). In 1940, when president Ortíz resigned due to health problems, Patrón Costas became vice-president of Argentina. Moreover, in September 1942, Patrón Costas became provisional president while president Castillo was absent on a trip (Luque Colombres 1991: 159-160). These processes had their close correlation in Salta. Following an old blend of inbreeding between the sugar industry and the regional political structure, Robustiano Patrón Costas' brother (Luis Patrón Costas, 1936-1940) and then his son-in-law (Abraham Cornejo, 1940-1943) were elected governors of Salta, usually through systematic electoral fraud (Rutledge 1987: 191; Gómez 1992: 7).

Within this "favorable" political context, in the 1930s San Martín del Tabacal was the plantation with the highest growth rate in land surface planted with cane. Between 1930-1940, it expanded from 4,805 to 7,616 hectares (Rutledge 1987: 189). In 1940, it

produced 34% of all the sugar coming out of Salta and Jujuy, the highest share it ever reached (Bisio and Forni 1976: 14). Due to this expansion, the administration looked for new sources of laborers, to be added to the Aborigines from the Chaco and the Chiriguano. The indigenous peasantry of the highlands of Salta and Jujuy, an area known as the Puna, became a primary target of this new strategy of labor recruitment, based on the systematic purchase of old haciendas. These peasants used to pay rent to their *hacendados* in goods or cash, and from then on they were forced to pay it in the form of labor services at the harvest in San Martín del Tabacal (Rutledge 1987: 195, 198-199; Bisio and Forni 1976: 25, 44-45). A similar situation occurred in a large estate located in the Calchaquí valleys, in Salta, bought by Patrón Costas in 1928 (Bisio and Forni 1976: 40). In the 1930s, San Martín del Tabacal also started recruiting impoverished peasants from the provinces of Catamarca and to a lesser degree La Rioja, usually through a web of rural store keepers to whom the peasants were indebted (Solari 1937: 122-123; Rutledge 1987: 205-206). After the Chaco War (1932-1935), there was also an increase in the flow of Bolivian workers to the Argentinean plantations, foreshadowing the massive increase that was to take place in the 1940s and 1950s.

In those days, Patrón Costas was able to create —paradoxically— a powerful aura of benevolent paternalism over many of his workers. As a good conservative patrician, Patrón Costas led the plantation on a personalized, “face-to-face” basis, and this had an important ideological and political effect among workers such as the Tobas (as we shall see). This aura of protectionism was an aura of power, nourished by the amalgamation between the first part of his composed last name, “Patrón” (his father’s surname), and his status as *patrón*, as boss of the plantation. Moreover, this status as *patrón* gained in the

eyes of the *aborígenes* more strength than his actual last name. As we shall see, for the Tobas his last name was simply “Costas,” and “Patrón” was the way people used to address him as boss. Because of this, they usually refer to him in Spanish as “*el patrón Costas*,” i.e. “boss Costas.”

Nourishing this image of a powerful yet accessible and sensitive *patrón*, Patrón Costas used to emphasize in public his “concern” for the well-being of his workers. In 1934, for instance, while addressing the president of Argentina at Tabacal, Patrón Costas (1966 [1934]: 55, my translation) said that the worker “is a human force of inestimable value, which is necessary to consider with the love that our religion compels us to show to all our peers.” The “social sensitivity” of Patrón Costas, however, was based on a political philosophy rooted in a firm belief in the inferiority of the working class. He opposed universal suffrage because (he argued) the working people were “unprepared to vote” (Luque Colombres 1991: 61, 217, cf. Patrón Costas 1937: 3) and argued that the government of Yrigoyen (overthrown in 1930) “had destroyed all idea of a genuine hierarchy in the social and intellectual values, by the systematic elevation of those who are stupid and inferior” (Patrón Costas 1991 [1933]: 210, 212).

In the 1940s, however, the political situation favorable to Patrón Costas became unstable. The conservative government ruling the country since 1930 was unpopular and the military were increasingly hostile to the perspective of the fraudulent perpetuation of the regime in the elections planned for 1943. Patrón Costas became the paramount symbol of the elitism of the regime, and the nationalist and the pro-allies members of the army alike strongly opposed him (Potash 1981: 265). In spite of this, in February 1943 the pro-government forces proclaimed the head of San Martín del Tabacal as the pre-

candidate for president. Due to the well-oiled system of electoral fraud upon which the conservatives relied, this was almost equivalent to proclaiming that Patrón Costas was going to be the next president of Argentina.

### **Populist Winds**

On June 4, 1943, the same day that Patrón Costas was to be proclaimed candidate, the military took over. A young lieutenant who participated in the coup and occupied an important position in the new government, argued that the “revolution” was made in order to “impede the fall of the government into the hands of the reactionary” and called Patrón Costas “a big exploiter” (quoted by Luca de Tena, Calvo and Peicovich 1976: 34. my translation). This officer’s name was Juan Domingo Perón, and the events of 1943 represented the beginning of his rising political career. The military coup symbolized the end of a whole political era in Argentina, characterized by the rule of the land-owning aristocracy, and the beginning of a new one shaped by the rising of populism and the unionized working class; it also meant the abrupt end of Patrón Costas’ political career. With the ascent of a series of governments hostile to his figure, Patrón Costas retreated to Salta and devoted most of his time to running San Martín del Tabacal, which continued under his firm grip.

The social and political changes brought by the new military government (1943-1946) and by the first governments of Perón (1946-1955) had an important impact on San Martín del Tabacal. The *estatuto del peón*, passed in 1943, ameliorated the working conditions in the San Francisco Valley, especially among the permanent factory and plantation workers, even though the *estatuto* had some points aimed at increasing labor

control (Rutledge 1975: 112; 1987: 212-215). Also in 1943, the government abolished the payment of rent in labor services and as a result the direct control that San Martín del Tabacal exerted over the peasantry of the highlands came to an end. Most peasants, however, continued migrating to the sugar-cane harvest out of economic necessity (Rutledge 1987: 219-222; Bisio and Forni 1976: 26).

After the expansion of the mid-1930s, the 1940s represented a period of economic crisis for the sugar industry, a crisis which nonetheless started before the coup of 1943 (Bisio and Forni 1976: 15). In the decade 1940-1950, San Martín del Tabacal decreased its participation in the regional production by 7%, and from then on Ledesma took the leading role among the sugar plantations of Salta and Jujuy (ibid.: 15). However, in spite of the new political climate in Argentina, the government of Perón did not get to curb the power of the *ingenio*-owners (Rutledge 1975: 112). San Martín del Tabacal continued being one of the most powerful plantations of Argentina; in 1945 (two years after it became a limited liability company) it encompassed 45,202 hectares, of which 11,800 were sugar cane fields, dwellings, and plantations of citrus and cotton. The rest, 33,400 hectares, were covered by jungle and used for the sawmill and as a reserve for firewood for the factory. By then, it was the plantation with the highest daily production of refined sugar in the world (San Martín de Tabacal S.A. 1946: 12).

The changing dynamic of class struggle in Argentina had an impact not only in the pace of growth of San Martín del Tabacal but also in the composition of its labor force. With the advent of Peronism, the unions of the sugar plantations strengthened their power and launched strikes more frequently. The administrations responded by sending more labor recruiters to Bolivia in order to hire men without working permits and thus weaken

the power of the unions. Consequently, the Bolivian workers soon became the bulk of the labor force employed during the harvest, especially after the military coup which overthrew Perón in 1955 (Whiteford 1981: 22, 24-25; Rutledge 1987: 204). By the late 1950s, the Bolivians formed more than 50 % of the seasonal workers in San Martín del Tabacal (Bisio and Forni 1976: 49).

The incorporation of new groups of workers brought an important change in the role played by the indigenous groups of the Chaco, among them the Tobas, in the productive dynamics of the plantation. Basically, since the 1930s the workers from the Chaco started to be replaced by Puneños and Bolivians as cane-cutters, for the administration regarded the latter as more “efficient” and “productive” than the former. Even though the *aborígenes* of the Chaco lost part of their share in the productive structure of Ledesma and La Esperanza, they continued migrating massively to San Martín del Tabacal. But the Tobas, Wichís, Nivaklés, Chorotes, and Pilagás became a floating mass of unskilled workers employed in tasks complementary to the harvest.

### **Medals and Silences**

In the bourgeois imagination, San Martín del Tabacal was the product of the skills and initiative of a class which had to struggle, as an English traveler who visited the plantation put it, against the “mentally inferior human element” which provided the plantation with its labor power (quoted by San Martín del Tabacal S.A. 1946: 13, my translation). Moreover, it was the product of a class which, according to an administrator of Ledesma, deserved “a gold medal” for the “civilizing task” they were carrying out among “*la indiada*” (quoted by Lagos 1989: vii). It is not surprising then that for those

directing the plantations, the tension opposing the bush and the plantations inverted the meanings embedded in the indigenous cultural practices. As part of ideological and cultural constructs which go back to the beginning of the twentieth century, the plantations emerged for these actors as nurturing places pouring light into the wilderness of the Chaco; as places of healing where the “wretched *indiadas*” were able to recover from the sufferings and wants of their life in the bush:

The Matacos arrive here thin and tired, but after six or seven months, when the harvest is over ... they return to the bottom of the Chaco inflated with sugar like bees (Huret 1988 [1911]: 35, my translation).

The civilizing and beneficial work of the factories reached the jungles of Chaco and Formosa and the east of Bolivia, whose wretched *indiadas* go to the factories of Jujuy every year during the harvest ... [A]fter a short period of time, they recover from their corporal misery, returning to their homes with the necessary fortitude to sustain themselves until the following harvest (Schleh 1921, quoted by Beck 1994: 179-180, my translation).

For those eyes which looked at the sugar-cane fields from the balconies of the factories or from cars supervising the pace of work, the plantations were certainly a “promised land” with religious overtones, to which long lines of savages went in pilgrimage every year in search of their share in the benefits of capitalism. This construction was based on the silence and anonymity of the thousands of men, women, and children who every year left their sweat —and often their lives— in the sugar-cane fields.

**NINE:  
“IT SEEMED LIKE WE LIVED IN THE INGENIO”**

I always remember when the times of  
the *ingenio*. It seemed like we lived in  
the *ingenio*.

*Marcelino (1995)*

**Whispers in the Dark**

In the silence of the night, at four in the morning in the winter, at three in the morning in the spring, the head foreman of the *lote*, the *capatáz mayor*, rang the bell. The assistant foremen started walking around the huts of the Tobas, screaming “¡*arriba, arriba!*,” “get up, get up!” It was utterly dark, and in the winter it was freezing cold. The Tobas sat around the fires which illuminated the interior of their huts all night long, sprinkling the *lote* with dozens of trembling lights. The warm *mates* passed from one hand to another. Some people, the most committed “believers,” prayed, almost whispering, for the well-being of their families, as the missionaries had taught them to do. Others shook their gourds, the *poketá*, and sang monotonous and wordless song which filled up the air before the break of dawn. Later on, still in the dark, people left their huts and walked to the warehouse of the *lote*, where they gathered around the *capatáz mayor*. Under the light of lanterns, the *capatáz* instructed the Toba who acted as translator, the *lenguaráz*, on the different tasks of the day and decreed how many people were needed for each of them. The *lenguaráz* then translated the directions to the rest of the men, women, and youngsters. Axes, shovels, hoes, pickaxes, machetes, and knives were then taken from the warehouse and distributed, according to the task of the day, to the members of the different work gangs.

Before the break of dawn, led by other foremen called *mayordomos*, the different groups walked to their assigned places of work, taking their tools with them. Sometimes, they had to walk up to ten kilometers to get there. When the sun emerged from the east, illuminating the imposing silhouette of the Andes, the men, women, and boys were already working, cutting trees, wood, weeds, or cane with tools in continuous movement. Another day at San Martín del Tabacal.

### The Journey to Koliá

The *waidomá* (contractors) from Tabacal usually arrived at misión El Toba between March and April, a time which depended on the changing demand for labor of the plantation.<sup>75</sup> The anticipation of the migration provoked a great deal of anxiety and expectation among the Tobas. On April 6, 1939, Alfred Métraux (1978: 73) witnessed the arrival of the *mayordomos* and wrote in his diary:

This afternoon the recruiters of Indians arrived. Great emotion in the village. In a few moments, there is a whole crowd around our house. These *contratistas* have a very "Chaco" look, with their *guarda monte* [leather chaps], their revolvers and their hats. They have descended all along the Pilcomayo, letting the Indians know of the proximity of the harvest and telling them to get ready. The Indians seem to know them well for they come to give them friendly greetings. The recruiters must have a good memory, for they call them by their names and treat them with familiarity.

The arrival of the *waidomá* was usually followed by a negotiation with the Toba *capitanes*, the leaders which mediated the relationship with the *ingenio*, regarding the rationing and the type and amount of goods to be distributed in advance. The promises of the *mayordomos* sometimes helped people forget previous experiences of exploitation

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<sup>75</sup> Hence, the Tobas sometimes were recruited as early as in February and as late as in June.

and mistreatment. In 1938, for instance, the Tobas had decided not to go to the sugar-cane harvest due to the bad experiences of the previous year, “but the promise of money in advance, new clothes, and good food on the journey made them think again...” (Tebboth 1938b: 113, see also 1943: 36). The number of people who migrated varied every year, and depended on the experience of the previous season, the demand for laborers, and the abundance of natural resources in their home territories. The missionaries’ reports reflect that usually between half and three-quarters of the total Toba population left for the plantations. In the village at the mission, for instance, 300 people migrated in 1936 and 1937, out of a population of about 500 (O. Leake 1936: 126; Leake 1937: 127-128). In 1950, when the population of the mission was 700, about 500 people left.<sup>76</sup> As a result, the mission and the rest of the villages were usually left semi-deserted. Men, women and children participated in the journey; “they don’t take any belongings except perhaps blankets” (Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 32-33).

In December 1930, the railway between Embarcación (Salta) and Formosa was inaugurated and Ingeniero Juárez was founded as a railway station, 70 kilometers southwest of Sombrero Negro. Ingeniero Juárez soon grew considerably due to the commerce mobilized by the Chaco War and became a necessary stop on the way to “the mountains.” As a result, the trip to the San Francisco Valley was no longer made all the way down on foot. Angélica told me about the journeys from Sombrero Negro to Ingeniero Juárez: “Two days. Two days walking. And two nights. But people went slowly ... The *capitán* never separated from the people. He went always in front ... He was the

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<sup>76</sup> A.H.F. Expedientes Judiciales: Cajas Aborígenes; *Causa: Hurto reiterado, contra el indígena "Caradura," denuncia de Don Guillermo Alfredo Leake* (foja 1 y 1 vta.).

one who looked after the people the most.” During the journey, people were fed with beef and packaged food that the *mayordomos* bought from local merchants. Once in Ingeniero Juárez, they boarded the train which took them to Embarcación, on the Bermejo River, at the mouth of the San Francisco Valley. At Pichanal, across the Bermejo, the Tobas got into another train; within minutes, they were in San Martín del Tabacal (see map 3).

Usually in the station of Tabacal, some other times in Orán, they boarded the small Decauville trains which took them to the *lote* (lot) assigned to them: the units of agricultural management and residence of the plantation and named after female relatives of Robustiano Patrón Costas: “Delia,” “María Luisa,” “María Angélica,” “Josefina,” “Magdalena,” “Mercedes,” among others.<sup>77</sup> The *lote* assigned to them was usually different every year, and people could be relocated during the same season. Sometimes the administration split the Tobas in various groups and sent them to different *lotes*. In the *lote*, the Tobas —like the rest of the *aborígenes* of the Chaco— had to build huts themselves with whatever materials were at hand: cane leaves and boughs. Some people bought canvas tents from the administration, which they used inside their huts as the only protection from rain.

From their *lote*, the Tobas could see, to the north, across the road and railway line connecting Pichanal with Orán, the low forested hills which surrounded part of the town of Tabacal, where the factory was; to the east and south, the open, wide extensions of the valley; to the west, the rocky mountain range of Orán and San Andrés, which seemed to absorb the semantic density of the *ingenio*. In those days, most of the lands of the

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<sup>77</sup> The *lotes* were grouped into *colonias* (colonies) named after letters of the alphabet (Bosio and Forni 1976: 49; cf. Karasik 1987: 7).

plantation were densely forested, something which enhanced the multiple dangers the Tobas associated with the mountains, as we shall see. The fear of these dangers was an indissoluble component of the experiences I will analyze in this chapter: the labor practices, forms of payment, living conditions, and overall fields of power which shaped the Tobas' experience of the plantation.

Aside from the term *kahogonaGá*, which applies in a broad sense to all the plantations of the valley, the Tobas call San Martín del Tabacal *koliá*, "tobacco fields." It was because of the tobacco fields of the area, *tabacal* in Spanish, that the site of the factory was named "Tabacal" and the plantation called "San Martín del Tabacal." Mariano remembered that when they began going there "there was little cane planted, and a lot of tobacco." The Cuban scholar Fernando Ortíz would have probably found remarkable the fact that a sugar plantation was named after the plant of tobacco. For Ortíz sugar and tobacco are commodities that are defined in sharp opposition to each other at multiple economic, cultural, and social levels: one of them being the different type of productive units they are associated with: large-scale plantations in the former, small or mid-size farms in the latter (Ortíz 1983 [1940]: 26-29).<sup>78</sup> In the area, the tobacco fields were gradually replaced by sugar-cane fields run by large capital. San Martín del Tabacal, however, maintained a hidden contradiction between its name and its size, social structure, and the commodity it produced. This is a subtle and unnoticed tension which

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<sup>78</sup> Ortíz's analysis certainly has to be taken in relation to the particular context of the history of Cuba. However, his conclusions have broader implication for a cultural history of commodities. My brief reference to the opposition between sugar and tobacco certainly does not do justice to the richness and complexity of Ortíz's analysis, which combines botany, history, production, consumption, culture, and politics in a remarkable exercise of dialectical thinking.

nevertheless suited the manifold social, economic, and ethnic contradictions shaping the experiences of those who worked in the cane-fields.

### **“They Were Worth a Lot, Not Like Us”**

The laborers at San Martín del Tabacal formed a very heterogeneous mosaic or groups. In 1962, for instance, the plantation employed 8,345 people: 2,214 permanent workers in the factory and the fields, mostly Criollos and Chiriguanos, and 6,131 seasonal workers, most of whom were field workers: Bolivians, “Coyas,” Criollos, and *aborígenes* from the Chaco (Bisio and Forni 1976: 18). The plantations reinforced this heterogeneity of groups by a systematic policy of hierarchical segmentation of the labor force along “ethnic” lines, through which each group was assigned a different set of tasks and paid different wages. In this regard, the plantations created a particular “ethnic” landscape as part of a historical processes of confrontation, in which structurally dissimilar groupings were asymmetrically incorporated into a single political economy (cf. Bourgeois 1988: 328-329; cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 54, 50). The Tobas internalized much of this ethnic segmentation. For them, this hierarchy became somewhat natural and expressed the objective features of the various groups of workers, most notably the “higher value” of those which were not *aborígenes*. As a result, the Tobas incorporated a sort of “inferiority complex” with regards to other groups of workers located on top of them in the labor hierarchy.

This attitude involves, firstly, the permanent Criollo workers, who were clearly at the top of the rank of manual workers: “excellent workers” according to an inspector of the Department of Labor (Vidal 1914: 15). The Criollos came to the plantations from the

provinces of Salta, Jujuy, and Santiago del Estero, gained the highest wages among the manual workers, and were provided with housing by the administration (cf. Vidal 1914: 15-16). However, the Tobas had little interaction with them, and saw them as a very distant group of workers.

The Chiriguanos or “Chaguancos” occupied the highest status among the indigenous workers. The administration considered them to be the “most civilized,” even the “kings” or the “aristocrats” among the “Indians” (Bialet-Massé 1973 [1904]: 95; Vidal 1914: 17). They came from southern Bolivia (usually by themselves) and many settled in the San Francisco Valley, either for several years or permanently. They were provided with basic housing and earned salaries only slightly lower than the Criollos (Bialet-Massé 1973 [1904]: 95-96; Vidal 1914: 17-19; Zavalía 1915: 13). In San Martín del Tabacal, they worked as permanent laborers in the fields (as personnel in charge of irrigation, tractor drivers, etc.) and also as *hacheros*, wood-cutters who provided the fuel for the factory. Since the Tobas also worked in the fields, they interacted with the Chiriguanos quite often, but without reaching the degree of intimacy they had with other groups of the Chaco like the Wichís or Chorotes. The Tobas usually regard the “Chaguancos” as important workers who were always well informed about what was going on in the plantation, and who since they were *paisanos* like themselves, often warned them on the dangers lurking in the plantation and the factory.

The Bolivians, the “Coyas,” and the Criollos from Catamarca were the cane-cutters, the most important source of seasonal labor in the fields. Even though they were well above the Aborigines of the Chaco in the hierarchy of the administration, they were not as highly regarded as the permanent Criollos and Chiriguanos. By the 1950s, the

Bolivians were the most important group of cane-cutters in San Martín del Tabacal, were paid by piece-work, and were also provided with housing. They maintained a certain distance from the unionized Criollo workers and the administration saw them as good and relatively docile laborers (Whiteford 1981: 65-67). The “Coyas” —the peasants from the forested Andean slopes (*yungas*) and the Argentinean Puna— and the impoverished Criollo peasants from Catamarca (*catamarqueños*) and the Calchaquí valleys (Salta) had wages and housing provisions similar to those of the Bolivians.

The group of workers with which the Tobas contrast their situation most often are the cane-cutters, “*los peladores de caña*” (or “*cortadores de caña*”), a category which they usually associate with the Bolivians. This contrast was particularly apparent for the Tobas: the cane-cutters were seasonal field workers like themselves but who, unlike them, received housing and enjoyed (in their eyes) “high wages.” Along these lines, when people talked to me about the “*peladores de caña*,” they always referred to them as important people for whom they professed a respectful admiration. Mariano, for instance, told me:

The Bolivian is *pelador de caña*. He worked the most, a lot, at night, the whole day ... The Bolivians were paid *por tanto* [by piece-work]. They were worth a lot, not like us. The missionary used to tell us: “You’re like people under age (*menores*).” We didn’t cut cane, because the cane is very costly.

As part of this contrast, many Tobas emphasize that the Bolivians were “rich,” had “nice houses,” “had *documento* (I.D.),” “knew how to read,” “knew how to go on strike.” In the mid-1990s, as the best “proof” of the wealth accumulated by the *peladores de caña*, several Tobas pointed to the fact that former Bolivian workers at San Martín del

Tabacal had settled as merchants in Ingeniero Juárez. Horacio told me, also emphasizing a self-blame I will return to in other chapters:

Look at the Bolivians, how well they're in the wealth ... [They] have a store ... stores everywhere ... But since we're *indios*, we don't know how to administer the money. And we gave it to those who didn't go to the *ingenio*: "Take it, go and spend it. go and spend it" ... I should have thought about keeping it in the bank instead. I've already woken up, but it's too late [laughs]. There isn't work anymore.

The lowest end, in terms of wages and working conditions, of this segmented ethnic landscape was occupied by *los aborígenes*, a term which in northern Argentina is restricted to the indigenous groups of the Chaco and often excludes the indigenous peasantry of the highlands or the Chiriguano. The ethnic segmentation created by the plantations, in itself a reformulation of old ethnic hierarchies, certainly reinforced the distinctive identity of the Tobas as *aborígenes*. In the 1930s and 1940s, as we have seen, the *aborígenes* had become a floating mass of unskilled laborers who were paid not by piecework but by a system of *tareas* ("tasks"), had to live in huts built by themselves, and lacked any social benefits. The *aborígenes*, however, were at the same time a very heterogeneous set of peoples, with different languages and cultural and historical backgrounds: Tobas, Wichís, Chorotes, Nivaklés, and Pilagás, which also had internal sub-groupings within them. And the administration manipulated this heterogeneity as well. Even though all *aborígenes* received similar wages, following an ideology which is centuries old, the administration regarded the "Matacos" —the derogatory term used to refer to the Wichís— as the paradigm of savagery and hence as the least "productive" group of workers. By contrast, the administration usually saw the Tobas as "cleaner,"

“more civilized,” and better workers than the former —but still not as good as the Chiriguano (cf. Biale-Massé 1973 [1904]: 95).

Prior to the experience of wage labor, the Tobas had their own feeling of pride and superiority vis-à-vis the Wichís, whom they often fought and defeated. The experience of the plantation reinforced and gave new meanings to this old “pride” and “arrogance” — especially when the Tobas felt that, for the administration, they were less important than other groups of workers. As part of this attitude, today it is very common to hear the Tobas refer to the Wichís with the condescending term “*mataquitos*,” “little Matacos.” Expressing a recurrent view, in 1992 Mariano told me that when the administration needed *aborígenes* to cut cane, they used to call the Tobas rather than the Wichís: “The Wichís” —he told me with pride— “were weaker than us.”

### *Tareas, Capitanes, Indios, Chinas, and Osacos*

When the Tobas talk about the labor they performed in Tabacal, they often express that one of their major concerns was to be able to finish the *tarea*, the “task,” assigned to them at dawn. The *tarea* was the basic system through the administration organized and paid the labor of the *aborígenes*. It was a *fixed quota* of labor which had to be fulfilled by the workers in order to *tarjar*, in other words to receive from the *tarjador* their daily ration (50 % of the daily payment), and a mark in their individual file that would credit the rest (the other 50 %) for the final payment in the *arreglo grande*. If a worker was unable to finish the work load of the *tarea*, he or she would simply get no payment, no matter how much work he or she might have completed, something that happened frequently (cf. Zavalía 1915: 40; Niklison 1989 [1917]: 86-87). This system was a *sui*

*generis* form of payment which was neither flexible (like piece-work) nor fixed (like payment by the day); it was a highly exploitative one which forced the worker to keep a steady pace of work (similar to that of piece-work) but which, at the same time, provided a reward not proportional to the work done (as in payment by the day).<sup>79</sup> Moreover, unlike piece-work and payment by the day, by leaving “inefficient” workers without any payment, the system of *tareas* had often the unique feature of extracting surplus value *for free*.

The Tobas had to fulfill in a day some of the following *tareas*, with a work load which could be different in different seasons: for instance, cutting down three trees, chopping and piling up five meters of firewood, planting five furrows (100 meters long) with cane, and so on. Even though some men remember with pride that they asked to be assigned two *tareas* per day (for instance, cutting down six trees instead of three) in order to receive double payment (“*doble tarja*”), people usually point to the high level of pressure imposed on them by this system. Esteban, a man in his mid-thirties, told me: “My father says that he suffered a lot. Those who didn’t get the *tarea*, they weren’t paid. Then, they just had to finish the *tarea*.” Facing this pressure to finish, some men pierced their flesh with sharp ended bones (*kaná*, “needle,” which they always took with them to the plantation) from animals known for their strength (especially a species of wild pig known as *uákae*) in order to absorb it. Besides, relatives usually helped each other when somebody had problems finishing their *tarea*. Horacio told me: “If you had a family, you

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<sup>79</sup> Because of its two-fold character, this form of organization of labor has brought some confusion in the analyses of the forms of payment received by the Aborigines of the Chaco in the sugar plantations of Salta and Jujuy. Thus, some authors have argued that the system of *tarea* was by “piece-work” (Vidal 1914: 9; Muir 1947: 235; Conti, de Lagos, and Lagos 1988: 22; Gordillo 1995b: 111) and others that it was by “a fixed salary” (Beck 1994: 167). It was both systems and neither of them at the same time.

could get help. For instance, back then I was young, seventeen years-old. My uncles were there. When they saw that I was tired, they were ready, so they all came. Then I was able to rest, earlier than them.”

The amount of payment the Toba workers received per *tarea* depended on the “category” to which they belonged. The *aborígenes* of the Chaco were divided in different categories according to their political role, their gender, and their age — something which created a further hierarchy in the labor force.<sup>80</sup> In San Martín del Tabacal, these categories were: 1) *capitán* (“captain,” or leading headman); 2) *lenguaráz* (translator); 3) *indio* (adult male); 4) *china* (adult female); and 5) *osacos* (boys up to fifteen years old). The highest wages were earned by the *capitanes* and *lenguaraces*, even though they did not work as hard as the rest (cf. Unsain 1914: 86). Ordinary adult men usually made between half and two-thirds of those wages. Women and *osacos* usually received, respectively, two-thirds and one third of the wages paid to adult men.<sup>81</sup> Those who fulfilled all their *tareas* (“*tarja completa*”) received extra “incentives”: weekly and monthly bonuses in cash and pieces of clothing (“*prendas*”) to be deducted at the *arreglo grande*.<sup>82</sup> According to Tomás, Patrón Costas distributed clothing because “he said that people shouldn’t be naked, so that they don’t say over there that Patrón Costas doesn’t pay to the people.”

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<sup>80</sup> This type of segmentation can be traced in the San Francisco Valley back to the late eighteenth century (Gullon Abao 1993: 316-17, 337-338).

<sup>81</sup> In the 1910s the salaries of women were higher in relative terms, and therefore closer to that of men. In La Esperanza, for instance, whereas men were paid 1.15 pesos a day, women received 1.00 a day, and *osacos* 0.50 (Zavallía 1914: 52; for similar relative differences see Vidal 1914: 8; Unsain 1914: 86-87; Conti, de Lagos and Lagos 1988: 24; Lagos 1995: 136). Decades later, according to Horacio, in San Martín del Tabacal at one point men made 2.95 pesos per *tarea*, women 1.95, and *osacos* just 0.70.

<sup>82</sup> Men with *tarja completa* received four *prendas* of their choice (e.g. pants, shirts, shoes, etc.) whereas women in a same situation received just two. The *capitanes* and *lenguaraces* always received four *prendas*.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the administrations of the plantations justified this hierarchy on the “customs” and “social organization” of the “tribes” (Unsain 1914: 86; Niklison 1989 [1917]: 57). Even though this system had some resonance with the relations of leadership and gender of the Tobas’ social organization, as I will discuss below, it was above all a policy which suited particularly well the interests of the administration: by gaining the allegiance of the indigenous leaders and overexploiting over half of the work force, women and youngsters. As they remember this hierarchy in the 1990s, most Tobas do not seem to question the higher wages to *capitanes* and *lenguaraces*. They look at it as part of the important responsibilities held by these figures, but also as part of the taken-for-granted state of affairs which dominated life in the plantation. Regarding the wage inequalities along gender lines, there is not a similar consensus. When asked about it, men usually say the situation was certainly “unfair” to their women. However, when they refer to the abuses which took place at the plantation very few mention the low wages of their wives. Women, by contrast, are usually open in their grievances against this wage differentiation. Angélica told me: “We [women] also asked for a raise, because the work was very heavy ... Because this salary they gave us wasn’t enough for anything ... They paid a pittance. Instead of making [some money] ... they only gave us half a salary. It can’t be that way.”

Wage labor, however, was for women a contradictory experience. They received lower wages because of their gender, but at the same time they were able to make some money *independently* of their husbands. I asked Marcelina, a woman in her late fifties, “Did you like the *ingenio*?” Her husband, Emiliano, was sitting near us, and while she answered he nodded several times as sign of approval:

Yes, I liked it, before, because Patrón Costas gave work to us. We, women, gained on our own. We bought something. We bought what we needed. Patrón Costas paid to us, because we like to work. We are women, but Patrón Costas gave us work. So, we made our own money, separate. Now, not anymore, only men [get paid] ... I liked the *ingenio* because we [women] worked, and my salary was separate from men. Not anymore ... Now, men give us food only when they've been paid. For instance, we eat *tortilla* only when he gets credit from the store.

The hierarchy which dominated decades of the Tobas' labor experience shaped and reformulated aspects of the dynamics of leadership and gender of their previous social organization. During the first decades at Tabacal, some *capitanes* were *haliaganék*, headmen who were powerful *pioGonáq* and who had been warriors in their youth. *Capitán* Moreno, for instance, who passed away in the 1980s, is today remembered as one of their most powerful *pioGonáq* ever. These first generations of *capitanes*, however, knew very little Spanish. Hence, their power was strongly mediated by a new and key figure which was a direct product of the experience of wage labor: the *lenguaráz* or translator. It was through the latter that the foremen gave work directions, the *capitanes* channeled grievances to the administration, and people were paid in the *arreglo grande*. The key role played by these men came to the fore when a new generation of *capitanes* emerged in the 1960s. The latter were no longer *pioGonáq*, but instead men who spoke fluent Spanish and had skills at negotiating with the Criollos and the administration (Mendoza and Gordillo 1989; Mendoza 1998).

According to reports written between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, among the groups of the Pilcomayo women played an active and respected role in public affairs and were very rarely mistreated, but had to bear a much heavier work load than men (Nordenskiöld 1912: 80, 82; Karsten 1970 [1923]: 20; Niklison 1990

[1916]: 59). The valorization of male work over female work in the plantations, through a hierarchical commoditization of labor that was (and is) absent within the household, seems to have strengthen these previous, although subtle, forms of male domination; and by doing so, it created an arena of contention which follows a clear gender divide, to which I will refer in a section below.

### **Working at Tabacal**

The labor of the Tobas was supervised by a well organized hierarchy of employees assigned to their *lote*. The highest authority was the *lotero* (with assistants called *contradores*). Diego told me about the *lotero*: “He was the one who ordered the most, the biggest. He always walked around to see the work.” The staff in the *lote* also included the *capatáz mayor* (head foreman) and the *capataces ayudantes* (his assistants), the *mayordomos* (in charge of taking the people to their work sites and controlling their work, not to be confounded with the contractors of the same name) and the *tarjadores* (in charge of marking completed work and rations in the workers’ files). The *capatáz mayor* was the one who assigned the tasks to the Tobas every day before dawn. Tomás described to me those early meetings with him:

The *capatáz* was there, and said: “30 people to cut cane, only with machete; 20, 25 with shovel and pickax to make a channel two meters wide, one meter and 20 centimeters deep; 50 women with machete only, to clear the bush from weeds. Another gang of women: 60 women with knife to plant cane.” That was the work.

The tasks assigned to men and women changed throughout the year, according to the changing needs of the administration and the different stages of the harvest. The tasks

assigned to women were various. Weeding the fields was an important female task, to the point that today most adult women are very skillful at weeding their own fields. In August 1997, I was in one of the gardening campsites the Tobas settle on the Pilcomayo marshlands. It was close to sunset, and while I was chatting with Marcelino I noticed that Valeria, his wife, continued working in the field, tirelessly weeding the soil with a hoe. I pointed to her and told him: "a hard-worker, Valeria." He immediately replied: "Of course, because of the *ingenio*. There, women learnt to work well." I was still thinking about the answer, especially about its gender overtones, when Emiliano came to visit and joined us. I was struck when, talking again about the weeding skills of Valeria, Emiliano made exactly the same casual comment: "Of course, because of the *ingenio*."

Doing clearings (usually upon their arrival at Tabacal) was a task in which women and men complemented each other's work: women went first in order to clear weeds and shrubs with machetes, and then men came to cut down large trees. Planting cane was another important female activity: it required cutting cane into shorter pieces with a large knife, taking them to the furrow, and planting them parallel to the furrow. The final stage, covering the cane using a shovel, was usually a task in charge of their husbands, but sometimes women did it themselves with hoes. Women also cleared irrigation channels, a task which sometimes they did together with men. In the 1960s, the administration of San Martín del Tabacal introduced the burning of fields in order to get rid of the cane leaves (*cogollo*) and save labor costs. The Toba women were then employed to gather the burnt *cogollos* and throw them away.

While carrying out these tasks, a recurrent concern for women were their babies and little children. Sometimes, women left them in the campsite of the *lote* under the care

of their older children. But they usually had to take them with them to the work site. Daniela, a woman in her late fifties told me: “The kids sometimes cried and I couldn’t work.” Angélica, who has about the same age, said to me:

We were suffering so much, the women, before, when we had two kids like this [she pointed to her two year old grand-daughter playing near us], or when we had another one who was smaller. We had to take the older in our backs, and the smaller in front. And on top of that, the tools. *Did you work like that? We did. With a kid in your back and another in front? Yes ...* The smallest, it was very complicated because I had to breast feed him, I had to have him well wrapped. I had to keep him right here, well tied up so that he fell asleep ... But with kids like this [she pointed to her grand daughter], you could leave them playing around there. That’s why we also had to take something to eat there. At least some bread, because, well, that’s the way it was when we were there. We suffered a lot. A lot of suffering.

Men, for their part, also had to perform varied tasks. One of the most important ones was to clear the jungle surrounding the cane-fields, especially during the first decades of expansion of San Martín del Tabacal. Men cut down the biggest trees after their women had cleared the lower vegetation. Mariano, who often enjoyed remembering the “hard work” he was able to carry out at the *ingenio*, told me:

I cut trees. There were trees which were big, and others which were small. Three trees per *tarea*. I cut three trees down and my *tarea* was over ... Some had big trees ... But that was a big *monte*. We were cutting it down, big *monte*. All type of people, Wichí people, Nivaklé people, also Chorote, and us as well. All of us. Pilagás as well. And it was dangerous, when all the trees were falling down. Some died, caught. Because when they fell, one tree was falling over there, another tree was one falling over there ...

Another important male activity was to chop wood to be used as fuel for the factory (and also for the Decauville trains which took the cane to the mills). Men also dug channels for irrigation and furrows for cane-planting. On some occasions, they covered with soil the cane just planted by their wives. Many times they were also in charge of

weeding. On an irregular basis, groups of men were sent to the factory, which the Tobas call *viyó*, literally “mortar,” for as Mariano put it: “the factory was as if they were pounding sugar, like when we pound algarroba, with a *viyó*.” There, they did 12 hour shifts and carried out various unskilled tasks: cleaning up, sealing sugar-bags, pilling them up, and so on.

The Tobas, men and women, were occasionally employed as cane-cutters as well: men cutting and peeling the cane and women taking it and loading it into the *zorras* (small cargo cars) of the Decauville train. However, the Tobas were called out to cut cane only when the cane-cutters went on strike or when at the end of the season there was a delay in the pace of harvest (“*atrasaba la cosecha*”), a situation in which the administration needed all available “*brazos*” cutting cane.

People usually finished their *tarea* around noon, but that depended on each one’s ability and strength and on the type of *tarea*. The foremen (usually the *mayordomos*) reviewed the work and gave the people a *boleto* (ticket), with which the Tobas went to see the *tarjador*. The latter made a mark in their *planillas* (their individual work files) and gave them a ration in cash, half of what they made per *tarea*. Then, people went to buy food from the *tachera*: a Criollo woman who cooked for the workers of the *lote* every day. They received almost always the same food: corn meal with a few vegetables and (if lucky) a cheap cut of meat —a diet which seems to have been the same on the plantations for decades (cf. Unsain 1914: 52). As Javier, a man in his early sixties who is a nurse and a committed Anglican, told me: “They gave us that all year-round. We didn’t know there was rice, or pasta, or anything. We only knew *maíz pelado* (corn meal).”

Since the Tobas had been working since dawn, in the afternoon they usually rested, but that depended on the needs of the administration (and therefore sometimes they worked as well, especially at the end of the harvest). After lunch, some people rested in the *toldería*, drinking mate and chatting. Others went in groups to the cane fields to chew cane (a practice banned by the administration). Some women washed clothing. The Tobas usually did not go out of the *lote* alone and parents always kept a watchful eye on their children, for there were many dangers lurking in the plantation. As the sunset approached, young men started preparing themselves for the *nomí*, the collective round-dancing they performed every evening together with Wichís, Chorotes, Nivaklés, and Pilagás. When the sun sank behind the mountains and night covered the cane-fields, a monotonous, rhythmic collective singing emerged from their *lotes*, as men danced in a large circle holding each other's waists and young women surrounded them from behind and chose the man they wanted to sleep with. The end of another day at San Martín del Tabacal.

### **“It Seemed That We Lived There”**

When the Tobas remember their experiences in San Martín del Tabacal, they usually point to the extended period of time they spent there. As Mariano told me: “It seemed that we lived there. When we came back here, we stayed only for two months.” Even though the sugar cane harvest lasts from five to six months (from June to November-December), the Tobas were usually recruited a few months before the harvest to be employed in other activities. The years when the Tobas were recruited in February, they ended up staying in the plantation from nine to ten months.

People remember that they had to spend those long months living in appalling conditions. Several people told me that the huts they had to live in looked like “bird nests,” and emphasized that they provided no protection whatsoever from cold and rain. According to Segundo: “We had like nests. They weren’t like a house, simply straw put together on top ... most filthy. That’s why lice came out of the dirt.” In those huts, fleas and lice made living conditions hard to bear. Diego told me: “It wasn’t possible to sleep. You had to go to bed totally naked. If I didn’t take my shirt off, the next day I had blood.”

In 1936, an inspector from the Ministry of Interior wrote that San Martín del Tabacal was the plantation where the *aborígenes* lived in the most dreadful conditions (Pardal 1936: 56). However, administrators, labor inspectors, and anthropologists have described the campsites in the sugar plantations (usually referred as *huetes*) as a reproduction of the “traditional” indigenous huts in the Chaco (cf. Niklison 1989 [1917]: 69; Pagés Larraya 1982 Vol. III: 51). This analogy, aside from being superficial, was particularly suitable to the interest of the plantation administration, which in this way made huge savings in housing costs (cf. Unsain 1914: 46; Vidal 1914: 13; Niklison 1989 [1990]: 88).<sup>83</sup> When building their *tolderías* in the *lote*, the *aborígenes* certainly relied on the techniques they used at home to erect basic dwellings. However, the materials employed (mostly cane leaves), the weather (more rainy), and the living conditions (little space, overcrowded huts, appalling sanitary conditions) were very far from being those of the Chaco. Besides, by the time the Tobas were migrating to San Martín del Tabacal on a

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<sup>83</sup> In a book published in 1946 by San Martín del Tabacal, one can read in the caption of a picture of a quaint Chiriguano *rancho* that the workers coming from the Chaco “build their own houses and live in complete independence according their own uses and customs. Thus, they are comfortable and happy...” (San Martín del Tabacal S.A. 1946: 19). Expressing a similar sensitivity for “cultural relativism,” an

regular basis, they had already replaced in their villages the oval huts with the solid type of *rancho* used by the Criollo settlers (a square roof made with a mixture of straw, sticks, and adobe, supported by solid poles fixed to the ground, and walls of straw and adobe).

In the *lotes*, the only drinking water available was that of the irrigation channels. Some people told me that the water “was nice,” but noted that sometimes it had “soap foam.” Before the advent of the government of Perón in 1946, there was almost no type of health assistance to the seasonal workers. Even after 1946, the clinics were totally insufficient to deal with the large number of workers employed. An author reported in 1962 that the hospital at San Martín del Tabacal had 35 beds, four doctors, and one ambulance to cover 6,000 seasonal workers (Shapiro 1962: 243; cf. Bisio and Forni 1976: 18). Javier, who was trained as a nurse by the Anglican missionaries in the late 1960s and then began working at San Martín del Tabacal, once told me: “Then, we didn’t use the hospital of the *ingenio* and from the hospital they didn’t visit the people either.” According to Mariano: “They didn’t take us to the hospital. It seems that the hospital asked for *documento* ... We didn’t have *documento*. Only the *pioGonáq* healed.” The plantations, including Tabacal, usually preferred to resort to massive and cheap “preventive” health measures, like applying vaccinations to the *aborígenes* upon their arrival and spraying their huts, and their bodies, with DDT. In the Tobas’ memory, the amount of disease, epidemics, and death in the *lotes* reached dreadful proportions, and the imagery of death became central aspect of their experience at San Martín del Tabacal, as we shall see.

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advocate of the sugar industry argued that “it makes no sense to offer the Indian from the Chaco a house and a roof, under which, he will probably feel asphyxiated...” (quoted by Beck 1994: 170).

While living in these conditions, and aside from dancing in the evenings, the Tobas used their free time in various activities. When they were in a *lote* located close to the town of Tabacal, on weekends some went to see movies projected by administration (free of charge) on a large screen near the factory.<sup>84</sup> On Sundays, men played soccer games and some people, as we shall see, watched in awe the tricks of the “magicians” who used to visit the *lotes*. When the Tobas were on *lotes* located not far from the rivers of the area, men usually went to fish with nylon fishing lines. Occasionally, some men went out to the jungle surrounding the cane fields to gather honey or hunt. However, this practice was relatively rare, for the Tobas feared those imposing tropical forests which descended from the mountains: they were full of unknown dangerous animals and potentially deadly “devils.” Besides, for some people the sole idea of foraging in the plantation was a contradiction in terms. The *ingenio* was about “*trabajo*” (work) not about “*marisca*” (foraging). Segundo, for instance, found my question “did you go to *mariscar* in the *ingenio*?” totally out of place. He told me: “No, no. How are we going to *mariscar* if we were busy with *trabajo*? All day, from night to day. We didn’t rest.” Still, people missed “bush food,” especially fish. Aside from fishing in nearby streams, many purchased fish from itinerant merchants who entered into the *lotes*. And those who came to visit from the Pilcomayo usually brought packages with dried-up fish. On their way back home, these visitors took with them letters and remittances of cash and clothing. Letters and remittances were also mailed by post or taken by the missionaries who paid brief visits to them.

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<sup>84</sup> This practice goes back to the beginning of the century, and was carried out “to morally educate the people” and prevent the consumption of alcohol (Zavalía 1915: 8).

When the end of the harvest approached, people became more impatient about going back home and longed for “bush food.” By then, the harvest entered into its final stage and the pace of work in the plantation increased. Usually around mid-November, sometimes a bit later, the harvest came to an end. It was time for the event all the Tobas had been waiting for: *el arreglo grande*, the final payment of the part of their salaries which the administration had retained during all those months.

### ***El Arreglo: “Happiness Among all the People”***

I believe that I only truly “understood” the fascination but also the confusion the Tobas might have felt during the *arreglo* one day in late 1995, when I was chatting with Tomás. We were having a *mate* when he said, all of a sudden: “Gastón, I wanted to ask you something.” I said “sure, go ahead.” Tomás thought about the question for a few seconds: “Could you explain to me the difference between a 10 *pesos* note and a 100 *pesos* note?” I remember the cold shivers going down my spine, my initial confusion, and the brutal, disturbing, sad “illumination” at the taken-for-granted forms of power and powerlessness associated with “details” such as this. Still somewhat shocked, and while I was awkwardly trying to tell him what that “difference” was all about, I asked him: “So, how did you guys do when you were paid at the *ingenio*?”

Oh, we never understood how much we were being paid. That was for sure something we never understood, how much they were paying us per day, in *pesos*. *But what about the capitanes, the lenguaraces?* They didn’t understand either ... But since people got many things, they were happy.

The *arreglo grande*, originally justified as a means of encouraging “saving habits” among the indigenous workers (Aráoz de Lamadrid 1914: 41), was the coronation of an already highly efficient system of extraction of surplus value. Firstly, the administration received from the workers a huge interest-free credit for an extended period of time (Rutledge 1987: 215). Secondly, by postponing the payment until the very end of the harvest the administration inhibited many *aborígenes* from quitting work and returning to the Chaco—a practice which was not rare. Thirdly, since by then each worker was owed a relatively large amount of money, by paying it all at once and in kind, the *arreglo* gave the *aborígenes*—most of them illiterate—the impression that they were making great gains, even if the administration or the employees in charge of paying them were keeping part of those amounts for themselves.<sup>85</sup> This is exactly the image that the Tobas had of the *arreglo*: a moment of abundance and excitement, something which remind us of the point made by June Nash (1993 [1979]: 242) that the worker often “measures his satisfaction from the job in terms of concrete utilities.” As Omar, a committed Anglican in his mid-fifties, summarized it: “The day of the *arreglo*, happiness among all the people.”

That day, all the Tobas gathered around the store of the *lote* from early in the morning. One by one, they proceeded to the window accompanied by the *lenguaráz*. The employee of the store checked their individual file (where the *tarjadores* had marked, day

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<sup>85</sup> This happened very often. In 1914, for instance, an inspector of the Department of Labor wrote about the *arreglo grande* in Ledesma: “The employee who pays [the “indians”] can write down any type of sum, \$12 or \$ 96. The Indian will always pick up the receipt, with any type of amount written on it, because he does not know how to distinguish the numbers” (Unsain 1914: 71). The same year, at La Esperanza, another inspector noted the same thing: the Aborigines confidently received what the administration decided to give them. This inspector went on to analyze the work files of 300 indigenous workers who had been paid at the

by day, and month by month, the number of *tareas* fulfilled) and told them the balance pending. As translated by the *lenguaráz*, the worker then started asking the goods of his or her choice. The employee brought them, deducted them from the balance, and new rounds of requests were made. When the balance was paid, it was the time for the next person. As a plantation policy, part of the “balance” was paid in cash. The Tobas usually used this money to buy packaged food to take back home (large bags of sugar, *yerba mate*, corn flour) and to purchase the train ticket to Ingeniero Juárez.

It was the end of a long season, people had large loads of highly desired goods, including horses and donkeys, and were anxious to return home. The algarroba was already ripened in the bush and this was always an object of concern, for if the return to the Pilcomayo was delayed too much the algarroba pods would be spoiled by the heavy rains of December. The Tobas burnt the *tolderías* where they had dwelled for so many months, carried their loads of goods with them and took the train back to Pichanal. With the donkeys and horses in the cargo cars, in Embarcación they boarded the train to Ingeniero Juárez.

They had already notified their relatives at the mission of their date of departure. Thus, some people went from the Pilcomayo to Ingeniero Juárez to wait for their returning kin with horses and donkeys for the journey back. Once in “Juárez,” the rest of the people hired trucks for the trip to Sombrero Negro, for —as Omar put it— “We had money to pay. We had plenty of money. The truck was full.” The arrival of the migrants caused great excitement, both among those who had stayed and those who had left. With

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*arreglo grande*. He found that none of them had received what they were owed. Furthermore, in many cases they simply got nothing (Zavalía 1914: 50-51; see also Niklison 1989 [1917]: 92).

the cash and goods brought from the plantation people bought or bartered animals from the Criollos; as Omar put it: “cows to eat, horses to raise.” Being the peak of the ripening season, women went in groups to distant corners of their territory to gather algarroba and other wild fruits. Men fished in the river and engaged in foraging expeditions to the bush. The old men who had stayed and had cultivated their fields near the river were now harvesting watermelons, pumpkins, maize. Once again people packed the church of misión El Toba to listen to the preaching of the missionaries. Many people, however, were still mourning their dead: adults, youngster, and children killed by the scores of “devils” which haunted San Martín del Tabacal.

**TEN:  
THE DIABOLICAL FACES OF TERROR**

The alienation of the worker from his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, assumes an external existence, but that it exists independently, outside himself, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power. The life that he has given to the object sets itself against him as an alien and hostile force.

*Karl Marx,*  
Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts  
(1844)

That place is full of devils. Plenty, a lot. It's called *ingenio* Tabacal.

*Segundo* (1995)

**A View of the Ridges**

When one stands in the San Francisco Valley on a clear day, it is impossible to disregard the imposing, powerful silhouette of the Andes rising to the west. Since the turn of the century, several Europeans who visited the sugar plantations of the valley were impressed by the view. In March 1899, a member of the Leach brothers' expedition to the Bermejo described those ridges as "magnificent" (Clunie 1899: 205). In 1912, a British missionary who had just arrived at La Esperanza wrote: "The mountains with their ever-changing colours, the transition of light from shade on the foliage, the glistening of the snow on the lofty peaks, are a source of constant delight to the eyes and relief to the mind" (Hunt 1912b: 27). The Tobas were also impressed by those ridges, and as we have seen, they called the plantations *kahogonaGá*, "the mountains." Their own view of those ridges, however, had little to do with the relaxed contemplation of European eyes. Because for the Tobas the mountains were, to a great extent, the spatial condensation of

an experience of terror. Early in 1996, I asked Ernesto, who was at San Martín del Tabacal when he was a boy, why was there so much disease at the *ingenio*. He looked straight into the ground and told me:

It's hard to describe. It was like a disease attacking. I don't know which disease, but it was tremendous. It's like, it attacked somebody during the day, and then the following day he was already finished off. According to the *pioGonáq*, it's the devils who live in the mountains ... There's plenty of devils in the mountains ... When the devils saw the people, they said: "Where do these people come from?" And then they said: "Let's go down there ..."

### The Mountains and the "Devils"

San Martín del Tabacal was for the Tobas an unparalleled place of disease and death. Countless "devils" inhabited the mountains overlooking the cane-fields. Invisible and like a silent breeze, they came down to the *lotes* and spread deadly diseases among the workers. On the slopes circling the sugar plantations, they sometimes came out as short and hairy humanoids, and in that part of the *ingenio* —as Diego put it— "there was no peace, because the devils wandered, but like men." When I asked the Tobas about these "devils," I was always struck by their unanimous and expressive exclamations. Take, for instance, these three men between their fifties and seventies, who answered my question: "were there 'devils' at the *ingenio*?"

Ooh! There were plenty of them, because they had the mountains. Many devils. Those were the worst (Tomás).

Ooh! There were many devils. Plenty of devils. All the diseases. That's why the kids died; the grown ups, women, girls, everybody. *Why were there so many devils?* We lived close to a mountain, that's why (Sebastián).

Ooh! Plenty of them! Because of the mountain ... *And were there diseases?* Plenty, there was plenty of them. We didn't lack disease (Patricio).

This abundance of “devils” was further enhanced by the towering tropical forests which covered the base of the mountains. For the Tobas, the “devils” are particularly abundant in very thick forests, and the jungles of the San Francisco Valley were of a density and height unparalleled by the bush of the Chaco. According to the Tobas, there were further dangers lurking in the mountains: large monkeys (*woyém*) which often kidnapped women wandering alone in the fringes of the forest, and “lions” and “tigers” much bigger than the *hawágaik* (puma or “león”) and the *kedók* (jaguar or “tigre”) of the Chaco. Several people told me that “the large lion,” the *hawagaikpólio*, has “a lot of hair in the neck” and that the Criollos call it *león africano*, “African lion.” They also agree that “the large tiger,” the *kedóepolio*, unlike the *kedók*, has “black stripes.” Several Tobas saw them a few times at a circus in Ingeniero Juárez, but they argue that their original home are the mountains near San Martín del Tabacal. Further up in the rocky and treeless heights of the mountains, “the ancient ones” explained the presence of columns of smoke by the action of *wédaik*, short and black humanoids known for their ability to make fire without wood, and which back home lived in the river. But the most dangerous creatures inhabiting those mountains were certainly the evil, non-human, and powerful “spirits” which the Tobas call *diablos* in Spanish and *payák* in their language.

As noted by Alfred Métraux (1937: 174; 1946a: 16), on the one hand *payák* is for the Tobas an attribute of creatures or phenomena they cannot explain or understand, and as such it is often used as an adjective. But on the other hand, for the Tobas this condition is most graphically condensed in the evil “spirits” which they call by the same name. In fact, most of the times people use the term *payák* in this latter sense. The Tobas

incorporated the term *diablo* as translation of *payák* especially through the Anglican missionaries. By doing so, they did not embody the Western idea of “the devil” at face value, as a singular and abstract entity; rather, they reformulated this imagery in terms of their previous cultural experience. But in so doing —and as part of the colonization of language associated with missionization (Fabian 1986: 76, 83)— the negative features of the *payák*, now seen as *diablos*, were enhanced. And the missionaries reinforced this reformulation through a permanent preaching focused on *el diablo* as the epitome of evil and a dualistic opposition between “good” and “evil” which was originally alien to the Tobas (cf. Cervantes 1994: 40-41). Along these lines, before the arrival of the missionaries, the *payák* had for the Tobas probably a more ambiguous character than today.<sup>86</sup> Though reformulated, this ambivalence can be seen nowadays in the fact that the *payák* which inhabit the Tobas’ territory, though feared and potentially dangerous, engage in forms of reciprocity with humans (by providing the *pioGonáq* with healing power and helping the foragers to find food). These ambiguous features are totally absent among the *payák* of the *ingenio*. Over there, the *payák* are simply alien and utterly evil beings, *diablos* which cause unparalleled levels of death.

In the Tobas’ memory of the sugar-cane fields, the death caused by the *payák* is a powerful, recurrent image. People usually argue that adults and especially children died by the score, that whole families were decimated. As could not be otherwise, the death of children is for them a particularly strong and painful image. In 1996, Daniela told me: “when people went to the *ingenio*, almost all the children died there. And when they were back, all the women cried for the children.” The death toll was so high that many people

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<sup>86</sup> See Cordeu and De los Ríos (1982: 149-151) for a similar reformulation of the *ahát* among the Wichís.

argue that the labor migrations to Tabacal decimated them as a group. I once asked Andrés, a man in his fifties and today a successful farmer, if many people went to the *ingenio*. He answered:

Ooh! Many! That's why all the people of about my age ... were finished off at *ingenio* San Martín. That's why you see that we're very few now. For when we worked at the *ingenio*, when people returned all the kids died. They died. Boys, girls, grown-ups. Then, people were shrinking.

In 1996, Ernesto told me that the dead were buried "anywhere." I will never forget when he added: "Ooh, at the *ingenio* there must be skeletons in the middle of the cane fields." This emphasis on the "bones" of dead people scattered in the fields is also widespread among the Wichís who worked in Tabacal (see Segovia 1998: 161, 163, 165) and condenses these people's feeling that their last and most basic possession, their own bodies, were being swallowed by the cane-fields.

The epidemics and the very high mortality rates among the *aborígenes* of the Chaco at the plantations of Salta and Jujuy have been documented in numerous reports since early in the twentieth century. In 1917, an inspector from the Department of Labor, José Elias Niklison (1989 [1917]: 65, my translation), wrote:

The indigenous mortality rate during these first weeks acquires dreadful proportions. Families and tribes are wiped out, are sadly reduced. "If it would be possible to investigate how many leave their lives there—a missionary friend of mine wrote me—the numbers would be horrifying."

In 1936, another inspector noted that at San Martín del Tabacal the Aborigines had "the aspect of being sick, malarial men" (Galíndez 1936: 31). In 1958, a member of the mission staff at El Toba visited the Tobas at Tabacal and wrote: "It was distressing to

see the cramped living quarters ... [and] the number of sick persons” (Kitchin 1958: 26). In 1967, Javier, the nurse trained by the missionaries, kept a record of 24 children and four adults who died during that season at Tabacal, out of a total of probably around 400 or 500 migrants.

Many Tobas were certainly aware that the appalling sanitary conditions in the *lote* had a very negative effect on their health. Tomás, who on another occasion had told me about the diseases caused by the *payák* of the mountains, told me: “In winter, it was very bad, very cold. When it rained, people got wet. Some had tents, but others didn’t. That’s why there were so many diseases in the *ingenio*.” Furthermore, some people blamed the administration for the “pests” that swept the *lotes*. Horacio, a man who has been involved in politics for many years, told me: “Many people died there. Maybe because the *patrón* didn’t look after the people. He didn’t give medicines, he didn’t send the doctor, he didn’t give housing. He only gave [us] that *toldería*.” Still, for most Tobas the effect of those sanitary conditions and the action of the *payák* do not exclude each other. Even though most people interpret most diseases and deaths as caused by the action of the *payák*, either by their own initiative or by the action of *pioGonáq* using their power, they also see appalling living conditions as a factor that can undermine one’s health (Bargalló 1992).

But what was the Tobas’ attitude vis-à-vis the death caused by the *payák*? How did they cope with such a high mortality rate? First and most importantly, it seems that this situation did not deter the Tobas from going to the plantation every year. Their dependence on and fascination with the commodities available in the *ingenio*, a fascination which I will analyze in the coming chapter, seem to have been stronger than the looming threat of death haunting the *lotes*. Secondly, and in spite of this, in order to

protect their children many people did not take them to the plantation, as long as they could leave them with relatives in their home villages (something which often was not possible, for most people left to *kahogonaGá*). In the midst of the horror created by recurrent deaths, other people simply escaped from the *ingenio*. Segundo told me:

That place was full of devils. Plenty, a lot. It's called *ingenio* Tabacal. Many people died. Because the devils killed the people, women, children. That day there were flies, black, small, coming out. There were plenty of them in the house, inside. One person that died. And I fled to Orán, I didn't return to the *ingenio*. I dropped the *ingenio*. I fled, because it had many devils.

In the 1990s, nonetheless, many people argued that there was little that could be done about the high mortality rates at Tabacal, and remembered them with a certain resignation. On the one hand, people certainly counted on the protective and healing power of their *pioGonáq*. Before departing to *kahogonaGá*, they made sure that a powerful *pioGonáq* was going with them to provide them with “protection against the evil spirits that cause illness” (Tebboth 1943: 36). Some people remember that in the *lotes*, at night, one could hear the loud healing songs of several *pioGonáq* healing simultaneously. On the other hand, the power of the *pioGonáq* was only partially effective against the *payák* of the mountains. According to Diego: “some were healed, some weren't.” I asked Sebastián, a man in his late fifties, whether the *pioGonáq* could “stop” those “devils.” He said: “No, the *pioGonáq* didn't stop them. They didn't stop them. If there was somebody who had secret [power] ... [pause] But I don't know. We don't know. Or maybe he was afraid.” This feeling of relative powerlessness vis-à-vis the *payák* also included the view that the medical doctors of the plantation had a very limited ability to control those diseases. Segundo told me: “Many devils ... Many people died.

There was a medicament, but it didn't stop them. Even the doctor died." In these circumstances, for many Tobas the disease and death at Tabacal seem to have become a harsh but unavoidable fact of life.<sup>87</sup> Expressing this "fatalism," Marcelino told me:

When we arrived there, I don't know how many dead ... Ooh! Many died there in the *ingenio*. Many diseases, Gastón, many diseases. Patrón Costas had medicine, but people died. When it was cold, people had pimples all over their bodies, they had *bichos*. The *ingenio* was awful, but we went anyway. We didn't think about dying. If somebody died, he died.

The deadly *payák* of the mountains were not the only dangers lurking at the plantation. A very particular and dangerous group of people inhabited different areas of the San Francisco Valley. They were big and tall, had long beards, used pieces of cloth wrapped around their heads, and were very wealthy. And they were also cannibals.

### **The *KiyaGaikpi*: "They Didn't Eat Cow Meat"**

I was conducting my second field trip among the Tobas in 1988 when I noticed that several times, upon my arrival at a household, little children desperately ran away from me, crying, and looking for the sheltering arms of their parents. Thinking that they were afraid of me because I was a stranger from Buenos Aires, I always tried to show a comforting smile, which usually met the smiles of their parents. Some men commented that what scared their children was my beard, which I did not have in my previous visit. Some of them added, laughing: "Since you're white and you have a beard, they think that you're a *KiyaGaikpi*."

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<sup>87</sup> See Segovia (1998: 165, 167) for a similar attitude among the Wichís.

According to the Tobas, the *KiyaGaikpi*, “the big eaters,” were a group of people who inhabited the surroundings of San Martín del Tabacal and whose most striking feature was that they ate human flesh.<sup>88</sup> Ernesto was the first Toba who told me a story about the *KiyaGaikpi*. Even though he never saw them personally, his father had told him about them in detail:

When I went [to the *ingenio*] those people didn't come out anymore. When my father used to go, there were some groups, but they lived in campsites. According to him, once, when they were working doing clearings ... close to a mountain, there was a campsite of those people. One of them [a Toba] went to take a bath, because there was a ditch. Then, he was getting closer and a bearded man came out. He was making gestures so that he came, and the Toba was getting closer. When he saw the campsite, he saw all the flesh hanging from wires. There was the leg of a person hanging there, instead of the leg of a cow. The man escaped right away and told the others: “There's a group of bearded men, with the leg of a person!” Ooh! The people didn't know what to do, they wanted to leave. The *mayordomo* and the foreman told them that they shouldn't be scared, that that people were staying over there.

The *KiyaGaikpi* are part of the direct experience of the generation of Tobas who are now approximately 60 years and older. They saw the *KiyaGaikpi* in person at the sugar plantations when they were young and passed the memory of them to the younger generations. Thus, those who worked in the plantations in the following decades knew well who the *KiyaGaikpi* were and were afraid of coming across them, even though they did not get to see them personally. Ernesto told me: “I couldn't believe it, but the old people saw them.”

The meanings associated with the *KiyaGaikpi* condense many aspects of the experience at the plantations, as well as its contradictions. Firstly, according to most

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<sup>88</sup> *Kiyágaik* means “big eater” and *pi* is a suffix for group of people. *Kiyágaik* is also the name the Tobas give to the beetle that the *pioGonáq* puts inside a person's body to cause a disease. The disease, and the pain resulting from it, is caused by the fact that the beetle eats the flesh from within the body.

people the *KiyaGaikpi* came from the place they feared the most: *kahogonaGá*, the mountains. However, people argue that the *KiyaGaikpi* also dwelled in campsites located in the two other major plantations of the valley: Ledesma and La Esperanza. Some old people have a vivid and detailed memory of their looks. Nicacio, making vivid gestures, described them to me:

They have a mustache like this, all around here in the face [he puts his hands all over his face]. Eyes very small, they can't see ... They have a big cloth on, red, white, on the head. They don't use hat. They have *chiripa* [cloth wrapped around the waist], no pants. Most ugly clothing ...

Some persons argue that the *KiyaGaikpi* had “another language.” Bernardo, a man in his sixties, remembered: “We were watching them. They chatted, but I didn't know what they were saying. They had another language ... They talked, but aloud.” Regarding some of their features, people give conflicting descriptions. Firstly, most people depict them as “white,” “very white.” However, others claim that they were “black” or “mulatto.” Secondly, some people argue that the *KiyaGaikpi* were workers at Ledesma and La Esperanza and that on several occasions they went to San Martín del Tabacal looking for work and human flesh. Others, by contrast, deny that the *KiyaGaikpi* were workers at all, and argue that when they approached the sugar plantations they just wanted to kill and “eat” people. For some, the reason why the *KiyaGaikpi* could not have been workers lay in a feature most people acknowledge: they were “very rich,” “full of money.” Mariano told me that they were fearless because of their wealth:

The *KiyaGaikpi* ... looked as if they were the owners of everything. They say that they live on the other side, beyond the big mountain. They came down with trucks, for they were many. They have trucks, they're very rich. They have everything. They say that they

have airplanes ... They have money, they have plenty of money. That's why they're not scared.

A few people explain the wealth of the *KiyaGaikpi* by the fact that they were merchants. Daniela told me: "Sometimes they sold their things, they went where the people were staying." For others, their wealth came from "a factory of salt," a commodity which many Tobas knew also came from the mountains. Fernando, an eighteen year old who has never been to San Martín del Tabacal, told me about what his father had told him about the *KiyaGaikpi*:

They're white, tall and fat ... They say that they have a lot of money, a lot of money. *Why?* They have a factory, that's why they earn something. *Are they rich?* Yes, they are the ones who make the salt, they're the owners of the factory. *Where is it?* In that place where they live. They say that they have a town. It's close to *ingenio* San Martín, farther up, in the mountains.

The experience of the commoditization of social relations prevalent in the San Francisco Valley shaped the imagery of the *KiyaGaikpi* in a strong manner, not only in their image as "rich" but also in the interpretation of the way they obtained their "food." Nicacio told me that the *KiyaGaikpi* used to leave small packages of money by the road, tied with a string, as a "bait" to attract and capture people. Other Tobas argue that the *KiyaGaikpi* used their money to "buy" people and eat them. Thus, the people whose only commodity while at the plantations was their labor power were being bought and sold as a new type of commodity: as meat, "just like an animal." The attitudes of these cannibals, in this regard, condense the very experience of commoditization associated with the plantation, where workers were reduced to objects deprived of a life of their own. The *KiyaGaikpi* used to "purchase" human flesh either from other workers, or as Gervacio —

a man with political experience— put it: “from the people who have money and contact with the authorities.” Mariano, for his part, told me: “Well, they say that a Chaguanco was very upset [for the *KiyaGaikpi* had killed one of them]. He was upset, but they gave him money, a lot of money. Then he wasn’t angry anymore.”

Moreover, the workers’ flesh was for the *KiyaGaikpi* not only a use-value to be bought and consumed, but also a commodity used as a means of exchange. Along these lines, Segundo told me a particular story about a Toba man who did a *changa*, a day’s labor, for the *KiyaGaikpi*. They paid him with a macabre commodity: the hand of a dead worker “wrapped up in a piece of paper.” When the Toba saw the hand, Segundo told me, “he threw up, poor man, he threw everything up. He didn’t eat anything. The next morning he was sick, always dizzy. Fierce men ... They gave him that for the work, at noon, for lunch.” This objectification of workers also comes out in something several people told me about: that when the *KiyaGaikpi* captured a man, before eating him they often castrated him, put him inside a paddock, and raised him “like an animal,” according to Mariano giving him “*galletitas*,” “crackers,” in order to make him gain weight.

The presence of the *KiyaGaikpi* was an important component of the climate of terror prevalent in the plantations. The Tobas agree that the fear of being devoured by “the big eaters” was omnipresent: people always had their children with them and avoided going out of the campsite at night or alone. As Pablo told me referring to their fear of the *KiyaGaikpi*: “People were very scared, very frightened. They didn’t want to go out ... they were scared.” Unlike the “devils” from the mountains, however, the *KiyaGaikpi* were human beings. And this enabled the Tobas and the rest of the workers to defend themselves. Nicacio, for instance, told me that the “ancient people” once shot and

killed two *KiyaGaikpi*; however, they did it following orders from Patrón Costas, the owner of the plantation. In this regard, people are unanimous: Patrón Costas “didn’t like” the *KiyaGaikpi*. Thus, some argue that when he discovered that the *KiyaGaikpi* were “eating people,” he immediately “chased them away” from San Martín del Tabacal. These accounts bring to light an important aspect of the experience of the *ingenio*: the image of “protection” associated with the administration and in particular with Patrón Costas, an image which (as we shall see soon) was deeply contradictory.

The Tobas were certainly horrified at these tall, bearded, and cannibal people. Even so, many people argue that the *KiyaGaikpi* did not kill Tobas or other *aborígenes* from the Chaco. The reason? They did not like the “bad taste” of their flesh and “preferred” instead to eat Chiriguano, Bolivian, “Coyas,” and Criollo workers. This distinction is remarkable, for it is based on a reproduction and at the same time a resignification of the ethnic hierarchies prevalent in San Martín del Tabacal. On the one hand, the Tobas project into the *KiyaGaikpi* the despising attitude which was dominant in the plantation towards the *aborígenes*. On the other hand, this time the Tobas considered that these hierarchies played to their advantage. For what saved them from the *KiyaGaikpi* was the very fact that they were *aborígenes* who ate “bush food.” Condensing this widespread perception, Bernardo told me when I asked him if the *KiyaGaikpi* “ate Tobas”:

No, they didn’t eat Tobas. They say that they don’t want to eat Toba people, for they say that they taste very bad. They say that they don’t find the flesh tasty. That’s what the old people say, because the *aborígenes* don’t eat nice things, they eat anything. The old man spoke like that. They’d rather have white people much better, for whites have nice food and they find their flesh very nice.

The Tobas certainly had difficulty classifying the *KiyaGaikpi*, who did not quite “fit” into the heterogeneous ethnic landscape of the San Francisco Valley. In the confusion which pervades many of their accounts, however, some people add further details about the practices and identity of the *KiyaGaikpi*. Thus, some remember that other workers and members of the administration called them “*hindúes*,” “Hindus.” Others told me that they did not like cow meat. As Segundo put it: “They didn’t eat cow. If one of them ate cow, he threw up. Flesh from people, that’s the nicest for them.”

In 1912, La Esperanza contracted about 400 Sikh workers from India, as part of the administration’s attempt to find workers more suitable to the harvest than the *aborígenes* of the Chaco.<sup>89</sup> The presence of the Sikh workers at the plantation, described by an administrator as “handsome fellows with wonderful curled beards” (Muir 1947: 264), added a new element to the complex and dizzy kaleidoscope of cultural production emerging from the sugar-cane fields. In 1913, while visiting La Esperanza, the Argentinean President Roque Sáenz Peña was greatly disturbed by the sight of the Sikhs cremating one of their dead (Muir 1947: 271). The Tobas and many other indigenous workers were certainly distressed as well by the presence of these strange looking men. In 1914, an inspector of the Department of Labor who visited the San Francisco Valley (Vidal 1914: 15, my translation) described some of the features of the Sikh workers which caught the Tobas’ attention: their wandering habits, dirty clothing, thrifty spirit, and especially their custom of not eating cow meat:

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<sup>89</sup> Around that time the plantations also brought from overseas small groups of Russian, Japanese, Italian, and Spanish workers (Vidal 1914: 13-15).

Regarding the *hindúes* ... the results of their work have been poor ... They are weak (*flojos*) and extremely nomadic. They come and go, without settling definitively, wandering in all the *ingenios*. They can be seen at the railway stations in groups, barefoot, excessively thin ... They live in huts with zinc roofs, without women and without any contact with the rest of the population ... Those who stayed are employed cleaning machines and burning boughs. They are extremely thrifty and one of them, days before my arrival, changed a note of 1000 pesos. Due to their religion, they do not eat cow meat. They take frequent baths, but they do not wash their clothes.

The fact that the "*hindúes*" were relatively well-off was noted by another inspector, who wrote that they were "sober and thrifty, and deposit most of their salaries in the bank of the estate" (Zavalía 1915: 19). In 1914, only two years after their arrival, there were only 50 or 60 Sikhs left in the region (Vidal 1914: 15; Zavalía 1915: 18). Judging by the age of the Tobas who claim having seen them personally, it is possible that a group of them continued working in the plantations for several years. But in the long run most of them settled in different towns of the valley. Today, some of their Argentinean children and grandchildren, recognized by their Sikh last names, are well known merchants in towns of the region (Lagos, personal communication 1997).

The fear of the *KiyaGaikpi* points to the disturbing experiences which shaped the Tobas' early experience of the *ingenio*. The fear of cannibalism does not seem to have played an important role in the Tobas' cultural practices previous to their migrations to the plantations.<sup>90</sup> Nourished by the rumors of their distaste for cow meat, the fear of the *KiyaGaikpi* expresses to my mind a particular aspect of the Tobas' experience of labor

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<sup>90</sup> The only reference to cannibalism which could be said to be previous to the experience of wage labor is included in a "myth" (today only known by the elderly) about the origin of the plant of tobacco. In this myth, a woman started eating people, among them her husband, until she was finally killed by her children and burnt down to ashes. It was from these ashes that the plant of tobacco first grew. Of the dozens of interviews I conducted about the *KiyaGaikpi*, only Segundo made a connection between them and this myth. When I asked him whether there were *KiyaGaikpi* in their own lands in the Chaco, he told me: "There aren't around here. Only a long time ago, there was a woman who ate her husband. But only a woman, the plant of tobacco. But a long time ago."

in the San Francisco Valley: the fear of the destruction of one of the few things that they still owned while working there, their own bodies, permanently consumed by exhausting work, mistreatments, diseases, and death. In fact, the San Francisco Valley has been haunted by rumors of cannibalism for a long time.<sup>91</sup> And metaphors of “being consumed” or “eaten up” by the estates are common among plantation workers around the world (cf. Stoler 1985: 197-198).

In the Tobas’ memory, there are some indirect but remarkable connections between the plantation administration and the cannibalism of the *KiyaGaikpi*. Even though people argue that Patrón Costas “chased the *KiyaGaikpi* away,” they attribute to them features which put them remarkably close to their *patrón*: they were rich, “white,” and did not work. Most Tobas see a direct continuum between wealth, whiteness, and not being a worker. In spite of the ambiguities and overlaps in their characterization, the *KiyaGaikpi* add a fourth element to the list: to eat human flesh. With all its subtlety and contradictions, the Tobas’ view of the *KiyaGaikpi* as rich, white, and non-workers points to the cannibalistic aspect of capitalist exploitation: to the consumption of the bodies of a social group by the “hunger” of profit of another social group. And it also inverts the old attribution of cannibalism to the indigenous groups of the Chaco by the Spanish, who considered, for instance, that the Tobas of the Pilcomayo were all “eaters of human flesh, extremely perfidious and not to be trusted by their word” (Lozano 1989 [1733]: 83).

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<sup>91</sup> For instance, in the 1910s Criollos from the province of Chaco working in Ledesma were horrified at the alleged “cannibalism” of the Chiriguano, who according to them had already eaten “quite many people” (González Trilla 1921: 263). Around that time, the Wichís at Misión Chaqueña —not far from the San Francisco Valley— regarded the first English missionaries of the South American Missionary Society, closely associated with the English owners of La Esperanza, as cannibals (Makower 1989: 40).

Patrón Costas himself was immersed in the blend between wealth, race, class, and cannibalism. For the one who ultimately consumed the workers' bodies was the owner of the terrifying social machinery at work in the cane-fields. The cannibalism of Patrón Costas, the cannibalism permeating the atmosphere of the plantation, was concentrated in the factory of Tabacal. It could not be otherwise, for as an administrator of La Esperanza put it (Muir 1947: 235): "The sugar mill is a huge, insatiable monster which must never be allowed to remain for a moment without food for its jaws."

#### **"A House of Terror": The Familiar**

When one approaches San Martín del Tabacal during harvest time, what first catches one's attention is the impressive and dense column of white (sometimes black) smoke emerging from the middle of the sugar-cane fields. It is a towering figure which seems to emerge out of the very bowels of a green sea. It is only when one gets closer, that it is possible to see that the endless succession of puffs is expelled by the chimney of a huge factory: a monster of steel which processes sugar cane day and night, without respite, spreading its breath into the sky, a permanent reminder to the thousands working in the fields that their work is devoted to feeding the mills. For all the dynamics of the organization of production in the cane-fields hinges upon the pace of work in the sugar mills (Whiteford 1981: 57; Mintz 1956: 356, 358). When the mills are running, the cane cannot be left long after it is cut (never more than 24 hours), for the sugar juice deteriorates rapidly. Hence, the hundreds of tons of cane cut every hour —before the mechanization of the harvest— by thousands of arms and machetes in full swing are rapidly taken to the heart of steel beating in the middle of the plantation. Probably inspired

by similar images, Karl Marx (1977 [1867]: 389) wrote in volume I of *Capital*: “The ‘House of Terror’ for paupers, only dreamed of by the capitalist mind in 1770, was brought into being a few years later in the shape of a gigantic ‘workhouse’ for the industrial worker himself. It was called the factory. And this time the ideal was a pale shadow compared with the reality.”

In San Martín del Tabacal, the factory was one of the places of the plantation most feared by the Tobas and many other workers. According to most of them, it was the refuge of a diabolical creature known as “*el Familiar*.” The Tobas usually define the Familiar as a *payák* entity, as a *diablo*. However, unlike the anonymous and generic *payák* of the mountains, the Familiar is an individual being with specific traits: a non-human, evil, and powerful creature which had a “pact” with Patrón Costas and lived in the basement of the factory. Some Tobas argue that sometimes he also wandered in the cane-fields and even in the nearby town of Orán. The Familiar usually appeared after midnight and acquired different physical shapes: a white man, a *gringo* dressed up in a suit, a hairy humanoid, a big dog, or a big lion. Other people mentioned that he could also turn into a *gendarme* (military in charge of border areas), a policeman, a black cow, an ostrich, a tiger, a large snake, a cat, or a pig. Emiliano told me that “sometimes he comes out like a kid, a little kid with as suit, tie, shoes. He comes out at night. Like a kid walking ... with a suit. A white kid.” Even though most Tobas portray the Familiar as a “devil” with male features, Tomás told me that he can also come out as “a girl.”

The imagery of the Familiar and its association with the sugar industry is very old and widespread in northern Argentina. Furthermore, the term “Familiar” and its association with “the Devil” has its historical roots in the Europe of the Middle-Ages.

“Familiar” was the name then given to the Devil (or to one of the lesser demons under his command) which dwelled in the home of a witch, usually acquiring the form of a cat (Jones 1967: 211-212; Godbeer 1992: 162-168).<sup>92</sup> In northern Argentina, the Familiar emerged as an important component of the cultural landscape of the sugar plantations of Tucumán, Salta, and Jujuy and became part of the experience of the diverse populations which were providing the *ingenios* with their labor. Due to its widespread geography, different social groups describe the Familiar as having various, heterogeneous features.<sup>93</sup> Still, in most cases the Familiar is basically depicted as a “*diablo*” or as a diabolical creature which has a pact with the owner of the *ingenio*.<sup>94</sup>

In the San Francisco Valley, the local population and the plantation workers associate the Familiar with the three major *ingenios* of the region: Ledesma, La Esperanza, and San Martín del Tabacal. At Tabacal, the Tobas incorporated the fear of this “devil” through their interaction with other workers, especially the Chiriguano. In this regard, the Tobas remember that the latter told them many stories about the Familiar, as some put it, “because they live there and they know.” After decades of work at San Martín del Tabacal, the Familiar became for the Tobas as embedded in their own practices and subjectivity, as “cultural” and as “real,” as the *payák* of the mountains who decimated their children, as the *tareas* they carried out every day, as the *KiyaGaikpi* who

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<sup>92</sup> The Inquisition used to consider heretics “those who had or had had *Familiars*, invoking demons” (Rosenzvaig 1986 vol. II: 248) and during the witch-hunts in New England prosecutors used to look for “diabolical familiars” as proofs of the defendant’s identity as a witch (Godbeer 1992: 162).

<sup>93</sup> Thus, in some cases the Familiar is presented either as a large black dog (*el perro Familiar*) or a large snake (*viborón*). However, the Familiar is often seen as having a changing physical shape, including that of a well-dressed man (Vessuri 1971: 61; Fortuny 1974: 169; Coluccio and Coluccio 1987: 51).

<sup>94</sup> See Rosenberg (1936: 133-137), Jijena Sánchez and Jacovella (1939: 145), Vessuri (1971: 60-62), Fortuny (1974: 169), Paleari (1982: 185-186), Rosenzvaig (1986: 248), Coluccio and Coluccio (1987: 50-52), Isla and Taylor (1995), and Isla (1998).

wandered in the valley looking for human flesh. In 1996, Tomás described the Familiar to me in a way which condenses the image of a creature able to acquire both human and animal features:

There was a Familiar in the factory ... The man always comes out, in the court of the factory. A big dog comes out, a big lion, all *bichos* to look after the factory. Sometimes he comes out even with in a suit and a tie, with shoes. Beautiful man. I've seen him. There's a change of shift, and then people know it's the time when the Familiar comes out. It's true. He comes out at two or three in the morning ... Handsome man, he has a beard, long hair. But people are scared of the man. He always looks after the factory ... Here he comes, and people hid, silent. Tie, suit, he has education. *Is he dangerous?* When he doesn't know somebody, they say that he kills ... When the man gets angry, he comes out. He has a lot of light, because of the factory.

Patricio told me that when the Familiar was in the basement of the factory he was "hairy like a large monkey," but that when he came out he turned either into different animals or into a "*gendarme*" or "*policía*."

When he walks inside the factory nobody recognizes him, [for] he goes out like *gendarmería*. He turns into a person, and comes out with clothes of *gendarmería* ... For several days he goes out again, like a *gringo*, and nobody recognizes him. The Familiar goes through the streets with a truck, in Orán. Nobody recognizes him. He goes like a *policía*, a *gendarme*.

Whenever I asked the Tobas about the meaning of the term "Familiar," most people replied that they did not know what it referred to. They usually added that "Familiar" was simply the term used by the rest of the workers. However, the literal meaning of the term Familiar in Spanish (*familiar*, "relative") was for some of them a source of speculation about the existence of some kinship relationship between the Familiar and Patrón Costas. Moreover, Tomás told me that more than being relatives they were maybe the same person: "Maybe the Familiar is a *familiar* [relative] of Patrón

Costas. Or maybe he and Patrón Costas are the same. He turns into the Familiar.” Most Tobas, however, regard the Familiar as a creature different from Patrón Costas. But it is a difference constructed symbiotically and defined by the very existence of the Familiar as a metonymical extension of the owner of the plantation. For a key defining feature of the Familiar is his “deal” with Patrón Costas, a pact which ties them together in a particular version of the old Faustian theme of the pact with the Devil.<sup>95</sup> In this “deal,” Patrón Costas was in charge of feeding the Familiar with workers. As part of the images associated with the commoditization and objectification of workers, some Tobas argue that Patrón Costas bought with his money the complicity of “the government” vis-à-vis those deaths, and even the silence of the victims’ relatives. Moreover, in an account similar to some of the stories about the *KiyaGaikpí*, Patricio told me that Patrón Costas used to capture people, castrate them, and make them gain weight before handing them over to the Familiar: “When he was really fat, the Familiar ate him ... Then, [Patrón Costas] prepared another one. He invited him over to eat, but he took his balls off.”

Many people contend that the Familiar also went out to kill people by himself. In that case, it usually captured workers “that he didn’t know,” who came from distant regions. Others claim that it used to cause the death of people working at the factory by making it look like an accident. And most agree that when the Familiar came out, the lights of the factory went off. The sign that it had killed somebody was the sound of the

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<sup>95</sup> Mark Edelman has argued, from his own field material in Costa Rica, that the imagery of the devil-pacts is rooted not only in economic exploitation but also in sexual domination, and that as a result men thought to have pacts with the devil are believed to have a predatory sexuality (Edelman 1994: 73, 78). This is certainly not the case of the Tobas’ view of Patrón Costas. I repeatedly asked men and women about Patrón Costas’ sexual reputation, and for them the topic was simply not an issue of their knowledge or concern.

siren of the factory. Emiliano told me that when the siren was on: “People knew already [and they said:].’ Ah! The Familiar got a person, poor person!”

As counter-part of the pact with Patrón Costas, the Familiar looked after the factory, provided Patrón Costas with riches, and made sure that the sugar-cane fields were always green. As Emiliano put it: “That’s why Patrón Costas had money. Not because of politics, but because he had a Familiar.” Enrique also expressed surprise at the fact that Patrón Costas ended up dying like any other human, something which happened in 1965: “I don’t know what the Familiar is. I always say that. Why did Patrón Costas die if he had that *bicho*? Why did he die having that ... like a God? ... *Was the Familiar like a God?* I don’t know what is it. Others say it’s like a *diablo*.”

Since the Familiar and Patrón Costas had such a close relationship, for the Tobas it is no coincidence that the large residence of Patrón Costas at Tabacal, an imposing mansion of Spanish colonial style, is located in front of the factory. Most people agree that there is a tunnel connecting the house with the basement of the factory. There, Patrón Costas and the Familiar had their rendezvous. At times of strikes, Patrón Costas hid in the tunnel and the Familiar was especially alert protecting the factory from intruders. Gervacio told me: “They say that when there was a strike, and the *patrón* didn’t come out, nobody dared to enter. That’s what the old men said.”

The Tobas usually worked in *lotes* located in distant corners of the plantation, far from the factory. However, on several occasions the administration allocated them in a *lote* located on top of a small hill (called “*la loma*”) overlooking the factory and the town of Tabacal. When the Tobas were living there, people were particularly scared of the

Familiar. Ernesto, who was then a young boy, recalled the fear of the women who were then looking after him:

They said that the Familiar lived there, that's why that year no person ever walked around alone, especially women. Women were always together, you know that women are very shy. One says something and they get scared. And since I was with when I saw that. They were scared of the Familiar.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, sometimes the administration sent parties of about a dozen Toba men to work in the interior of the factory to do various tasks. These men once saw the Familiar and Patrón Costas together in the basement of the factory. Enrique depicted this encounter, recalling the terror they felt at the sight of the Familiar turned into a large white man with suit and tie:

We once went underneath the factory ... There was a *jefe* (foreman) who was with us and he said: "If a fat person comes out" —the *jefe* was talking with a low voice— "a person sort of red, nobody has to talk, you don't have to talk." We were twelve, they gave us little lamps. There was an old man who was very scared. [He said:] "Now I know where the Familiar is." [The foreman said:] "You don't have to talk, otherwise something will happen." And he came out, a very big person, with a suit, a tie. But he didn't talk. There [was] a tunnel which goes straight to the house of Patrón Costas ... [The foreman said:] "Patrón Costas is coming." And we all started sweeping, we all had brooms ... There they came, the *ingeniero*, Patrón Costas, and the fat man. [Patrón Costas said:] "Good morning. These are my brave and strong people (*mi gente guapa*)." And he gave a cigarette to each of us and also matches. And the fat man was right beside him, with a black suit, black tie. He didn't talk, but we knew, because the foreman had explained to us. None of us said anything. "All right" —the Patrón Costas said— "My sons, my brothers; hard working people." He turned and he went to another corridor with that man. He told our foreman: "Take these people [with you]." Then, one of us said: "Let's go, let's go, let's go!" We all ran, we went up. We all talked about how scared we were: "I think that was the Familiar, the one who was with us! That's it!" ... The old *Naidó* said: "I'll never go down there again. I'm really scared." We didn't know him, but the *jefe* told us that we shouldn't talk to him or get close to him, because he was the Familiar.

The memory of this encounter points to an important factor of the "culture of terror" prevalent at San Martín del Tabacal: the fact that the fear of the Familiar was

encouraged by the plantation administration. Many Tobas told me that sometimes, aside from the Chiriguano workers, those who warned them “to be careful” with the Familiar and not to wander at night close to the factory were the Criollo foremen. In this regard, the construction of a climate of terror around Patrón Costas and the most important facility of the plantation became an important instrument of social control. It contributed to reinforcing a respectful submission to Patrón Costas’ authority and to maintaining the factory free from intruders. Still, it would be misleading to reduce the Familiar as the product of an utilitarian strategy of social and ideological control designed by the plantation administration, as Rosenzvaig (1986: 249), among others, has claimed. The manipulation of the Familiar by the administration seems to be a successful attempt to use for its own convenience an old and widespread cultural practice created and recreated by the workers themselves out of their own experiences of exploitation and terror.

Even though the Tobas make it clear that they were terrified by the Familiar, most argue that it did not kill Tobas but workers from other regions. Exactly like in the case of the *KiyaGaikpi*, the Tobas explain this by the fact that they were “*aborígenes*.” This particular incorporation and reformulation of the ethnic hierarchies of the plantation is diverse and contradictory. Patricio argued that the Familiar, like the *KiyaGaikpi*, did not eat Tobas because “they say the Familiar doesn’t like them. *Why?* He knows that that the people don’t eat what the Christians eat. They have a smell.” Emiliano —one of those who saw the Familiar with Patrón Costas underneath the factory— argued by contrast that the Familiar “forgave” the Tobas: “Because we have God, the Familiar forgave us. Because we’re poor. *And the Whites?* It killed them. Sometimes it got two, sometimes it got one. The factory was dangerous.”

The Tobas remember the Familiar as a “devil” so powerful that any type of resistance against him was futile. When I asked them whether it was possible “to defend yourself” from the Familiar, some people looked at me with a certain wonder at the extravagance of my question, before answering “no, it’s not possible.” As we shall see, the Tobas’ attitude towards the Familiar was part of their overall sense of political powerlessness in the *ingenio*. By contrast, among workers with experience in unionized forms of struggle there are many stories of individual men who not only fought the Familiar but also defeated it and killed it (Rosenberg 1936: 135, 136-137; Vessuri 1971: 62-63). These men are usually “mythical workers,” anonymous and lonely figures who after defeating the Familiar leave the *ingenio* without leaving any trails (Isla and Taylor 1995: 318). Conversely, for the Tobas the Familiar somehow condensed the almighty and paralyzing power of the plantation and Patrón Costas, a power in which non-human and human actors were closely intertwined.

#### **“We Were Afraid of *Gendarmería*”**

As I have argued in chapter four, in the 1920s the plantations of the San Francisco Valley emerged for the Tobas as contradictory places which, on the one hand, provided them with a partial and temporary refuge from the massacres unleashed by the army in their home territories but which, on the other hand, exerted their own forms of repression and terror. In the 1930s, this latter feature gained strength over the former. As misión El Toba became a “sanctuary” from the army at home, the plantations emerged as the places in which the presence of military and police uniforms became most recurrent and threatening.

In San Martín del Tabacal, the surveillance and control of the workers was in charge not only of the staff of the *lote* but also of the plantation's infamous private police force. This police "was the same or even worse" than the one in Ledesma—which unionized workers called "the Gestapo"—and was often used to intimidate and beat up activists (Nelli 1988: 41, 42). This social control was supported by the squadron of *gendarmería* deployed in Orán, which often curbed unrest in the plantation.<sup>96</sup> Violent and often deadly forms of repression of dissent and strikes have been recurrent in all the plantations of the San Francisco Valley (Rutledge 1977: 219; cf. Rosenzvaig 1986 vol. II: 250-255; Nelli 1988). But various sources coincide that probably the harshest conditions of repression were those prevailing in San Martín del Tabacal, where, according to the testimony of a Criollo worker, people were treated "with cruelty" (Rosenzvaig 1995: 35; cf. Nelli 1988: 41). Being not only the head of the plantation but also a powerful and prominent public figure, Patrón Costas was the condensation of these displays of power: "He was like the grace of God, for he was everywhere" (Aráoz 1966: 61). Aside from showing—as Michel Foucault (1975: 53) would put it—the unrestrained presence and superiority of those in power, terror became in his plantation an intrinsic component of the system of production (cf. Taussig 1987: 100).

The Tobas' experience of intense fear in San Martín del Tabacal was certainly connected to the previous experience of terror with the army; but the fear they felt in the *ingenio* acquired different, more polysemic expressions. On the one hand, in the 1920s, as we have seen, the administration threatened "to kill all the Tobas" on several occasions, and the panic of being killed by the power structure of the plantation still weighs in the

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<sup>96</sup> See *La Nación* 23/10/1946.

memory of several old men. On the other hand, this close association between the administration and terror comes to the fore in other domains, especially in the Tobas' views of El Familiar. Unlike the Criollo workers, for whom the victims of the Familiar are usually politicized laborers regarded as "troublesome" by the administration (Vessuri 1971: 62; Rosenzvaig 1986: vol. II: 248; Isla and Taylor 1995: 318), the Tobas usually make no explicit connection between the victims of the Familiar and their level of political activism. However, they do associate the Familiar with forms of repression at numerous levels. Firstly, as we have seen, some people claim that the latter used to come out as a *gendarme* or *policía*. Mariano, for instance, told me: "We were afraid of the Familiar. And we were afraid of *gendarmería* as well. *Why?* Well, *gendarmería* was there because of the people who went on strike. That's what we were afraid of." Secondly, the terminology some people use to refer to the Familiar is similar to that which became customary in Argentina in the 1970s to refer to state terrorism. In 1996, Gervacio, who was in San Martín del Tabacal as a young boy, told me about people who "disappeared" because of the Familiar and about rumors which attributed their death to "electric shocks"—terms which in a country like Argentina almost automatically bring to mind images of torture and state terrorism:

The old men say that they made a big hole [below the factory], and that there's a house down there. Many people died there. Some say that [they died] because they got an electric shock. But it wasn't because they got an electric shock, but [because the Familiar] got them, and they died. They disappeared and nobody saw them anymore.

The forms of repression prevalent for decades in the sugar plantations were the basis for the combination of state and capitalist terrorism which spread, with unparalleled

violence, in the San Francisco Valley in the second half of the 1970s, when the Tobas were no longer recruited by the sugar plantations. This had its peak in “*el apagón*,” “the black out” of Ledesma, the night of July 24, 1976 (four months after the onset of the military dictatorship). That night, the town of the *ingenio* Ledesma, Libertador San Martín-Calilegua, was left in complete darkness. In vehicles provided by the administration of Ledesma, a combined force of army soldiers, *gendarmes*, and private policemen of the plantation kidnapped 300 workers from their homes. Thirty of them remain missing (Nelli 1988: 117; Rosenzvaig 1995: 62). Between 1975 and 1980, the “black outs” —the same that many Tobas associate with the appearance of the Familiar— became the customary method used by the plantations and the armed forces to detain and kidnap workers and union leaders. Even though the Tobas did not experience this last wave of terror, the way some people talked about the Familiar in the mid-1990s seemed to combine the influence of the (at least partial) knowledge of the terror brought by the military dictatorship in the second half of the 1970s and their less violent, but equally vivid, experiences of terror at San Martín del Tabacal.

The Tobas’ cultural experiences of terror in the *ingenio*, nonetheless, also acquired dimensions which, though indirectly linked to forms of repression, were not reducible to them. This was particularly clear in the case of the *payák*: faceless, anonymous, usually invisible forces with no connection with the power structure of the administration, but which in the Tobas’ eyes were responsible for the death which haunted the *lotes*. A similar, but less indirect, distance applies to the *KiyaGaikpi*, which stand in a particularly contradictory place: they had no direct connection with the administration either but were closely associated with features of their *patrones*. Beyond

all these complexities, mediations, and ambiguities, the Tobas' intense fear of the Familiar, *gendarmería*, the *payák*, and the *KiyaGaikpi* became a recurrent component of their experience in the *ingenio*. And fear, as argued by Gavin Smith (1989: 220), can be “no doubt as emotionally pregnant as a circumcision, face-scarring, or other manifestations of ‘cultural specificity’.”

But what is behind the manifold articulation between the Familiar, the *payák* of the mountains, and the *KiyaGaikpi*, as they are currently remembered by the Tobas? How can we analyze these representations of experiences of terror shaped by imageries of “devils”?

### The Diabolical Faces of Terror

In anthropology, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (1980) and *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1987) by Michael Taussig, are probably the best known books, respectively, on the devil imagery and on terror in their connection with capitalist exploitation.<sup>97</sup> These books, however, have an independent thematic structure, and Taussig has not attempted to connect the issues which are central in each of them, namely the devil and terror. How can we analyze this connection, which is so crucial in our case? Taussig's (1980: 36, 37) argument that the devil imagery merges commodity fetishism with an indigenous form of fetishism—which he calls “pre-capitalist”—is still an insightful starting point. But as noted by many reviewers of his

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<sup>97</sup> These books are very different from one another. *The Devil* became a controversial and thought-provoking analysis of the association of the devil-imagery with capitalist exploitation in the Cauca valley, in Colombia, and in the tin mines of Bolivia. *Shamanism* is a more ambitious and experimental book: an historical and at the same time de-constructive ethnography aimed at analyzing the complex dialectic between the terror

book, Taussig's model is structured along dualistic oppositions —between “exchange systems,” “modes of productions,” and “forms of fetishism”— which oversimplify much of his own analysis (see Taussig 1980: 18-19, 114, 125; see also Platt 1983: 64; Gregory 1986: 67; Trouillot 1986: 86-87; Turner 1986: 105; Roseberry 1989: 222). In this regard, some components of Taussig's analysis require to my mind a more historical reformulation.

Firstly, this devil imagery, rather than being inherent to the way rural peoples perceive capitalism —as a reading of Taussig may suggest— should be analyzed as the result of specific historical and cultural circumstances and particular experiences of labor (Nugent 1996: 281; Roseberry 1989: 221). In our case, very important aspects of the fetishism associated with the *payák* were part of the cultural *habitus* of the Tobas previous to their experience at the plantations: a set of subjective dispositions amenable to explaining disease and death by the action of powerful forces beyond human control (what Taussig would call “pre-capitalist fetishism”). In other words, the “cultural background” which the Tobas brought with them in their first migrations to *kahogonaGá*, which included the figure of the *payák*, provided them with symbols with which they tried to understand the new experiences which were affecting their lives. And the experience of missionization at home charged the *payák*, by turning them into *diablos*, with further negative meanings. In the case of the Familiar, the Tobas incorporated it from their daily interaction with other workers. But after decades of labor migrations, the meanings associated with these different “*diablos*,” the Familiar and the *payák*, were

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brought by the rubber boom in the Amazon and the historical conformation of shamanism as a practice with a strong counter-hegemonic component.

shaped and reformulated by their recurrent experience in the cane-fields of San Martín del Tabacal; in other words, they became semantically embedded in a historically situated and localized experience of alienated labor and terror.

A further historical-cultural feature which is specific to these “devils” is that the Tobas had no type of reciprocity with them. Thus, the notion of making “pacts” with them in order to increase productivity and wealth—central in the cases of Colombia and Bolivia analyzed by Taussig (1980)—is totally alien to the Tobas. For them, it is not the workers but the *patrón*, Patrón Costas, who made “pacts” with the Familiar. Other groups of laborers working in the plantations of the San Francisco Valley, however, considered possible to make those types of deals with “the Devil,” like the Bolivian cane cutters who were paid by piecework (Whiteford 1981: 55). The Tobas simply had few possibilities of increasing their wages through higher productivity; for they worked (as we have seen) not by piecework but per *tarea*. Besides, they did not have, like the Bolivian workers, a long experience of immersion into the values and ideology of market economy. Thus, their construction of the “devils” as totally alien and evil beings is to a great extent rooted in their experience of being at the bottom of the labor force.

Taussig’s model partially hinges on the problem of “alienation;” thus, for him whereas commodity fetishism is based on the *separation* of the producer from his product, “pre-capitalist” fetishism is based on the *unity* between the two (1980: 17, 37).<sup>98</sup>

In my opinion, this concept should be put to the fore, especially because of the connection

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<sup>98</sup> In a more recent piece, Taussig (1995: 398) offered a reinterpretation of his original thesis of the “devil contract,” in which he abandoned references to labor processes and alienation. In this new interpretation, the “devil contract” is analyzed as a phenomenon of sheer excessiveness and wild exuberance restricted to the sphere of *circulation*: instances of “giving without receiving.”

“alienation” entails between labor and subjectivity. Because alienation is not merely a “philosophical” way of referring to what should be simply called “exploitation,” as Louis Althusser (1993: 105) has suggested in one of his many critiques of the concept. Rather, the concept alludes to the *subjective aspect* of the experience of being exploited, to the experience of *feeling separated* from the products of one’s labor. When the young Marx wrote about alienation in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, he was concerned with what we would call today “cultural experiences” of exploited labor, in which the worker, in Marx’s words (1963 [1844]: 122-123), feels that “his labor becomes an object, assumes an external existence, but that it exists independently, outside himself, and alien to him, and that it stands opposed to him as an autonomous power.” Along these lines, the Tobas’ view of the *payák* of the mountains, the Familiar, and the *KiyaGaikpí* as distant and alien entities cannot be fully understood without reference to a cultural experience of estrangement; an experience rooted in the last analysis in the alienation from their own labor but also shaped, in a powerful way, by the death which haunted the *lotes* and the intense fear which dominated their experience of labor. As argued by Aiwa Ong (1988: 34) regarding female factory workers possessed by spirits in Malaysia, the lurid images associated with workplace speak of the Tobas’ *lack of control* over the conditions of labor. This situation was further heightened by the Tobas’ seasonal return to the bush, which allowed them to *contrast* their experience in *kahogonaGá* with practices over which they exerted a direct control (cf. Taussig 1980: 92-93, 115).

Being shaped by an experience of alienated labor, but not reducible to it, the imagery of the “devils” creates a *reification* similar to that of commodity fetishism, which objectifies the social relation between labor and capital in creatures with a life and will of

their own. In so doing, this construction partially blurs the social relations lying behind the production of commodities, the appalling living and working conditions imposed by the plantation administration, and the terror exerted by it. However, as noted by Taussig (1980: 18, 129, 132), these constructs are at the same time very different from commodity fetishism, for they associate a place dominated by capitalist relations of production such as San Martín del Tabacal with evil, negative, terrifying features. In this regard, these forms of reification have the opposite effect of commodity fetishism, which is the *naturalization* of social conditions of production, and consequently they can be said to have an underlying critical component of conditions of exploitation.<sup>99</sup> Terence Turner (1986: 111) has argued that the image of “the devil” in contexts such as these represents *power* rather than capitalism. This caveat deserves attention, for in our case the *payák* and the Familiar certainly symbolize beings with powers beyond human control. But I also believe that Turner’s point should be reformulated, because it would be misleading to reduce the power of these *diablos* to “power” in the abstract. Their power is rooted in a very particular place which is the product of particular historical forces: the plantation and its surroundings. This is clear in the fact that the Tobas see the *payák* of the mountains as more alien, deadly, and powerful than those of their home territories, and that the Familiar lives in the place which is the greatest symbol of the power of the plantation: the factory. Hence, the power of these “devils” alludes to the power of a place ruled by *particular relations of production*: those of capitalism.

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<sup>99</sup> Some authors have contested Taussig’s assertion that the devil-imagery implies a critique to capitalism (see Edelman 1994: 78; Da Matta 1986: 62-63; Turner 1986: 110-111). Even though these critiques are well grounded especially in the case of the Bolivian tin mines (see Platt 1983: 65-66; Nash 1993: xxxvii), I consider that Taussig still has a point. I also think, however, that the critical component of the devil imagery is more subtle and ambiguous than what Taussig suggests (cf. Taussig 1980: 120-121).

This image of the paramount symbol of the power of the whites, the *ingenio*, as a place haunted by evil, diabolical creatures also implies *an inversion* of the demonization of their own cultural practices carried out by the Anglican missionaries in their home villages and in general of the old European view of the “Indians” of the Chaco as led and inspired by “Satan” (see Lozano (1989 [1733]); cf. Cervantes 1994). Thus, by constructing the plantation as a “diabolical” place the Tobas also *projected back* onto their oppressors, in a mostly unconscious and not necessarily reflective way, many of the negative features that the latter had constructed about them.

The critical component of meanings such as these, though important in their denaturalization of conditions of exploitation, is not clear and straightforward; rather, these critical meanings are contradictory and deeply ambiguous. These contradictions include the Tobas’ view of Patrón Costas. For most Tobas, he was “a nice old man” who “cared” about his workers. Furthermore, many times people so described him right after mentioning his connection with the Familiar. Like Tomás, who told me:

Patrón Costas had a Familiar. Patrón Costas was the nicest, very nice. Thin, very thin, tall. He had pants. He was always wearing a white jacket, white pants ... High boots, so nice. The Familiar, maybe he’s a relative [*familiar*] of Patrón Costas. He turned into Familiar. It was the time, he came out. People got silent.

The capacity of the Tobas to remember Patrón Costas as a man who fed the Familiar with workers and who was also “nice” takes us to another important set of meanings associated with the *ingenio*. For the sugar plantations were for the Tobas not only fields of death and terror but also mesmerizing places of abundance and wealth. These imageries of terror and wealth are closely related, for the latter were also nurtured

by experiences of estrangement: in which commodities, riches, and hidden treasures shone in front of the Tobas' eyes like a close, promising, yet unreachable Babylon.

**ELEVEN:  
“WE RETURNED RICH”**

It was nice at the *ingenio* San Martín. We returned rich.

*Pablo* (1996).

**“Like Candies, the Money”**

Many Tobas remember it clearly. The train stopped at Tabacal, and president Juan Domingo Perón himself emerged from one of the cars. Excited masses of workers, among them the Tobas, had gathered at the train station to see him. Perón reached the bags carried by several assistants and a few seconds later the air was filled with hundreds, thousands of coins, flying from his hands to the stretched, desperate, hands of the workers. Diego remembered with excitement the day when Perón “threw money” to them in San Martín del Tabacal:

In Tabacal, we saw him. It was him that we saw; we didn't see another man. In those days, he traveled by train. When Perón saw the people, he got off. Many people. And all the secretaries had little bags. And the people didn't believe that he carried money, in little bags like those. When he finished talking to all the *caciques* and *capitanes*, [it was] only then he threw the money. But coins, new ones. He threw money, he was throwing it like this. The people were bumping into each other, many kids, women. Many 20 cent coins, back then when they were worth something. Then, you found quite many *pesitos* and bought a shirt. Then, when he left, we never come across Perón again.

Many emphasized that the attempt to gather the money thrown by Perón caused a chaotic excitement among the people. According to Bernardo: “He grabbed a handful of money and threw it. Ooh! The people gathering money over and over again. They were pushing each other. The younger kids cried, the grown ups were stepping on them.” Along these lines, some people used metaphors which remarked the animal-like or childish nature of the Tobas' desperate, impulsive attempt to gather the money. Pablo told

me: “The people like hens which are being fed with corn. They came like that.” Mariano said of the same event: “When he threw the money, like candies the money ... And everybody run, the kids, the grownups, everybody.”

The image of president Perón throwing money to them stands in a special place in the memory of the elderly Tobas. And it stands as a particularly dazzling condensation of their view of the plantation as a place of abundance and wealth. In this chapter, I will focus on different aspects of this representation: the abundance of commodities and the riches and various expressions of fetishized wealth and money which were unique to the plantation. And I will analyze the memory of this *ingenio* as it is shaped by the unresolved tension between the Tobas’ simultaneous feeling of participating in it and being excluded from it.

### **“We Returned Rich”**

The enchantment with the amount of goods they were able to earn at the *ingenio* emerges very often and strongly in the Tobas’ memory. Moreover, they often argue that the *ingenio* was a “nice” place where they were able to earn plenty of goods. These goods were for the Tobas not only use values but also exchange values: i.e., commodities in the strict sense of the term. For even though they were unaware of their actual monetary value, back home many of them were sold and bartered to the Criollo settlers, and as a result they became an important source of income.

Among the many remarks made by the Tobas on how “nice” the *ingenio* was, I remember the excited reply by Nicacio to my question “did you like going to the *ingenio*?” He raised his right arm and vehemently told me: “I liked it a lot! When the

*mayordomo* arrived, I left without doubting!” Right away he explained why: “I bought shotguns with bullets, cartridge belt. The old woman got a mare. Some bought donkeys...” Most times I asked people whether they liked going to San Martín del Tabacal, they replied along similar lines, putting the emphasis on the large amount of goods they earned. Moreover, I always noticed that men and women alike loved giving me a detailed and seemingly endless list of goods in a rhythmical, cumulative tone, which gained momentum and a bizarre, dizzying strength as the listing increased. Mariano described the *arreglo grande* as follows:

The money was worth a lot ...Then I bought a large blanket, shotgun, shells, gun powder, reins, bit, spurs, cloth for dress. I bought ten pieces of cloth of three meters each, two shirts to go out, five working shirts, cloth for *bombachas* [Criollo pants], eight meters. I bought pants, *bombacha*, as if was *chaqueño* [Criollo], hat, boots, shoes, a full suit for Sundays. [The employee] summed up, and then there was still a bit left. Then I bought a flashlight, needle, thread, soap, mirror, handkerchiefs, socks ...

In her own “listing,” Marcela, a woman in her early forties referred to the items chosen by the female workers: “A lot of clothing, blankets, dresses ... cooking pots, buckets, money, purse ...” The commodities that people brought back to their villages also had a contagious effect on the British missionaries. Dora Tebboth (1989 [1938-1946]: 59) wrote about the amount of goods brought by the migrants from the *ingenio* with the same in crescendo rhythm used by the Tobas themselves:

You should have seen the new trousers, *bombachas*, skirts, coats, vests, shoes, socks, hats, caps, boaters, handkerchiefs, frocks, cheap rings, balls, soap, cigarettes, food and goodness knows what else, ducks, horses and dogs too. They all look like figures in a spectacular stage show.

The fact that the Tobas earned all at once a relatively high number of goods in the *arreglo grande* was key in creating this dazzling image of abundance. Hence, this concentration of goods at the end of the harvest had an important ideological effect, for it contributed to obscuring not only the exploitation they were subjected during the year but also the fact that they were usually being deceived in the amount of balance owed to them.

The *arreglo* had a further dazzling, ideological effect. When the Tobas referred to the distribution of commodities in the *arreglo*, they usually presented it as if they were somehow in charge of the situation; as if the power balance at the plantation had been suddenly inverted. It was *they* who decided which type of goods they were going to take home. And —as long as there was a “balance” left— they were able to do it *over and over again*, as if they were being served, like good patrons of the house, by respectful employees just willing to comply to their wishes. As Tomás put it: “They gave us whatever we wanted.” Emphasizing both this image of being served and the abundance of commodities associated with the *arreglo*, Diego told me: “You went to the *almacén*, and they asked you: ‘What do you take?’ You asked what you wanted and the pile started growing: poncho, cloth for women, blanket, shoes. The bag was full like this, but there was still money left. Then, you continued asking ...”

On many occasions, the Tobas’ references to the abundance of goods in Tabacal came out right after dreadful descriptions of the death, suffering, and terror they were experiencing. I was always struck by the ease with which they were able to shift from one topic to the other. For instance, Marcelino was talking about the Familiar and he suddenly

made a comment, followed by the customary listing of commodities, on “how nice” it was when they worked at the sugar plantation:

When you saw a black dog you had to escape, because it was the Familiar ... When it wanted to, it was going to kill people. Ooh! At that time there was a lot of work in the *ingenio*. But the work was nice, it wasn't much. But when you worked, you earned clothes, a lot of clothes, bicycles, record players for music, radio, shotgun, donkeys, horses ...

An important feature of the memory of the *ingenio* as a place of abundance is the fact that it is constructed in tension with the current experiences of wage labor in the bean and cotton farms, which the Tobas, particularly the older generations, see as providing them with very little goods. It is to a great extent in *this very contrast* that the *ingenio* emerges as a place where the Tobas were able to “return rich” to their home villages.

Pablo told me:

It was nice the *ingenio* San Martín. We returned rich. We bought boots, spurs, *bombachas*, hat, revolver. Others bought shotguns, boxes of bullets. Another one bought a rifle, bullets. Now, it's not like that. Now, people go to harvest beans, to harvest cotton. But they aren't going to earn a good firearm, a good pair of shoes, a good hat. Nothing. Just something to eat.

The abundance of the *ingenio* is also constructed in terms of the different purchasing power attributed to money back then and today. For instance, some people argue that back then a few “cents” enabled them to buy several goods, whereas today the same amount of money is totally worthless. Marcelino told me that in the *ingenio* “the money was worth a lot, even though it was twenty cents, the cents were like American dollars.” The Tobas' view of the *ingenio* as a place of abundance where money “was worth a lot” leads us to the different constructs about “money” associated with San

Martín del Tabacal. And this takes us back to the memory of the money that president Juan Domingo Perón threw at them.

### **Perón's Factory**

Some Tobas argue that the reason why Perón threw large amounts of money to them is that he owned a "money factory." This private factory was located, depending on different versions, either in the city of Salta, up in the mountains, or in Buenos Aires. All of those who mentioned this "money factory" made a close association between owning it and being president of Argentina. Mariano traced a particular sketch of Perón's political career, in which he was "from England" (the same country of the missionaries) and his "money factory" was the key means which enabled not only him to become president, but also president Carlos Menem to succeed him:

The story goes that Perón had a money factory ... They say he came from England. Eva married him in Argentina ... And Perón had a lot of money also. Then, when there was a vote, they were elected to be the government. Since he had that money factory, he was going to govern, to govern all the people. Then when he died, they say that Menem [became] president. They say that Menem stole that money factory from him. For they say that Menem was Perón's secretary.

"Factories" became for the Tobas key fetishized symbols of their experience in the sugar plantations of the San Francisco Valley; powerful places which create wealth independently from human labor. As we have seen, because of the "pact" with the Familiar living in its basement, the factory at Tabacal was the key to the wealth of Patrón Costas. And the *Kiyagaikpi*, the cannibal people wandering in the valley, were "rich" according to some because they had a "salt factory" in the mountains. The Tobas certainly

saw the factories as terrifying places, but they were also fascinated by them as the source of the wealth of the *dokohé*. These fabulous producers of riches, however, had somewhat distinctive features. The factory which was closest to the Tobas' experience, the imposing sugar mill at Tabacal, was a threatening and diabolical source of wealth which required (through the Familiar) a regular flow of human flesh for its very functioning. The "money factory" of Perón, by contrast, was located in very distant lands and produced the most powerful of all commodities: money. This made it a hypnotic condensation of the economic system of the *dokohé*. As mesmerizing as the image of Perón as it is remembered by the Tobas: him stepping off the train in Tabacal and throwing to the workers the money produced by his machinery of steel.

Juan Domingo Perón, however, never visited San Martín del Tabacal.<sup>100</sup> In the campaign for the presidential elections of November 1951, when Perón was running for re-election, several trains went all around Argentina with functionaries of the government which threw money and gifts to the crowds at the stations—a practice which had become customary in the Peronist government (cf. Pavon Pereyra *et al.* 1974: 68; Eloy Martínez 1995: 193). Furthermore, these functionaries usually combed their hair like Perón and were surrounded by an impressive Peronist paraphernalia: large pictures of Perón, the

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<sup>100</sup> Having in mind the Tobas' vivid depiction of the money that Perón threw to the workers at Tabacal, I devoted weeks of bibliographical research in Buenos Aires and Salta looking, without success, for any published reference of the episode. Firstly, none of the most important biographies of Perón report a visit to the San Francisco Valley. Secondly, since the Tobas agreed that the train had arrived at Tabacal close to the end of the harvest (the "Eva Perón Train", see below, arrived at that time), I reviewed the October and November issues of a mainstream newspaper during the time of Perón's first two presidencies (1946-1955), and no trip by him to Tabacal is ever mentioned. Tomás Eloy Martínez (personal communication, 1997), one of the most distinguished writers and historians on Perón, also agrees that there is no evidence of such a trip. The closest that Perón seems to have been to San Martín del Tabacal was in his tour by train to Salta and Jujuy during the presidential campaign for the elections of February 1946. However, he did not visit the sugar plantations of the San Francisco Valley. After all, these plantations, and especially San Martín del Tabacal, were the strongholds of some of his most bitter political adversaries.

symbol of the *Partido Justicialista*, and banners with the slogan “*Perón Presidente*” (Eloy Martínez, personal communication 1997). One of these trains, called “Eva Perón Sanitary Train,” arrived at San Martín del Tabacal on October 28, 1951, a few days before the elections.<sup>101</sup>

At that time, the Tobas knew very little about Perón and about the political situation in Argentina in general. Tomás told me, remembering the day they “saw” Perón: “You know, we didn’t know Perón. Perón arrived at *ingenio* Tabacal. We didn’t know who Perón was.” The arrival of the “Eva Perón” train at San Martín del Tabacal most probably triggered among the Tobas, as well as among other groups of workers, great expectations as to the possibility of seeing the distant president from Buenos Aires. A few Tobas even claim that Evita was in that train, side by side with Perón. Situations like this were then widespread in Argentina, and people often “saw” Perón and Evita in places they never went to (Eloy Martínez, personal communication 1997).

The Tobas’ memory of Perón’s visit to San Martín del Tabacal is important not because of this “gap” between their subjective experience of the event and the “actual” identity of the man who threw money to them. Rather, what is significant about it is the various clusters of meanings it conveys to them, among them the contradictory view of the plantation as a place of wealth and abundance. But this memory points to something else. People’s recollection of their own desperation at reaching the coins thrown by Perón, the fact that they gathered them like “hens” running after “corn grains,” uncovers the other side of this imagery of wealth: that they also felt alienated from it. This twofold process, the fascination with wealth and the simultaneous sense of estrangement from it,

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<sup>101</sup> El Mundo 26/10/1951; 8/11/1951.

emerges in accounts by the Tobas of a type of money “with a life of its own” which was exclusive to San Martín del Tabacal.

### “Living” Money

The *aborígenes* of the Chaco were caught by the “hypnotizing” effects of money since their very early experiences in the plantations. In 1912, one of the first British missionaries at La Esperanza was trying to learn the Chorote language, and he was feeling frustrated by the Aborigines’ indifference to his questions about the word for “water.” One of the Leach brothers, the owners of the plantation, was by his side; he showed the *aborígenes* “a dollar bill,” and —the missionary wrote— “the effect was marvellous”:

Taking a dollar bill out of his pocket and holding it up so that all could see it, Mr. Leach said in Spanish, “Here is a dollar for the word for ‘water’ in the man’s language.” The effect was marvellous. Excitement grew high, and the interpreters were running in every direction. After a little while two Chunupí men appeared, who claimed to know the language, but they could not speak Spanish (Hunt 1913b: 79).

The enchantment with money was embedded in many other aspects of life in the plantations. In the early 1910s, an administrator of La Esperanza described the “Coya” workers as people who were “perpetually counting their money” (Muir 1947: 250). In 1933, when Kedók told Alfred Métraux (1937: 188-189) about his dreams, the first thing he mentioned was: “I dream of my trips to the sugar mills ... of sacs full of money ...”

In the context of the commoditization of social relations prevalent in the plantation and of the experience of alienation associated with it, many of these images of money in *kahogonaGá* are strongly fetishized. In that particular place, money, *laikawá* — literally “iron,” due to the metallic character of coins, the first type of money known to

the Tobas— had on several occasions a life of its own, moved from one place to another, and was able to breed more money, independently from human labor. This form of fetishism is recurrent in other parts of Latin America, and has been analyzed by Michael Taussig (1980) regarding the so-called “baptism of money” in the Cauca Valley, Colombia.<sup>102</sup> The Tobas do not have such a notion of “baptism,” but the same type of fetishism is recurrent at various levels in various of their accounts about money in the plantation. And all of these accounts have something in common: the Tobas felt that this *laikawá* was alien to them.

This fetishized money is firstly associated with white men from distant regions, called by the Tobas “magicians” or “artists,” who arrived at the *lotes* on Sundays and performed various and remarkable tricks to entertain the workers. People depict the “magicians” as strange men with wonderful powers; some argue that they had a “secret,” something which made them *brujos* (shamans) with powers provided by a *payák*. And their most remarkable trick, men in their fifties and sixties agree, involved the creation of money out of other objects or simply out of thin air. Thus, the white “magicians” of the *ingenio* successfully mastered the very secret which governed the economic system of the *dokohé*: the creation of money.

When the Tobas recalled the acts of these “magicians” in the mid-1990s, they gave all the impression that they used to watch them in awe, as perplexed and passive spectators. This attitude was not unrelated to their own experience of labor. After all, they were *aborígenes* living in utter poverty who were witnessing in front of their eyes, on a

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<sup>102</sup> This “baptism” occurs when the godfather conceals a bank note during the baptism of the child. The bill is then “baptized” instead of the child and will return to its owner after any purchase (Taussig 1980: 126).

day-to-day basis, the creation of vast amounts of wealth from which they were estranged. Ernesto did not get to see these “magicians” but heard about them from his father. When he told me about them, he expressed a resigned frustration for not being able to do something like that:

They are white people from the *ingenio*. They were young, some with beard ... and they say they were like magicians ... First, they pulled out a white paper, and then they transformed it ... and a brand new bank note came out. They also took one [bill] from their running shoes. He put the hand there, and brand new bank notes came out ... They say it's all like that ... How come? I wish I could be like that, me, that I'm poor ... I don't know how is it.

According to other people, these men could produce *peso* notes out of various objects: like burned paper, eggs, or playing cards. Furthermore, they could also make money breed more money, by turning, for instance, a simple coin into “ten thousand pesos.” Tomás, who saw these tricks performed in the *lote* several times, told me:

If there's a coin, then he made like this with the hand [he moved his fingers], with the coin. Then he showed it to the people. The hand was empty. Where did the coin go? ... Then, after a while he said: “All right, I'm going to check my pocket. It seems that I have money.” Then he pulled out the money, and the money came out, paper money like 10,000 pesos, from the coin ... The coin was worth 10,000 pesos already ... The man seemed to have a lot of knowledge.

There was a further feature of the money created by the “magicians”: after a purchase, this money returned to its owner; moreover, it also brought more money with it. That is the reason why some Tobas also referred to the “magicians” as *carteristas*, “pickpockets” (*kacháGaik*). In this regard, some argue that some people who were watching their show sometimes lost all the money they had in their pockets. The bank notes of the *carteristas* had simply taken that money away.

In San Martín del Tabacal, there was another type of money with “a life of its own,” able to breed more money. It was money hidden in “boxes” buried in various parts of the surroundings of the plantation and especially in the rocky heights of the mountains. Some Tobas call the boxes of money by the term “the gold” and for them they were associated with the *payák*.<sup>103</sup> The image that the Tobas have of the money buried in these “boxes” is also associated with a deep sense of estrangement from it. For people unanimously agree that no *aborigen* has ever been able to find them. Only some bold Criollos and Chiriguano were able to discover them and had consequently “become rich.” However, many of these treasures were located in the mountains, the paramount home of the *payák*, and very few people dared to look for it. Mariano told me:

Those mountains, the people were afraid of them ... People said that neither planes nor nothing went around there ... It was forbidden for planes to go up there. They said there was a gold up there. *A gold?* Gold, silver. Forbidden to go. Maybe there was somebody who had nothing, and then the man who was up there was going to give him the money ... They said that many tried to get up there, but they didn't make it. When they were almost there, the plane fell down. *Did you say there was a man up there?* No, no person lives up there ... There're many devils ... Many devils.

Boxes with money were also buried close to the plantation, usually in the heart of a forest, and their location was marked by a thin yellow flame, according to the Tobas “like a candle.” Similar stories of money associated with “the devil” and buried in places marked by flames, are common in other parts of Latin America (cf. Crain 1991: 76). In our case, this “candle” ignited and faded in regular intervals, coming out of a small hole

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<sup>103</sup> Other people mentioned that there was also “gold” and “silver” hidden in the area, but the term “the gold” usually refers to these buried boxes. Stories of treasures near the sugar plantations seem to have been widespread among other indigenous workers from the Chaco. For instance, in the late 1960s some Wichí groups had oral accounts in which the cultural hero *tokwáj* found “a pot full of gold coins” near Ledesma, where “there was a yellow mountain which was all gold” (Pagés Larraya 1982 Vol. II: 245, my translation).

in the ground. The Tobas emphasize that only the Criollos and the Chiriguanos knew how to find these flames. Moreover, only the most courageous among them set out in their search, at night and in forests known for their dangers. After seeing the flame from the distance, they had to approach it very slowly and to halt every time the flame faded. Once near the flame, they had to cover the little hole from which it emerged with either a knife, hat, or bottle, and then return home. The following day, they had to return with a shovel to dig up a hole to get to the box. Ernesto told me: “They say that right there there’s a little golden box. And it has like a little key. And then you open it and all the bank notes are right there. All the notes very well ordered.” The money included in these boxes — like that of the “magicians”— had also the power, once spent, to return to the pocket of the person who found it and to bring more money with it. Ernesto added:

You pull one bill out and you take it to the store ... and the following day you open the little box. The note that you spent is already there, and it comes with the others, with the other notes of the store ... And then you’re getting richer and richer. Ooh! Until you have so much dough that you don’t know what to do with it ... My brothers used to say: “Ooh, how I wish I could come across that thing of the story.” But here nobody found them.

People argue that only once was a Toba man able to see, from the distance, the flame marking the presence of these fabulous boxes. However, while he was trying to get closer, he lost sight of it. Tomás argued that the Tobas never found one of those boxes “because ... we don’t know that money of gold. We don’t know that. We don’t have knowledge. We’re new ones, we don’t have knowledge.”

The meanings associated with this money and with the “gold” point to several aspects of the Tobas’ experience of wage labor. On the one hand, the image of money “with a life of its own” draws elements from capitalist culture and ideology: the idea that

capital breeds more capital without the intervention of human labor. And the Tobas' fascination with it is also a fascination with the eternal —but always postponed— promise of the bourgeois ideology: that ordinary people always have the possibility to becoming “rich.” On the other hand, in its implicit association with the *payák*,<sup>104</sup> this type of money has for the Tobas negative, somehow evil and unnatural connotations, which undermine some of the elements of bourgeois ideology.

### **Estrangement and Fetishism**

The Tobas were immersed in a productive system whose main driving force was the creation of vast amounts of wealth. And they captured this central aspect of the *ingenio* in dazzling and contradictory images of abundance. This is a memory enhanced by the Tobas' current poverty but also molded by their back then very actual acquisition of goods which had become central in their life. Moreover, the renewed promise of this acquisition became the powerful force that every year pulled hundreds of Tobas out of the bush, in spite of the disease and death that awaited them in the cane-fields. Since they were paid with numerous goods at the *arreglo*, the Tobas felt that they were indeed participating of the wealth of the *ingenio*. After all, every year they returned to the bush “rich,” and this experience momentarily “suspended” their simultaneous experience of terror and exploitation.

But this “suspension” was never total, and the contradictory aspects of their experience of labor maintained a permanent, creative tension among each other. As part

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<sup>104</sup> The Tobas do not articulate the idea that the discovery of this money implied a “pact” with the *payák*; they simply mentioned that it was “money of the devil.”

of these tensions, in spite of feeling momentarily “rich,” the Tobas were somewhat aware that the secret of the wealth of the *dokohé* was still unknown, alien to them. That is why their accounts usually include an attempt to *understand* the origin of the wealth impregnating San Martín del Tabacal: through Patrón Costas’ pact with the Familiar, the “money factories,” the people with powers to create money out of thin air, the money which breeds more money, the buried boxes of “gold.” These attempts at explanation are tentative, ambiguous, and not necessarily rationalized as such; and above all, they are *fetishized* accounts, in which the creation of wealth has no connection with human labor: with their own labor. This fetishization increased the Tobas’ sense of distance between themselves and the wealth associated with the plantation, seemingly at the reach of their hand but actually shining behind an abyss they were unable to cross. For ultimately, in the Tobas’ eyes, this wealth and the knowledge on how to create it were restricted to actors like Patrón Costas, president Perón, white strangers, and the Criollo and Chiriguano workers who were at the top of the ethnic hierarchy of the plantation.

As I have argued, the meanings associated with the plantation were created in permanent tension with the Tobas’ experiences back home, in the mission station and the bush. For this reason, aside from being a contradictory place of terror and abundance, San Martín del Tabacal was for the Tobas also a place of unrestrained “freedom” from the social control exerted by the missionaries.

**TWELVE:  
“DANCING, DANCING, DANCING”**

I hope those Christians who have gone away  
will keep straight, for it is awful to hear of some  
of the things these Indians get up to down there  
at the cane-fields.

*Dora Tebboth,*  
With Teb Among the Tobas (1938)

When we arrived at the *ingenio*, the dancing  
started right away.

*Tomás* (1996)

**Mimesis and Memory**

I was sitting with five or six men in a circle, having a *mate* in the shade on one of those Chaco summer afternoons swept by the overwhelming heat of the north wind. We were in the town of El Potrillo, located about 70 kilometers to the northwest of the Toba villages, where a contingent of about 60 Tobas and myself had gone over a weekend (in a slow journey in a tractor trailer) to participate in a religious meeting hosted by their Wichí Anglican peers. We were having a break from the long (and for me exhausting) meetings in the church, and at one point a Wichí man whom they all seemed to know joined our round of *mates*. After a few minutes, they all started remembering the days of San Martín del Tabacal, where they had originally met, and where they had worked together for so many years. At one point, the Wichí man monopolized the conversation and started talking about the dancing that all of them, Wichís and Tobas, used to perform together every evening in the plantation. Standing in front of us, with a wide smile crossing his face, he imitated the rhythm of the dancing. His arms first stretched to both sides as if he was holding the waists of two other persons in a circle. Then, he imitated the rhythmical movement of somebody shaking a gourd. The laughter was general. My Toba

companions, most of them in their fifties, followed that monologue and that performance with spontaneous smiles. While laughing, some looked at the ground and shook their heads repeatedly. None of them, however, said a word. They just laughed.

A very special climate emerged out of that circle of men who were remembering the “wild” dances they held in San Martín del Tabacal. They were remembering a practice which had been central in their youth but which at that moment was so distant, so removed from that hot afternoon of February 1996, when they were celebrating the Christian values received from the missionaries. I felt that those shared but silent smiles indicated a subtle but nevertheless noticeable complicity. It was an ambiguous complicity about “youth sins” which were at odds with the very Anglican values they were now celebrating and which somehow reminded them of how much they had changed since those days at *koliá*.

#### **“The People Deceived the Missionaries With That”**

San Martín del Tabacal was for the Tobas a place which condensed multiple forms of “excess.” Excess of disease, death, and terror; excess of commodities and wealth; excess in the search of bodily forms of pleasure. Paramount among the latter were the *nomí*, the collective male dances (known in Spanish as “*baile sapo*”) which the *aborígenes* of the Chaco used to perform every evening, all together, in the *lotes* where they had their campsites and which were the prelude to generalized and casual forms of interethnic sexual intercourse.

On the one hand, the various expressions of “excess” emerging out of the practices held in the plantation were tied to each other in a tense ensemble and

consequently one cannot be fully understood without reference to the other. I will refer to their connection later on in the chapter. On the other hand, the bodily forms of “excess” associated with dancing was for the Tobas directly tied to their experience of missionization in their home villages, where they were subjected to everyday forms of social control. One of the defining features of the plantation was the absence of Anglican missionaries;<sup>105</sup> hence, the *ingenio* became a place where people felt free to carry out the practices banned and censored in the mission station and in their home villages.

The *nomí* emerged as the most paradigmatic expression of the constitution of the plantation as a place free from missionary surveillance. Thus, in the mid-1990s many Tobas saw the dancing carried out in the *ingenio* as the best expression of their “disobedience” of the strict paternalism exerted by Alfred Leake. Along these lines, Patricio told me that in the *ingenio*: “People sang with gourd ... singing of the devil. Everybody sang. All the people didn’t remember God, nothing, because there was no missionary.” Expressing this image of noncompliance, Mariano, nowadays a committed Anglican, told me: “When the people went to the *ingenio* they didn’t pay attention to the missionary. There, people sang.” Late in 1995, Tomás, also a regular follower of the Anglican credo, described with a smile on his face how they “deceived” the missionaries, pretending to have dropped (“hid”) the *nomí* in the mission.

People were the worst, at the *ingenio*. Many people: Pilagá, Chorote, Chulupí [Nivaklé], Mataco. They were the worst, all mixed up the people. *Did you dance?* A lot of dancing, all night long, every night ... We hugged, we did a large round ... That’s what we did when we worked. Not anymore. We’re used to the church. *Did you dance at the mission?*

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<sup>105</sup> In San Martín del Tabacal there were some Franciscan missionaries at “La Misión”, a mission founded in 1937 among Chiriguano in lands owned by the plantation (Pistoia 1989: 102). However, aside from occasional visits by them to the *lotes*, the Tobas had little direct interaction with these Catholic “*curas*”, whom they saw as members of a Church which was not their own.

When we returned to the mission, we didn't do it anymore. You had to hide. We hid it. When they took the people out of the mission, and we arrived at the *ingenio*, the dancing started right away. When we returned we hid it, because there was missionary already [he smiled]. The people deceived the missionaries with that, the dancing.

These dances in the *ingenio* were not a recreation, in a new place, of a "traditional" Toba practice; rather, they were *created* by the Tobas' very experience in the cane-fields. The *nomí* was originally of Chorote origin (cf. Métraux 1937: 380) and due to the intense experience of interethnic socialization in the sugar plantations it was soon incorporated by other *aborígenes*. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was already practiced by most indigenous groups of the Pilcomayo River, both in the *ingenios* and in their home villages. In the 1990s, many Tobas acknowledged that the *nomí* was not originally "their" dance but the Chorotes', and that the most skillful dancers and singers were Chorotes, followed by the Nivaklés.

In October 1932, the Anglican Bishop E. Every visited Misión El Toba. Alfred Leake was then on furlough in England and Every (1933: 126) witnessed a dancing session conducted by the Tobas in the evening. His description of the event is sprinkled with the erotic overtones which dominated the missionaries' initial fascination with the Tobas:

Later on again we went down to the village and watched them, the young men at least, at their dances. It was a wonderful sight, these tall graceful men, in headdress, blankets, belts, anklets, moving in perfect time to rhythmical chants. A circle seemed the favourite figure. There must have been fifty or sixty taking part, and the effect in the moonlight was extraordinarily attractive, suggestive of the grace and strength of manhood.

Soon after, due to the missionaries' pressure, the *nomí* stopped being conducted by the Tobas: first in the mission and a few years later in the rest of the villages. Thereafter, the dancing became strictly limited to the *lotes* of the *ingenio*.

### **“All Night Long, Every Night”**

All the groups from the Chaco working at the *ingenio*, depending on the way they were distributed in the *lotes*, participated in the *nomí*: Wichís, Chorotes, Nivaklés, Pilagás, and Tobas. The *nomí* became a central symbol of their aboriginality; it was, as some Tobas put it: “the dance of the *aborígenes*.” While performing the *nomí*, the Chorotes and Nivaklés in particular developed distinctive “roles,” as we shall see. But something stronger tied them all together while dancing: their status as *aborígenes* living and working in San Martín del Tabacal under very similar conditions, something which condensed the very forms of ethnicity created by the sugar plantations.

Those who performed the *nomí* were young single men. “These dances,” Nordenskiöld (1912: 76) wrote, “are the life of the youth.” Far from being aimed at halting the threat of the *payák*, as claimed by Rafael Karsten (1970 [1923]: 27), the *nomí* was above all a male display of eroticism performed to seduce young females. As Patricio told me: “We danced to make women fall in love and to sleep with us.” Consequently, it was very important for men to look attractive during the dancing. As Mariano put it: “Very clean the men, very well dressed, very beautiful the men” (see also Nordenskiöld 1912: 72-73).

In this regard, the *nomí* required an esthetic arrangement of the male body with key markers of aboriginal identity, an arrangement which stood in sharp contrast to the

appearance of the same body while working in the fields. Firstly, for the *nomí* the Tobas took off their working clothing, pants, and shirts, and put their own indigenous clothing on: the *chiripa*, a large piece of cloth wrapped around their waists. Secondly, they painted their faces and parts of their bodies in red and black; some also rubbed their skins with leaves of *koukolék*, a plant known for its power to seduce women. Many wore anklets and necklaces. This careful preparation for the evening dances was maintained for several decades. However, it eventually faded as a new generation of dancers, socialized by new experiences, took over the dance floors of the *lotes*. Thus, during the last migrations to San Martín del Tabacal conducted in the 1960s younger men usually danced wearing pants and without paintings.

The *nomí* consisted of a group of men grabbing each others' waists and dancing in circles. Sometimes they simply formed a long, straight row which moved back and forth. Singing was a central component of the *nomí*. These songs had no words, and some of them were shared by different groups (Nordenskiöld 1912: 76). The *canchero* ("the person of the *cancha*," or dance field) was in this regard a key figure: he was often a Chorote, a skillful singer who led the singing and was followed by dozens, hundreds of howling throats. This singing included the one called by the Tobas *dónagan*, which was accompanied with the shaking of a *poketá* (gourd). Erland Nordenskiöld (1912: 76) described these dances as he saw them being performed by Chorotes and Nivaklés on the Pilcomayo in 1909:

I have seen several times hundreds of men taking part of this dance in the same circle. The movement is usually very slow, and all of a sudden, without transition, it becomes dizzy; the dust rises, and the only thing one can distinguish is a whirlwind of undulating ostrich feathers. At the same time, all the place becomes full with singing and shouting.

Even though young women were not the main dancers, they played a very important role in the *nomí*, for they were the ones who took the initiative to start sexual intercourse. Thus, they observed the sweating male dancers from outside the round, at one point approached the round from behind, and grabbed the man of her choice from the waist or from the handkerchief hanging from it. Then, they either danced with him or took him out of the round. Occasionally women slipped in at different parts of the round and danced side by side with men (see Nordenskiöld 1912: 78; Trinchero and Maranta 1987: 82-83, also note 9).

In their accounts of the *nomí* held in the *ingenio* and of the generalized casual sex that followed it, the Tobas gave me the image of an uncontrolled promiscuity, which stands in contrast to the more restrained sexual practices of the present.<sup>106</sup> Mariano told me in 1996:

People danced ... You grabbed a woman, and you slept just one night. A woman grabbed a man, and they slept together one night. Another night, one more man ... Not like now. You already live married ... Back then, some had two women. Some women had two men, three men, and they sang, and sang ... Now we've dropped it because we know well that the *nomí* is not good.

Because of the intense dancing and sexual intercourse, many young people had very little sleep. I asked Andrés whether because of that he felt sleepy during the day. He said: "Yes, yes, yes [laughs]. But I was young. I was sleepy, but what could I do." Some

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<sup>106</sup> Because of the high rate of exchange of sexual partners, venereal diseases at the *ingenio* seems to have been rampant. Mariano told me that, because of that, he was then careful when it came to choosing his sexual partners: "I didn't go with the women who fooled around with anybody."

people argue that, because of this, the most enthusiastic dancers were not able to finish their *tareas* the following day and therefore earned less goods at the *arreglo*.

Emerging as a practice which stood in explicit and clear tension with the values being received from the missionaries, the *nomí* became an arena of contention over which both the Tobas and the missionaries condensed much of the cultural politics of missionization.

### **“They Didn’t Want to Listen to the Word of God”**

The missionaries were perfectly aware that the *ingenio* was a place which stood in sharp contrast to the controlled space of the mission and which undermined their authority and influence. Thus, references to the “negative” influence of the plantations were very frequent in the missionaries’ reports:

Thus the Indians return from each absence a little less interested in the Gospel than before, and so gradually lose ground. It should be noticed that the years of our greatest advances in the way of baptisms and conversions corresponded to a period when the Indians did not go away in search of employment (Grubb 1945: 17).

The missionaries tried to deal in different ways with the prolonged disruption caused by these migrations in their direct influence on the Tobas. Firstly, while people were in their home villages, the missionaries frequently preached in the service about the “evils” associated with the dancing and promiscuity of the *ingenio*. However, this preaching was not effective. I asked Emiliano whether “Alfredo” knew about the *nomí* in the *ingenio*, and he said: “He knew. Then, when people went away, they danced a lot. He

told us about the word of God, but people didn't pay attention. When they went, they danced again. They didn't forget [laughs].”

Aside from preaching, the missionaries counted on the influence of the Toba evangelists who migrated to the plantations with their peers. In 1943, a year the Tobas went to Ledesma, four Toba evangelists went to the cane-fields. Alfred Tebboth (1943a: 37) wrote: “A lot depends on them and their willingness and ability to keep meetings going, and to be the foundation stones of a dam against the spate of evil that will attempt to drown them in a godless place like Ledesma.” When people remember the evangelists' work in the *ingenio*, however, they usually emphasize that most people simply ignored them. Emiliano told me:

There was a preacher in the *ingenio* ... In the *ingenio*, at five in the afternoon he rang the bell, “tin, tin, tin,” to preach. But not many people arrived, because they were dancing already, the people. Just two [arrived]. The people didn't pay attention. They just danced; they most liked it. They didn't want to listen to the word of God. Just dancing all the time. It seems that they didn't listen to the bell.

Furthermore, some people claim that the Toba evangelists did not tell the people to stop dancing for they were afraid of their reaction. I asked Mariano whether “the Toba preacher” said something about the *nomí* and he replied: “No, he didn't say they shouldn't do the *nomí*. He was afraid. There were many people, [he was] afraid someone was going to get upset.” The missionaries were aware that these evangelists prayed “in the face of the mockery of unbelievers” (Makower 1989: 109); still, they continued putting pressure on them to put some limits to the *nomí*. In 1954, for instance, Alfred Leake (1954: 90) suspended a Toba *capitán* from preaching for he had been unwilling “to stop the heathen dancing and drinking” in the cane-fields.

Facing these problems in their ability to restrain the “sinful” practices held in the cane-fields, some of the missionaries used to pay short visits to the Tobas while they were working in the plantation. On these visits, the strong and charismatic figure of the missionaries and especially of Alfred Leake seem to have momentarily grabbed the attention of a significant number of Tobas. For instance, Leake (1940: 9) went to San Martín del Tabacal in 1939 and wrote:

It was a surprise visit, and I shall not forget the scene as I arrived in the bright moonlight to be almost overwhelmed with brown bodies as they crowded round in an endeavour to shake hands all at once. A meeting was held as soon as the excitement had died down, and the following morning at dawn the keenest of them gathered for a short prayer meeting before they went out to their work.

Because of these momentary displays of enthusiasm, and because of the positive references received from the administration about the “skill and moral integrity” of the Tobas, the missionaries usually wrote positive reports about these trips (cf. Tebboth 1940: 73; cf. Leake 1940: 9; Tebboth 1989 [1938-1946]: 91). However, when the Tobas remember these visits, they emphasized that they were very short and that many people continued dancing anyway. Other missionaries, in this regard, were cautious about the influence of these sojourns: “True we are able to pay them short visits, but these have to be so short as to be almost useless, for any spiritual purpose” (Grubb 1945: 17).

As we can see, the *lotes* of the plantations became very important arenas of contention for the very process of missionization which was shaping the Tobas’ lives in their home villages. The unresolved tension between the Tobas’ enthusiastic dances in the plantations and the attempts by the missionaries to halt them lasted for decades. And this tension deeply shaped the dialectic being constructed between the plantation and the

mission, and consequently between the plantation and the bush. In spite of the missionaries' efforts, the Tobas continued practicing the *nomí* until the very last migrations to San Martín del Tabacal in the late 1960s. The end of these migrations due to the mechanization of the harvest and other labor processes also meant the definitive end of the *nomí*.

Different factors contributed to its demise. The *nomí* was by then deeply embedded in a very particular place: the *lotes* of San Martín del Tabacal, where numerous *aborígenes* lived together for a long period of time. With the end of the migrations, the Tobas lost that particular place of socialization of which the *nomí* was a particular product. In 1976, a group of Tobas was recruited for a few months by *ingenio* Ledesma. That was the last time the Tobas migrated to the sugar plantations of the San Francisco Valley, and on that occasion they did not conduct any dancing. In the farms the Toba have been migrating to since the 1970s and 1980s, the conditions of residence and labor are very different from the ones of the *ingenio*. These farms hire a much lower number of workers and for a shorter period of time and the Tobas do not develop the type of fluid interactions which they had with other *aborígenes* in the *ingenio*. By the 1970s, the *nomí* was already for the Tobas a practice of the past. Being a central component of their construction of place in the sugar plantations, the *nomí* came to an end together with that whole period in the Tobas' historical experience. The long-term influence of the missionaries' preaching also contributed to the abandonment of the *nomí*. Furthermore, this influence ended up shaping threads of ambiguity in much of the Tobas' current appreciation of it.

Thus, when the Tobas remembered in the 1990s the dancing and casual sexual intercourse they carried out three or more decades earlier in San Martín del Tabacal, they seemed to have mixed feelings about them. This ambiguity is tied to their current varying degrees of commitment to Anglicanism and has very different, and contradictory, expressions. Firstly, many people—even those who are today committed Anglicans—clearly enjoyed telling me how they danced and sang in spite of the continuous efforts of the missionaries to halt them. Moreover, as we have seen, they usually smiled at the image of themselves disobeying the missionaries. The memory of the *nomí* becomes then a reminder of their own ability to keep an space of autonomy in spite of the strong influence of “Alfredo” and his colleagues. Secondly, some people downplayed the “sinful” character of the *nomí* by emphasizing that people “just danced” and that they were not involved in “vices”: i.e. that they did not drink wine or chew coca leaves, even though others claim, by contrast, that people did indeed consume alcoholic beverages. In this regard, these persons attempted at maintaining a positive appraisal of the *nomí* but from a perspective rooted in a selective reference to Anglican norms of morality.

However, many other people, including those who enjoy the recollection of their noncompliance vis-à-vis the missionaries, acknowledge today that the *nomí* was somewhat “sinful” and “evil.” Along these lines, some men who are today committed members of the church told me that “God” did not like the dancing and the sexual promiscuity in the *ingenio* and that because of that He sent a series of natural disasters to the *lote* as punishment, like an earthquake (Mariano) or very strong winds (Emiliano). Other people try to underline how much they have changed since those days. For instance, Emiliano told me: “When I was young, I did dance. Now I’ve already changed. I stopped

drinking, I stopped talking no sense. I always pray to God. When I'm sick, I pray to God." These attempts to detach themselves from the *nomí* also come out in remarks which emphasize that those who organized the dances were actually not the Tobas themselves but the Chorotes, the Wichís, and especially the Pilagás—who are remembered as being particularly enthusiastic dancers, for, as Tomás put it, "they had no religion." Thus, some people argue that they simply "joined" these dances, implying then that they were not directly responsible for them.

Even though the *nomí* was deeply shaped by a movement of domination and contention vis-à-vis the missionaries, it was not restricted to it; it was also rooted in an experience of alienation, terror, and death.

### **"Partying Until They All Die"**

The fact that the Tobas danced in the same *lotes* where they lived in appalling conditions, where their children were decimated by the *payák*, where they woke up every morning before dawn to carry out exhausting tasks, made the *nomí* a practice which was also deeply caught up in an experience of labor. It could be argued that, aside from being a contestation to the missionaries' authority, the *nomí* was the Tobas' way of "conjuring," "counteracting," or even "resisting" the alienation of their lives in the plantation. Certainly, "the dancing of the *aborígenes*" was a collective assertion of vitality, sensuality, and ethnic pride which contrasted to the death, terror, and exploitation which dominated San Martín del Tabacal. Yet this aspect of the *nomí* should not obscure something else: that the bodily intensity which filled the *lotes* with human sweat in the evening was part of the same movement which exhausted the *aborígenes*' bodies in the

fields during the daytime. Andrés told me that when they were at Tabacal, they had “two works”:

At the *ingenio*, there was dancing, dancing, dancing ... That’s why many times I say to my son: “When I was young, when I went to work to the *ingenio*, I had two works. There was dancing at night. I had another work at night, for I was young.” The *nomí*. We only slept two hours ... The old people didn’t [dance], they were more quiet. But us, since we were young, we worked again at night. So incredible, che!

The enthusiastic, unrestrained, search for bodily forms of pleasure was still part of an overall experience of alienated labor, of “work”; and its very excess was triggered and caught up by an experience of estrangement. In the late 1960s, a Wichí from San Patricio (Salta) (quoted by Pagés Larraya 1982 vol. II: 257) had an apocalyptic vision in which the Wichís were to be taken in a final trip to the *ingenio*. There, they were going to dance to death: “They will be partying all the time, until they all die.” Resonating to threads like these, the *nomí* and its unrestrained forms of sexuality were to my mind closer to a bodily, complex, expression of anxiety than to an “everyday form of resistance.” In fact, the administration tolerated the *nomí* and the Tobas agree that they always danced unmolested by the foremen. The Tobas’ resistance to exploitation was expressed in other, different domains: in practices through which, individually or collectively, spontaneously or premeditatedly, but with different degrees of awareness, they tried to undermine the plantation’s seemingly unshakable power.

**THIRTEEN:  
THE CONCRETE MOMENTS OF THE STRUGGLE**

We didn't go on strike ... The rich, they went on strike.

*Patricio* (1996)

In reality one can "scientifically" foresee only the struggle, but not the concrete moments of the struggle, which cannot but be the results of opposing forces in continuous movement.

*Antonio Gramsci,*

Prison Notebooks (1929-1935)

The dense fields of power which dominated San Martín del Tabacal shaped in a very important form the way in which the Tobas attempted to carry out practices of non-compliance to hinder exploitation in the cane-fields. And this situation reminds us of Lila Abu-Lughod's point (inverting the famous quote by Michel Foucault) that "where there is resistance, there is power" (1990: 42). In other words, resistance is neither a "reactive" force nor a sign of "human freedom," independent or outside a system of power, but rather an expression of the very fields of power in which actors are immersed (Abu-Lughod 1990: 43, 47). In our case, the Tobas' forms of resistance were strongly molded by the ethnic segmentation of the labor force and the policy of "benevolent conservatism" carried out by the administration and personalized in the figure of Patrón Costas. But what do I understand by "resistance"? Many authors who, influenced by the work of James Scott, have discovered "unconscious forms of resistance" at almost any level of social practice usually forget that Scott himself has rightly argued that "[a] definition of resistance ... requires at least *some* reference to the intentions of the actors" (1986: 26,

his emphasis; see also Smith 1989: 232-233).<sup>107</sup> Along these lines, the forms of resistance that I will analyze in this chapter are mostly spontaneous, improvised, and at times individual and fragmented; but all of them, at different levels, include a certain intention on the part of the Tobas to challenge and change the conditions imposed by the administration. And these forms of resistance, even though entangled in the webs of power set by the plantation's administration, also contributed to shaping the dynamic fields of force which constituted San Martín del Tabacal as "a practiced space."

### **The *Capitanes* and *Patrón Costas***

In the mid-1990s, many Tobas remembered that on a regular basis *Patrón Costas* used to visit different corners of the plantation and that he often stopped to chat with the workers and listen to their grievances. This cultivated image of accessibility was much internalized by the Tobas. On the one hand, "*el patrón Costas*" was certainly for them the personalized and feared condensation of the power of the plantation, the *haliaganék* (as the Tobas translate the term *patrón*) of the *ingenio* who, as we have seen, fed the Familiar with workers.<sup>108</sup> On the other hand, because of his relative visibility, *Patrón Costas* was for the Tobas a "nice old man," a generous, protective figure who cared about their concerns and well-being. Thus, most Tobas are usually at pains to distinguish *Patrón Costas* from the foremen, making it clear that those who abused them or exploited them were only the latter. Emiliano told me: "*Patrón Costas* was nice. But the *encargado*,

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<sup>107</sup> The notion of "unconscious" forms of resistance is to my mind analytically shallow and politically risky, for it reduces to a similar status very different forms of oppression and contention, and therefore "diminishes, rather than intensifies, our sensitivity to injustice" (Brown 1996: 730).

<sup>108</sup> However, the Tobas never invert this translation, i.e. they never call their own *haliaganék* (headman) by the term *patrones*. For them, *patrones* are almost by definition white people associated with wage labor.

*lotero, capatáz*, they weren't. They didn't pay attention to the people. But the big *patrón* didn't say anything ... He didn't order nonsense. Because Patrón Costas was most nice, very nice ..." This positive image is also associated with the memory that it was Patrón Costas who, after the clashes of 1917, convinced the military "not to kill the Tobas" and interceded to allow them to return to their home territories.<sup>109</sup>

Seeing Patrón Costas as a protective figure who was sensitive to their concerns, the Toba *capitanes* and *lenguaraces* usually tried to channel their grievances and demands through a face-to-face contact with him. This practice became probably one of the most important strategies the Tobas relied on to put pressure on the administration. Mariano described how the *lenguaráz* would approach Patrón Costas to put forward particular demands:

When the Patrón Costas was visiting the work, the *capitán* or *lenguaráz*, he ran [towards him] as soon as he saw him ... He threw the hat in the middle of the road so that the truck would stop. It stopped right there ... Then, the *lenguaráz* talked, and talked, and talked ... The *lenguaráz* asked for *alpargatas* [light shoes], he asked for clothing, because some people had the working pants torn up. The Patrón Costas said: "All right. Tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, I'm going to send a telegram to let them know, in order to give you this clothing." Then the *lenguaráz* said: "...Tonight, I'm going to talk to the people." Then, around seven, or eight, he said [to the people]: "Attention, attention!" Then ... he talked, and talked, and talked ... Then, everybody screamed: "Hey! Nice!" ... They knew that he got the clothing. Then, the people were already happy.

The *capitanes* had a vested interest in strengthening these direct demands over other forms of protest. They benefited from a higher salary and other privileges and their occasional dealings with Patrón Costas contributed to increasing their prestige among their own people. Thus, occasionally the *capitanes* seem to have discouraged the Tobas'

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<sup>109</sup> According to Mariano, when the military arrived at the mission in Sombrero Negro in 1938 (see chapter six), Patrón Costas also sent an "inspector" so that the military "don't kill them."

direct involvement in strikes. I was talking to Andrés about the Tobas' lack of participation in strikes and he said: "Our *capitán* ... always gave advice to the people ... He advised the people to work; he said: 'That's why we came here. We didn't come to fool around. We came to work, so that when we go back home we take something with us'." Still, on several occasions the *capitanes* led more direct forms of protest, especially when the assigned *tarea* was "very heavy." In these cases, the Tobas simply decided to stop working while the *capitán* channeled their grievances directly to the administration, preferably to Patrón Costas himself. Gervacio told me: "Sometimes we stopped working, for the work was very heavy, and they paid little. It was not worth it for us and we complained. But directly to the *patrón*. The *patrón* said: 'Yes, no problem. We're going to pay.' Yes, they gave a raise."

Most Tobas do not see these improvised actions organized by themselves as a *huelga*, "a strike" in the strict sense of the term. For them, a *huelga* implied a more organized form of resistance held by the cane cutters and the *sindicato*, the union, and their attitude about them was affected not only by their fearful respect of Patrón Costas but also by the ethnic segmentation which dominated San Martín del Tabacal.

### **"The Rich, They Went on Strike"**

The Tobas' subjective internalization of the gap separating the *aborígenes* from the Criollo, Chiriguano, and Bolivian workers severely hindered the organization of joint forms of struggle with them. When in the 1990s I asked the Tobas about "*huelgas*" in San Martín del Tabacal, most argued that they did not participate in them. As Tomás put it: "When the union protested, we the *aborígenes* had nothing to do with it ... We had

nothing to do with it.” The reasons were almost unanimous: “We didn’t have *documento*.”<sup>110</sup> Without *documento*, the Tobas were almost “non-citizens;” and aside from not being registered voters in federal and provincial elections, they could not join the union. But the Tobas interpreted the lack of *documento* at a deeper level: as a confirmation of their status as people who worked at the bottom of the social scale of the *ingenio* and “were not valuable;” moreover, the lack of *documento* was something which they felt as paralyzing, and which made them feel that they did not even had the right to go on strike.

The Tobas had other reasons for not going on strike: they were too poor to afford it. Strikes were in their eyes a sort of a “luxury” of “rich” workers like the Bolivians or the Criollos, who had enough money and resources to feed themselves while not working. As noted by June Nash (1993 [1979]: 9, 241, 330), the dependence of wage laborers on their incomes and hence the vulnerability of their daily subsistence is a factor which strongly undermines militant action. This problem was particularly apparent for the Tobas, who received the money for their daily plate of food only upon completing their daily *tarea*. The prospect of losing this food was for the Tobas a particular strong deterrent for strikes. This fear was clearly expressed by Mariano:

We didn’t go on strike. *Why?* Because if we went on strike, what were we going to eat? We didn’t have money. The Bolivians, they went on strike because they have money saved. They had union. We didn’t. *Why?* We didn’t have *documento*. None of us had *documento*. We were working as if we were underage.

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<sup>110</sup> The Tobas only got their first *documentos* in 1968, when the migrations to the sugar plantations were about to come to an end.

Many people intertwine references about the lack of *documento* and about only “rich” workers going on strike, with allusions to the fact that Patrón Costas told them “not to get involved.” Patricio and myself had the following dialogue:

*Did the Tobas go on strike? No. What about the Coyas? Yes, they did. Why didn't you? Because another race. Because the Tobas didn't have documento then ... All the people working like ignorant, they didn't have a paper. Patrón Costas taught them not to get involved, so that they were not hungry. The rich had things already, then they went on strike; they already had something to spend. Were the Bolivians rich? Ooh! Not only the Bolivians! The Catamarqueños, Riojanos, Tucumanos, Santiagueños ... Those were the ones who went on strike.*

Sherry Ortner (1995: 175) has argued that since the powerful “has often something to offer, and sometimes a great deal” to those who are dominated, the latter have many grounds for ambivalence about resisting domination. This certainly applies to the Tobas. In their eyes, the plantation provided them with many and highly desired goods, but only upon condition of working hard most of the year. Moreover, on many occasions, the administration succeeded not only in keeping the Tobas away from organized forms of protest, but also in using them to break strikes. An important political weakness of workers in the sugar industry is that cane work, being usually unskilled, can be performed by any worker, something which makes strike-breaking common (Mintz 1956: 399). This is exactly what happened in San Martín del Tabacal. When the *peladores de caña* were on strike, the administration was usually able to rely on the Tobas, Wichís, Nivaklés, Chorotes, and Pilagás to cut cane in the fields.

Nonetheless, the Tobas had contradictory attitudes about *huelgas*. Part of this ambiguity can be seen in their current memory of the large strikes which took place in the 1940s, when the rising figure of Juan Domingo Perón was encouraging the emergence of

*sindicatos* in the plantations of the San Francisco Valley. In February 1946, a violent strike shook Ledesma and the Tobas happened to be there. The country was in the midst of a tense presidential campaign and weeks earlier, at the end of December 1945, candidate Perón had been in the cities of Jujuy and Salta. His presence in the region increased the politicization of the plantation workers. In Ledesma, the workers on strike, armed with sticks and stones, cut telephone and telegraph lines, the supply of electricity and water, and did not allow the management personnel to leave the plantation. The *gendarmería* and the army arrived and four people died in clashes (Rosenzvaig 1995: 35; Nelli 1988: 43).<sup>111</sup> Before the administration yielded to most demands, several stores of the plantation were looted and the Ministry of the Interior “declared that the acts of looting were caused only by the Indians [of the Chaco]” (Rosenzvaig 1995: 35, my translation). The Tobas were among those “Indians,” but nowadays they recall the unrest sweeping Ledesma as something that had little to do with them. They argue that those who were destroying the stores were the people on strike; what they and other *aborígenes* did was simply to take advantage of the large piles of goods scattered everywhere. Tomás told me in 1996:

I remember the time of the *ingenio* Ledesma, when there was a strike ... Those who were on strike turned over all the materials, all the stores, all the guns ... The people broke down all the houses because they weren't paid. And there was a *lote* full of scattered *mercaderías*... *Did the aborígenes also break things?* No, no, no ... People just stayed there, standing, until the army passed by, and they returned to the *lote* ... Then, when they saw that there were no people, they went. The houses, the windows, all broken. There, the *aborígenes* gathered pots, shovels, *mercaderías*, which were scattered. But the others said nothing to them. Yes, I remember. Fucked up times!

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<sup>111</sup> See also El Intransigente 1-14/2/1946.

The memory of those events in Ledesma condenses much of the attitudes which the Tobas had vis-à-vis *huelgas*. Strikes were conducted not by themselves but by other people; but at the same time, they were actions which they could benefit from and in certain circumstances join. Unlike other seasonal workers of the *ingenio* who saw the union as a bureaucratic institution “sold out” to the administration (Whiteford 1981: 65-67; cf. Rosenzvaig 1995: 139-140), the Tobas regarded *el sindicato* as the epitome of radicalism. And in spite of the distance they felt vis-à-vis the *cortadores de caña*, many people express admiration at their ability and boldness at challenging the administration so openly. Hernán, a man in his forties who was in Tabacal as a boy, expressed this respect when he told me about the Bolivian cane-cutters: “They knew the work. They didn’t forgive the government of the *ingenio*.”<sup>112</sup>

Along these lines, in particular moments the Tobas put away their reticence and joined the cane cutters in their strikes. Some people talked about it as if it was a question of pride. Pablo told me in 1990: “It wasn’t that we worked just like that, that easily, without protesting.” People remember going on strike to protest high prices in the plantation stores and to demand salary increases. Still, the Tobas remember that they “didn’t understand much” what was going on and that those who directed the strike were the people from the *sindicato*. In 1997, I was talking to Angélica and her husband Horacio about their experiences at San Martín del Tabacal, and she was complaining about the low salaries received by women. Then, Horacio said:

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<sup>112</sup> It is interesting to note that the Tobas make a close association between the union and the Bolivian cane-cutters. However, other sources show that the Bolivian workers had usually a negative image of the union and saw it as a distant and bureaucratic institution run by the permanent workers (Whiteford 1981: 66-67). Besides, it should be remembered that the early migrations of Bolivians were encouraged by the *ingenios* to curb the power of unions (ibid.: 36).

That's why we went on a strike. But, fortunately there were many *sindicatos*... Like the Bolivians, they had *sindicato*. Then when the Bolivians went on strike, they came where we were [and said] ... "You have to go on strike so that we ask for a raise" ... Then, since there was an old man, our *capitán* ... they went directly to the man, to let him know, so that the people go on strike. Then, around eight, or nine in the evening, our *cacique* shouted: "Tomorrow, nobody has to move! Today the *sindicato* came [and they told me] that there has to be a strike like them. They're on strike." Then, the following day, nobody moved. If we were lucky we suffered only one day, we didn't eat. Or two days. What could we do. Till they made an arrangement. Until the Bolivians made an arrangement, and we too.

Together with these collective, often ambiguous, forms of resistance, men and women carried out everyday forms of contention which put them in a tense relation with the most visible agents of labor control.

### **"Swelled up with Sugar"**

Since the late nineteenth century, one of the most recurrent complaints by the administrations of the *ingenios* about the *aborígenes* was that they chewed enormous amounts of cane. Already in 1889, a governor of Salta argued that the salaries of the "*indios*" were in fact "very high ... because the whole family of the Indian chews cane from dawn to dusk, with the result that one fifth of the harvest is lost in the insatiable stomach of the Indians" (quoted by Schleh 1945: 293; see Unsain 1914: 48). Many witnesses reported that because of this the *aborígenes* returned to the Chaco with their bellies distended, "swelled up with sugar like bees" (Huret 1988 [1911]: 35; cf. Unsain 1914: 48).

The "*chupe de caña*" became an everyday and at moments politically tense arena of contention between the indigenous workers and the administration. In San Martín del Tabacal, the administration allowed cane-chewing during the harvest time, but "*el chupe*"

was strictly banned while the cane was still growing. Nevertheless, the Tobas carried out furtive forays into the cane-fields during that period. In order to enforce the ban, the administration deployed *chacareros*, foremen mounted on mules and armed with revolvers or shotguns, who made regular rounds along the *callejones*, the “corridors” of about ten meters of width which cut across the cane-fields every 100 meters.

On the one hand, the Tobas chewed cane out of sheer necessity. They were poorly fed and needed extra sources of calories to perform, and finish, the demanding *tareas* of the day. In this regard, this practice could be simply seen as a “survival strategy.” On the other hand, this was a *politically charged* survival strategy, which implied a recurrent and conscious challenge to the rules of private property of the plantation; a tense process of test and renegotiation of the fields of power of the *ingenio*, in which the Tobas tried to see what they could get away with from the social margins of labor control (see Scott 1986: 18).

Because of the surveillance of the *chacareros*, people had to be particularly careful when chewing cane. Men and women usually set out in groups for the cane-fields in the afternoon, after they had finished their *tareas*. They usually hid in the interior of the cane-fields, far from the sight of the *chacareros*, where they chewed as much cane as possible and also cut heavy loads of cane to carry with them to the *lote*. Still, fights with the *chacareros* were common. Mariano told me about an incident in which a *chacarero* caught a group of them and a young Toba man hit him with a stone:

When we were hungry, we went to look for cane, to chew, to take with us ... Then, we entered in the cane-fields. And the *chacarero* came, and the *capatáz* came too. And they almost caught me, and I got out [of the cane fields]. The other one ... didn't leave. We were shouting at him: “Come! Come that the *capatáz* is coming! They're going to get

you!” ... They got him. When he got off the canes, the *chacarero* caught him ... We had a pile of cane like this ... The *chacarero* aimed at us with a revolver, and we laid in the ground to hide. And the *chacarero* was hit by a big stone. The boy hit the *chacarero*. He hit him well ... A Toba boy hit him with a large stone ... The man lay right there.

These assaults on foremen take us back to another period in the Tobas' experience of wage labor; to the first decades of the twentieth century, when the fields of power structuring the plantations were somewhat different, and so too were the forms of resistance the Tobas relied on.

### **“That’s What the *Aborígenes* Did in the Past”**

When in the 1990s the Tobas remember their own lack of participation in strikes in Tabacal, some people contrasted this attitude with that of “the ancient ones.” Hernán told me about the strikes in the *ingenio*: “That, we didn’t know how to do it. I listened to the old people. They say that the ancient ones, they did go on strike ... When [the *patrones*] didn’t want to pay them, when they didn’t want to give them a raise, the people went on strike.”<sup>113</sup> But what the Tobas remember most clearly about the defiant spirit of “the ancient ones” in the *ingenio* are their assault on foremen and other staff members. This phase of violent, mostly individual forms of assault on the lowest and most visible representatives of the power structure of the plantation is similar to what the situation was at the beginning of the twentieth century in the plantations in Sumatra analyzed by Ann Stoler (1985: 52-53). These assaults seem to be associated with the early incorporation

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<sup>113</sup> There is little historical information about strikes launched by Aborigines at the beginning of the century in Ledesma and La Esperanza. To my knowledge, the only one registered took place in 1914, when the Aborigines openly resisted some of the changes included in a new “contract.” An inspector from the Department of Labor wrote: “The tribes refused to recognize [the contract], and wanted it to be modified. As a sign of protest they refused to go out to work” (Unsain 1914: 85).

into wage labor of groups not used to direct forms of abuse but still unfamiliar with organized and collective forms of struggle.

Today, the Tobas remember these assaults as part of the untamed and rebellious spirit of the *toiéts*. In these accounts, *los antiguos* are presented as proud, impulsive people who would not stand abuses by the foremen. Emphasizing that this is a spirit which has been somehow lost, Emiliano told me about these fights: “That’s what the *aborígenes* did in the past.” According to the Tobas, these assaults occurred when the foremen refused to pay for unfinished *tareas* or mistreated people.<sup>114</sup> Patricio told me about one of those assaults, which occurred before the arrival of the missionaries, and emphasized that the Toba involved in it “was mean, nervous”:

Those who didn’t work well, they didn’t get *boleto* ... The foreman encountered a person who spoke up, who was mean, nervous. Right there the person was upset. But since there wasn’t a *lenguaráz* ... the boy didn’t understand what he was being explained ... And when the foreman returned, [the boy] started shooting at him, started shooting at him; luckily he didn’t hit him ... [He was a] mean, nervous person. He didn’t respect what the foreman said.

The Tobas remember another form of contention which was unique to the first decades of work in *kahogonaGá*: the bewitching of foremen and administrators by the *pioGonáq*. Thus, some elderly people claim that several *pioGonáq* joined their power to kill two well remembered “*ingenieros*” who mistreated the *aborígenes*: “Guillermo” (who once beat up *capitán* Kedók) and “Teófilo.”<sup>115</sup> In 1996, Patricio told me about how

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<sup>114</sup> At least on a couple of occasions these incidents provoked repressive measures by the administration, the collective abandonment of work, and the suspension of the migrations to the plantations for several years. One of these incidents took place in 1931 (see Leake 1970). Years later a member of the mission staff wrote about the incidents of 1931: “that year they caused such disturbance that the administrators refused to have them again until this year” (O. Leake 1936: 126).

<sup>115</sup> Literally, “*ingeniero*” means in Spanish “engineer”. Most Tobas, however, consider that “*ingeniero*” is a term deriving from their administrative work in the “*ingenio*.” In their experience, they often heard that

a *pioGonáq* sent his *payák*, the one which gave him power back home, to kill “Guillermo” and “Teófilo”:

*Did the pioGonáq ever kill a foreman? Bewitched. That’s why Guillermo died. Two ingenieros died: Teófilo and Guillermo. Was this pioGonáq a Toba? A Toba pioGonáq killed him. He bewitched him with the payák ... Who was the pioGonáq? I’m not going to tell you who he was. He was an old pioGonáq. They are all dead already ... They say that Guillermo died all of a sudden. The payák stopped the heart. The payák has power, powerful. Teófilo also died all of a sudden ... He died. I was in the ingenio. But all the doctors didn’t even know who the pioGonáq were. All the doctors, if they knew, they’d have caused much trouble to the indios. Fortunately, the doctors didn’t know.*

Nowadays, people unanimously agree that the *pioGonáq* of those days were much more powerful than those of today. That is why they were able to do something that the *pioGonáq* are not able to do today: to kill powerful *dokohé* like Guillermo Otero and Teófilo Mayer. The former was *jefe de cultivos*, “head of cultivation” of San Martín del Tabacal during the first years of the plantation; the latter, administrator at Tabacal between 1923 and 1942 (Aráoz 1966: 68). With regards to Teófilo Mayer, “people told terrible stories about him. In particular about the way he treated the Indians” (Rosenzvaig 1995: 35, my translation). In the decades to come, these direct, sometimes violent forms of contention were gradually transformed and softened by the changing fields of power of the dynamics of labor in the San Francisco Valley and the consolidation of the Anglican missionization at home. But there was an option which the Tobas, like their proud and warlike ancestors, continued relying on to counteract exploitation.

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important administrators of the plantation, who in many cases were indeed *ingenieros*, were called accordingly by the foremen.

## The Shade of the Bush

Quitting work and returning to the bush was a practice the Tobas carried out since the very beginning of the migrations to *kahogonaGá*. It was usually a collective practice which mobilized clusters of extended families tied by kinship or groups of single work mates. Even though on some occasions the *capitanes* negotiated with the administration to get paid the group's train fare to return to Ingeniero Juárez, abandoning work implied losing the incomes saved for the *arreglo*. Sometimes the working conditions were so harsh that—as some put it—“people didn't care” about leaving and losing it all. Still, because of the importance of the *arreglo*, these “returns to the bush” usually did not involve all the Tobas. In 1996, Patricio told me: “Some returned because they were weak ... Those who were strong didn't quit; they just kept going, till the end of the work.”

As we have seen, in the first decades of the century several “returns to the bush” were caused by violent incidents with foremen and the threat of a military reprisal. Later on, as people remembered in the 1990s from their own personal experiences, an important reason for returning home was the “heavy work” required to finish the *tarea*. Mariano told me about one of those experiences, emphasizing that people left ignoring the *patrón's* demands for “forgiveness”:

Once I returned here and I quit the work. The work wasn't what it used to be. Before then, we worked well. But then, we did another work which wasn't good. A lot, a lot of work. Then, the people quit the work. The *patrón* came, he didn't want us to go: He said: “Forgive me! Come! Don't go!” But they left anyway.

A further strong reason for quitting work, especially close to the end of the harvest, was to forage in the bush and to eat “bush food.” Hernán told me: “The algarroba

was ripening, that's why people quit work. They couldn't [work anymore], for in the *ingenio* there was no rest ... They returned. They didn't care about losing the money."

Diego told me about a massive abandonment of work which took place sometime in the 1960s, when "half the people" returned to the Pilcomayo:

The people were screaming that the work was very heavy. The *patrón* gave them a very heavy work, twenty furrows per person [instead of seven] ... Then half of the people came back here ... Those who stayed there, they returned naked. Me, over here, eating fish all day.

In accounts such as this, quitting work becomes a practice which enhances the tension opposing the bush and the plantations. For unlike the other forms of resistance I have analyzed, this practice implied not only an inability or unwillingness to endure oppression any longer but also an assertion of partial autonomy from the administration, a reliance on the existence of a place alternative to the plantation and very different from it.

**PART IV:  
UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD**



**FOURTEEN:  
A PLACE OF HEALING**

We're *aborígenes*; we're not going to die  
because we have the food from the bush.  
*Pablo* (1996)

... healing can mobilize terror in order to  
subvert it ...  
*Michael Taussig*,  
Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild  
Man (1987)

**Mourning and Healing**

One mild afternoon of September 1995, 26 years after the Tobas had been to San Martín del Tabacal for the last time, Javier was telling me about the powers that the current generations of Tobas have lost, like the capacity to decipher the language of animals. We were standing near the dispensary of one of the villages, and he then gave me the example of Miguel, a powerful *pioGonáq* who died in 1954.<sup>116</sup> Miguel was once hunting with a group of men across the Pilcomayo River, deep inside the bush in Paraguayan territory, when all of a sudden he heard the “singing” of a fox. Javier added: “It was like a letter, but there was no letter; but the *pioGonáq* understood.” Through this “singing,” the fox told Miguel some tragic news: that his son had died in San Martín del Tabacal. “And right there,” Javier went on, “everybody started crying.” Shocked by the news, Miguel and the group of hunters set out to return to the mission. Before crossing the Pilcomayo River, Miguel received another message, this time from a bird. The bird confirmed the news, “like a telephone, and all of them cried again.” When they arrived at misión El Toba, Miguel found a letter sent by his relatives from the “*ingenio* San

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<sup>116</sup> That year, Miguel was killed by another Toba (Leake 1954: 90-91).

Martín.” But he had already received the news about his son, faster than “letters” and “telephones,” through his power to communicate with the forces inhabiting the bush.

As exemplified in this account, the memory of death associated with San Martín del Tabacal is often that of mourning for those who died in the cane-fields. And people usually remember this mourning as an action which took place in the bush, in a place relatively free of the horrors of the *ingenio*. The moment of the return of the hundreds of men, women, and children from San Martín del Tabacal was particularly important in the tense semantic articulation between the bush and the plantation. When in the mid-1990s people remembered that moment, they emphasized the painful contrast between the number of those who departed to the *ingenio* and that of those who returned back. By pointing to this contrast, people implied that when they were in the bush they were healthy. Julián told me how this contrast led people to sing sad songs of mourning, especially at the sight of their now semi-empty homes:

When people went to the *ingenio*, they took all the family. When they came back here, there was one who was missing. Some lacked two, dead at the work in the *ingenio* ... Some people sang with a gourd because their grandchildren had died, or their sons or daughters had died. They remembered them, and then they sang when they got back here ... They were sad, they were sad. They were remembering their children, their grandchildren. They had seen the house. And the daughter, the grandchildren, they weren't there anymore. Then at night, they sang. At four in the morning, they also sang.

Ernesto, the school teaching assistant, emphasized this contrast between those who left and those who returned relying on precise percentages and pointing to the children who left the bush “beautiful and big.” I asked him if there were “diseases” in the *ingenio*, and he said:

Ooh! That's what killed 40 percent of all those who went. When they came back [home], they were few; more people dead than alive ... The kids were those who died the most. When they went [to the *ingenio*] with their parents, only a few survived. I remember one of my nephews, he was beautiful, big. When the *mayordomo* came, he went [to the *ingenio*]. When they came back, he didn't exist anymore.

The Tobas' experiences in the cane-fields have shaped their current views of the bush in complex, mediated ways: as a refuge from direct domination, as a place of endurance, as a contradictory place of poverty and non-commodified abundance. I will analyze the unfolding of these various meanings in coming chapters. And in particular their experience of disease and death in the cane-fields has made the Tobas perceive the bush as a place of health defined in contrast to that experience. This view emerges not only in the implicit suggestions that people left the bush in good health, but also in *explicit* references about the radical contrast between the two places. Diego told me in 1995:

In the *ingenio* there were all types of diseases. You didn't lack disease: coughing, fever, smallpox. That's why every time we arrived over there, they vaccinated on us [he looked at his arm]. Every year. But people got diseases anyway. That's why many kids died, many grown ups too ... The diseases came from the mountain ... Here [in the bush], there's almost no disease. There's some, but after a little while it goes away ... In the *ingenio*, there were tons of diseases, they didn't go away. Here [in the bush], they don't show up. It seems that over here we don't have what they have over there.

In the days of the migrations to San Martín del Tabacal, the construction of the bush as a place of health was also molded by the presence of the mission station at El Toba. As was analyzed in chapter six, the Tobas saw the missionaries as powerful healers and this also molded the contrast between the *ingenio* and their home territories. Mariano, for instance, told me:

Over there [in the *ingenio*], I don't know how many kids died. Many kids died. When we came back the kids were dead already ... Two of my sons almost died at *ingenio* San Martín ... The next time I returned to the *ingenio*, I didn't take my kids with me. I went there on my own, my wife stayed. Because in Sombrero Negro there was no disease. It was very nice. There was no disease because the missionary was always there, praying in the morning, in the afternoon. He didn't stop [praying]. When there was a missionary, there was no disease because he always prayed.

But the bush became for the Tobas more than a place of health. It also became a place of healing where they were able to counteract, at least partially, the experience of disease, death, and terror in the *ingenio*. Already in 1916, Father Rafael Gobelli (1916: 216) noted that the *aborígenes* returned from the plantations “totally demoralized and attacked by disgusting diseases.” And in 1938, Dora Tebboth (1989 [1938-1946]: 58) wrote that on their return from the cane-fields to the mission station the Tobas “always bring back epidemic illness.” In the bush, people were able to recover from these diseases in a physical, bodily sense. But health and illness are for the Tobas much more than a corporeal, individual state: they are a *social* condition, emerging from tensions over moral values (which trigger the damaging actions of the *pioGonáq*) or from social environments seen as alienating and dangerous (which favor the action of the *payák*).<sup>117</sup> Consequently, the Tobas also experienced the bush as a healing place in a *social* sense: as a place where they reconstructed practices, social relations, and a whole “social fabric” which counteracted collective experiences of suffering. For, as argued by Michael Taussig (1987), healing is one of the ways in which the social effects of terror can be subverted. In this chapter, I will analyze the Tobas' manifold view of the bush as a place of healing in its various expressions. These domains include the most important product

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<sup>117</sup> See Miller (1979: 152) for a similar social conception of health among the Tobas of the eastern Chaco (which he nonetheless analyzes from a somewhat different perspective).

of the Tobas' subsistence practices, "bush food," and the non-human, invisible forces which inhabit the bush and provide the *pioGonáq* with their healing power.

### "We're not Going to Die"

There is something that the Tobas emphasize over and over again when they talk about fish, honey, wild fruits, and game meat; in sum, about "bush food": that this type of food is the most important guarantee of their health and well-being. Moreover, for many people "bush food" is not just a healthy food but also a food with *healing* properties. For instance, since Andrés is now a full-time farmer, I once asked him if he still eats fish. He said: "Only when I get the flu. Then, I feel like eating fish. When I had the flu, I wanted to eat fish so badly! Then, I told my wife: 'Tomorrow I'll go to the stream, to get palometa.'" A similar connection between "bush food" and healing came out in September 1995, when I saw that Reinaldo, a man in his late sixties who had been very ill for several weeks, was being taken to the back of a pick-up truck. A few weeks earlier, he had come to the village located deepest in the hinterland (where I was staying) in order to be treated by the collective healing prayers conducted by the local members of the church. But his condition had not improved and he decided to return to his home village near the marshes, where "bush food" was more plentiful. While we were standing near the truck, I asked Gregorio, his nephew, why he was returning home since he was still so ill. He told me: "He wants to go back. He wants to eat fish and honey."

These meanings of health and healing associated with "bush food" are constructed in terms of complex historical experiences, among which the experience in "the mountains" has played a central role. While the Tobas were at San Martín del Tabacal

experiencing diseases on an everyday basis, they tried to consume “bush food” as often as they could, especially fish, the type of food more readily available there. As we have seen, in their free time people fished in the rivers and streams of the plantation, bought fish from itinerant merchants, or received dried-up fish from visiting relatives. The Tobas’ anxiety to eat “bush food” intensified as the date of departure drew near. In October 1995, Diego told me: “Around this time of the year, people were already feeling flabby. They wanted to come back; [they were] thinking that they wanted to eat fish, honey.” Moreover, in their return back home from the *ingenio*, even before arriving in their villages on the Pilcomayo, people began picking up and chewing algarroba pods in an old hunting ground located a few kilometers before Sombrero Negro. Diego told me: “When the algarroba was ripe, then the people left. That’s why when we got to Vaca Perdida, we began chewing algarroba, up to the border.”

The meanings of health and healing embedded in “bush food” are also constructed in opposition to those associated with “store-bought food” (pasta, rice, corn flour, corn meal, *yerba mate*) a type of food which the Tobas link to weakness and disease. “Bush food,” in this respect, is a recent concept which the Tobas did not need to identify as such in the past and which refers to the food that they obtain through their own productive practices.<sup>118</sup> The fact that most people include within “bush food” an item

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<sup>118</sup> For instance, in the Toba language the terms for different types of food classify them according to the form of preparation: i) *nóhik* refers to boiled food eaten directly from the pot: most notably boiled fish, but also packaged food which is prepared this way (like rice and pasta, even though most people use the term *comida* to refer to the latter); ii) *nóhe* refers to boiled food which is taken out of the pot once it is ready (this includes wild fruits which need a long boiling process like *nelomá* and *elké* or produce like pumpkin); iii) *iavók* alludes to barbecued fish and meat.

obtained in the marshes such as fish is a further sign of the cultural weight of “the bush” as the place which the Tobas see as condensing the base of their livelihood.<sup>119</sup>

“Bush food” and “store-bought food,” in this regard, are for the Tobas expressions of different social conditions. This emerges clearly in the Tobas’ memory of their ancestors, for people agree that “the ancient ones” were a remarkably strong and healthy people, mostly because they only ate “bush food.” Along the same lines, most people agree that the new generations of Tobas are “flabby” and prone to diseases because they are getting used to *mercadería*. Condensing a widespread view, Teodoro, a nurse in his mid-thirties and also an active participant in local politics, told me:

What’s ruining us is the pasta, the rice. In the past, it wasn’t at all like this. People used their own food: for instance, algarroba, honey, fish. Now we’re very weak because of the *yerba*, because of the sugar. Our life has already changed, pop drink (*gaseosa*), [synthetic] juice. Very weak the people. Maybe they’re going to have even more diseases. We don’t have the energy that we had in the past.

The existence of strong values of health and well-being associated with “bush food” does not mean that the Tobas are not attracted by *mercaderías*. They certainly are. People’s generalized view that “store-bought food” causes “flabbiness” is as strong as their dependence on, and fascination with, this type of food; a dependence and fascination rooted in the current incapacity of foraging to guarantee the Tobas’ subsistence and the influence of hegemonic values about the “higher value” of the white man’s ways. For instance, most Tobas usually refer to the “store-bought food” with the Spanish word for

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<sup>119</sup> Some people also use the broader (non-spatialized) expression “our food” or “the food of our own” to differentiate packaged food from the one produced by themselves. Being more inclusive, this term also includes produce from their own fields (pumpkin, watermelon, maize).

“food,” *comida*.<sup>120</sup> Thus, several times I heard people saying “today, we don’t have *comida*” when they had a pot full of boiled fish near them or algarroba pods drying up under the sun. In other words, by “*comida*” they meant packaged food. Moreover, many people refer to *comida* as “nice food” (*nóhik ónaGaik* or *comida linda*). Many teenagers are open about their preference for packaged food, even though most of them still regularly eat fish, honey, and algarroba. Some adults complain bitterly about this trend, and argue that it will be negative for the well-being of the new generations. Andrés, in spite of being a full-time farmer, told me that he often tells to his children: “If you don’t learn about the food from the bush you’re going to die of hunger!”

Despite the ambiguous meanings associated with “store-bought food,” and as the last quote suggests, for the Tobas the well-being and health associated with “bush food” are their ultimate guarantee against the hardships of poverty. People know that “bush food” will always be available for those too poor to afford *mercaderías*, and in their eyes this makes “bush food” to be a source of social endurance. Furthermore, the Tobas’ perception of the endurance allowed by “bush food” is shaped by their survival of past experiences of terror and death; an endurance which has saved them not as individuals but as a *group*; not merely as Tobas but as *aborígenes*. This connection emerges in the Tobas’ perception that “bush food” protects them not just from hunger but also from death; and not just from any death, but from intentional attempts at murdering them. Pablo told me once, in a particularly intense tone:

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<sup>120</sup> The Tobas have even adapted the word *comida* to their own language, and some people (especially old women who speak little Spanish) use the term *comi’idá* to refer to rice, pasta or flour.

Sometimes I've heard that they're going to make a war to kill those who have nothing, so that the *aborígenes* die, dying of hunger. Sometimes I say: We're *aborígenes*. We're not going to die because we have the food from the bush ... I'm poor, but I'm not going to die, because I have something to *mariscar*, to fish, to gather honey ... Of course we're not going to die! We're not going to die.

It is certain that, in some respects, the Tobas' emphasis on "food" entails a fetishization of social relations. People tend to explain the health of "the ancient ones" and the weakness of "the new ones" in terms of the relative nutritive value of their diets, not in their different insertion within social relations of exploitation. However, when the Tobas talk with pride about "bush food," they not only challenge hegemonic views of what "nice food" is supposed to be but also refer to food that *belongs to them*; that they have obtained *with their own hands*. Hence, talking about "bush food" becomes an indirect way of talking about labor practices carried out by themselves in a place of their own. For this reason, "bush food" becomes the ultimate condensation of the practices and collective social relations which define their form of production as it provides them with a relative protection from experiences of domination. The place where the Tobas obtain "bush food" is saturated with other social forms of healing power, which the *pioGonáq* obtain from the most powerful inhabitants of the bush.

### **The "Other" *Payák***

When the Tobas were falling ill in San Martín del Tabacal, the only ones who were able to heal at least some of them were the *pioGonáq*. On the one hand, the *pioGonáq's* symbolic capital was being undermined by the missionaries' active and firm condemnation of their practices. Consequently, today most people censure the practices

of the *pioGonáq* as “the work of the devil” (even though this attitude is not free of ambiguities). On the other hand, in their very struggle against shamanism, the missionaries contributed to creating it as a new social force (Taussig 1987: 143, 377). In other words, the pressure exerted by the missionaries shaped the contours of Toba shamanism along lines of defiance to new forms of domination, and some *pioGonáq* emerged as staunch and defiant keepers of the “old ways.” It was a defiance to domination which also emerged in the cane-fields, where the *pioGonáq* were able to kill powerful and abusive “*ingenieros*” and especially heal some of the diseases spread by the deadly *payák* of the mountains, in a process in which shamanic practices became a “means of asserting their own dominance over the otherwise uncontrollable forces of natural and cultural oppression” (Chevalier 1982: 423). The experience of death in *kahogonaGá*, consequently enhanced the healing power of the *pioGonáq*, for “shamanic healing ... also develops its force from the colonially generated wildness of the epistemic murk of the space of death” (Taussig 1987: 127).

The healing of the *pioGonáq* took place both in the plantations and the bush, but had its roots in the latter; in particular in the forms of reciprocity that the *pioGonáq* maintain with the “other” *payák*: those which inhabit their home territories. On the one hand, the Tobas also call the latter *diablos* in Spanish and consider them potentially threatening and dangerous, as we shall see in chapter sixteen. Like those of the mountains, they are usually invisible but can also acquire the shape of a humanoid and hairy dwarf with male features. On the other hand, the *payák* of the bush are utterly different from those of the plantations. First and most importantly, they engage in forms of reciprocity with humans that are unthinkable among the former. Aside from providing

the shamans with the power to heal, they are “owners” of most species of animals and fish and as a result help the Tobas to find their most valuable source of well-being: “bush food.” Secondly, unlike the anonymous *payák* of the *ingenio*, they often have individualized features: there are *payák* in the water, the underground world, and the sky, and there is also a female “devil,” *PayaGó*, which provides healing power to the *piogonaGá*, the today quite rare female equivalent of the *pioGonáq*. Still, these “devils” are essentially male and their paramount spatial domain is the thickest section of the bush; and even though they can act during the day, their ultimate time domain is the night.<sup>121</sup> Being also a particular condition associated with non-human phenomena (see chapter ten), *payák* is also the attribute of other creatures which are not confounded with these “devils,” like *wosáq*, “rainbow,” and *kadáachi*, “whirlwinds.”

But how do the *pioGonáq* acquire their power? Many do it through a father or a grandfather who was also a *pioGonáq*, but many others are offered healing powers by a *payák* after encountering it in the bush or through dreams. In the past, the initiation of a *pioGonáq* by a *payák* required of a relatively prolonged stay in the heart of the bush. Based on his fieldwork among the Tobas in 1933, Alfred Métraux (1937: 176-177) wrote that once contacted by the *payák* the future *pioGonáq* had to live in isolation in the bush for three or four weeks, fasting and singing continuously until the secret healing songs of the *payák* were revealed to him. Today, most *pioGonáq* do not go through such an intense phase of initiation. A few people remember that some old *pioGonáq* (now dead) had to

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<sup>121</sup> This is why the Tobas sometimes call the *payák viágahik* “the one who wanders in the bush” (*viáq*: bush) or *piyágahik*, “the one who wanders at night” (*piyak*: night). However, *viágahik* and *piyágahik* are generic terms and as such they can also be applied to any person or animal wandering in the bush or at night. For instance, the Tobas call *viágahik* the Wichís who used to roam in the bush of the hinterland, and in this case

spend up to “two months” in the bush. But nowadays the Tobas either argue that the *pioGonáq* does not have to stay in the bush at all, or that he has to do it for a few days only. In spite of this, the acquisition of healing power is still deeply associated with the bush, foraging, and the ability to acquire “bush food.” The *payák* usually approach men who are frequent foragers; being creatures of the bush, they “like” men who spend a great deal of time wandering in the bush. As Mariano put it: “If the man ... always wanders in the bush, in the bush, in the bush, then, the *payák* likes him. Yes, he likes him, he likes him, for he always goes to the bush. Then, the *payák* wants him to do his work.” The first sign that a *payák* is interested in turning a forager into a *pioGonáq* is that, all of a sudden, it becomes much easier for him to capture prey. Tomás, for instance, told me:

For example, one day I go to the bush to look for honey, iguana. If I’m not lucky, the *payák’s* around there. It hides, I don’t see it, but it sees me. I find *lachiguana*, *extranjera*, iguana. I find all the *bichos* as if they were tame. The *payák* gives me all those *bichos* ... That’s what it teaches ... [Then] it shows up like a man, like us ... [And it says]: “Look, my son. I’m giving you all these my tools, so that you don’t lack anything to eat, so that you can get anything from the bush.” It gives me the power to eat everything from the bush, everything. Then I already have the secret, and all the *bichos* [are] as if they were tame. When I sleep at night, the *payák* comes and we chat.

As we can see, the ability to find “bush food” is very closely associated with the reciprocity links developed between *payák* and foragers. “Bush food”, the *payák* of the bush, and the acquisition of healing power are then intertwined in a dense semantic ensemble which permeates the bush with social forms of healing at various levels. For the Tobas, by contrast, it is simply unthinkable to receive healing power from the *payák* of the *ingenio*. I once asked Mariano whether the latter gave people the power to heal. He

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the term can be translated as “bushmen.” Along the same lines, the Toba name for viscacha, a night mammal, is *piyághik*.

replied rather categorically: “No, they didn’t.” Another day, I asked him the same question in a different way. He insisted: “No, they only gave the disease.” Furthermore, for the Tobas the contrast between the *payák* of the bush and those of the “*ingenio* San Martín” is so sharp, so radical, that when I asked them to compare the two places, people often got to the point of denying that there are *payák* in the bush. Luisa, a woman in her late twenties, was telling me what her mother had told her about the *ingenio*. I asked her whether there were *payák* there, and she said:

Oh yes, there were tons of *payák* at the *ingenio*, because the mountains are very close. There, it was much more dangerous than here in this zone. There, [the *payák*] came out during the day, during the night. It was more dangerous than here, that’s what they say. *Around here, are there payák like those?* No. There’s almost nothing here. There’re no stories of somebody seeing the *payák* in the road. But over there, there are.

I asked this type of contrasting questions between the *payák* “around here” and those “over there” to several people. The answers were strikingly similar. Like that of Amalio, a man in his early thirties who in other occasions complained bitterly about the *payák* of the bush: “No, I never saw them around here ... Over there, there are *payák*. But over here, it’s more quiet.” In this opposition between *payák* of totally different places and in contradiction with the general characterization of the *payák* as evil *diablos*, people even argue that the *payák* of the bush “teach” the *pioGonáq* to use their power “only to heal.” In 1988, Celestino —a shaman then in his late sixties who always professed a public (and for some, suspiciously too passionate) faith in the Anglican “religion”— imitated a *payák* lecturing a *brujo*, a *pioGonáq*, in terms of a reformulated Anglican morality: “Now that you’ve got my power, you shall be like a great helper of your people.

If there's a sick person, then you have to heal ... You shall not kill, you shall love each other, you shall love your brother."

Along these lines, many people argue that when a *pioGonáq* kills too many people his *payák* "punishes" him for misusing his power and eventually kills him. In fact, the Tobas have explained in this way the death of several *pioGonáq*. The healing capacity of the *pioGonáq*, nonetheless, has been gradually undermined not only by the prolonged influence of the missionary preaching, but also by the transformation of the structure of leadership, which turned the *pioGonáq* into men devoid of political power, and by the fact that people now have access to alternative healing practices. The fact that the *pioGonáq* charge for their services (in expensive goods like a bicycle, a shotgun, or a tape recorder) make these other alternatives (free of charge) appealing: i) the biomedical practices, carried out in their villages by Toba nurses and midwives but centered in the hospital of Ingeniero Juárez;<sup>122</sup> ii) the collective prayers held by committed Anglicans in one village; iii) and the ecstatic meetings of the Pentecostal *Iglesia Evangélica Unida* in the Barrio Toba of Ingeniero Juárez, to which a few Tobas converted in the 1980s. The last two practices, in spite of having opposed institutional affiliations, invoke the healing power of the "Holy Spirit." The Tobas tend to count on a variety of practices at different stages of a disease; but when what is at stake is a serious illness (inevitably attributed to sorcery) they usually seek either the collective prayers or the *pioGonáq* (cf. Bargalló 1992). Along these lines, the *pioGonáq* find themselves in an ambiguous position. They

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<sup>122</sup> Even though the hospital is public and free, going there implies expenses which many people cannot afford (e.g. for drugs or the living expenses of those relatives who go to "Juárez" to be with the patient).

are less powerful than in the past and perform practices at odds with “the missionaries’ teachings,” but are often sought after when what is at stake is a serious disease.

The end of the migrations to San Martín del Tabacal and hence of the massive experience of death and terror in the cane-fields, together with the retreat of the Anglican missionaries in 1982, also deprived the *pioGonáq* of the instances that made them gain force as “counter-hegemonic” agents of non-compliance. However, this force had always an intrinsic limitation: it was based on an individual expertise, not on a collective practice of resistance. As Jacques Chevalier (1982: 423) has rightly argued, “most of this shamanic rebellion is hidden, lost as it were in the nocturnal silence of individualized rituals, none of which is adapted to the particular exigencies of popular democratic confrontations or real class struggle.” Among the Tobas, the force of shamanism as a “counter-hegemonic” practice faded as the more powerful *pioGonáq* died one after the other and as the prestige of the new generations of shamans was undermined by the processes just analyzed. Nonetheless, the everyday practices of the *pioGonáq* still remind the Tobas of the healing forces lying in the depths of the bush, and of their power to counteract—in subtle, mediated, contradictory ways—experiences of social suffering.

The tensions between the imageries of health and healing of the bush and the images of death and terror of the plantations ultimately takes us to contradictions between experiences of labor. As the *payák*, the Familiar, and the *KiyaGaikpí* in San Martín del Tabacal were fetishized expressions of forms of alienated labor carried out in a context of terror, the healing properties of “bush food” and the *payák* of the bush are fetishizations of a different sort: of practices and social relations carried out in a place of relative autonomy molded as such by long experiences of domination.

**FIFTEEN:  
FORAGING UNTIL THE END OF THE WORLD**

We have to go out to the bush, for the poor's life is like this, like the old man says ... Thus, we're going to live with this because we have nothing. We're going to forage until the end of the year, until the end of the world.

*Angel (1996)*

Foraging, the Tobas are invincible ...

*José E. Niklison,  
Los Tobas (1916)*

**A "Return" to the Bush**

A central aspect of the Tobas' experience of the bush associated with the decades of seasonal migration to *kahogonaGá* has been its constitution as a place of endurance, as a place which in their eyes will allow them to persist against all odds. The end of the migrations to San Martín del Tabacal in the late 1960s has recreated but also reformulated some of these meanings. The decline in the importance of seasonal wage labor, in spite of new forms of labor migration in which they began participating, implied that the Tobas had to rely on foraging much more often than in the past. This "return" to the bush was also molded by the radical reformulation of the Tobas' experience of place brought by the floods of 1975, which meant the destruction of the mission station, the disappearance of the river, and the formation of the marshes. Until the late 1960s, the Pilcomayo River, misión El Toba, and San Martín del Tabacal were part of the same spatial, cultural, and economic ensemble. Thus, in those days the productivity of foraging was to a great extent favored by the fact that most Tobas spent eight to ten months in the *ingenio*, something which considerably reduced the pressure on the resources of the bush and the river.

Besides, back then the Tobas relied on very productive fishing techniques, which provided them with large quantities of sun-dried fish and fish fat to be stored for the “hunger season” (August-September). This productive capacity disappeared along with the river in the flood of 1975, and this became the basis of the current nostalgia for the times “when there was a river.” The destruction of the mission also brought to an end a place which had become central in the Tobas’ experience of the bush. This was further altered by the withdrawal of the missionaries during the Malvinas (Falklands) War in 1982 and the growing presence of state-run institutions throughout the region following the return of democracy to Argentina at the end of 1983.

In these circumstances, the Tobas’ “return” to the bush was associated with an important reformulation of their experience vis-à-vis the missionaries and the state, and implied an increase in their practice of foraging under more precarious conditions. In spite of this, foraging continues providing the Tobas with “bush food” which is central to counteract the hardships of poverty in their own villages and new experiences of exploitation in distant “places of work.” And this experience of the bush, also nourished by the memory of the times of *kahogonaGá*, has become a central aspect of the Tobas’ subjectivity. In this chapter, I will analyze the practices, social relations of production, and meanings through which in the mid-1990s the Tobas constructed “the bush” as a place of endurance. In particular, I will look at: i) the social relations of production through which people have access to means of production and regulate the distribution of the social product; ii) the forms of organization of production and the various practices through which the Toba households conduct their livelihood, paying attention to the meanings of endurance and safeguard from poverty associated with them; iii) the Tobas’

capacity to rely on petty commodity production as a means of avoiding seasonal wage labor and consolidating their practices in the bush; and iv) their access to the resources of the state as a further means of reproducing their form of production. As we can (and shall) see, it is in the complex, sometimes tense articulation of these factors that the Tobas are nowadays able to construct the bush as a place of relative autonomy.

### **Relations of Production: “We Still Have the Custom of the Old People”**

A central feature in the Tobas’ experience of the bush as a relative haven from outside forces is its collective nature, which in 1989 gained legal recognition when they were able to obtain legal title to 35,000 hectares of land. This title includes an area over 30 kilometers in width which reaches 15 kilometers into the hinterland (see map 2). Most of these lands are covered by thick *monte* but also include sections of marshes, where the Tobas center their fishing expeditions and many hunting trips. The title gave formal recognition to something which had been central in their relations of production all along: that all Tobas have right of access to the land, the bush, and all its resources. Once a household clears a field and fences it (with wire and thorny boughs to protect it from animals, especially cattle), it is acknowledged that it “belongs” to its members, but this has not implied so far a right of private property. The title has meant a clearer delimitation of the location of the Tobas’ fields and the Criollos’ paddocks, but Tobas and settlers (14 Criollo families live inside the perimeter of their lands) continue sharing large tracts of land, which for the most part are not fenced. Thus, the Tobas continue foraging in the lands (either public lands or lands owned by settlers) that surround the limits of their property towards Paraguay. And some Criollos continue grazing much of

their cattle on Toba lands. However, conflicts over the construction of paddocks, the practice of logging, or the granting of pasture permits are very common.

Households are the main units of production; they usually consist of a matrilineal extended family: an adult couple, their single children, and the nuclear families formed by their married daughters. Labor tools (firearms, nets, shovels, axes) usually have an individual owner, but are used by the rest of the members of the household. These tools are often shared with kin or neighbors from other households. Cooperation between households related by kinship is common in practices like horticulture and fruit-gathering. Women are in charge of food preparation, gathering firewood and water, handicraft production, gathering wild fruits in the ripening season, herding sheep and goats, and weeding and harvesting the gardens. Men fish, hunt, gather honey, and engage in all the stages of gardening: clearing the field, sowing, weeding, and harvesting. Still, this division of labor is not rigid: some men gather fruits in the gathering season and women can gather some species of honey. Women have a much higher share in domestic production than men, but they keep an important control over the dynamic of the household and impose a “moral obligation” on their husbands to hand the product of their labor to them (see Métraux 1937: 386; see also Lee 1982: 39).

Sharing, *awachét*, plays a key role in the social distribution of the production of foodstuffs, both within the household and to other households tied by kinship and vicinity. The obligation to reciprocate, though important, is not specific regarding the type of item involved or the moment in which it should take place. Unwillingness to share is sanctioned by public accusations of “stinginess” and ultimately by the threat of sorcery of a *pioGonáq* or a *konánaGae* —the latter are female sorcerers who only cause harm and are

particularly feared. This situation creates a strong social pressure to share which has been noted among other foraging groups (see Woodburn 1982; Lee 1988, 1993; Peterson 1993).

Since the late 1980s, the Tobas have been experiencing an incipient process of social differentiation associated with jobs in state-run institutions and more recently with commercial horticulture, and generalized reciprocity is playing an active role in the way this differentiation is being molded. On the one hand, the poorest Tobas put a steady pressure, often through “casual visits,” on the better-off households to receive *mercaderías* from them, a distribution which they see as a right sanctioned by “the custom of the ancient people.” On the other hand, some of the employees and *agricultores* (horticulturists) are reluctant to give away what they see as their well-deserved gain, and often complain about the drain of resources they are submitted to by their peers. These tensions often trigger open conflicts, in which some of the better-off Tobas are accused of being “stingy,” *hemóik*. Thus, people often interpret cases of serious illness among the employees or their relatives as a form of “punishment” conducted by jealous *pioGonáq* or *konánagae* (Gordillo 1994; see also Lee 1979: 412-414). Out of this social pressure, the poorest Tobas are able to create and recreate very significant circuits of redistribution of packaged food which contribute to alleviating their situation. Thus, many people make it clear that sharing is key for those “who have nothing.”<sup>123</sup> Pablo told me, praising an employee known for his generosity:

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<sup>123</sup> According to surveys I conducted in a sample village between 1991 and 1992 (at three different moments of the year) among the poorest households (those with no regular income), about 55% of all the packaged food they had consumed came originally from households of public employees. In another sample village with a lower number of public employees, that percentage was somewhat lower but nevertheless significant: about 45% (Gordillo 1994: 70).

We're not like the white people. When they slaughter a cow, they don't share it with their sister. We, the *aborígenes* still have the custom of the old people. You slaughter a goat and then another comes. He cuts a piece and he leaves ... We also do that when the employees get paid ... Javier [the nurse] gets paid and he helps the brothers, those who have nothing. He fills up a dish with flour and [the other person] takes it. Rice, he gives it to the brother. He helps them, because he knows that they have nothing.

The right of any Toba to have access to "the bush" and demand from better-off people the distribution of resources provides them with an important safeguard from the conditions of extreme poverty. This can guarantee the reproduction of households even in the cases in which their members are subjected to systematic extraction of surplus value and therefore it also provides them with a partial protection from over-exploitation. In this regard, the collective relations of production which the Tobas inherited from their ancestors, rather than being the mere reproduction of a somewhat "natural" moral economy (see Leacock 1982; Roseberry and O'Brian 1991), get much of their current dimensions and meanings in their immersion in experiences of domination. Negotiated through intricate local webs of power, these social relations are reproduced an everyday basis by the practices which the Tobas carry out in the bush.

### **"We're Going to Forage Until the End of the World"**

For the Tobas, the food they obtain in the bush is not only defined by its healthy nature but also by the fact that it is always available for those in need. This availability stands in contrast to the commodified and hence restricted character of *mercaderías* and makes many Tobas call "bush food" simply the "food of the poor." As Nicacio put it: "The rich eat bread. We the poor eat all that food, our life ... Because we're not rich. The Tobas eat fish, in the bush all day long: honey, ostrich, deer, wild pig." But what exactly

do the Tobas mean by being “poor”? As I believe is by now clear, most people associate being “poor,” *pióGoik* (or *choGodák*), *pobre*, first and foremost with unsatisfied basic necessities, especially involving clothing, food, and shelter. As Martín, a man in his early thirties, put it: “He’s *pióGoik*, he has nothing; he has nothing to eat.” At a broader level, some people and especially public employees implicitly associate “poverty” with lack of accumulation of desired goods. Thus, even though the latter eat everyday, usually live in brick houses, and wear good clothes, they also see themselves as “poor,” mostly because they lack fancy stereos, vehicles, or cattle. This identity is also strongly tied to their aboriginality, to the fact that for most Tobas being *aborigen* is tantamount to being *pióGoik*. As the reverse of this same notion, for the Tobas to be “rich,” *newoyák*, *rico*, is associated with owning large amounts of goods (and hence having no unsatisfied necessities). As Mariano put it: “He has all the clothes, all the machines, like an airplane. Then, the man is *newoyák*, he has everything, he has a house, everything.” But for the Tobas, aside from being deeply “material,” wealth is also associated with forms of power and knowledge in which the human and non-human realms are intertwined. Thus, the *payák* of the bush are often closely associated with material riches and the Tobas see powerful men like Patrón Costas as obtaining their wealth from dealings with a *diablo* (in this case the Familiar).<sup>124</sup>

But there is a further component in the Tobas’ identity as “poor”: that it is deeply tied to the practice of *népe* or *marisca* in Spanish, a concept which people in all the

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<sup>124</sup> Pablo Wright (1997: 502) has argued that the Tobas of Eastern Formosa see themselves as “poor,” *chóGodaik*, mostly vis-à-vis the powers of the non-human realm of *nowét*. In our case, even though people also see the *payák* as having powers and riches beyond their reach, they define their own poverty, first and foremost, vis-à-vis the wealth of other human actors.

region (Tobas, Wichís, and Criollos alike) use to refer to the foraging practices of the *aborígenes*. At one level, *marisca* alludes for the Tobas to the diversified and flexible practice of male foragers. Even though a man may set out to the marshes with the explicit purpose of fishing, he often takes with him either a hunting dog, a large knife, or a firearm in case he finds wild animals or beehives. Thus, men often combine fishing, hunting, and gathering honey in the same trip, and the term *marisca* expresses this diversified practice. At one level, *marisca* does not include gathering wild fruits and women's practices in the bush are not summarized under an equivalent generic term.<sup>125</sup> However, when people refer with this concept to their overall practices as foragers, "*marisca*" acquires a broader meaning which implicitly includes the practices of both men and women.

The meanings of *marisca* are to a great extent constructed by the tensions which oppose this concept to "work," *nontáq* or *trabajo* in Spanish. For the Tobas, "foraging" and "work" are mutually exclusive terms, and the latter refers to wage labor, either in plantations or state-run institutions, agriculture, herding, and craftsmanship. Even though this notion of "work" as something separate from "foraging" is nowadays contradictorily mingled with meanings of "*trabajo*" inculcated by the state, it is also rooted in the Tobas' own experience that there are places where they "work," the sugar plantations and nowadays various farms, and a place very different from the latter where they "forage": the bush. Thus (and beyond further meanings which I will analyze later) *trabajo* implies

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<sup>125</sup> Moreover, even the most important female practice in the bush, gathering fruits, is referred to with different verbs, depending on the type of fruit involved: *hatoGón*, "to gather from the ground," regarding fruits which fall from the tree (such as algarroba and mistol), and *hapogaGán*, "to pull out" (the same verb for "harvesting"), regarding fruits which have to be picked from the boughs of trees and plants (like bola verde, sachasandia, and poroto de monte).

for the Tobas a responsibility, sacrifice, regularity, and submission to a certain discipline which is absent in *marisca*. *Marisca*, by contrast, involves practices of a very different sort, defined to a great extent by movement, flexibility, satisfaction, and relative freedom. Furthermore, *marisca* presupposes important skills which are absent in *trabajo*: a detailed local knowledge of the bush and the forms of reciprocity needed to interact with the *payák* which are the “owners” of natural resources (as we shall see). In 1916, José Elías Niklison (1990 [1916]: 121-122) outlined some of these aspects of *marisca* when he wrote “La ‘*mariscada*’ ... is carried out with visible satisfaction ... ‘*Mariscando*’ the Tobas are invincible and tireless,” a description closely tied to his simultaneous report on the alienation of the indigenous experience of “work” in the sugar plantations. Eighty years later, Tomás expressed this sense of gratification associated with “*marisca*” when he remembered with nostalgia the practice of collective fishing “when there was a river”: “I lived that and I liked that. All sorts of fish. It was very nice ... People got together; they laughed, happy, when they got together.” These meanings of autonomy and satisfaction, rather than an expression of the “non-alienated” character of *marisca*, are to a great extent molded by the contrast between this practice and the Tobas’ experiences of estrangement in *trabajo*, especially seasonal wage labor (and in Tomás’ case, also by the contrast between a present of poverty and the memory of a past of abundant fishing).

A further aspect of *marisca* as it is defined by these experiences of domination is that since most Toba households can count simultaneously on a wide array of subsistence practices, foraging allows them an important flexibility to accommodate to the constraints imposed by a cash economy. The fact that foraging, unlike agriculture, has an immediate return which allows for the acquisition of resources on a daily basis, becomes a further

valuable asset in a context of poverty and uncertainty. This return depends on the changing availability of natural resources and as result has important fluctuations throughout the year. But as we can see from table one, during most of the year households produce an average of 70% of the foodstuffs they consume and even about 50% during the beginning of the period of highest scarcity (July-August), a productivity which is a central component in the constitution of *marisca* as a safeguard from poverty. This safeguard cannot prevent people's need to sell their labor and other commodities in order to obtain goods central to their reproduction (as we shall see). However, in certain moments, it can partially limit the negative effect of the fall in prices of commodities they sell or the overexploitation of their labor. In this section, I will analyze how this capacity changes throughout the different moments of the annual cycle.

**TABLE 1. PERCENTAGE OF FOOD PROVIDED BY SUBSISTENCE PRACTICES**

	<i>MAR/APR</i>	<i>JUL/AUG.</i>	<i>DEC.</i>
Fish	42 %	28%	19%
Wild fruits	13%	4%	33%
Honey	11%	5%	6%
Game meat	0%	4%	2%
Produce	7%	4%	10%
Dom. Animals	2%	2%	2%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>PACKAGED FOOD</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>53%</b>	<b>28%</b>

**Source:** Gordillo 1995b, based on surveys conducted between 1991 and 1992 in the 13 households of a sample village. "Packaged food" includes rice, corn meal, pasta, beans, and *tortilla* (home-made unleavened bread). The percentage per each period is the result of an average emerging from 10 different surveys conducted on each household throughout a period of two weeks. Therefore, each period of the year includes data from 130 surveys. These figures only intend to be approximate.

The wet season, between November and April, is marked by the relative abundance of resources, especially wild fruits and honey, and also by the harvesting of their fields, a situation which allows many households to have a somewhat greater margin of maneuver vis-à-vis the constraints of poverty. As Amalio put it: “When it’s the time of the algarroba, people almost don’t suffer.” In October, the chañar (*tákae*, *Gourliea decorticans*) ripens, and in November is the turn of the algarroba (*mápa*, *Prosopis alba* and *paaták*, *nigra*). When the algarroba pods start falling into the ground it is the time of *wóe*, “the time of the fruits,” and women engage in what becomes for them the most intense subsistence period of the year. Women gather as many fruits as possible during several weeks, for the heavy rains of December spoil the pods left on the ground. Besides, the households aim to store large quantities of fruits in their storage huts (*trojas*) elevated from the ground. Luisa told me about the pressure many women feel while gathering fruits:

The fruits of all kind are very important for the kids, for the grown-ups, and for all the family. That’s why when it’s the time of the fruits, there’re women who get desperate and don’t sleep. Every morning they have to get up and go to the bush to look for very many fruits. For instance algarroba, chañar, mistol. All kind of fruits. There’re fruits which are stored for a long time. *Why do they get desperate?* Because they want to have many, to store all the things. To put them into the *troja*, to store them in bags. You store all the food that’s available, for a long time. Then, the women get desperate because they want to have lots of fruits ... Maybe the algarroba ripens and two days later a storm comes, wind, rain. And then, the storm does harm to the fruits.

Women always gather fruits in groups, formed by the women of the same household and sometimes by other women related by kin. The gatherers, taking a donkey with them, are usually led by an older woman —a *nahogolaté*, “*puntera*”— respected for her expertise in gathering techniques and for her knowledge of the bush and of the best places to find fruits. Some women carry with them a *kedé*, three to four meter-long sticks with a dented

end, used to take down ripen pods which are still in the trees. Gathering is usually carried out in the *nonakapiGát*, the relatively open sections of the bush, where most of the forests of algarrobos are. When the group arrives in a suitable spot, the women form an improvised “campsite” where they leave the donkey and one or two large bags made out of chagiär fiber, called *uénaGa*. Then, women split in different directions to gather fruits in smaller bags, and return regularly to the “campsite” to load the *uénaGa*. In order to know each other’s location and not to get lost, all the women “whistle” at regular intervals.

Aside from algarroba, early in the summer women also gather mistol (of the smaller, *nónaGahé* variety, *Zizyphus mistol*), bola verde (*nelomá*, *Capparis speciosa*), sachasandia (*elké*, *Capparis salicifolia*), and poroto de monte (*tigík*, *Capparis retusa*), some of which are available until the end of the summer. Still, the most popular fruit is by far algarroba, and at that time of the year the villages are filled with a regular, distinctive sound: that of women pounding algarroba pods in their mortars to turn them into flour, which will then be consumed with water as *ikiénik* (*añapa* in Spanish, a paste whose sweet “juice” is sucked with one hand). After being sun-dried, a large percentage of the fruits are stored. Moreover, fruits like sachasandia, bola verde, and poroto de monte are gathered mostly to be stored for the time of scarcity in August-September. In their gathering expeditions, women can also gather honey if they come across a hive of the varieties of bee which are not considered aggressive, like bala (*uaGatô*), lachiguana (*katék*), moro-moro (*konoyák*), yana (*maayê*), or carana (*neejal*). If they find a hive of *konaiapolio*, “large bees” (of European origin, called *extranjera* in Spanish, *Apis mellifera*), they will usually leave it and later on tell their husbands about its location. In January, it is the time of the year called *nólaGa*, “when the algarroba is over.”

In the wet season, men also intensify the practice of *marisca* in the bush and the marshes. In December, the productivity of fishing increases due to the annual flooding of the Pilcomayo, and as a result men go out fishing more often. Nowadays fishing is an individual practice, even though small groups of *lakáia* (brothers or first-cousins of the same generation) often go together to a fishing site. Since the nets *heélaGae* and *uanadanaGát* used “when there was a river” are unsuited for fishing in shallow marshes, the Tobas nowadays use only a smaller version of the *uanadanaGát* net (called *pugaGáik* and used to capture small fish). Nowadays, men fish mostly with *chiquena* (*fija* in Spanish), an harpoon made out of a bamboo cane and a sharp iron head, and hooks and nylon lines. The decrease in the productivity of fishing since the floods of 1975 has meant that people are not able to store fish like in the past. At most, people keep barbecued fish for a few days. Even the variety of species of fish has decreased, and large fish like *surubíes* (*Pseudoplatystoma coruscans*) and *dorados* (*Salminus maxilosus*), common even until the late 1980s, are now very hard to obtain, something which the Tobas attribute to commercial fishing upstream and/or to people “stopping” the flow of fish from Bolivia. In the 1990s, the most common catches were *palometas* (*Serrasalminae*), *pacús* (*Colossoma mitrei*), *viejas del agua* (*uédæ*), and *sábalos* (*Prochilodus platensis*).

Due to the abundance of honey in the wet season, men (individually or in pairs) often set out with the explicit purpose of gathering honey (*hawalék*, or *melear* in Spanish), especially when they know the location of a hive in advance (either from their wives or from a previous foraging trip). Honey is among the Tobas’ most valued food, and men with many children (who are particularly fond of honey) are usually active looking for it. Techniques of gathering vary according to the type of bee, but in most cases involve

setting a small fire with green boughs in order to neutralize the bees with the smoke, and cutting down the hive to small pieces (to be carried in a bag) with a machete or ax.

Due to the depletion of game and to the difficulty of finding animals, hunting has become an activity of secondary importance in terms of its contribution to everyday subsistence. Unlike fishing and honey-gathering (which can involve two or three men in a same excursion) hunting is usually an individual practice. Today, a great number of men simply hunt with their dogs and, depending on the prey, a knife, a stick, a shovel, or an ax, a type of hunting condensed in the verb *hayáGan*. The Tobas distinguish this practice from *hainaganéGe*, to hunt with a weapon, either a caliber 22 rifle or a shotgun. Among those men who practice *hainaganéGe* (and therefore use firearms) many are public employees, and those engaged in *hayáGan* are usually those who are simply too poor to afford a firearm. The most skillful foragers among the Tobas, the *epiáGayaik* or *mariscadores*, are usually the poorest Tobas and usually hunt without firearms.

The Tobas call the sections of the *viaqádaik* (“large bush”) that have abundant animals or honey *viáq ónaGaik*, “nice bush” (*monte lindo* in Spanish). This section of the bush is defined to a great extent in opposition to the *viáq hakoiwók*, “the evil bush” (*monte malo*), a dangerous area inhabited by *payák* but which due to the presence of roads and vehicles nowadays exists only in Paraguay. Since different animal species live in distinct sections of the bush, when a hunter looks for an specific prey he has to go to a particular place of the *viáq*. Large mammals like corzuela (*tanánaga*, *Mazama*) and wild pigs (*kodáGi* [*Tayassu tajacu*], *uákae* [*Tayassu pecari*], and *nólaGae* [*Catagonus wagneri*]), are captured deep into the *viaqádaik*. In the relatively open sections of the bush, the *nonakapiGát*, men capture small animals like rabbits (*nejeónak*, *Sylvilagus*

*brasiliensis paraguarensis*), viscacha (a rodent, *piyághik*, *Lagostomus maximus*), and small birds like charata (*kochí'ili*, *Ortalis carnicollis*). In the marshes and the surrounding open areas, men hunt ostrich (*mañik*, *Rhea americana*), carpincho or “water pig” (*machigihé*, *Hydrochoerus hydrocoeris notialis*), and birds like “Criollo duck” (*tagañí*, *Cairina moschata*), chajá (*taháak*, *Chauna torquata*), white heron (*dálayaGaik*, *Egretta alba*), and yulo (*tomaGolkohót*, *Tantalus americanus*).

In the wet season, many Tobas focus much of their expectations on the harvest of their fields, most of which are once a year flooded by the marshes (between December and May). This technique of cultivation on flooded lands, the most productive for an area with little rain like this (less than 600 millimeters a year), is very old among the Tobas, but in the early 1990s it has been regaining a growing importance.<sup>126</sup> Horticulture is usually directed towards the households' consumption but also towards the market. Nowadays, the most important crops are those already cultivated by the “ancient ones”: watermelon (*kóda*, *Citrullus vulgaris*), pumpkin (*taiñí*, *Cucurbita maxima*), anco (*lóllaga*, *Cucurbita moschata*), melon (*newaké*, *Cucumis melo*), and corn (*táwaga*, *Zea mays*). Harvesting (*hapogaGán*, “to pull out”) takes place in December, before the marshes flood the fields.<sup>127</sup> Most fields range from a quarter of a hectare to two hectares, but a small group of successful farmers works four to six hectares each. In 1997, the fields in use by

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<sup>126</sup> After the disappearance of the river in 1975, the missionaries cleared large fields in the hinterland near several villages and this mobile technique was only practiced by few households. For several years, many Tobas cultivated the large fields, but the combination of sparse rain and high temperatures ruined most of the harvests. In the early 1990s, this seasonal and mobile horticulture began gaining again popularity and a few years later many Tobas stopped using the large fields in the hinterland.

<sup>127</sup> Some households cultivate small gardens cleared inside strips of *viaqádaik*, something which happens especially when there are abundant rains. In these cases, depending on the time of sowing, harvesting usually takes place later in the summer and even early in the fall.

all Toba households —spread especially along the edge of the marshes in dozens of different locations— encompassed a total of 86 hectares.

It is at this time of the year, in the summer, when households can rely on a relatively wide array of subsistence practices (see table 1), that people have a base from which to be more selective in decisions involving access to manufactured goods and consequently to avoid those considered less worthwhile, especially seasonal wage labor. But this selectivity only rests in sound grounds when households count on *alternative* forms of access to cash. This leads us to the importance of the interconnection between petty commodity production, wage labor, and the resources of the state, because subsistence practices alone cannot provide the Tobas with resources which are key for their reproduction. This can be seen in the fact that, even though the summer is the season of relative “abundance,” when the contractors from the bean farms arrive in February or March, many Tobas (up to 250) migrate for work in order to obtain goods such as clothing, blankets, or utensils. In spite of this, most households are able to stay in their villages: not only because they can rely on “bush food” but also because they can sell iguana skins and especially part of their crops.

The end of the summer marks a weakening in this relative capacity of maneuver. Between March and April, people have already consumed the reserves of algarroba stored in the *trojas*. This is the time of the fall, *káp*, the flower of the quebracho colorado, which signals the ripening of other edible wild fruits, some of which are also gathered by women: mistol (*nála*, *Zizyphus mistol*, of a larger variety than the one which ripens in the summer), doca or tasi (*CháGadae*, *Morrenia odorata*), tuna *mañik lokó*, and tusca (*paGák*, *Acacia aroma*). At this time of the year, April or May, households which had

cultivated small fields in the bush may still be harvesting them. But from then on, resources in the bush get scarce and people become increasingly dependent on fishing. The peak of fishing starts in May, when the marshes recede and large shoals migrate upstream. In this period, men fish in areas of the marshes in which streams concentrate the bulk of water, and many households form seasonal fishing campsites, *nemacháqa* located in the heart of the marshes, where they stay for a period ranging for a few days to several months.

Since the mid-1990s, these fishing campsites have been increasingly associated with the practice of horticulture. It is at just this time of year, in May or June, when the marshlands recede and leave their margins humid and covered with rich sediments, that people prepare their fields for plowing. In order to do so, some households (especially from villages relatively removed from the edge of the marshes) settle a temporary campsite near their fields, where they live mostly off fishing, hunting, and gathering honey. These are the dry months of *nakaviaGá*, “winter,” when it rarely ever rains and there can be a few frosts. Nowadays, plowing is financed by the ICA and done with the tractor of a successful Toba farmer. People often sow (*hanaGán*) in late July or early August, when they consider that the last frost has passed and hopeful that a rain in August will help their crops resist the very hot north winds of early spring. While many households are preparing their fields, in late May or early June the contractors from the bean farms in Salta arrive at the largest villages, and an average of 150 men, women, and children leave to work as harvesters for a period ranging between four and six weeks.

At the end of *nakaviaGá* in late July, when the productivity of fishing decreases, the Tobas face the toughest moment of the year, dominated by scarcity and hunger. As

Amalio put it: “When it’s winter time, that’s when people suffer the most. The fish is the only thing that saves people. When the fish is over, people suffer too much.” Between August and September, there are no wild fruits in the bush, wild animals are scarce and difficult to catch, and bee hives are only available in the marshland. In those months it is common to come across people who have spent several days without any food, and to see in many households pots boiling with sachasandia, bola verde, or poroto de monte, the most durable of the wild fruits stored in the summer. Aside from relying on fishing, many households intensify hunting in the marshland, where the shallow waters of the dry season make it is easier to capture carpinchos. Some households also harvest sweet potatoes (*poGolakté*, *Ipomea batatas*) from their fields in the hinterland or gather an edible liana called *nayók* (*Odontocarya asarifola*). In this unfavorable situation, the Toba households have an increased need for access to cash and packaged food; consequently, they have a lower degree of choice when looking for access to cash and do it in worse conditions than in previous months. Moreover, at this time of the year there is also a decline in the demand for goods and labor and no contractors arrive in their villages. It is especially at this moment of the year that some young men look for wages at the Paraguayan ranches, where conditions of exploitation are severe. In the midst of these months of scarcity, people look forward to the ripening of wild fruits. Already at the beginning of *nawoGó*, “spring,” in September, when the algarrobo trees get their first green sprouts, people begin speculating about the quality of the coming harvest of algarroba, which can have strong variations from year to year. Thus, a heavy early rain (beneficial for the harvest) or a prolonged heat wave (which has negative effects) usually triggers

comments about its implications for the quality of the pods. In October, the ripening of chañar finally marks, once again, the beginning of *niaGá*, “the time of the fruits.”

Together with subsistence activities which are characterized by a strong seasonal pattern, the Tobas also practice a year-round activity which may serve as a buffer from poverty: the herding of sheep, goats, and pigs. Herding, practiced by the Tobas well before the arrival of the Criollos, has experienced an expansion since the early 1990s. On the one hand, many households with public jobs have been investing part of their salaries in livestock, especially, goats, sheep, and pigs, usually raised for their meat (although sheep are also an important source of wool for craftsmanship and pigs are often sold to the Criollos). A few political leaders have also been investing in cattle. On the other hand, many households living in poverty also have a handful of pigs or goats. These animals have become living reserves of meat and potential commodities on which they can rely at times of scarcity, especially in August and September.

The fact that throughout the year most Toba households rely on a wide array of changing subsistence activities provides them with an important buffer from the hardships of everyday life. When the Tobas are overexploited in the cotton and bean farms and are able to obtain very few resources, upon their return they can still count on “bush food.” This means that this over-exploitation does not necessarily undermine the reproduction of their labor power. Consequently, the safeguard provided by “the bush” is embedded in a paradox; on the one hand, it has been historically “functional” to the social actors which have exploited the Tobas’ labor, for it reproduces them as a cheap pool of readily available and over-exploitable seasonal laborers; on the other hand, the endurance associated with *marisca* can provide the Tobas with means with which to avoid the

harshest forms of domination and maneuver in contexts of extreme poverty and economic uncertainty.

The potential strength of this capacity of maneuver, as well as its limits, came to the fore during the hyperinflation crisis that hit the Argentinean economy in May 1989, when inflation reached a peak of 200% a month. The whole country entered into a period of social and political instability and in major cities like Rosario and Buenos Aires the urban poor looted numerous food stores and supermarkets. In July, still in the midst of *la hiperinflación*, I visited the Tobas for three weeks. Several of the villages were semi-deserted. Unable to purchase *mercaderías* in a context in which the value of cash evaporated within days, a great number of people had simply moved into the marshes to form fishing campsites. That period coincided with the peak of the fishing season (May-July) and most Tobas were living off fishing and gathering honey. On a regular basis, those living in the marshes were bringing fish and honey to their relatives who had stayed in the villages to look after their belongings. In those days, Javier, the nurse in one of the villages, told me that several people in the Barrio Toba of Ingeniero Juárez, pushed by hunger, had moved “back to the bush” and were foraging in the marshes. He also told me: “Malnutrition among the children in Barrio Toba is now very high. We don’t have malnutrition here.” The massive “exodus” to the marshes also showed the importance of the relative mobility associated with fishing, hunting, and gathering as the basis of a flexible capacity to maneuver vis-à-vis conditions of poverty and scarcity, a mobility which is ultimately sustained by the collective property of land.

This “retreat” to the marshes, however, met its limits. During those months of mid-1989, most Tobas were living off foraging but in precarious conditions. In these

circumstances, when in June contractors from the bean farms in Salta arrived looking for harvesters, about 150 people (mostly single men and young couples) decided to go. Among those who were temporarily living in campsites in the marshes, the decrease in the productivity of fishing in mid and late July forced about 200 people (men, women, and children) to cross to *la banda* to work in the Paraguayan cattle ranches. In spite of the severe conditions of exploitation, they managed to regularly bring *mercaderías* to their relatives on the Argentinean side, and this contributed to alleviating the impact of the crisis. However, while in their villages I noticed that what allowed most Tobas to withstand the “crisis” was their everyday reliance on “bush food.”

The partial safeguard from hunger and exploitation associated with *marisca* is a recurrent component of the Tobas’ current subjectivity, even though this perception is not free of contradictions and ambiguities (as we shall see in coming chapters). As we have seen, being *aborigen* and “poor” are almost synonymous for the Tobas. But in the dialectic between their poverty and their aboriginality, the latter —their systematic reliance on the “bush food”— provides them with an ultimate protection from hunger which the non-indigenous poor lack. The Tobas point to this contrast between themselves and the urban poor quite often. In May 1996, for instance, I was chatting with half a dozen men in the largest village and at one point Juan Manuel, an important leader in his late fifties, began telling the rest of us about his latest trip to Buenos Aires. He had been impressed by the poverty he saw, and described the beggars and street kids who had neither shelter nor a regular source of food. Florencio, a young leader in his thirties commented: “Here, we’re poor, but we go out with a shotgun and we have charata, ducks, animals.” Juan Manuel nodded, and then said, with a touch of irony that is typical of him:

“We have cats, but we don’t eat them yet.” He then stared at me looking for confirmation, and said that he had heard on the radio that in the city of Rosario people were so poor that they were “eating cats.” I confirmed the news, which was then being aired all over the country.<sup>128</sup> A general rumor emerged out of the group. Some men looked at each other and shook their heads. A few seemed incredulous. Horacio was sitting near me and added, while assenting with his head: “That’s what they say they do over there.”

At that moment, I found these comments about the hardships faced by the urban poor, and people’s shocked reactions about practices which for them are unthinkable, to be very revealing of how the Tobas perceive the protection from poverty that foraging provides them. When Florencio said that they are poor *but* that at any time they can go out to the bush in search of food, he expressed the fact that the Tobas’ identity as *pióGoik* (“poor”) is deeply tied to their spatial experience in the bush; to their reliance on a wide spectrum of resources lacked by the urban poor. Moreover, for the Tobas their reliance on the bush is deeply tied to a notion of *resilience*, of *permanence against all odds* constructed through experiences of terror and social suffering. As Pablo put it:

The whites are going to die. When the *mercadería* they have in the house is over, they’re going to die. But the *aborígenes* won’t. I remember, the old people lived like this. They didn’t die of hunger. The old man didn’t know the *mercadería*. There were no *pensionados* [people with pensions]. Nobody had a *cargo* [public job]. But they lived, foraging in the bush. They had something to eat ... Maybe they found *doca* ... That’s what they ate. It’s fine then. Then, they took a nap, and the little kids had a good rest ... That’s the way it is.

“To forage in the bush,” in this regard, becomes a symbol of autonomy from the cash economy and the state (from “*mercaderías*,” “*pensionados*,” and “*cargos*”) and also

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<sup>128</sup> See for instance *Página/12*, 17/5/1996.

a symbol of protection from death. Moreover, this resilience of the *aborígenes* is focused not only on a particular place, a “here,” but also on the promise of a “forever.” Eduardo articulated this notion clearly when he told me: “Since we’re kids we’re born in misery, in poverty. ... But we don’t complain, we don’t feel it. Not like the poor people in the city ... We don’t have to worry because we’re *aborígenes*. We’re going to be here forever.”

But probably no Toba articulated more clearly than Angel the emergence of *marisca* as a “security” which will allow the *aborígenes*, those “who have nothing,” to endure forever. Angel is a man in his thirties, one of the most remarkable *mariscadores* I know but also a man who often works for the Criollos. He told me early in 1996, while we were chatting in his house near the marshes:

The *aborígenes* live just like that, because that’s our custom. I don’t say just like that, for I say security. Like the old man says, ours is the life of the poor, born without anything until the end of the world. The poor person all year goes on foraging because he has nothing, because he doesn’t use money all day long ... We have to go out to the bush, for the poor’s life is like this, like the old man says ... Thus, we’re going to live with this because we have nothing. We’re going to forage until the end of the year, until the end of the world.

The fact that historical processes of domination often turn the practice of foraging into a last resort people can count on to hinder poverty, has generated various debates on the very notion of what it means to be a “hunter and gatherer,” most notably in the so-called “Kalahari debate” (see Wilmsen 1989; Wilmsen and Denbow 1990; Solway and Lee 1990; Lee and Guenther 1991) but also in other regional contexts (see Chang 1982; Woodburn 1988; Peterson 1991). In the case of the Gran Chaco, over several centuries the region became an indigenous haven *through* its violent interconnection with the Spanish and then Argentinean frontier, and this process had certainly a profound effect on

the social dynamics of many groups. However, it would be misleading to sustain (as a reading of the position of Wilmsen may suggest) that the foraging practices and social relations of groups like the Tobas were the *result* of this long siege on the Chaco. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the Tobas' foraging practices were not molded as they are now by experiences of direct subordination and exploitation. Consequently, in those days the meanings currently associated with *marisca* and "bush food" were most probably absent. An important aspect of the reformulation of the practices and social relations the Tobas inherited from their ancestors is that their "perseverance" in the bush, and their capacity to avoid seasonal wage labor, also depends on their capacity to produce commodities.

### **"Let's Do Our Own Things"**

Petty commodity production is also affected by systematic exploitation by local and regional agents of merchant capital. The *bolicheros* (local store keepers) and the larger extra-local merchants usually pay very low prices for the Tobas' products and in kind. However, due to the mediated nature of exploitation in petty commodity production, the undermining of labor associated with it is usually lower than that associated with seasonal wage labor. Besides, the production of commodities allows the Tobas to stay in their own villages and recreate a wider set of relations in which they have a direct control over the pace of labor. Consequently, the Tobas often prioritize this practice over seasonal wage labor when it provides what they see as a worthwhile income, though this may not be a rationalized strategy (Gordillo 1996a).

This situation is clear vis-à-vis horticulture. The commoditization of this practice began in the early 1970s, when the Anglican missionaries launched a series of ambitious (but eventually short-lived) cash crop projects in several missions in the Chaco, among them El Toba. Before then, as Julián put it, people cultivated only “to eat and share.” Even though those projects failed, they provided the Tobas with an experience that became important in future attempts at developing cash crops. Over the last few years, encouraged by the financial support granted by the ICA and the (now declining) assistance provided in a few villages by the Anglican mission at Ingeniero Juárez, horticulture near the marshes has become quite an important source of cash for a growing number of households. The Tobas sell the crops to the merchants of Syrian descent of Ingeniero Juárez who dominate the retail business in the region, known as “*los turcos*,” and also to merchants who come from the province of Salta. In some cases, people take their crops to Ingeniero Juárez in the tractor of the Toba farmer (who charges for it), but the merchants often send in their own trucks. Once the price is negotiated, most people usually barter their crops for clothing, packaged food, domestic utensils, or tools. As already noted, a handful of households are beginning an incipient social differentiation through horticulture. Even though they still rely exclusively on their own labor, they are reinvesting part of their gains in production and are in the process of becoming full-time farmers. Furthermore, one of them has recently purchased a tractor from the missionaries (through a financed payment) and the ICA pays him to plow the rest of the Toba fields. It is among these farmers that the preference for horticulture over seasonal wage labor is most clearly articulated. As one of them, Andrés, told me: “Now, we don’t leave anymore [to work in farms]. We used to do

it, but we didn't bring anything back. And we said: 'let's do our own things.' And that's the way we live, until now."

Still, most households direct much of the crops towards their own consumption needs, and the income obtained from a sale is often used to satisfy very basic subsistence needs. In August 1997, Emiliano told me he how he was "saved" by the sale of 200 watermelons to a merchant from Tartagal (Salta). He did it in a way that made clear that his family's urge to satisfy very basic needs did not leave him much room for negotiation:

[The merchant said:] "I sell cheap, one kilogram of sugar: one peso [1 U\$S]; yerba: one peso." I was first listening. He was offering. He said: "I have pants, ten pesos." Since I have many kids, I was thinking. My son said: "Dad, how come you're not going to barter the watermelon!" ... [I told him] "I'm thinking, don't hurry" ... [The merchant] said: "Mosquito net, ten pesos, for the mosquitoes." My other son said: "Dad, let's do the exchange!" ... And well, I finally accepted, bulk sale. He paid me three pesos per each [watermelon], the size didn't matter, bulk sale ... Then, the man said: "All right, take 200." Then, I talked to all my children. Then, right there, they pulled the watermelons out, pulled them out, pulled them out ... The merchant came with a truck ... He changed them for pants. Then, I ordered my son: "All right, take the clothing" ... I was saved. If it weren't for that, for selling the watermelons. That saved me.

Nowadays, another important form of petty commodity production is craftsmanship, carried out by women all-year round. Even though the handicrafts are made in the villages, women gather some raw materials in the bush: chagüar fibers (*kailté* and *kotáGaia*, *Bromelia fastuosa*) in the *viaqádaik* and fruits and barks which serve as dyes in other areas of the bush (even though many women also use industrial dyes). Wool, the other key raw material, is either bartered from the Criollo settlers or obtained from the households' own sheep. The two most widespread forms of commercial crafts

are tapestry made out of wool (with vertical looms) and hand bags made out of chagiär fiber (*kotakis*), bags which nevertheless still retain a strong use-value.<sup>129</sup>

Craftsmanship is today a very important marker of female identity, to the point that women and men alike usually refer to it as “the women’s work.” In a context in which public jobs are mostly restricted to men, women see that craftsmanship is one of the few worthwhile forms of “work” (*trabajo*) available to them, in terms of providing them with a source of income independent of their husbands. For instance, I asked Luisa what the women’s most important “work” was and she said: “At this moment we prefer the work of the crafts, because it has its sale, it has its value ... For us it’s very important because we can sell, because we can also have our clothing, for the work. There’s no other *trabajo*.” Since the missionaries decreased their presence in the area in 1982, to a great extent the commercialization of handicrafts has been under the charge of the ICA, but with sharp fluctuations which included in the 1990s the interruption of purchasing for several years.

Commercial hunting is the only commodified practice carried out by the Tobas that is entirely immersed in the bush. For decades, this practice included a wide variety of prey and provided them with a relatively important income. But nowadays it has been severely restricted in the region by the disappearance of wild animals, changes in the market for fauna products, and government regulations to protect endangered species. Thus, commercial hunting is today restricted to the capture of iguanas for their skins. Even though the low prices paid for iguana skins since the early 1990s has decreased the Tobas’ interest in this practice, between November and February (when iguanas leave

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<sup>129</sup> Before the 1970s, the most common crafts were belts and ponchos made out of wool.

their underground dens) many men living in poverty set out to capture them with their hunting dogs. Because of the intense competition between hunters (which also include Wichís and Criollos), this is the hunting practice which takes men farther away from their villages, often in long forays into Paraguay, where wildlife is more abundant.

A further practice through which a number of poor households obtain packaged food while in their villages, but which is not a form of petty commodity production, is *la changa*: individual, irregular, and informal work for the Criollo settlers, often paid in kind, and which involves building up paddocks and *ranchos*, gathering water and firewood, or chopping wood. For some men, *changas* are often their most important source of *mercaderías*. Hugo, a man in his late twenties who often works for the main *bolichero* of the area but is also a frequent *mariscador*, told me: “If I don’t do a *changa* I can’t live. I do it, and they give me a little bit, and I can go to the store.”

Nowadays, the main source of cash in the three largest Toba villages are the jobs that several Tobas have in state-run institutions. In this regard, the state is also contributing, though in a contradictory fashion, to sustaining the Tobas’ practices in the bush.

### **“The Government” in the Bush**

The distribution of public jobs among the Tobas began in the 1980s, after the return of democracy and as part of complex political negotiations between the Tobas and various institutions of the government of Formosa. These jobs are concentrated in various state agencies: i) the municipality of Pozo de Maza, known locally as “*la comuna*” and which gives employment to elective representatives, secretaries, and manual workers (full

and part-time),<sup>130</sup> ii) the ICA, the provincial agency for indigenous affairs, which hires Tobas as representatives, nurses, and skilled manual workers (such as pick-up truck and tractor drivers), iii) the *Consejo Provincial de Educación* (Provincial Council of Education), which hires several Toba as *auxiliares docentes* (bilingual teaching assistants) of the Criollo school teachers, and iv) the *Ministerio de Salud Pública* of Formosa (Ministry of Public Health), which gives employment to several nurses and midwives. Except for the midwives and a handful of women informally hired as cooks in some of the schools, all the state employees are men. Even though this income is concentrated on the three largest Toba villages and a relatively small group of households, it circulates to most of households through the sharing networks. The resources distributed by the state also include provincial and national pensions which, even though low, are a relatively important source of cash for many poor households. Besides, *el gobierno*, “the government,” distributes further resources through subsidies for agriculture and herding or the purchase of handicrafts (among many others). The distribution of public jobs reached its peak in the early 1990s (see table 2), but in the following years the number of jobs in *la comuna* experienced an important contraction (as we shall see in chapter nineteen).

People associate to have a job, a “*trabajo*” (which in Spanish means both “work” and “job”), first and most importantly with the security of a regular source of cash and light conditions of labor. Due to the uncertainty and exploitation associated with other forms of access to cash, these jobs have become a much desired social item. Thus, in the

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<sup>130</sup> Because of its small size, the official term for this *comuna* is not *Municipalidad* (municipality) but *Comisión de Fomento*.

eyes of the Tobas “*trabajo*” in state-run institutions has little in common with the seasonal wage labor they do in farms. When the Tobas nowadays argue for the importance of having a “*trabajo*,” they refer firstly to a public job and secondly to agriculture, herding, and craftsmanship. The very idea of having a job is partially fetishized in its most important outcome, a “*sueldo*,” a salary, and many times people refer to “having a job” as “having a *sueldo*,” which is what really matters to them.

TABLE 2. DISTRIBUTION OF PUBLIC JOBS IN THREE TOBA VILLAGES, 1992.

	<i>MSP</i>	<i>CPE</i>	<i>ICA</i>	<i>Comuna</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Population</i>
Village						
A	2	1	2	13 (5 ch.)	18	ca. 220
B	2	1	1	4 (3 ch.)	8	ca. 140
C	1	3	7	24 (12 ch.)	35	ca. 550
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>41 (20 ch.)</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>ca. 910</b>

Source: Gordillo 1996a. References: *MSP*: Ministerio de Salud Pública. *CPE*: Consejo Provincial de Educación. *ICA*: Instituto de Comunidades Aborígenes. ch: “*changarines*,” part-time employees with very low salaries.

Except in the case of the part-time manual employees of *la comuna*, who gain very low salaries, these jobs are having an important impact on the standard of living of the employees and their closest relatives and on the productive dynamic of their households. Among skilled employees like teaching assistants, nurses, and midwives their standard of living clearly differs from that of the rest of the Tobas. They often have brick houses, new clothing, and desired goods such as stereos or new bicycles. But most importantly, in their households the practice of *marisca* drops dramatically. Still, some of these households continue being part-time units of production: women often participate in gathering trips during the wet season, keep on working a field (often with relatives from

other households), and produce handicrafts; and in many cases the employee invests part of his wages in sheep and goats (Gordillo 1994).

Among the most important political leaders, who involve half a dozen households, this differentiation has moved one step further. These men originally built up their leadership out of their good command of Spanish, skills as mediators, solid and widespread kinship networks, and their experience of political negotiation vis-à-vis “the government.” But their emergence as the best paid Tobas in the area, especially as *concejales* in Pozo de Maza and delegates at the ICA, has made them consolidate their leadership over an economic differentiation. Aside from being involved in a social dynamic similar to that of skilled employees, some of them have used their connections with the Criollos to invest in herding at a higher level: not only in herds of several hundreds goats and sheep but also (so far small) herds of cattle. As an expression of this trend (and like wealthy Criollos), some of these leaders began hiring *puesteros*: either relatives or poor Criollos settled in the bush who look after their animals. Therefore, through locally defined webs of power resources coming from public jobs are enhancing economic differentiation sustained in a form of petty commodity production and centered on the symbol of the Criollos: cattle.

In spite of this differentiation, these leaders know that they are closely scrutinized by their peers and that they need to recreate a general consensus on their leadership: through the everyday distribution of packaged food through reciprocity networks, public displays of “generosity” (for instance, organizing collective meals on national holidays), the defense of “the Tobas’ interests” vis-à-vis the Criollos and *el gobierno*, and the debate of important political decisions in meetings with the male members of the villages. Even though women

usually do not participate of these meetings, they exert successful forms of pressure on the leaders through their husbands, and are in general heard as a respected voice in community affairs. This pressure exerted “from below” by men and women is often associated with multiple tensions; and even though it does not get to undermine this social differentiation it creates important “leveling mechanisms.” In August 1997, in a meeting held in a village with leaders of the *Partido Justicialista* of Formosa, Marcelino (one of the Toba leaders) said aloud: “When I get paid, people come like ants and I’m left with nothing.”

Overall, the presence of the state has had a paradoxically two-fold effect on the Tobas’ practices. On the one hand, in a context of decreasing demand for seasonal labor from the private agricultural sector, decline of commercial hunting, and ecological degradation, the state has emerged as a key actor in the reproduction of the Toba households. And this allows many Tobas to stay in the bush, avoid labor migrations to distant “places of work,” and counteract some of the burdens of poverty. On the other hand, the presence of the state is sharpening internal contradictions within the Tobas and undermining the economic, social, and cultural weight of “the bush,” a process I will further explore in chapter nineteen. But as important as the state and petty commodity production are for the Tobas’ social reproduction, the renewed continuity of the practice of *marisca* is the ultimate “security” most people can count on. It is a “security” sustained in a wide body of local knowledge also molded by images of endurance.

**SIXTEEN:  
LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND DOMINATION**

Ooh! Tireless, the *aborígenes*. Bush, but they get inside; *chagüaral*, but they get inside.

*Emiliano* (1996)

While foraging with Toba men deep into their territory, I was always very impressed by their detailed knowledge of the bush: by the casual language of their bodies adapting to an environment they feel at ease with; by their remarkable perception at its plants, animals, and insects; at its sounds and silences; at its smells, movements, and colors. This is a local knowledge that middle-class and urban sensitivities such as mine are particularly prone to highlighting; and for this reason it is an expertise that it is easy to naturalize and exoticize. The Tobas' knowledge of the bush is certainly linked to productive practices which, almost by definition, require a detailed knowledge of the place where they are carried out. This knowledge is created and recreated in their daily forays in search of animals, honey, fish, and wild fruits in a process in which every forager "brings to bear the knowledge and experience of past generations, handed down as an accumulating tradition" (Ingold 1987: 2). But it is a practice and a discourse which, as embedded as it is in a foraging *habitus*, can only be fully understood in terms of the contradictory experiences of domination the Tobas have gone through. In this chapter, I will analyze the Tobas' practical and discursive construction of local knowledge of the bush, which includes the particular reciprocity links they maintain with the *payák* of the bush, in terms of the (often subtle) mediations introduced by these experiences.

### Local Knowledge and Experience

As part of their comparisons between themselves and their ancestors, many Tobas argue that “the new ones” are losing the knowledge of the bush that the “ancient ones” used to have, or that the *pioGonáq* have lost the power to understand the language of birds and animals. This attitude is particularly clear among the elderly. Diego, in his youth a remarkable *epiáGayaik*, told me:

Now, people don't go out [to the bush] anymore. We're mixed up with white people. Somebody has a job, doesn't know what hungers is, doesn't know how to get inside the bush, doesn't know how to fish, doesn't know how to plunge, doesn't know how go climb [a tree] to look for honey. This is what I tell my grandchildren. Only the old grown-ups (*los grandecitos*) know, but we're very few now.

In spite of these perceptions of loss, many Tobas, especially those who live in poverty, still create and recreate a local knowledge of the bush through multiple practices and discourses, a knowledge which serves to produce “reliable local subjects and reliable local neighborhoods” (Appadurai 1995: 206). This knowledge, first and most importantly, hinges on the view that the bush is a place of their own that they master and control, a view which has been enhanced by diverse collective experiences localized, firstly, in their own lands. The control, accommodation, and contention which for decades opposed the bush and the mission station at El Toba enhanced the Tobas' sense that the bush was a place of their own. In the 1960s, the social control which existed in the mission began to fade as for several years no missionary resided at El Toba (cf. Leake 1970: 14).<sup>131</sup> Moreover, in the 1970s, with Alfred Leake's definitive departure to England in 1971 and

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<sup>131</sup> Leake was in England between 1957-1962 and on other occasions was away for relatively long periods.

the destruction of the mission in 1975, the Tobas “regained control” over the space of their own villages. However, by then the internalization of the experience of missionization had created new forms of “moral surveillance” conducted this time by Tobas, especially the members of the *Consejo de la Iglesia* (Council of the Church), formed by men and women in their fifties and sixties. Even though the religious influence of these *Consejos* varies in each village and their actions as not as “intrusive” as those of the early missionaries, many young Tobas feel that their preaching is too moralistic and “old fashioned.” Consequently, the bush maintains for the latter a somewhat “counter-hegemonic” content in tension with the Anglican codes ruling some of the villages. Thus, young men and women have often their sexual affairs in the bush, and on some occasions some young men “kidnap” a girl for several days and take her deep into the bush, a practice which was also common at the time of the mission.

The collective land struggle in the 1980s also strengthened the Tobas’ notions of their local knowledge of the bush, especially because they successfully used this knowledge as a political tool. As part of their land claim, and with the support of a legal advisor, they reviewed the numerous names of the particular places through which they and their ancestors have constructed their lands as a “practiced space” (see De la Cruz and Mendoza 1988; and especially De la Cruz 1993), something which gave legitimacy to their mobilization.<sup>132</sup> Once the legal title was granted in 1989, the Tobas gained a great deal of confidence in their sense of control over the bush. In 1995, I asked Diego why was important to have the title and he said, quite emphatically: “So that no rich people who

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<sup>132</sup> See Piccinini and Trincherro (1992) and Carrasco and Briones (1995) for other, less successful, land claims among the Wichís in Salta.

need lands come and chase the *aborígenes* away ... No rich people who come from over there get inside anymore.”

At an everyday level, the Tobas’ knowledge of the bush is created and recreated by a further historical factor: the fact that they forage in a bush considerably depleted of resources and animals and under conditions of extreme poverty which force many men to hunt almost with their bare hands. This means that the current practice of a *epiáGayaik*, a *mariscador*, is probably more challenging and demanding than ever, for it involves the search for food in adverse conditions which were relatively absent at the turn of the century, when wildlife was plentiful. In fact, we have seen that the most expert *mariscadores* are often the poorest Tobas, who often set out to *hayáGan*: to hunt simply with a dog and a knife, a machete, or an ax. Hugo, who lives in extreme poverty and spends much of his time foraging, told me: “I always go alone, alone, but without weapon. With nothing. Only the knife. I kill the *bicho*, carpincho, just with that. With an ax. With that, I already have a weapon.” This technique requires skills and a knowledge of the bush which many better-off Tobas (who only hunt with rifles or shotguns) lack. In this regard, the extremely developed hunting skills and knowledge of the bush of *epiáGayaik* such as Hugo are today strongly molded by an experience of poverty.

This detailed knowledge of the bush is not merely the result of practices and experiences rooted in their own territories. This knowledge has also been enhanced by its very contrast to the estrangement the Tobas have felt in places perceived as alien and beyond their control. The people’s cyclical return back home from plantations and farms has certainly reinforced their perception of mastery over the bush. In other words, this feeling of mastery comes to the fore especially when it stands in tension with experiences

of exploitation and estrangement. But in what sense do the Tobas construct this knowledge of the bush?

### “Tireless, the *Aborígenes*”

One of the expressions of this local knowledge is their emphasis on the physical resistance and expertise of the *aborígenes*, closely connected to the resilience granted by the *marisca*. Even though most Tobas argue that compared to “the ancient ones” they are “flabby” and weak, on many other occasions they emphasize that in the bush they are strong and tireless. This praise is most strongly articulated by those Toba who live in harshest conditions of poverty and therefore depend more closely on foraging. Diego, who in his youth had been a remarkable *mariscador*, told me when I asked him if the bush was dangerous:

When you don't know it, sure it is; you're afraid to get lost. Not me. I know all the places. When I get inside this bush, I go from here to there, far. Now, I don't have a gun anymore, that's why I don't go out ... Not in the past, I used to go far, fishing, hunting ... *Did you ever get lost?* Never, never, never. I was most skillful ... The ancient ones were most skillful at walking, going far, and not getting lost.

Among men, the emphasis on their expertise and physical resistance is particularly clear when they compare themselves with the Criollos. Even though many poor settlers rely heavily on hunting and gathering of honey and algarroba, most Tobas agree that the Criollos “don't know the bush.” Men focus their discourse on the knowledge of the bush on the *viaqádaik*, *el monte fuerte*, which they see as alien to cattle, horses, and settlers and conversely as their hunting ground par excellence. Sometimes, some concede, the Criollos may go into the *viaqádaik* looking for lost cattle; but they do it on horseback and

wearing *guardamonte* (leather caps) and *coleteo* (a leather poncho) as a protection from the thorny vegetation. Toba men often point out that they, unlike the Criollos, enter the *viaqádaik* on foot, only with a machete, and without minding the thorny vegetation. After arguing that the Criollos “don’t know the bush,” Emiliano told me: “Ooh! Tireless, the *aborígenes*. Bush, but they get inside; *chagüaral* [very thick bush], but they get inside, using machete all the time.” Angel, for his part, told me:

The Criollos don’t get inside [the bush]. They go along the edge of the bush, but on the road. These people don’t go on foot, they only use the horse. Not like us, that we go on foot, [for] two leagues, two leagues and a half. We carry 15 kilos, 20 kilos. We still carry that. For such a long distance! Not the Criollos. They don’t do that. But we do.

Men actively engaged in *marisca* consider that the *viaqádaik* is also a place alien to women, and that they know it in greater detail than their wives simply because they get inside on a more regular basis. Thus, even though some men may show a respect for their wives’ expertise in the bush, many others downplay it. For instance, I asked Tomás whether women “know the bush” and he answered:

No, they don’t know it. Women don’t know. *What about when they go to look for algarroba?* But that’s only for a while. When they fill the large *yica* up, they already return. They don’t get deep into the bush. The algarroba is inside the *campo* [open section of the bush]. We [men] do. We get deep inside the bush.

Many women acknowledge that the bush is a place which men foray into more often and whose danger lies in the unwanted presence of men. However, some women’s construction of their knowledge of the bush as gatherers constitutes an important challenge to male claims of exclusive expertise. Luisa told me:

The men aren't the only ones who know a lot. There're men who don't go out to the bush either; they seldom go to the bush. There're men who know a lot, but there're others who don't. They go nearby and they get lost right away. And there're women who know a lot. It depends on the woman. There're women who wander a lot; they work a lot over there, during the time of the fruits. Then, it's not only the men who know. Women too.

Ernesto, her husband, was listening to our conversation and added, confirming what his wife had just said: "I remember that she once took me to a place, far from here. She knew the place, and I had never been that far." This female knowledge of the bush emerges out of a collective practice of socialization which is somehow embedded in a paradox: the most paradigmatic spatial repository of male ideology is the only place where women are entirely on their own. Even though the villages are to a great extent places dominated by female labor, female socialization is restricted there to the space of the household, where women are always in direct or indirect contact with men. Like in the case of the !Kung analyzed by Draper (1975: 78), the formation of sedentary villages seems to have decreased the mobility of women and hence their relative autonomy from men. Among the Tobas, nowadays only the gathering trips allow women to recreate this relative autonomy, and several women told me that during these trips they exchange a lot of information and "talk a lot" with one another. Aware of this form of socialization, Ernesto told me when I asked him whether women "chat a lot" while gathering fruits:

Ooh! Always. Ooh! They're all the time very cheerful. When the women leave, [they chat] all day long. While they walk, they're never silent. They always tell something so that they don't get bored along the way ... Women are the ones who talk the most when they walk. [They say]: "No", "this", "that". All the time. For instance [he pointed to his wife, sitting near us], when she goes with her sister, when they come back at night she tells me what her sister told her: that man's sick, or that a woman isn't getting along with her husband. Ooh! She always tells me all those things ... The walk is where all the news come from.

These gathering trips have another paradoxical feature. Even though in the bush women are afraid of encountering strange men, they simultaneously count on the bush to hide from them, especially from the Criollos. I asked Claudia, a woman in her late twenties who lives with his family on the edge of the open spaces which surround the marshes, if she was afraid of the bush. She answered: "Yes, I'm afraid that there's some mean animal, a cow. And besides, at this moment there's a Criollo who's a bit angry [because of conflicts over the land]. [I'm afraid] that he'd kill us over there. That's why when we go to the open country, we always hide in the bush."

Because it is inseparable from a joint experience of domination, the Tobas, men and women alike, include the Wichís as active participants in these various forms of knowledge of the bush. Even though many Tobas look down on the "*mataquitos*," they are the first to acknowledge that the latter know the bush as well as themselves. And this points to their common identity as *aborígenes*, an identity molded by their joint experiences as seasonal laborers and as *mariscadores* living in poverty in the bush. Angel, for instance, told me that the Wichís know the bush as well as the Tobas "because they're the same as us, the same race." Moreover, following a strong image of some Wichís groups as *montaraces* ("bushmen"), a few Tobas argue that the Wichís know the bush even better than themselves. Roberto told me: "Ooh! They're good. They know the bush better than us. They're *mariscadores*, that's why their house has almost no permanence, they camp everywhere. That's the way they like it."

The knowledge which enables the Tobas to recreate their practice as foragers implies a further type of expertise: the forms of reciprocity that any forager has to maintain

with the most powerful beings which live in it, the *payák*, and which are key for having access to the resources of the bush.

### **“The *Payák* Give an Aid to Some Poor People”**

As we have seen in chapter fourteen, the *payák* of the bush are not only “devils” but also “owners” (*ladípa*, *dueños* in Spanish) of the animal species available in the bush and the marshes, of many of its resources, and of whole ecological niches.<sup>133</sup> The Tobas’ characterization of the *payák* as “owners” is heterogeneous and non-systematic, because it is tied to a knowledge that is *practical* rather than articulated in a neatly organized “cosmology.” Some people talk about “owners” who have individual names and individualized features: like *dáwaik*, the “owner” of ostriches and of the “open country,” and described as a large ostrich with colorful red feathers; *kopeletáGa* the female “owner” of the *nelomá* (bola verde) —and therefore a *payaGó*— and described by Lucrecia, a woman in her late forties, as “like a little girl, very pretty they say, with long hair,” or *waioGók* (mentioned only by few), a large bird which “owns” the skies and the birds. Nonetheless, most people talk about “the owners” in more generic terms, focusing on the specific place under their control: *noGoplék* (literally “the person of the water”) as the “owner of the water” and therefore of fish, or *viághik* (literally “the one who wanders in the bush”) as the “owner of the bush” and therefore of the animals and various species of bees available there. Some people also mention “the mother of the bush,” a figure which

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<sup>133</sup> Among other Toba groups of the Chaco, the meanings associated with the “owners of the animals” have been shaped by their experience of domination along different lines. Edgardo Cordeu (1969-1970: 87-89), for instance, wrote that among the Tobas of Miraflores the “owners” of the individual species of animals are *peones*, “workers” subordinated to *nowét*, which is seen by the Tobas as a *patrón* who “gives orders” to

seems to have emerged out of the interaction with the Criollo settlers. Many others simply make ambiguous and general statements of the sort of “every animal has an owner,” and look confused when I pressed them to come out with a more systematic picture of individual owners. This attitude does not appear to be simply the result of recent cultural changes. Already in the 1930s, Alfred Métraux found among the Tobas a similar “lack of coherence” which points, in terms of Bourdieu (1977: 19), to “a mode of practical knowledge not comprising knowledge of its own principles.” Thus, depending on the informant, Métraux (1946: 6, 50, 52, 149) was told that the “owner of the water” was either “*saayín*,” “*soñidi*,” “*wién*,” “*noGoplék*,” or “*lék*.”

Beyond these variations, the Tobas agree that the relationship between *payák* and foragers is one of reciprocity. Thus, the *payák* allow the foragers to obtain food, regardless of the quantity of prey, provided that they follow certain attitudes and provisions: especially that they do not throw away the animals or fish captured, for if they do so the *payák* will “get angry” and make it impossible for them to find game or fish in the future. These restrictions are particularly important while hunting species seen as “delicate,” like ostrich and iguana. Gathering honey also requires certain precautions, and when one sets a fire to neutralize the bees with smoke it is important not to burn the hive. Some argue that when fishermen cook and eat part of their catch in the fishing spot, they have to burn down the bones of the fish, but I have seen people who simply throw them away. Wild fruits constitute a particular case, for men and women alike agree that the only fruit which has an “owner” is the *nelomá* (whose “owner” is *kopeletáGa*). Still,

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them. This hierarchical ordering of the “owners” and this terminology linked to an experience of wage labor are absent among the Tobas of the mid-Pilcomayo.

women do not gather fruits that they will not take with them. In exchange of these precautions, the different *payák* allow foragers (and especially the *pioGonáq* to whom they gave their power) to capture the species under their control.

The reciprocity associated with the “owners of the animals” cannot be separated from the social relations of production which construct the bush as a collective place which protects them from hunger, and consequently from the sharing networks which provides many poor households with valuable foodstuffs. As a result, the knowledge of the reciprocity ruling the relationship with the *payák* has for the Tobas important meanings in their current experience of poverty. Thus, several people told me that the *payák* “help the poor” by providing them with a daily source of food. Hugo, for instance, told me: “The owner is like a help for some poor people. It shows him the things so that he can live, [he shows] to the one who doesn’t have a job, so that he can live with honey *extranjera*, so that he has something to eat, so that he doesn’t go to steal ...”

In the 1990s, it was not rare to hear some Tobas argue that “God” is the actual “owner” of the animals. Mariano, for instance, told me: “If I go to the bush, I have to pray very early, at five in the morning. I have to pray to the Lord so that he gives me animals. He created all the things; he created the trees, the land, the stones.” “God,” nonetheless, is for most Tobas a figure which, unlike the *payák*, is abstract and removed from their direct experience. Thus, even those who present “God” as “the owner of everything” are aware of the powerful, everyday presence of “*los diablos*.” Expressing this view, Ernesto told me: “We know that the creator is God, but what we see is that *el diablo* is the one who reigns over everything. *Are the ‘owners’ los diablos?* We know very well that it’s *el diablo*.”

Because the “owners” are part of a taken-for-granted local knowledge of the environment, when people foray in search of food into the heart of the bush their attitude has very little to do with a mystic-like encounter with a mysterious world;<sup>134</sup> rather, they forage guided by very practical concerns, in a process in which the “owners” are part of their subjective, and not necessarily explicit, dispositions for action. As Antonio, a teenager who on another occasion gave me a detailed description of *noGoplék*, put it: “I don’t think that there’s an owner when I go to *mariscar*.” This aspect of the Tobas’ knowledge of the bush reminds us of the important warning made by Pierre Bourdieu (1977 [1972]: 114-115) on the search for the supposed “internal symbolic logic” of practices such as these:

Understanding ritual practice is not a question of decoding the internal logic of a symbolism but of restoring its practical necessity by relating it to the real conditions of its genesis, that is, to the conditions in which its functions, and the means it uses to attain them, are defined ... By cutting practices off from their real conditions of existence, in order to credit them with alien intentions, by a false generosity conducive to stylistic effects, the exaltation of lost wisdom dispossesses them, as surely as its opposite, of everything that constitutes their reason and their *raison d’être*, and locks them into the eternal essence of “mentality.”

Further along these lines, in a context of extreme poverty in which many people can hardly feed their families, the Tobas do not throw away the little food available first and foremost because it would be unthinkable to do otherwise. In 1991, I asked Diego whether people refrain from throwing away fish because of the fear of the “owner.” His answer made me feel clumsy and insensitive: “Actually, people don’t throw away fish because they’re hungry.” On other occasions, Diego had told me about the *payák* in the

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<sup>134</sup> The ethnography of the Chaco has been prone to exoticizing the figure of the “owners” and creating what Bourdieu (1977 [1972]: 19) calls an intellectualist reification of native explanations (cf. Gordillo 1996b) .

bush and about his own carefulness while handling his prey and fish. But at that moment, my own objectification of those explanations forced him to “pull me down” to the practical and harsh reality of their everyday experience of poverty, scarcity, and hunger. In other situations, my similar, abstract questions about the “owners” also made people emphasize the very practical importance of food. I once asked Pablo “What happens if you throw away the fish”? His energetic reply pointed, first, to the value of food and only then to the forms of reciprocity with “God” involved in obtaining it. He told me:

What do you want the fish for? Why do you look for fish? Why do you want to eat fish? You wanted to find fish very badly, to catch a lot of fish, and now you want to throw it away! That’s not good. If you look for fish, you have to be careful with it ... You don’t have to throw it away, for it’s a good nourishment. Besides, later on you won’t have luck. It seems that God hides it, because you don’t comply, [because] you aren’t careful with the things.

The experience of commercial hunting has also shaped the meanings of the reciprocity associated with the *payák*. According to Martín, the “owners” of the iguana and of the curiyú “don’t like it” when people hunt animals when the price of the skins is very low: “Then, he gets angry, for people get nothing for the skins. That’s why when the price is low it seems that the owner gets stingy, and you see few curiyús.” However, when I asked Diego about it, he openly criticized the fetishization of this explanation: “The price has nothing to do with that. It’s the people who think that it’s not worth going out if they don’t pay well. That’s the only thing.” Other people interpret the relationship between the commoditization of hunting and the “owners” in terms of Anglican moral values. According to Hugo, the “owners” of the iguana and the lampalagua do not want hunters to buy “vices” with the money obtained from the skins: “With the iguana,

lampalagua, when you sell [them] and you buy drinks (*la bebida*) they don't come out anymore.”

As we can see, the Tobas' knowledge of the bush and their ability to obtain “bush food” is partially granted by the forms of reciprocity they keep with the *payák* and, according to some, “God.” But the ambiguous and ultimately unpredictable nature of the *payák* make the bush a place over which the Tobas' control is never complete. The Tobas' knowledge of the bush, nonetheless, also includes how to face or sort out those challenges.

### **The Risks of the Bush**

Many Tobas, especially men, argue that the bush poses no real danger for skillful foragers. Still, foraging deep into the bush may involve potential risks of which everybody is aware. In the past (people agree), the jaguar (*kedók*) could pose a serious danger, but nowadays it has disappeared from the region and the rest of the wild animals (including the puma) are usually inoffensive to foragers. Most people argue that nowadays the most serious danger of the bush is to get lost, especially during the dry season, when there are very few natural ponds in the hinterland. In these circumstances, to get lost without enough water can be deadly. Diego told me, after emphasizing that the bush “isn't dangerous”:

Only when you go far during this time of dry weather, [there's the] problem of the water. That's what kills you, the thirst. That's the only thing that's serious. Getting lost isn't. You can get lost but you don't die. But you can [die] because of the water. If there's no water and you get lost, you die of thirst ... The water's serious.

Since in the heart of the *viaqádaik* the sun is the hunters' most important point of reference, men agree that it can be risky to get into the bush on a cloudy or rainy day. Still, even though this may increase one's chances of getting lost, losing the sense of direction is usually due to the action of the *payák*. Even expert *mariscadores* can get lost simply because the *payák* decided to make them "feel dizzy" or "scared." For instance, I asked Martín whether he ever got lost in the bush and he told me:

Yes, many times. I don't know how is it when you get lost over here. It seems that your head just gets bothered by anything. Maybe it's the *payák*, or maybe it's our head. It seems that we can't see, that we can't think ... For instance, if I go over there, I [bumped into] my own footprints ... I go in circles ... Maybe it's the *payák*. Because my grandfather [a renowned *pioGonáq*] told me: "If you passed where the *payák* is, then right away he makes you get lost". It seems that the *payák* gives you a power so that you forget where you're coming from.

The danger of getting lost because of the whims of the *payák* applies both to men hunting on their own and women in groups. For instance, *kopeletáGa* (the "owner" of bola verde) can imitate the "whistle" women do while gathering fruits, and then guide some of them in the wrong direction. *Kohodót*, a dwarf *payák* which is the "husband" of *kopeletáGa*, is particularly prone at playing whimsical tricks on humans. And when a *payák* appears in front of a forager, sometimes it does it as a "*gaucho*," a Criollo on horseback fully dressed in *colete* and *guardamonte*. In these different circumstances, the *payák* can go one step further and turn the disorientation or dizziness they cause on humans into temporary or permanent "madness". There are several cases of people known to have lost their minds this way, losing their memory and sometimes their ability to speak. One of the consequences of this "madness" is that some of them become

remarkable *epiáGayaik* who increase their knowledge of the bush and spend much of their time foraging.

One way of counteracting the potential threat posed by the *payák* inside the bush is to control any expression of fear. For the *payák* can easily turn this fear into “dizziness.” In fact, *susto*, a sudden and intense surge of fear, usually triggers a serious disease which requires the intervention of a *pioGonáq*. Some Tobas argue that when one feels in danger (for instance while spending the night deep inside the bush) another way to keep the *payák* at bay is “to pray to God” or “to sing.” Hugo told me that he once got a headache while fishing, and since he thought a *payák* was the cause, he started singing Anglican religious songs, and then: “The headache was gone. It seems that the devil got scared.” Other people argue that when one feels the near presence of a *payák*, to scare it away one has to light matches and throw them behind one’s back.

When the Tobas get lost in the bush, the first thing they do is follow back their footprints or climb to the top of a tall tree in order to try seeing any familiar sign in the distance. To have hunting dogs with oneself, many agree, is very important not only to find the way back home but also as protection. But the most pressing concern is to find the way out of the bush before sunset. For the night is the time when the *payák* are most active and when dangerous animals come out. If one has to spend the night in the bush, a crucial protective measure is to climb to the top of a tree. Men and women alike tell stories about strange noises (like axes hitting trees) or seemingly human voices (in fact the *payák* wanting to confound people) being heard at night in the interior of the bush.

Paradoxically, in many of the cases in which Tobas got lost in the bush, those who saved them were the ones whom many look down on as knowing “nothing” about the

bush: the Criollos. Since many settlers live in isolated *puestos* deep inside the bush, far from the Toba villages, this is actually not a coincidence. That is why another technique many Tobas resort to when lost is to follow the tracks left by the cows of the Criollos. Martín told me that he was once able to get out of the *viaqádaik* because he followed these tracks: “That’s why when we get lost, we always look for the cows’ tracks. For the cows, when they go, they go straight to the house. Then, I arrived where the Criollo was.”

In the marshes, a further potential danger one may find when foraging, especially during the flooding season, is posed by the extraordinary creatures (large “snakes” or “horses”) which live there, and which I will analyze in chapter twenty. Finally, to come across a wandering soul, a *nepakál* (literally “shadow”), can also be dangerous; not because of the *nepakál* itself but the fear one might feel, which may lead to a *susto* and therefore to a serious disease. Still, for most Tobas, these types of direct encounters with *payák*, *nepakál*, or the creatures of the marshes are rare. Moreover, the potential threat posed by them is not among people’s explicit concerns. Métraux (1946a: 16) rightly noted this when he did fieldwork among the Tobas:

The Tobas do not actually live in the constant fear of aggressions by spirits [*payák*] ascribed to them by some authors. The Indians admit that goblins and ghosts are especially obnoxious at night, and they are ready to interpret any queer nocturnal noise as evidence of the presence of a spirit; but during the day they show little concern unless something definite suggest supernatural interference.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Métraux was tacitly, and rightly, criticizing Rafael Kasten’s argument that the Tobas of the upper Pilcomayo live in permanent fear of the *payák* (see Karsten 1970 [1923]: 22, 27, 40, etc.). Karsten’s interpretation was shaped by a view recurrent in the ethnographic literature of the Chaco, which attributes a permanent and irrational mysticism to the Aborigines. For a criticism of the exoticism and essentialism of much of the anthropological literature on the Chaco see Gordillo (1993 and 1996b). See also the review by Claudia Briones (1996) of my 1993 piece as well as my reply (Gordillo 1996c).

In my own numerous foraging trips with the Tobas, they never expressed any concern for the invisible forces or creatures inhabiting the bush and the marshes and seemed by contrast to be purely concentrated with the technicalities of obtaining “bush food.” When I asked people about it, most of them confirmed this impression. Mariano, for instance, told me several times that while in the bush he was more afraid of coming across a man than a *nepakál*: “because a man can kill me, or [he can] take from me what I have. But if it’s a *nepakál*, he can’t.” When I asked Pablo whether it was dangerous to come across the *payák* of the bush, he told me:

Well ... I think that ... Well, the *payák* don’t steal from people ... The new ones, we don’t find *payák* in the bush, we don’t find them. That’s why I don’t say that the *payák*’s dangerous, if you bump into the *payák*. I don’t say so, because I haven’t seen it. I haven’t seen it. I go far away, because there’s iguana, but I don’t find the *payák* ... I go foraging calmly. The only [problem] is when I run out of the water that I take with me. Worried. I want to find where I can get water again ... That’s the only thing.

The women’s perceptions of the dangers of the bush, even though they include getting lost and the potential threat posed by the *payák*, are different from men’s. In the past, the women’s fear of the bush was shaped by the fact that the giant snakes of the bush, *nanaikpólio*, were attracted by their menstrual blood. This greatly restricted the movement of women outside the household during their periods, especially of girls in their first period. Today, the Tobas agree that the *nanaikpólio* have disappeared from their lands and most women do not follow this restriction. As Daniela put it: “It seems that most of us already know the Lord God. And it seems that this is what makes us forget that custom.”<sup>136</sup> Today, for most women their fear of the bush is fear of men, especially Criollos but also unknown

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<sup>136</sup> In the households in which this restriction is still practiced, it only involves girls who go through their first period.

Tobas and Wichís. I asked Fabiana, a woman in her fifties, whether it was dangerous to go into the bush. She said:

When you go alone, maybe you'll find a man who will bother you. Then, you don't go to the bush, you're afraid of the bush ... If you go alone you're afraid of the bush. If you go with all the family, then it's quiet, you're not afraid. Then you go far into the bush, with other women, you're not afraid.

For some women (unlike men), a further reason for not going into the bush alone is the potential danger posed by animals like wild pigs, anteaters, poisonous snakes, pumas, and the bulls of the Criollos. The women's fear of the bush, however, does not deter them from foraging into the bush in groups. The risks which the Tobas, women and men, can encounter in the bush are for them part of the accepted and taken for granted features of a place which is their home, and from which they extract much of their daily nourishment. However, we have seen that this knowledge is that of a form of production in which the Tobas do not exert full control over their conditions of reproduction. This still forces many men, women, and children to look for distant places of work, but in very different circumstances from the ones which prevailed at the times of *kahogonaGá*.

**SEVENTEEN:  
“THE NECESSITY”:  
LABOR MIGRATIONS TODAY**

The realm of freedom really begins only  
where labor determined by necessity and  
external expediency ends.

*Karl Marx,*  
Capital Vol. III (1894)

### **Leaving the Bush**

The Tobas' current experiences of seasonal wage labor lack the length, massiveness, and semantic density of the migrations to San Martín del Tabacal; consequently, they do not carry the power which the *ingenio* has in the imagination of older generations. And most importantly for the central topic of this dissertation, the cultural dynamics generated by the tensions which exist between the farms and the bush have been reformulated by the new fields of force which nowadays shape the Tobas' experiences in their own lands and the dynamics of capitalism at large in northern Argentina. In this chapter, I will analyze the Tobas' new experiences of seasonal wage labor in terms of this reformulation (to which I will return in the final section of the chapter) but also in terms of contradictions which still oppose places perceived by them as very different from each other and which are still haunted by the memory of the cane-fields.

As it was already mentioned, in the mid-1990s the Tobas participated in two large seasonal labor migrations: to bean farms located in the westernmost edge of the Chaco, in the province of Salta, and cotton farms in the east of Formosa and (more recently) in Salta. People migrate in trucks taken by labor contractors which arrive at their villages in

February or March for the cotton harvest and in late May or early June for the bean harvest.<sup>137</sup> The Tobas who migrate are often single men and women and young couples with their little children, and the most recurrent reason to do it is certainly sheer necessity. As Amancio, a man in his late fifties, put it when I arrived at his semi-deserted household in July 1996: “They’re all gone to the bean harvest. The necessity, a lot of necessity. Many kids.” As in the times of the *ingenio*, seasonal wage labor is a source of staple goods rather than cash. Since in the Criollo stores of the bush prices are much higher (and the supply much lower) than in the areas where the farms are located, people usually spend the cash earned in the harvests before returning home. Clothing is the good the Tobas seek the most. Still, they also aim to obtain other goods such as blankets, mosquito nets, domestic utensils, radios, watches, and if the harvest is particularly good, stereo tape-recorders and bicycles. A further incentive to migrate is the prospect of eating everyday, for in the farms people can get packaged food from the *proveduría* (later deducted from the final payment) on a daily basis. Intertwined with these constraints, among teenagers a further reason for temporarily leaving the bush is the thrill of traveling to distant places and carrying out practices like wine-drinking, coca-chewing, and casual sexual affairs, which in most villages are condemned by the members of the *Consejo de la Iglesia*.

When the truck of the contractor arrives, the latter announces the basic labor conditions. Since in many cases these conditions are later “modified,” for the Tobas it is

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<sup>137</sup> In each of these two “waves,” contractors often come more than once, depending on the changing demand for laborers. The contractors often let the Tobas know of the date of their arrival in advance, through radio contacts or (more recently) telephone calls to Pozo de Maza, and when the news spread, the people who already decided to migrate begin to get ready to leave.

very important to know the *waidomá* from previous migrations, and some people refuse to go with contractors they have never seen. Those who get into the truck usually receive some sort of *adelanto* (advanced payment) from the contractor: either small sums of cash or goods purchased after a stopover in Ingeniero Juárez. Packed in the back of the truck, looking at the straight dirt road which cuts through the dense bush of the Chaco, a standing mass of men, women, and children head once again, like several generations of Tobas before them, towards distant “places of work.”

#### **“They Forget the People”: After Tabacal**

The mechanization of San Martín del Tabacal began in the early and mid-1960s, when the Argentinean sugar industry suffered a deep crisis which put strong pressure on the plantations to reduce costs and diversify their production (Bisio and Forni 1976: 12, 15). The prospect of reducing the “threat” posed by the sheer mass of workers working in the fields put further pressure on decisions leading to mechanization (Karasik 1987). Mechanization first involved the loading and transportation of the cane to the factory and then cane-cutting, though in a more gradual way due technical problems associated with it. But mechanization also included the labor practices which involved *aborígenes*: doing clearings, digging up channels, and chopping wood. In a few years, the overall number field laborers, permanent and seasonal, dropped dramatically. In 1965, San Martín del Tabacal employed over 1,199 workers in the factory and 7,291 in the fields. In 1970, whereas the number of factory workers stayed roughly the same, the number of field workers had dropped to 4,268 (Bisio and Forni 1976: 18). In 1996, Enrique told me about the consequences of this mechanization: “Now, the *ingenio* has all the machinery to cut

wood, to cut cane. They have a machine which turns cane over. And they forget the people. They don't want to look for people anymore to give them work." In 1969, the Tobas were recruited by San Martín del Tabacal for the last time. Ledesma sent a contractor to their villages in 1976 and a group of people worked there for a few months. That was the last migration of the Tobas to the sugar plantations of the San Francisco Valley, a process which "the ancient ones" had initiated over 70 years earlier.

One of the paradoxical consequences of the "return to the bush" which followed this process is that for the Tobas wage labor —until then confined to a distant place and restricted at home to individual *changas* for the Criollos— began being carried out not far from their villages, even in the interior of the bush. I will refer to these particular experiences of wage labor in the interior of the bush, and to the consequent reformulation of the tensions existing between exploitation and autonomy, later on in the chapter. But the Tobas also began participating in new labor migrations to distant places: in particular, to farms which in the past had been unable to compete with the powerful sugar plantations in the recruitment of *aborígenes* (Gordillo 1995a). The horticultural farms in Salta, especially around Colonia Santa Rosa (southwest of Orán), were among the first to send contractors to recruit groups of Tobas, especially for the harvest of tomatoes, oranges, pepper, and eggplants (paid by piecework). The migrations to these farms were conducted on an irregular basis, but continued at least until the early 1980s. By then, farms known as *fincas poroterías*, focused on the production of beans (*poroto alubia*), had gone through a very important expansion along the western edge of the Chaco and

acquired a dominant role in the absorption of Toba labor from Salta.<sup>138</sup> But the demand for Toba labor also came from the other edge of the Chaco, especially *colonias algodóneras* (cotton farms) from the area of Pirané, in the east of Formosa, which had been in the area since the expansion of cotton in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>139</sup>

### **The Farms: “A lot of Action”**

The bean and cotton farms are much smaller than the sugar plantations of the San Francisco Valley and have a lower capacity to absorb laborers, in terms of amount of people and length of the harvest. Whereas between 60 to 70% of the Toba population regularly migrated to San Martín del Tabacal, nowadays only 10 to 20% migrate to the farms: between 100 to 250 people out of a population of about 1,500. And the time these people spend working away is also much shorter: about one month (sometimes five or six weeks) in the bean farms and two to four months in the cotton farms (compared to the eight to ten months spent every year in Tabacal). Besides, in any given year the Tobas who migrate to one of these sectors farms do not migrate to the other.

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<sup>138</sup> In the 1970s, the high international prices of beans, together with tax reductions and abundant credits encouraged intensive investments by capitalist firms along the western edge of the Chaco, turning tens of thousands of hectares of forest into bean fields oriented to the world market. The bean farms often recruit their labor among Criollos from Santiago del Estero and *aborígenes* of the area and the interior of the Chaco (Trincherero and Leguizamón 1995; Reboratti 1989).

<sup>139</sup> In the 1970s and 1980s, the Tobas were also recruited by farms located in Bartolomé de las Casas and Clorinda (Formosa) and to a lesser degree in the province of Chaco (Gordillo 1992). In February and March 1996, and due to a recent expansion of cotton fields in Salta (due to the high international prices of cotton), several hundred Tobas were recruited for weeding cotton by bean farms which had turned part of their fields to the cultivation of cotton. Unlike those in Pirané, the cotton farms in Salta are highly capitalized and the Tobas complemented the work of weeding machines. Being more representative of their experience with cotton, however, here I will refer to the Tobas' work in the *colonias* of eastern Formosa. In 1984 and 1990, the Tobas were also recruited as harvesters by sugar plantations located in the provinces of Chaco and Santa Fe: Las Palmas and Las Toscas. Nevertheless, this did not coalesce into a new pattern of migrations.

In spite of differences between the two which I will analyze later, the Tobas' experience in the bean and cotton farms is similar. The Tobas always work in teams formed by the members of the nuclear family or groups of single friends. Since payment is by piecework, the members of a single team add their joint gains into a single account and split the gains. Families usually share an account in the farm's store when they get *mercaderías* but single friends often prefer to have individual accounts. The Tobas often work together with other groups of workers, scattered in different areas of the farm. In the bean farms, these are Criollos from the area or from Santiago del Estero, Chiriguano and Wichís from towns of the area, and Wichís from the interior of the Chaco. In the cotton farms, these are usually Wichís from other areas of western Formosa (often Ingeniero Juárez or El Potrillo). Even though harvesters who work in the same farm are often paid the same amount, the hierarchies which characterized the ethnic landscape of the *ingenio* are also reproduced in the farms, though in a different way. In the bean farms, for instance, the contractors see the Criollos as the most valuable workers, but also as the most troublesome. A contractor told me about the *santiagueños*: "They come to make money; they're difficult to cheat on." The Wichís are located in the other extreme of the spectrum, and according to the same man: "They're useless for the work, and they're full of vices." The Tobas, by contrast, were for him "hard-working and educated (*instruidos*)." Jaime, a man in his early twenties who migrates often to the farms, told me about the Wichís who were on the same bean farm he was working at: "They're lazy. They call them lazy, lazy."

Because of the piecework system, it is up to the Tobas to decide how many hours per day they work. Still, the contractors (in the bean farms) and the foremen (in the cotton

farms) spend most of the day walking down the fields, making sure that people are effectively working, and that they are doing it “in the right way.” As in the times of the *ingenio*, the Tobas’ forms of counteracting exploitation are often based on individual and improvised forms of pressure. In the bean farm I visited in June 1996, I noticed that people subjected the *contratista* to a permanent stream of individual demands and complaints which were relatively effective, such as “the water in the tanks has too much chlorine,” “I want powdered milk for my little children,” “I have diarrhea and want to go to the dispensary in town.” But the contractors’ ability to keep track of these demands and satisfy many of them was also quite effective in terms of keeping the Tobas relatively content. For years, when I asked the Tobas whether they went on strike in the bean farms, they gave me an answer similar to that of their parents when talking about the *ingenio*. As Roberto told me once in 1990: “We don’t know how to go on strike.” However, in the mid-1990s groups of Tobas began organizing improvised *huelgas*, motivated either by the high price of the *mercaderías* or the low amount paid per hectare or kilogram. Some of these *huelgas* were held simultaneously with Criollos and Chiriguanos, but some Tobas emphasized that in other occasions they went on strike by themselves. In 1995, Atilio, a man in his late thirties who usually participates in most labor migrations, told me about a strike organized by Tobas in a farm near Embarcación:

People had a meeting, so that they pay more and they lower the [price of the] *mercaderías*. They had to talk to the *patrón*. When they paid little for the work, the people went on strike. Then, the people didn’t work and they had to pay more. If they gave a raise, then the people would go to work. Then, the *patrón* lowered the price of the *mercaderías*, and he also increased the salary ... The *patrón* was stingy.

Even though most Tobas are somewhat aware of the exploitation they are subjected to, many argue that to obtain a worthwhile balance depends to a great extent on their individual responsibility. And this responsibility is often defined along the lines of Anglican morality. Expressing a common opinion among the Tobas, Saúl, a teenager who once participated in the bean harvest, told me in 1995: “Those who aren’t into vices, they earn something. Those who buy coca leaves, tobacco, they get ruined and earn nothing.” This brings to light something we already mentioned: that for young people, an important attraction of the farms is the possibility to chew coca leaves, drink wine, and have casual sexual affairs, often with Wichí women. Antonio summarized this aspect of the experience in the farms when he told me: “In the place we were at, there was a lot of action (*movida*).” For some young men, these practices bear a reminiscence to what they heard from their parents about the *nomí* in San Martín del Tabacal and hinges on a similar tension between the forms of social control which exist in their villages and the perceived “freedom” associated with the farms. As Martín put it, while we were chatting in one of the Toba villages:

The bean harvest [is] the worst, you wander at night, you chat with one another ... Many young men go to the bean harvest, and the girls too. *Do they sleep together more often than around here?* More than here. Over there, it seems that there’s a *gusto* to chat with young men, with girls. Over there, they get together, like this, close, close. Over there, in the bean harvest you can look for a girlfriend, borrow one, just for a while. *What about the cotton harvest?* Over there too. That’s why when they come back, someone has already a husband, someone has already a wife ... I went once [to the bean harvest]. At night, we were wandering, looking for girls, bothering their houses. But when we stopped bothering them, they became tame. We could sleep with them. Worse, the same as in the *ingenio*. You don’t sleep all night long. Sometimes there’re Wichís, and Wichí girls too.

In spite of the similar experiences that the Tobas go through in the different farms, the bean farms and the cotton farms are located in very different places, involve different labor practices, and are associated with different perceptions and fears.

**“In Pirané, only Hunger”**

The most striking spatial feature of the cotton farms of eastern Formosa is that, being the heart of the expansion of cotton in the Chaco in the 1920s, there are very few natural forests left and most lands are open extensions of *campo*. This marks a sharp spatial difference with the other “places of work,” often surrounded by thick and threatening forests, and some people told me that because of that, there are few *payák* near the cotton-growing *colonias*. However, most people argue that dangerous *payák* lurk the cotton farms as well. The most distinctive manifestation of the *payák* in these *colonias* is a “light” which comes out at night and moves through the cotton fields. I asked Antonio if there are *payák* in the cotton farms. He replied:

Yes, sometimes when the weather is changing, they came out. It came out over the road, and went where the people were. It came, and people got scared. *What was it?* Like a light, but very big. At night, in the evening, when people finished at seven and went to rest, it came out. *Did it do anything to you?* No ... *Are there payák like those over here?* No, I don't think so.

Those lights are often associated with strange sounds of animals, and that as a result people stay in their barracks at night and do not dare to go out. In *colonias* located near strips of bush, the dangers posed by the *payák* are higher. Germán, a twenty-year old man, told me about his experience in the cotton farms in 1991:

Yes, at night there were *payák* which were bothering us. We were alone in a *rancho*, in the bush, with my brother and Atilio. The *payák* turned into a wild animal, like a lion, and screamed. That was what we were afraid of ... We were scared, so we left the *rancho* and went to sleep in the *campo*. The problem was that it was thick bush.

Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, due to the irregular crises the cotton sector has been through the conditions of labor and the wages in these farms have considerably deteriorated, and the Tobas' negative opinion of these *colonias* has increased. Mauricio told me in 1995 about his previous experiences in the cotton harvest: "We brought nothing, absolutely nothing. I went out and I didn't bring a roll of money. Just like this." For his part, Marcelina told me, contrasting the cotton farms with her memories of the *ingenio*: "It's not worth it, because you earn nothing. The *ingenio* was worth it, in the past, because you earned money. This Pirané, you earn nothing, only debts. I don't like it. You earn nothing. In the *ingenio*, you did earn money. In Pirané, only hunger."

Migration to these farms can involve up to 250 people, but since the crisis of the sector the Tobas have been recruited by them on a more irregular basis. The *colonias* are for the most part small and medium-size productive units, rely on some forms of family labor, and for decades depended on credits and subsidies from the state. In most farms, the Tobas live in barracks provided by the *colono* (farmer), and the water available to them is that of streams or water wells. The farm's foreman is in charge of the organization, control, and payment of the workers, and the contractor is simply in charge of their recruitment. The *colono* often "sub-contract" the laborers working for him to other farmers and as a result the Tobas are often taken from one farm to another. In 1996, Marcelino remembered that when he and his family went to the cotton harvest "in 1979": "About 100 of us left from here. In Bartolomé de Las Casas, they scattered us all over: ten

over here, ten over there. The contractor sold the people [and said]: ‘Ten people, I’m going to sell them like animals’.”

Gathering cotton requires people to bow over the plants and to take the fibers into large bags using the tips of the fingers, something which has to be made very fast if one wants to make a worthwhile income. Because of the nature of the labor process, children often help their parents. Ignacio, a man in his early twenties, told me: “Many screw their waists. For the kids it’s easier.” Some Tobas can gather up to 150 kilos a day (with the first sprout of cotton, which is heavier), but many do not get more than 80 kilos. In the 1990s, in spite of variations according to the season, the Tobas were paid an average of one peso [1US\$] per 10 kilos. Since the “second” and “third” sprouts of cotton are lighter than the “first one,” people’s earnings per day decrease as the harvest progresses. The teams of harvesters get paid every Saturday, and the wages include a deduction for the packaged food they take from the *proveduría*. Marcelino told me about his experience in the cotton harvest in the late 1970s:

Year ‘79, Pirané, with my sons we were four. Working non-stop all morning, sometimes we took 120 kilos among all of us. But the kilo was 30 cents. I don’t know, maybe 10 cents, or one peso. But the *mercadería* was expensive. I was taking [cotton] out all day long, sometimes 160 kilos. Ooh! [Working] all the time. On Saturday, it was the balance. I have 20 pesos, 25. I have my balance: meat, comida, then I buy clothes. Then, the harvest is over. The first one is nice, but the second, the third one, is worse. I earned nothing.

When the harvest is over, after a period which can be different every year but which ranges from two to four months, the contractors take the Tobas back to their villages. Later on, some times just a few weeks after they have arrived back home, new contractors arrive at their villages. This time they come from the other edge of the Chaco,

from places whose proximity to the foothills of the Andes permeates them with threads of the Tobas' social memory of the cane-fields.

### **The Shadows of the Mountains: “Many Devils There”**

The bean farms where the Tobas work nowadays are usually not more than a few dozens of kilometers away from San Martín del Tabacal, in the strip of land which stretches from Pichanal to Tartagal along the western edge of the Chaco. North of Embarcación, where most of the *fincas* which hire the Tobas are located, the rocky ridges of the mountains are not visible from the fields and the landscape to the west is dominated by low and densely forested hills. That is why some Tobas claim that those hills are not *kahogonaGá*, “mountains,” *strictu sensu*. As Hugo put it: “That’s made out of earth, like a *bordo* [very low ground elevations]. But it never has the height of the mountains, high ... I say it’s not rock (*ká*), that’s not *kahogonaGá*.” In spite of these differences, the memory of the death which dominated the *ingenio* also haunts those hills and sprinkles the bean fields with images of fear which are stronger than in the cotton farms. Firstly, the *payák* are more abundant in the bean farms because of the presence of the hills, which many people refer to as *cerros*. Ernesto told me about those *fincas*: “All the *payák* are there, because of the *cerro*, you see. They kill people. From Embarcación up, everything is *cerro*.” Secondly, as in the surroundings of the *ingenio*, some Tobas argue that large lions (*hawagaikpólio*), tigers (*kedóepolio*) and monkeys (*woyém*) live near the farms, especially in the dense forests of the area.

Every year, an average of about 150 Tobas migrate to “*la poroteada*” (the bean harvest). Unlike the cotton farms, in these farms the contractor is also in charge of

organizing, controlling, and paying the workers (together with foremen who work for him). Upon their arrival, people built up rudimentary “campsites” with posts, corrugated iron, and large pieces of nylon sheeting provided by the contractors (usually deducted from their salaries) in the strips of forest left between the fields. Not far from these *campamentos*, the contractors place various mobile water tanks (the only source of water available) and also a rudimentary *proveduría*.

Today, the bean harvest is semi-mechanized and the work carried out by the Tobas and other workers is combined with that of threshing machines and tractors.<sup>140</sup> In the first stage, threshing machines cut the bean plants from the ground, and then the Tobas have to put the plants together with their hands (sometimes using plastic gloves) in small piles forming parallel lines, an action which is known as “*engavillar*.” When families work together, the man leads and women and children put together plants left behind by him. Then, a tractor with an iron weight passes in between these parallel lines, flattens the ground, and prepares the terrain for the next manual task: the “*acordonada*.” In this stage, using a pitchfork, the Tobas move the piles of plants into the flattened line left by the tractor and form with them a continuous line. Once this is completed, threshing machines gather the plants thus aligned, separate the boughs from the beans, and load the latter in 60-kilos bags which two skilled Criollo workers sitting in the machine quickly sow and throw at one side.

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<sup>140</sup> In the 1970s, when the expansion of the bean farms began in the area, cutting the plants was often done manually, a hard and demanding task which today only a few farms have not mechanized. In those days, some Tobas carried out this task, known as *la arrancada*. Segundo remembered: “Bean, I was in Embarcación, 20 years ago. I was a bit young, pulling the bean out. There were no machines that cut. Now, I’ve heard the young men [saying that] they have machines that cut. In my times, there was no machine. Only pulling out with the hand. A lot of work.”

Payment is by piecework, according to the number of hectares worked. As an average, in one day a person does one hectare, but experienced workers can do one and a half. Aiming to get a worthwhile income, some Tobas work also at night, especially when there is full moon. Still, most people are too afraid of the *payák* to do it. Atilio told me about the “devils” of the *fincas*: “They appear sometimes like a light, always at night. Sometimes you can listen to voices, like Criollos singing. The *payák* come from the *cerros*.” Luis told me about the dangers of working at night:

There're some who work at night, but it's very dangerous. There're many *diablo payák*. It's like a female devil. She does things to kill a man, that's why we don't work at night. There's a Wichí friend who died because he worked at night. He didn't have a knife's wound, nothing. Maybe it's the *payák*. That's why the *patrón* says that we don't have to work at night, [that] we have to sleep, to rest ... Many people died. Very dangerous. We always pray to have strength to keep on working ... We always sleep together. The *payák* at night makes noises, like voices. And it cuts the clothes of the people. There's a shirt hanging, and the next day is cut.

Unlike the *payák* of San Martín del Tabacal, the threat posed by the *payák* haunting the bean farms lies less in their capacity to spread scores of diseases than in their power to cause a sudden and instantaneous death. When these *payák* wander in the bean fields, they can take the shape of naked humans and it can be fatal to come across them. According to Fernando: “If they hug you at night, you're going to die.” As a noticeable reversal of some of the gendered imageries of the dangers embedded in San Martín del Tabacal, where women feared the lust of the large monkeys of the jungle, several men told me stories of “female devils” who “robbed” men working in “*la poroteada*.” Hugo told me in 1997, in an account about the bean farms which also permeates the nearby hills with images of riches reminiscent of the *ingenio*:

There's a woman who steals people ... She stole a boy to the *cerro*. She took him and showed him all her house. [She said] "You have to do this." She showed him all the things. Then, it seems that he's tame ... He gets together with the woman. There's no food lacking. She has everything. They say the woman has a lot of money. Then, they say that they got together as if he was the husband. Beautiful woman. Then, they say that they had two kids, like these [he pointed to his little children], but monkeys... Because the *payák* robs some kid to the *cerro*, and then it seems that she raises him. Until he grows up. Then, he has long hair, and [has] the hands like this, the nails growing ... Then, how many years! This is the story of all the *cerro*. The *cerro* has everything, there's everything.

During the harvest, and as a means of saving money in food, people boil and eat large quantities of the beans spread in the fields. The contractors usually tolerate this practice, but the situation is different when, at the end of the harvest, this "robbery" involves not loose beans but the 60-kilos bags left by the threshing machines in the fields, which in 1996 were worth 70 pesos (70 U\$S) each. The Tobas usually try to take as many bags as they can. As Hugo put it: "The last night, all the people were stealing the [bags of] beans, to take with them." A contractor told me that, before returning home, a contingent of people can take up to 30 bags in one truck. He added: "I turn a blind eye. But if the administrator checks the truck, he will make them leave everything."

Payment takes place at the end of the harvest, when people are paid their balance in cash. In 1996, the Tobas were paid 22 pesos per hectare; even though they summed up as an average about 400 pesos, after the deductions of the *proveduría* some were left with as little as 30 pesos. After being paid, the Tobas go either by bus or taxi to the border town of Pocitos (near Bolivia) or to Pichanal or Embarcación to buy clothing and other goods. Kiko, a seventeen year old boy, told me: "They make the calculations, how much balance you have ... In the afternoon, people go to Pichanal to buy clothes, shirts. Some buy two tape recorders, those who have a higher balance." Thus, even though many Tobas argue that in *la poroteada* people can earn more things than in the *colonias*, this

place is very far from being close to the abundance of commodities and riches remembered about the *ingenios*. And this has introduced new semantic components to the tensions existing between the bush and the “places of work,” as we shall see. A further important reformulation in the old contradiction between “the bush” and “the plantations” is that, together with these migrations, over the last decades the Tobas relied on forms of wage labor carried out in the heart of the bush, a process which took experiences of exploitation into a place until then relatively free from them.

### ***Obrajes and Estancias: Wage Labor in the Bush***

After the end of the migration to San Martín del Tabacal, one the first forms of wage labor the Tobas engaged in was as *hacheros*, post cutters. In the 1960s, logging experienced an important expansion in this region of the Argentinean Chaco, led by local merchants and wealthy Criollos who invested low sums of capital in *obrajes*, mobile campsites focused on the production of charcoal and especially fencing posts out of quebracho colorado trees (Cafferata 1988; cf. Rodríguez 1975). Because they were centered on quebracho colorado, these *obrajes* did not imply clear-cuts but a selective depletion of the *monte*. The Tobas began working for private *obrajeros*, often with Wichís, deep into the hinterland (where the tallest quebrachos are) in different parts of northwestern Formosa, usually in lands owned by the provincial government (which granted a logging permit, or *guía*, to the *obrajeros*). As on the farms, each *obraje* had its *proveduría* from which the Tobas obtained their daily source of packaged food. They were paid by piecework according to the size of the post and its quality, and exploitation was further enhanced by the *obrajero's* assessment of this quality (see Rodríguez 1975:

12-13).<sup>141</sup> The *obrajes* were active especially during the cooler and drier months of the year, between June and early August, because of the very demanding nature of this work and in order to avoid the rainy season, when the roads and trails in the bush become impassable.

Producing a pole out of a quebracho involved different tasks: cutting the tree down (“*voltear*”), cutting off the edges of the trunk (“*despuntar*”), cutting out the bark and branches (“*devastar*”), smoothing the surface of the trunk (“*labrar*”), and finally carrying the post to the truck (“*rodear*”). The Tobas usually worked in teams ranging from two to half a dozen men, who shared their joint earnings. Sometimes they complemented each other’s work, and for each trunk each man performed a different task. But when they found many quebrachos in the same spot, people carried out all the stages together, one after the other.

One of the most remarkable features of the Tobas’ experience as *hacheros* is that it not only implied taking exploitation deep inside the place which symbolized their autonomy as *mariscadores*, but that it also led to their (so far) one and only collective experience of organization of labor alternative to exploitation. In 1971, the Anglican missionaries founded a logging cooperative among Wichís and Tobas called *Cooperativa Pilcomayo Limitada*. Inserted into the development programs began by the missionaries the year before in the west of Formosa, the explicit aim of the cooperative was “to replace the relationship of dependence with the *obrajeros* through a organization of solidarity

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<sup>141</sup> There are four sizes of posts: 1) “*especial*” (“special”), 3 meters long, 2) “*entero largo*” (“full long”), 2.40 meters, 3) “*entero corto*” (“full short”), 2.20 meters, 4) “*medio reforzado*” (“medium reinforced”), 2.20 meters (thinner than the *entero corto*). The quality was labelled “1<sup>st</sup>”, “2<sup>nd</sup>”, and “3<sup>rd</sup>” class.

aimed at economic self-government.”<sup>142</sup> In those days, cooperatives like this were formed in various parts of the Argentinean Chaco, and some of them were part of the political radicalization which dominated the Argentinean political landscape in the early 1970s (see Rodríguez 1975: 25-33; Arengo 1996). Even though this did not apply to this cooperative, with “*la cooperativa*” the Tobas felt that they were indeed the owners of their own labor. In the words of Diego: “There was no *patrón*, just us.” Tobas and Wichís began organizing itinerant *obrajes* by themselves, formed by several households which worked together, and while men cut the posts their wives prepared food and gathered firewood and chagüar in the surrounding bush. The posts were sold in the cooperative headquarters in Ingeniero Juárez (the building of the Anglican mission) and the numerous *mercaderías* obtained from the sale were taken by truck to the people in the *obraje*, an experience which is nowadays remembered with strong images of abundance (as we shall see). The experience of the cooperative, however, was brief. In 1973, it went bankrupt and most Tobas had to begin working for *obrajeros* again.

Working deep into the bush entailed an important risk: the danger posed by the *payák*. Because of their particular spatial location, the *obrajes* implied the paradoxical combination of the estrangement and fear associated with the *payák* of the “places of work” and the risks the Tobas are aware may await them when they forage in the *viaqádaik*. Thus, it was common to hear strange noises around the *obrajes* at night, especially the distant echo of somebody hitting a pole, as if the *payák* were mimicking the practice of humans. Emiliano told me one evening: “Around this time [9:00 PM], we felt

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<sup>142</sup> “Reformulación de la Segunda Etapa del Programa Indígena de Desarrollo Comunitario para Ingeniero Juárez” (Expte. No. 9121/69). m.s.

somebody hitting a pole, as if he was a person, hitting a pole. We heard: 'tan, tan;' we the *aborígenes* said: 'the *payák*'s over there.' It is interesting to note, however, that even though the Tobas imply that the *payák* were active in any *obraje* (including those of the *cooperativa*) most of their accounts on *payák* haunting them focus on those run by *patrones*. Late in 1995, Segundo told me about the fear people felt in an *obraje* infested with *payák*, and how a *pioGonáq* interceded with the *patrón* to change the site of the campsite:

I was cutting posts. There was a heavy rain, a strong storm which broke a big tree, a quebracho. I saw a hairy man, like a monkey, who fell, but like a man. I was screaming, calling my son. My *chango* was scared. *Was it at night?* At night. It looked as it was dead, like this [he closed his eyes and stretched his arms]. And after the rain stopped, it went away. It was *payák*, but where did it go! It looked like a dead man. But it wasn't a man; it was a *payák* ... *Was it in an obraje?* Yes. Manuel Gil's [an *obrajero*] ... A large campsite, of 100 people, or 60 people, I don't know how to count ... The campsite was in the area of Juárez. Many *payák*: one sang, the other screamed. Many *payák* in that bush. People were scared. [We stayed] one month there, *viaqádaik* ... Many *payák* which scared the people. *Did the patrón know?* Salvatierra [a *pioGonáq*] let him know. He told him: "You, *patrón*, listen. These people can't sleep. Many *diablos*. We have to change the campsite." Then, a big truck came and changed the campsite. We changed. People fled. They didn't show up there anymore.

The work in *obrajes* constituted an important experience for the Tobas, and in the 1990s adult men talked about it often. But it was a relatively brief experience, for the quebracho was rapidly depleted in all the region. By the late 1970s, the *obrajes* were in decline. In the early 1980s, small groups of Tobas were still cutting posts and selling them to merchants or the ICA. But by the mid-1980s, the production of quebracho posts had come to a halt in all the region.

Nowadays, the only type of seasonal wage labor the Tobas conduct not far from their villages takes place in the Paraguayan cattle ranches. The Tobas' work in the

*estancias* began in the 1960s, when a large ranch made clearings across the river near Laguna Los Paces. The owner of this ranch, "Ferre," is often remembered by the Tobas in a way reminiscent of the fearful respect they had for Robustiano Patrón Costas: as an authoritarian, "very rich," and "very nice" *patrón*. Nowadays, small groups of young men cross the marshes and ask for work in one of the several *estancias* of the region, usually between July and September, when it is easier to cross the marshlands and "bush food" is scarce. There, they usually work doing clearings and cutting posts. Since the nearest ranches are relatively close to their villages, 30 to 40 kilometers away, this is the only occasion in which the Tobas look for wage labor by their own means, without mediation of contractors.

Like many other "places of work," the *estancias* are feared places. Firstly, foremen are often armed and are abusive and when in 1989 (during the hyperinflation crisis) a large number of Tobas worked there, there were some incidents with them. Secondly, some Tobas see the location of these *estancias* in Paraguayan territory as a risk. In May 1993, Roberto told me about those incidents with the foremen in the ranches: "I was afraid, because I had no gun. And there, in Paraguay, that's not my country. If something happens to me: whom am I going to complaint to? At least over here I can go to the *gendarmería*." Thirdly, being located in very thick sections of the bush, the *estancias* are haunted by scores of dangerous *payák*. Even though the *estancias* are located in the bush and not far from home, people often express the same contrast which exists between the *payák* of other "places of work" and the *payák* of their home lands, and which make the latter lose their semantic weight when compared to the former. Amalio, for instance, told me about the dangers of working in Paraguay:

What's dangerous over there is the *diablo payák*, which lives in the thick bush in the *estancia* of Ferre. Sometimes we were working deep inside the bush, sleeping, and the *payák* appeared. It was all hairy, a little short. That was dangerous, because it got close and bothered us. Some *changos* were sleeping and it came, and grabbed them, and touched them. And you woke up and you saw it. But it disappeared right away. They come out especially when the weather is about to change. *Are payák like those over here?* No, I never saw them around here. Many times I got deep inside the bush at the time of the iguana, and I never found anything. Over there, there are *payák*. But over here, it's more quiet.

The Tobas stay in the *estancias* from a period ranging from a few weeks to several months, and are paid per work day. Since the final payment is in Paraguayan currency (Guaraníes), they have to spend all their earnings before returning home. Still, a particular feature of these *estancias* which some men find appealing is that they are provided with packaged food free of charge (except a few items such as sugar). I asked Atilio if he liked going to the bean harvest, and he told me: "I don't like it. A lot of work, a lot of work. I like the *estancias* better, because they sell cheap clothes and the *mercadería* is free. You don't pay for that ... Besides, it's closer." This last perception of the relative distance from home as a factor which contributes to make a particular *nontanqá* more appealing than others, takes us to the sets of tensions which nowadays mold the contrast between the bush and the "places of work."

### **"We're Happy Because We Got Back Here"**

The contradictions which nowadays oppose experiences of foraging and wage labor are certainly very different from the ones which existed at the time of the *ingenio* and the mission station. The people who worked at the *ingenio* often point out this contrast, at various levels. A central perceived difference is that even though the *fincas*, *colonias*, and

*estancias* are also alien, feared places haunted by *payák*, the powerful image of disease and death which permeates the memory of San Martín del Tabacal is absent in these new places. Because of this, several people told me that Toba population began recovering only when the migrations to *kahogonaGá* came to an end. As Ernesto put it: “When we went to the *ingenio*, a full generation of ours was diminished. If it weren’t for that, we should be many more. But the reason is that many died. Now that the people never go to the *ingenio*, somebody has eight, ten kids.”

When people over 50 articulate the contrast between these different “places of work” more openly, however, they usually emphasize the greater “importance” of the *ingenio* over the farms. Mariano, for instance, told me that the latter “are not actually *nontanqá*,” because “they take you to work for one month, or two months ... You go to work only for a while, just for a little while... But in the *ingenio* you worked like nine months.” The fact that the Tobas spent so much time in one particular place, the cane-field of Tabacal, marks a further difference with the farms. Nowadays, in subsequent years the Tobas are often hired by different *colonias* or *fincas*, and this decreases the familiarity that they can develop with these places. In the *lotes* of *koliá*, paradoxically, the Tobas’ deep sense of alienation and estrangement stood side by side with the notion that the plantation was a relatively known place in which “it seemed” that they lived. But for most adults the deepest contrast with the current “places of work” hinges on the remembered “abundance” of the *ingenio*. When Pablo told me that the Tobas “returned rich” from San Martín del Tabacal, he immediately added: “Not like now. They go to harvest beans, to harvest cotton, and they’re not going to earn a good firearm, a good shoe, a good hat, nothing. [They earn] hardly enough to eat.”

A central component of these various differences is the fragmentation of the Tobas' current experience of wage labor, a fragmentation created by a phase of capitalist accumulation which has left behind the "classical" model of labor-intensive plantations once characteristic of the San Francisco Valley. This greater spatial dispersion has made the terms of the opposition between the bush and the "places of work" more blurry, out of focus, and diffusive than in the past. This haziness emerges in the very fact that some of these new experiences of wage labor have taken place, and still do in Paraguay, deep inside the bush, something which has reformulated the Tobas' previous experience of the *nontanqá* as places located in distant lands.

The tensions and contrasts between different places, nonetheless, are *still* sources of cultural meanings about them. The Tobas' labor migrations still have a common starting point and a common place to which they converge: their villages in the bush. Consequently, the fragmentation I have just analyzed does not change the fact that these "places of work" are defined to a great extent by their contrast to "home." And returning home, like when the Tobas returned to mourn their dead in the cane-fields, is always a particularly thick semantic moment. It is a moment of enhanced contradictions, of practical and semantic contrasts. One warm night in August 1997, Kiko told me about his recent return back home from "*la poroteada*": "We had a few beans, and a few oranges. Lucas brought a tape recorder and me too." He then added, under the light of candles and as his adolescent eyes turned into a smile: "Then, when we got here we were happy, because we got here. It's not like when we were over there in Salta ... We are happy because we got back here."

As in the time of *kahogonaGá*, the exploitation, fear, and estrangement which dominate the farms and the ranches continue nourishing the meanings of healing, resilience, and safeguard which the Tobas associate with *marisca* and “bush food” as well as their feeling of knowledge of the bush. But the current labor migrations are shaping the Tobas’ cultural experiences of the bush in new, more mediated domains. People’s perception that seasonal wage labor is not a rewarding source of goods, together with other experiences and memories, informs the contradictory images of poverty and wealth which permeate the bush.

**EIGHTEEN:  
“GOD’S STOREHOUSE”:  
POVERTY AND WEALTH IN THE BUSH**

People are hungry. In the bush ...  
there’s no food.  
*Gregorio (1996)*

With the fish, we’re rich already.  
*Roberto (1996)*

The Tobas’ view of the safeguard they find in *marisca* and in general “the bush” has two aspects which stand in tension with each other. On the one hand, this safeguard makes them see “the bush” as a place of their own from which they can extract resources that enables them to counteract some of the constraints of poverty and endure in the midst of experiences of oppression. On the other hand, this view of “the bush” is molded by their own experience of *partial dispossession* from the control of their conditions of social reproduction, by their deep awareness of the hardships of their everyday life in the bush, which force many men, women, and children to migrate to distant *nontanqá* to earn meager goods which will not improve their standard of living at home. This twofold and contradictory experience of control and dispossession in their own lands is at the heart of what will be the topic of this chapter: the manifold images of poverty and wealth associated with the bush.

**The Bush as a Place of “Poverty”**

The Tobas’ century-long experience of labor migrations has contributed to creating among them strongly *spatialized* images of poverty and wealth. As we have seen,

for decades the *ingenio* was for the Tobas the epitome of riches. And even though several people argue that they returned home “rich,” the bush was a place in which those forms of commodified wealth were relatively absent. Consequently, one of the defining features of the bush has been its relative poverty vis-à-vis commodities; but at the time of the *ingenios* this was compensated by the Tobas’ regular journey to *kahogonaGá*, which made them feel participants of the wealth emanating from the plantation. With the end of the migrations to San Martín del Tabacal, these cultural representations permeating contradictory experiences of place were partially modified.

On the one hand, the decrease in the importance of wage labor as a source of commodities and the further ecological degradation and depletion of wild life which followed it, has enhanced the Tobas’ view of the bush as a place inhabited only by “the poor,” the *pioGokpi*, *los pobres*. This view includes not only the Wichís but also the Criollos, who often own just a few animals and whom most Tobas see as even poorer than them. The end of “the river” further contributed to deteriorating life conditions in the bush. An Anglican missionary wrote in 1976: “I can never remember the Indians on the River Pilcomayo and other areas of the Chaco being so badly off economically. For many there is no work at all; supplies of forest animals and fish are greatly diminished ... The rate of tuberculosis is high” (quoted by Makower 1989: 168). On the other hand, since the current *nontanqá* are not associated with riches anymore, the places which nowadays capture images of distant wealth are often the large cities, especially Buenos Aires. Only recently, usually through leaders who travel to the national capital, have the Tobas developed a partial awareness that in Buenos Aires there are “poor people” as well. Yet,

most people still see this city as a place of immense riches inhabited mostly by “the rich,” the *newoyagadí, los ricos*.<sup>143</sup>

Along these lines, and in tension with the characterization of *marisca* as an expression of endurance which protects them *from* poverty, many Tobas see foraging as a practice defined *by* poverty. Thus, the current view of the bush as a place where “poor people” live is permeated by the notion that *marisca*, “the life of the poor” in Angel’s words, is molded by unfulfilled necessities. Even though in the bush people exert a direct command over their practices, the constraints associated with *marisca* are part of the same forces which push them to participate in labor migrations. Amancio, the same man who had told me that his family migrated to *la poroteada* because of “the necessity,” told me about his son-in-law: “He forages all day long. Of course, since he has no job ... There’s nothing, there’s nothing for people to live from, to eat. He has no other choice than to forage every day.” Those who emphasize the hardships associated with foraging are often public employees or young people. Gregorio, a man in his late twenties, told me:

People are hungry. In the bush, there’s almost no honey, fish ... *Do you go out to the bush?* It’s a lot of work. I leave early. There’s almost no honey. When I take my dog, the rabbits come out, all the *bichos*. Then, I walk all day long and I’m tired. And the heat. Because the bush is far away. Here, in *Vaca perdida*, is all *campo* [open bush], the bush is far away. I gather honey and I have to take water with me. It’s hot, the disease comes. I walked all day long. Then, I came back late. The night arrived already ... Then, the next morning, what am I going to eat? Nothing ... There’s no food, all day long. Then, we’re going to look for fruits, in the bush. Just that. Without fat, no salt, nothing.

Because of the poverty attributed to *marisca*, some employees and horticulturists have begun reformulating the social memory of the perceived abundance of “the times of the river.” Esteban, today a successful farmer, told me: “In the past, there was a lot of

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<sup>143</sup> See Wright (1997) for a similar image of Buenos Aires among the Tobas of eastern Formosa.

poverty in Sombrero Negro. Now the kids have their running shoes, they have their cap. The kids didn't have clothes." I then asked him "But what about the food in those days?" Esteban replied: "Just the fish, or *la marisca*." Whereas the poorest Tobas remember that back then fishing enabled them to live better than today, for Esteban in those days people had "just" fish.

These different views of the bush as a place of poverty have been partially molded by the Tobas' own experience that commodified wealth never took a deep hold in their lands. But if people remember that they returned "rich" from San Martín del Tabacal, what happened to that "wealth" in the bush?

### **Elusive Riches**

As we have argued, the goods brought from the *ingenio* were for the Tobas not only use values but also commodities in the strict sense of the term, and in the bush they sold them or bartered them (usually for packaged food). Dora Tebboth (1989 [1938-1946]: 29), wrote in 1938: "anything wearable or useable is saleable. To raise money to buy sugar, yerba mate ... is more vital to them than to wear a pair of trousers or to own a pair of scissors ..." In the mid-1990s, several Tobas expressed frustration at their "inability" to keep the goods brought from the *ingenio*. Expressing a quite generalized view, Enrique told me when I asked him about the reasons for the Tobas' poverty:

Because we, *aborígenes* Tobas, we don't know how to handle things so that we don't lack anything ... We earn money, we earn clothing. What happens? When we come over here, we don't even think about making a business, we don't even think about making a *boliche* [store]. Just spending money all the time ... I wonder why people don't understand. I don't understand anything. I only understand when it's over. Because the life of the *aborigen* Toba is to be poor. It's not like the whites'.

For decades, the mission station was also an important source of commodities for the Tobas. How did they interpret that experience? The Tobas certainly regarded the *dingolék* as wealthy people with unlimited resources; however, they usually felt estranged from this wealth. They expected the missionaries to behave as would any Toba in a similar situation: being generous and sharing most of their wealth. But the missionaries did not fulfill their expectations. Moreover, the missionaries' Protestant ethic of reward through individual hard work and the Tobas' ethic of sharing and radical egalitarianism created frustrations and tensions on both sides. The missionaries regarded the Tobas as "an unthankful lot who expect everything for nothing all the time" (Tebboth (1989 [1938-1946]: 164). With reminiscences of a well-known story analyzed by Richard Lee (1993: 183-188) in his "Christmas in the Kalahari," Tebboth wrote about the Christmas celebrations of 1939 at El Toba:

[A]ll the hundreds of Indians had a ration of sugar, yerba mate, and hard biscuits. The children were given biscuits and a few sweets and then sent home again. So far as I know, only one man said "Thank you." Everyone grabs what is given him as if it were his proper due, with the words "We are poor things" (Tebboth 1989: 80).

The Tobas, for their part, felt frustrated by what they interpreted as "stingy" attitudes of wealthy people who kept enormous resources for themselves. Dora Tebboth wrote in October 1938: "Of course some Indians imagine we have plenty of money and that we are mean for not handing it out ... 'You're mean! you're mean!' They shout at us" (1989 [1938-1946]: 55, 62). Almost 60 years later, some Tobas still thought that the missionaries were "full of money" and that they kept that money mostly for themselves.

Enrique told me in 1997: “The mission administered so much money! That’s why people don’t like them at all ... They have money. Ooh! They go back to England as millionaires.” Enrique also remembered that when he was a kid, he saw an old man reprimanding Alfred Leake in public for “becoming rich with the poor *aborígenes*”:

That man didn’t like the missionaries. He didn’t like them because they didn’t come to help the aboriginal people. [He said]: “The missionary comes because he wants to make money, he doesn’t come to make us progress.” That’s the way the old man said [laughs]. Alfredo was standing. *Was Alfredo listening?* Yes, he was telling Alfredo off. I was in the mission when the old man was there ... He was screaming aloud because he said that the missionaries came in order to become rich with the poor *aborígenes*.

These public complaints were part of the Tobas’ own strategies of victimization aimed at obtaining resources from the missionaries and undermining their potential arrogance, an attitude which is part of a “leveling mechanism” common among foraging groups (see Rosenberg 1990; Lee 1993). But these complaints also expressed the Tobas’ frustration for feeling excluded from the “riches” which were at the missionaries’ disposal. It was only with the *cooperativa forestal* in the early 1970s that the Tobas felt themselves active participants in the “wealth” associated with the missionaries. But this “wealth” was in fact the product of the Tobas’ own labor. In the 1990s, men remembered that after the sale of the posts in Ingeniero Juárez, the truck of the cooperative returned to the *obrajes* full of valuable commodities. In the words of Diego: “bicycles, radios, corrugated iron, so many things!” Horacio, for his part, condensed his memory of the days of *la cooperativa* as follows: “It was nice. We earned well, we ate well. We had lots of profits.” Moreover, the abundance associated with the commoditization of wood, even though short-lived, molded important meanings about the bush. Thus, some people argue

that the “nice” sections of the bush, the *viáq ónaGaik*, are those which (aside from animals, fruits, and hives) have many quebrachos. The fact that the Tobas refer to “posts” with the same word for “tree,” *epáq*, further enhanced the image of trees-as-commodities. Enrique told me in 1997: “When there’s a lot of wood, the bush is nice. But when there isn’t, it’s ugly. People have to look for [quebrachos] very far. It’s a lot of work ... The bush was most nice in those years, when there were many *epáq* ... Then, it was over.”

This nostalgia for a vanished source of commodities also applies to commercial hunting. In the mid-1990s, men remembered the abundance associated with the sale of skins, furs, and ostrich feathers “when there was a river,” a memory nourished by the decline of commercial hunting in the late 1980s and early 1990s. With the exception of the iguana, this decline marked the end of the possibility of obtaining commodities from the interior of the bush. Diego remembered those days:

The *turco* in Sombrero Negro bought all sorts of skins, furs: wild cat, carpincho, alligator. He also bought iguana, puma, wild pig, ostrich feathers, curiyú, lampalagua ... We went to Paraguay and we used to get plenty of iguanas. In 15 days some had 40 iguanas, some had 50, some had 60. *Ñiemchi* once got 90. We went to the store [of the *estancia*] and got clothes, shoes, *mercaderías*. Not anymore. There’s no price.

The Tobas’ changing but in the long run ultimately frustrating attempts at creating forms of commodified wealth in their own lands comes to light at another level: in their attempts at finding hidden “treasures” and creating money in the interior of the bush.

### **“How Come I Didn’t Ask Him to Become Rich!”**

When the Tobas told me about the “gold” buried in the surroundings of San Martín del Tabacal, I often asked them if there were similar riches in the bush. Even

though most answered negatively, a few argued me that there are treasures like those but that they were just unable to find them. Martín told me that he was once riding his bicycle right before dawn on a trail in the bush and got to see two little pale flames, like “lighters” (*encendedores*). But they disappeared before he could locate them. He added: “I told my brother and my dad: ‘I don’t know, maybe that’s the gold, like a lighter’ ... I thought it was the gold. But it seems like ... I don’t know, I don’t know ... I don’t understand that fire.”

In the Tobas’ eyes, the ability to discover hidden treasures is part of a “knowledge” restricted to the *dokohé*, even though these treasures may be in their own lands. Martín told me that Moreno, his grandfather and a powerful *pioGonáq*, saw those “lights” but thought that they were “just” made by the *payák*. He only learnt that it was “the gold” when a white man came to the bush looking for them. Martín added:

It turned out that those lights were the gold. Gold, silver. Knowledge of the whites. But since we didn’t know. [The white man] found the light. When he took the gold out, he hid it, so that nobody sees it. He took it away, he sold it somewhere. That’s what my grandfather told me ... He said that there’s gold, like a lighter. But we don’t know where that is, until now.

In spite of this feeling of estrangement with this “knowledge,” some *pioGonáq* attempted to use their interaction with the *payák* to replicate in the bush the mysterious art of the whites: the discovery of riches and the creation of money. However, due to the *pioGonáq*’s own inability or unwillingness to create wealth for the sake of pure accumulation (as the *dokohé* do), most of these attempts were either a failure or just a partial successes. In some cases, these attempts were doomed by the *pioGonáq*’s own indecision. Enrique told me that Chileno, a *pioGonáq* who was also a *capitán* at San

Martín del Tabacal, was once foraging in the bush when he found “a room” in the heart of the *viaqádaik*: “A nice room, it had everything. It had like a classroom, it had its arms, its knives, everything. It had a table ... They say there were many wires (*cablerío*). Wires? Wires! Tons of wires!”<sup>144</sup> Then, a short man, a *payák*, came out and told him: “You can ask me anything I have in the room.” Chileno, however, decided to wait and return the next day. But when he arrived the following morning:

The house wasn't there anymore, just the wires. “That was a mistake,” he said. “I was mistaken. How come I didn't ask him for those arms! How come I didn't ask him to become rich! How come I didn't ask him so that I don't lack money! How come I didn't ask him so that I don't lack clothing!” Because he saw that there were many things inside the room. And then, he came back the other day, and there was nothing left. Neither wires, nor anything.

Other, more powerful *pioGonáq* were successful in their request for money from the *payák*. They were old *pioGonáq* who have already passed away and were much more powerful than those who live nowadays. One of them was Carancho. In 1997, Marcelino, one of his grandsons, told me that Carancho was once drinking *aloja* with other men and decided to call his *payák* to get money in order to buy wine. Like the mysterious money created by the “magicians” in the *lotes* of San Martín del Tabacal, this money was able to “return” to its owner. Marcelino told me:

Carancho said: “Let's call the money.” He raised his poncho, singing. They say that he asked for money. He was grabbing the money with his hands over and over [he stretched his arms and made a wide gesture] ... But it's true, he grabbed the money, five pesos. But it was money in those days ... Then, he was very happy, he was singing, the old man ... Then, my dad went to Palma Sola to look for wine [where there was a store]. He brought five bottles of wine, he had money left. Afterwards, my grandfather said: “The money is

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<sup>144</sup> The Wichís have similar stories of houses of riches owned by “the devils” of the bush. One involved the owner of ostrich “dressed like the *patrón de estancia*” who had a house where “there was anything you wanted, clothing, *mercadería*, sugar-cane, cars, air planes...” (Pages Larraya 1982: Vol. II: 239).

already coming back. It doesn't stay. That's money of the *payák*. It's going to come back soon ..."

However, Carancho never used that money to accumulate goods and wealth and become "rich." Rather, according to Marcelino, he simply wanted "five pesos notes" to purchase the very basic "vices" he was fond of, like wine and tobacco:

*Did he become rich?* No, he didn't. He only asked for five pesos, five pesos ... The old man only needed it to drink *la bebida*. Not much. Five pesos, but exactly like the five pesos note from the factory: all the numbers, everything, everything, as if it was from the factory ... I saw it too ... But not a 100 pesos note ... Just a one peso note, *centavos*, when he needed tobacco, because he was a smoker.

Another *pioGonáq* who was able to create money and find riches in the bush was Merino. Diego told me that, with the help of his *payák*, Merino found "the smoke" which, coming out of the ground, marked the presence of a buried treasure. In that place, he dug with his machete and found money, "but not too much." Like Carancho, Merino simply used this money to buy *mercaderías*. Diego went on: "Then, when he arrived at the house, we saw that he brought the things, the things that are costly, *mercaderías* ... He had nothing, he didn't sell any animal, or goat ... It turned out that he asked the *payák* ... the money." Mariano, who was Merino's step-son, told me that Merino was illiterate and consequently "didn't know" how to distinguish the value of the different bank notes he obtained from the *payák*. And this put him at the mercy of the store keeper:

He was singing, and the hand was raised like this, raising, and it seemed that the money came ... But since he didn't know how to read, [he said]: "I don't know what money is this. I don't know if it's 50 pesos, or 20 *centavos*, or 10 *centavos*..." And he bought something ... He saw a white man, and [the latter] told him that it was just enough to buy something: "This is enough for this; that's it."... Sugar, and yerba, and meat, and tobacco too.

In spite of Carancho and Merino's remarkable powers, which no *pioGonáq* can replicate today, the two of them died as poor as the rest of the Tobas. Carancho passed away in the lotes of San Martín del Tabacal probably in 1944,<sup>145</sup> haunted by the deadly *payák* of the mountains, sick, and unable to communicate with his own *payák* in the bush of the Chaco. According to Marcelino, Carancho said before dying: "I'm going to die because the *payák* doesn't answer anything." Merino died decades later, in the bush. According to Diego, his death was caused by his repeated requests of money, which ran against the teachings of the *payák*: "It seems that he was punished. It seems that he was mistaken, what the *payák* had explained. That's why he punished him, the *payák* punished him." But Mariano gave me a different version of Merino's final days. Firstly, the *payák* stopped giving him money because, unlike the whites, "he didn't know how to read." It was the times of the *obrajes*, and Mariano and Merino were working together cutting posts. Mariano remembered: "The man was working a lot with the posts, posts of quebracho colorado. And I told him: 'Listen, uncle, you're working too hard'." Merino would not listen; he had a family to feed. "Then he died ... because of the work, very heavy work." He died of overwork, poor, and deep inside the bush.

### **Missing the "Train of the Wealth"**

How do the Tobas explain these experiences of poverty? Why are they, in their own eyes, "poor"? At least since the eighteenth century, different indigenous groups of the Chaco produced similar mythical stories about the origin of their own poverty and the

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<sup>145</sup> See Tebboth (1989 [1938-1946]: 184).

wealth of the whites. These accounts involved either a “god” or an “evil spirit” who offered them and the whites valuable goods, clothes, and animals such as cattle and sheep. Whereas the whites took them and consequently became rich, the Aborigines refused them: they were either not interested in them or too afraid or distrustful to adopt them; since then, so the myth goes, they live in poverty relying solely on hunting and gathering (see Métraux 1946a: 94-96; Karsten 1971 [1923]: 102; Dobrizhoffer 1970 [1784]: Vol. II: 66). In the 1930s, Alfred Métraux (1946a: 94-95) collected among the Tobas accounts like these, and 60 years later I heard from people several variations of the same theme. Martín, for instance, told me that the Tobas were offered “the wealth” by a man who came from the sky with a large and noisy train, “the train of the wealth.” This man “wanted to help the poor people,” and told the Tobas to build a large storehouse. Once they did it, he came down and filled up the place with a large amount of packaged food, with “all sort of *mercaderías!*” “However,” Martín went on:

It seems that the ancient ones were mistaken ... The ancient ones knew nothing; they didn't know the food ... And they didn't want to eat it because they were afraid, they didn't understand: [One said]: “I don't know what's that.” Others said: “That's not our food; that's dangerous.” ... It seems that the owner of all those things got angry. He said: “I'd better take these things away from here” ... The train began making noise again. But they didn't see it. A lot of noise! ... It made a turn over the village, like this ... They were hearing it. They say that they heard that there was a cow, a horse, a goat, a sheep ... It turned out that that's what the man wanted to give to the people ... The train didn't come back. Then, the man said: “You are mistaken. Now, I'm going to look for the white people.” ... He didn't come out anymore ... That's why the *aborígenes* are poor, because they don't know. Whereas the whites, since they are studious, they're used to listening, they work on their own, they don't want to tell the other ... This is what my grandfather used to tell me.

When asked directly “why” are the *aborígenes* poor, few people refer to these mythical accounts. Still, these myths capture an important component of the Tobas'

current interpretations of their poverty (but not the only one): that it is somewhat their own responsibility. Throughout different chapters, we have seen that the Tobas often blame their poverty on themselves. This type of explanations are diverse, but many of them point to their ignorance “on how to administer money.” For some people, this includes what they see as their ignorance on “how to manufacture money,” a knowledge which some regard as restricted to the *dokohé*, and which points to the fetishization of money as a commodity produced, like any other commodity, in a private factory whose ownership is the golden key to wealth and power (as was the case of Perón’s “money factory”). Along these lines, Angel told me: “As the old man says, there’s other people who were born with more knowledge. Then, they can fabricate the money. Then, they don’t have necessity because they have [things]. And we were born with nothing, just like this, poor.” For many Tobas, the “custom of sharing” is also to blame in their inability to administer money. This image of sharing as an obstacle to accumulation is widespread among public employees, who often complain that their salaries are eaten up by the pressure people put on them to distribute packaged food. In the words of Ernesto, the school teacher: “That’s why I can’t move on so that I get rich.”

These explanations based on individual blame express widespread and old hegemonic values about “the ignorance” of the *aborígenes*, which the Tobas have internalized through their experiences in the *ingenios*, the missionary preaching focused on self-responsibility, and more recently their interaction with state-run institutions which praise “productive” practices at odds with their experiences of *marisca*. These explanations, nonetheless, also bring to light the Tobas’ feeling that the capacity of the *dokohé* to produce immense riches requires a knowledge and power which are beyond

their comprehension, and which often fills them with a paralyzing confusion. This is a confusion which emerged, for instance, in their view of the “white magicians” of San Martín del Tabacal or the “gold” buried in their own lands, which seemed to confirm both their own “ignorance” and the whites’ “knowledge.”

These explanations which naturalize poverty as a condition the *aborígenes* were almost “born with,” however, are often intertwined with accounts which explain poverty in terms of constraining, historical forces which are beyond their control and responsibility. Moreover, it is not rare to hear people emphasizing one set of reasons and then, in other circumstances, the other. Along these lines, some Tobas blame their poverty on very concrete social actors: “the rich” or “the whites,” who for most Tobas are almost synonymous. Some people point to the exploitation of their labor in plantations and farms. Reinaldo, for instance, told me: “The *ingenio* had a lot of sugar to sell, and the people were left poor.” Expressing a similar awareness, but also the contradictions recurrent in the Tobas’ characterization of Patrón Costas, Tomás told me about the wealthiest “*turco*” in Ingeniero Juárez: “He made profits with the work of the *aborígenes*. Very nice, the old man.” Other people point out the appropriation by the *dokohé* of goods and animals which were their own. I was talking to Tomás about the clashes with the army in 1917, and he told me that the military “wanted to kill all the *aborígenes*.” I asked him why. He said:

Maybe it’s because they, the rich, didn’t want the poor to be richer ... That’s why we’re poor, because the rich took everything away from us, the *aborígenes*. It seems that the whites didn’t want that there’re rich *aborígenes*. They took everything away, until now. That’s why we’re always like poor, poor, all the years, until now.

Also after mentioning that in 1917 the military took from them plenty of goats, horses, and sheep, Mariano told me about the whites' wealth: "Well, yes, the *dokohé* have many things because they steal. Yes, they steal. They steal." Furthermore, some people consider that before this "robbery," the Tobas were actually not poor at all but "rich." This argument usually hinges on the numerous animals they owned, for the Tobas see horses, sheep, and goats as a strong symbol of wealth. Condensing this image, Enrique told me about the warlike practices of "the ancient ones": "They always won. That's why the Toba people were rich in those years, because they always won. When the Chulupí fled, they brought all the animals. Full of animals, the people."

For many Tobas who nowadays live in utter poverty, nonetheless, there are still certain ways through which they can be "rich." This is a wealth obtained in the bush and which involves neither "gold" nor commodities.

### **"With the Fish, We're Rich"**

Even though the Tobas are well aware of the depletion of natural resources and the sharp decrease in wild life, it is not rare to hear them talk about *marisca* in terms of images of abundance. Tomás told me once: "I like the bush better [than the open country]. It has anything, it has many things, honey, yana, extranjera, lachiguana. There's everything in the bush." Hugo, as we have seen a very poor *mariscador*, told me:

The bush is nice for wandering. There's everything, lachiguana. Now it's the time of the fruits of the bush, *tigik* [poroto de monte]. My wife knows how to look [for them]. There's a lot of fruits coming out during these years. There's honey, also rabbit. Sometimes I get four or five [rabbits], when it rains. There're many *bichos*.

Moreover, sometimes people turn these images of abundance into metaphors of wealth, in which wealth is defined by criteria alternative to the commodified wealth of the whites. Consequently, in this case people often point out that the bush makes them “rich,” but by providing them with resources which are available to anybody and are consequently non-commodified. In February 1996, Roberto commented on the belated arrival of the marshes’ floods which ended a long drought: “With the fish, we’re rich already.” Diego used similar metaphors of “wealth” when he referred to the success as a forager of a person who receives power from the *payák*:

The *payák* gives him everything he has. He gives him like power. When he forages over there, he finds lachiguana. When he goes over there, he finds whatever he wants. He becomes like rich then ... That’s what [the *payák*] gives to him, everything, everything, everything. He gives him the complete thing. Everything, everything, everything.

Moreover, as a counterpoint to the memory of the abundance in the *ingenio*, in which people often refer to long lists of commodities, many people emphasize the wide variety of resources available in the bush by giving long listings of animals, fruits, and honey. Angel, for instance, told me about his foraging trips: “Yes, [I go] to *mariscar*, to fish, to look for bees, lachiguana. I bring all sorts of things from that world: alligator, carpincho, iguana, quirquincho, rabbit, viscacha, corzuela.” Mariano, for his part, remembered when he was younger and foraged in the bush, the river, and the “open country”:

When I want to eat, I like to get into the bush, go to the open country, get into the water too ... Because the bush has yana, honey, iguana, quirquincho, corzuela. The country has suri. In the lagoons I got a bird, *piék*, many birds, all sorts of herons, and ducks. In the great lagoon you also get to eat eggs, like hens. That’s the open country. And in the water, I get fish, carpincho. That’s what I get, all sorts of fish: surubí, dorado, bagre.

As part of these subtle and mediated counterpoints between the wide variety of “bush food” and forms of commodified wealth, many people argue that the bush provides them with resources comparable to *mercaderías*. Pablo, for instance, told me: “There’s *mercadería* in the bush, honey, anything. We’re fine here. We hunt, we fish, we go out to the bush. We bring anything in, our nourishment.” Bernardo, for his part, compared the bush to “a store” in which food is always available, in this case for free: “Fish is almost the same as the *mercadería* in the store. When you don’t look for it, you don’t eat... But when you look for it, you eat and you’re at ease.” Along similar lines, there are some types of “bush food” which the poorest Tobas often use to replace equivalent types of packaged food. For instance, many people drink *mate dulce* (sweet mate) adding honey to it instead of sugar and they often comment, as Diego did, that honey “is just like sugar, but for free.”

Still, the Tobas are well aware that the resources of the bush are not as abundant as they were in the past. And many of the images of the “abundance” of the bush point to a nostalgic past defined in contrast to the poverty of the present, a “poverty” created both by a less productive *marisca* and less rewarding experiences of wage labor. Some focus on their life “when there was a river.” Eduardo, for instance, told me: “In those days, they say that our parents didn’t feel the poverty, because they had a lot of food, in the river, in the fields, in the *marisca* ... When this part was flooded, the suffering of the people began.” Other people point to a more distant past. In an account similar to others I heard from the Tobas, a Wichí from the Bermejo (quoted in VV. AA. 1994: 11, my translation) said:

In the past, we went to the *monte*, which was like God's storehouse. There was a lot of food. It was enough for everybody. You didn't need money ... Then, the Criollos came and we learnt how to eat *harinita* (flour), *azuquita* (sugar), and *yerbita*. Money is never enough. There's never enough for everybody

As the current "places of work" have lost the dizzying, almost hallucinatory power of the *ingenio*, as poverty has become an over-reaching experience which includes both the farms and the bush, and as the tensions between these places seem at times blurred by the fragmentation of their experiences of labor, there is a new, powerful actor which is capturing the social contradictions currently unfolding in the bush.

**NINETEEN:  
“POLITICS”:  
THE BUSH AND THE STATE**

Now we're forgetting the bush; we're  
getting used to the government.

*Tomás (1995)*

Our food is there, in spite of politics.

*Mauricio (1995)*

**“I was Nervous and I Moved Over Here”**

When I arrived in the Toba villages in September 1995 after an absence of more than two years, I found Eduardo living with members of his extended family in a small village recently established deep inside very thick bush. To get there, one had to follow a tortuous trail covered with thorns and carved out in what used to be a *viáq hakoiwók*, an “evil bush.” Moreover, rather than a “village” what I found was a cluster of four basic huts, compacted in a small clearing and dominated by a wall of vegetation from all sides. Fascinated by the “wild” look of the place, I wrote in my diary: “I think this group of people, for the type of settlement and the fact that they moved to this place all together, is what might most closely resemble the old semi-nomadic bands.” The reason why Eduardo and his family had moved there, however, had little to do with a nomadic spirit. A few years earlier he had been elected representative, *concejel*, at the municipality of Pozo de Maza. And just a few months earlier, some of the former authorities of *la comuna* had been prosecuted for the bankruptcy of its finances. Even though Eduardo had no responsibility in those dealings and in fact had not been charged, he got scared of going to jail. When I saw him there, in the thickest sections of the bush, he told me: “I was nervous because of the trial of *la comuna*, and then I moved over here.”

Eduardo's "escape" deep into the bush is the current expression of processes which go back to the early twentieth century, when the bush was for the Tobas a partial refuge from the most powerful armed institution of the state: the army. Although ultimately ineffective in escaping its power of destruction, the bush was a place the military felt unfamiliar in and afraid of and which provided the Tobas with a certain protection from them. After this region of the Chaco was "pacified," and as the bush emerged as a place where the Tobas found relief from the social control exerted by the missionaries, so it became a refuge of another sort vis-à-vis the institutions of the state.

Firstly, as comes out in Eduardo's case, the bush became a safe place where the Tobas could hide from agents of the state, in particular from the police and *gendarmería*. This aspect of the bush was particularly significant among the last Wichí *montaraces* ("bushmen"), who at least until the late 1970s roamed in small bands in the hinterland of northwestern Formosa, not far from the Toba villages. In 1960, for instance, for several months the policemen deployed in Pozo de Maza tried without success to capture a Wichí band of about 30 men, women, and children who had slaughtered several cows of the Criollos and were in hiding deep in the bush.<sup>146</sup> The Tobas engaged in similar retreats, but on a more irregular and individual basis. In 1941, for instance, a Toba who had stolen money from a Criollo hid for several days in the bush, evading the police until he was finally captured (SAMS 1941: 23). But one of the best known cases involved Moreno, the famous *pioGonáq* and *capitán*. He was once jailed with another Toba in Ingeniero Juárez

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<sup>146</sup> A.H.F. *Expedientes judiciales, Cajas "Aborígenes" No. 2*. Exp. 693, folio 98, 1960. "Patrocinio, Marcelino, Ramón, Vega, Hernando Sánchez, Martín, Aniceto, Juárez, Supedi, Chuño, Santiago, Rufino, Julián, Carlos (fo.), Domingo, Morocho, Alberto, Silvestre, Damaso, R. Julio, Negrito y Ricardo (indígenas prófugos) por hurto de ganado mayor," foja 16.

for the murder of a Criollo, a crime which according to several Tobas they did not commit. Being a powerful *pioGonáq*, however, Moreno made one of the guards “turn blind” and they managed to escape from the town’s jail. In 1995, Mariano told me about their escape to the bush:

Then, they escaped, and they ran to the bush ... He said: “Let’s go.” And the police were looking for them, but they already got into the bush. They shot at them, but they escaped ... At midnight, Moreno asked the *payák*: “Is there anybody after us?” [The *payák* said] “No problem, you can feel at ease, you people can sleep, the police already went back.” And then, right there they slept in the bush.<sup>147</sup>

In the 1990s, the Tobas remembered several stories like this, in which men fled to the bush for days or weeks to avoid being captured by *policías* or *gendarmes*, usually because of minor offenses. And the Tobas still see the bush as a relatively safe place to hide from “the law.” In 1996, Mauricio was staring at a postcard of Buenos Aires, with an aerial picture of the city, which (upon his request) I had brought for him. At one point, he pointed to the dense mass of streets, buildings, and little cars and told me, comparing the dense anonymity of the city with the safety provided by the bush: “If I steal an animal, I get into the bush so that they don’t find me. I think that Buenos Aires is the same.”

Nowadays, the construction of a greater number of roads and *picadas* all over their lands by different agencies of the state, has made this type of flight less frequent and effective. This growing presence of the state in their territories has implied an important reformulation of the Tobas’ experience of the bush as a haven from the state at another level. The case of Eduardo, because it was linked to his involvement in what the Tobas

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<sup>147</sup> According to Mariano, the police did not look after them “because they were afraid.”

call “*la política*,” “politics,” condenses this new dimension. For the Tobas, *la política* captures their new experience with the state since the return of democracy. At an specific level, the term refers to their own active participation in local and provincial elections since 1983 and also to the mechanisms used by the local and regional agents of political parties, especially the ruling *Partido Justicialista* (the official name of the Peronist Party), to gain and control their vote. But since these forms of negotiation and struggle are closely associated with the jobs and resources made available by the state, the term *la política* also condenses the Tobas’ current experience of “the government.” In this chapter, I will analyze the Tobas’ view that *la política* has become the most serious threat to their reliance on the bush, but that simultaneously the bush is their ultimate defense from their dependence on “*el gobierno*.”

### **From the Mission to “Politics”**

Between 1930 and the 1970s and early 1980s, the relationship between the Tobas and the state, as we have seen, was strongly mediated by the missionaries. At El Toba, the missionaries not only protected the Tobas from the army but also provided them with services (like primary schooling and primary health care) which a couple of kilometers away, in Sombrero Negro, were granted to the Criollos by the state. This mediation took place during decades in which the Tobas had an ambiguous status as citizens, a situation condensed in their paralyzing feeling or powerlessness associated with their lack of *documento*, especially while they were in the sugar plantations. It was only in 1968, through the mediation of the missionaries, that the Tobas got *documentos* and consequently gained formal status as Argentinean citizens and could vote in elections

among other things. In those days, David Leake (1968: 10), son of “Alfredo,” asked a Wichí: “What do you want most in life?” The man replied: “my *documento*.”

Back then, the Tobas agree, they did not know what *la política* was. Teodoro told me: “In the past, there was no *documento*. I was thinking: ‘What’s this thing about *la política*?’ We didn’t know what *radical* was, what *peronista* was. We knew nothing about that.” As we have seen, it was mostly in the *ingenio*, far from the sheltering and paternalistic space of the mission station, that the Tobas got direct glimpses of the political situation of Argentina: for instance, “president Perón” visiting San Martín del Tabacal and throwing money at them or the *sindicato* launching strikes in connection with broader struggles. But the Tobas experienced those processes as perplexed spectators who knew very little of the forces behind them.

Even though the Tobas voted for the first time in the presidential elections of 1973, the military coup of 1976 foreclosed the collective political activity in the country for several years. In the late 1970s, during the bloodiest period of the dictatorship, this area in Formosa was relatively marginal in terms of previous political activism and the Tobas felt the repression only indirectly. Sometime in 1978, a Toba nurse accused of hiding a deserter from the military draft was detained and beaten up by the *gendarmes* at Pozo de Maza. However, unlike their previous experiences with the army, at that time most Tobas felt that the military were not after them. Enrique told me about those days: “The military didn’t kill any Aboriginal people because nobody was into *la política*. White people, they were ...” When the Malvinas War between Argentina and Great Britain broke out in 1982, however, the old local tensions between the British missionaries and the military were recreated in a new context. And the Tobas were

indirectly involved in these tensions. The missionaries decided to leave the country and the *gendarmes* of the area targeted the Tobas as potential allies of *los ingleses* (the English) and made several searches of the villages looking for concealed weapons. According to Juan Manuel: “During the Malvinas War, the *gendarmes* came with questions, strong questions. They asked me: ‘Did the *gringos* leave an atomic bomb or a machine gun?’ I said: ‘The only atomic bomb they left is the Bible.’”

The Malvinas War meant an important retreat of the Anglican Church from the Toba villages, a process which had already begun in 1975 with the destruction of the mission station. The Tobas were left in charge of handling their own affairs with “*el gobierno*” and making their formal rights of citizenship effective. And the disappearance of the cohesive force of “the missionaries” brought important transformations in the political dynamics of the villages, and led to the emergence of localized leaders struggling to gain a control over the representation of the whole group (“The Tobas”) vis-à-vis the state, a political fragmentation which has also been noted among the Wichís (Trinchero and Maranta 1987: 402). This brought very important changes in the Tobas’ experience of the state, even though the memory of past experiences of terror and current experiences of political manipulation still make most people have a deep distrust at “*el gobierno*.”

In December 1983, new democratically-elected governments assumed power in the country and in the province of Formosa. The following year, the provincial government sanctioned a provincial law (*Ley Integral del Aborigen*, 426) which recognized the indigenous peoples’ right of title to land, and this gave an important impetus to indigenous land claims. It was in this context that the Tobas launched their first important collective mobilization vis-à-vis the state and that they had their first direct

experience of *la política*. This mobilization was informed in a strong fashion by the meanings of autonomy the Tobas associate with the bush, and became a process in which they attempted to secure, by means of legal title, the relative refuge they had found in their lands since the first decades of the century. The Tobas organized assemblies and sent their leaders on repeated trips to the city of Formosa to put pressure on the government to obtain the title. This mobilization was based on an explicit defense of their right to use the bush according to collective relations of production and also a defense of *la marisca* as a valuable form of livelihood vis-à-vis the state. After complex negotiations, and in a context in which indigenous land claims became an important political force in all the province, in 1985 the Toba villages were recognized as an *asociación civil* ("Civil Association"), the legal figure required by the government as a prerequisite for the granting of the title (De la Cruz and Mendoza 1988). And in 1989, this *asociación* obtained the collective title of 35,000 hectares.

This first experience of *la política* was also closely associated with the Tobas' interaction with the provincial government, which distributed a growing number of jobs and resources among them and began encouraging the practice of agriculture and herding, centered on the idea of the productive value of "*trabajo*."

### **From Land to "*Trabajo*"**

After the title was granted in 1989, the land issue continued to be an important political concern for the Tobas. By then, nonetheless, the Tobas gradually began shifting the focus of their political energies towards their insertion into the apparatus of the state and the demand for "*trabajo*," public jobs. These demands have been focused on the

municipality of Pozo de Maza, the institution most receptive to their demands because the election of mayor and *concejales* depends to a great extent on the weight of the Toba vote in the area. Thus, *la comuna* became the center of the Tobas' political strategies, through which they tried, firstly, to gain control over the distribution of *trabajo* and other resources, and secondly, to consolidate places of power from which to negotiate with the provincial government. For this reason, *la comuna* also became the focus of the strategies of the local representatives of the *Partido Justicialista*, often Criollo leaders who used the resources of the municipality to build up webs of followers and allies among the Tobas and Wichís and consequently to consolidate the apparatus of the provincial government. Pozo de Maza became then a heated arena of struggle and negotiation, and the distribution of jobs in *la comuna* and *mercaderías* became key in the construction of local webs of power.<sup>148</sup> The commodified nature of these negotiations is for the Tobas particularly apparent when they remember the first elections they participated in "when there was no *política*." Diego told me about the elections of 1973: "In the past, people voted and they didn't ask anything in return. You just voted. Nothing about asking this, and asking a *trabajo* or *mercaderías*. Not like now."

In an unstable and often turbulent process, in which for instance two mayors were removed by the *concejales*, by the early 1990s the Tobas had managed to obtain some important directive positions and an important number of jobs, most of them part-time jobs which require little work. But this process also led to a significant fragmentation of the Tobas' political energies, a fragmentation which had already begun with the departure

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<sup>148</sup> This type of negotiation has become so key in recent years that if a Toba leader wants to run for *concejal* or mayor he knows that, first, he has to secure a large amount of *mercaderías* to gain an initial set of

of the missionaries. Thus, different Toba leaders (tied to different villages and different fractions of the *Partido Justicialista*) began competing with one another in various elections. This has not only been the source of important tensions and conflicts but has also paved the way for the consolidation of the power of Criollo political leaders. Moreover, these Criollo leaders have been able to break the “ethnic loyalty” of many Tobas and Wichís vis-à-vis their own candidates and have consequently gained clusters of supporters in some of the indigenous villages of the area. Many people lament this situation, remember with nostalgia the times when the Tobas “were all united,” and complain that nowadays, because of *la política*, “people are all divided.” Because of this, and of their overall suspicion of “the government” rooted in old experiences of domination, many people see *la política* with negative eyes. Expressing a common view, Teodoro told me: “It seems that the people get ruined by *la política*.” Eduardo, for his part, told me, emphasizing the conflicts associated with their involvement in politics: “The ancient ones had the war. Now the new ones, we’ve got *la política*.”

In spite of these negative views, one of the most significant consequences of *la política* has been the consolidation of “*trabajo*” in state-run institutions as a powerful cultural and political value, at a time in which *marisca* is seen by many as associated with “poverty” and in which labor migrations do not provide the resources they did in the past. This emphasis on the value of “*trabajo*” is especially strong among men, who are the almost exclusive recipients of these jobs. Women also participate in this valorization, but especially vis-à-vis their own form of *trabajo*: craftsmanship, also tied to the upheavals of *la política* because of the role played by the provincial government in the purchase of

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followers. Otherwise, he knows he is doomed to lose.

their handicrafts. The most politically charged types of “*trabajo*” are nonetheless public jobs. In December 1995, for instance, the new Criollo mayor laid off a great number of part-time Toba employees (aside from Wichís and Criollos) and the layoffs triggered among the Tobas a heated mobilization to regain those jobs which absorbed most of their political energies. When in July 1996, the governor of Formosa toured the Toba villages in a long caravan of four-wheel drives, a group of the laid off employees displayed a big sign by the road which read “*Peronistas sin trabajo*,” “Peronists without jobs.” The same day, a Toba leader improvised a discourse in front of the governor very critical of “*el gobierno*” because of the layoffs and the lack of “*trabajo*;” he also complained about the interruption of the purchase of handicrafts, which affected “*el trabajo de las mujeres*,” “women’s work.” Furthermore, since these repeated pleas to revert the layoffs were unsuccessful, in 1997 a significant number of Tobas decided to resign their membership to the *Partido Justicialista* and join *los radicales (Unión Cívica Radical)*, the opposition in the province. This massive shift took place in spite of the fact that the provincial government was at that moment investing important resources in their villages: improving roads, building new houses, health care centers, schools, and setting up electrical generators. The Tobas did not seem impressed by this; rather, they emphasized over and over again that what they wanted, and what really counted in their support of any political party, was “*trabajo*.” Emiliano told me in August 1997 about the massive shift to *los radicales*, expressing the strategies involved in it:

We’re angry with the *peronista*. We threw the *peronista* away, like garbage. It’s been a long time since we have *la política*. There’re many *capos peronistas* [Peronist leaders], but for the voters there’s nothing. There’s no *trabajo*. That’s why we want to change, because people are upset. If they give *trabajo* to the people, then they’ll leave the

*radicales*. People are talking like this. If they give them *trabajo*, then for the people it's convenient to return [to the *peronistas*]. If they don't, why are we going to continue with this *peronista*?

The Tobas' collective demand for *trabajo* expresses one of the paradoxical features of hegemony. William Roseberry (1994: 361), expanding on Gramsci's original analysis of hegemony in terms of political struggle, has rightly argued that the concept of hegemony should be used not to understand "consent" *but to understand the constraints which shape forms of struggle*: the ways in which the images and symbols used by subordinate groups to understand or resist their domination are shaped by the process of domination itself. This is clear in the Tobas' pressing demand for "*trabajo*": this struggle on the one hand challenges the neo-conservative agenda aimed at cutting public spending and on the other hand is caught up in the productive values of the state, which downplay the social values and meanings of autonomy which the Tobas associated with *marisca* and the collective use of the bush. This leads to another question: what is the effect which such a strong emphasis on "*trabajo*" is having over the Tobas' experience of the bush?

### **"We're Forgetting the Bush"**

Even though public jobs make a substantial contribution through reciprocity networks to the reproduction of households which rely substantially on hunting and gathering, the dependence on the resources of "the government" and the importance of "*trabajo*" associated with *la política* has been accompanied by a de-valuation of the value of *marisca* and a growing awareness that this process is undermining their reliance on the bush. Eduardo, now a full-time employee at *la comuna*, told me: "In the times when there

was no *política*, I used to look for honey, to fish all the time. Not anymore.” Tomás, for his part, told me that because of his *trabajo* it had been more than a year since he had last eaten iguana meat. He then added: “Now, we’re forgetting the bush. We’re getting used to the government ... Some women also get used to the things of the government. Sometimes, the [government] sends all the things for the food, then the women stay here. They don’t go to look for food.”

Young men who have received at one point or another an unskilled part-time job in *la comuna* have developed an open preference for “*trabajo*” over “*marisca*.” And even though many of them live in poverty, some have begun looking at their experiences in the bush in a negative light. Like Amalio, one of the laid off employees at *la comuna*:

In the past, we suffered so much, when I had to go into the bush, everywhere. It was a lot of effort. When I wasn’t lucky, it was worse; I had to return hungry. *You don’t go to the bush anymore?* Not anymore. Sometimes. *You said that it was a lot of effort?* Ooh! Yes, a lot of effort. You had to go deep inside the bush. It’s not possible to be like that, without a *trabajo*, you’re suffering ... In the bush the clothes get torn. Now I’m thinking about having a *trabajo*, that’s more secure.

For other public employees, this view of the practices in the bush is not that grim. Still, many of them express growing feelings of estrangement with the bush. Ernesto, for instance, emphasized that, unlike his “quiet house,” the bush is a dangerous place: “In the bush there’s always a danger. If it’s not a snake, it’s a mean bull which runs after a person ... In the bush there’s the danger, always the danger ... It’s not like the quiet house. In the bush, you have to be alert.”

As we have seen, the tension between *trabajo* and *marisca* involves not only jobs in the state but the other activities which the Tobas see as “work”: most notably

agriculture and herding. Andrés, the successful farmer, told me in 1996 how he gradually replaced *marisca* for *trabajo*:

Until '87, I think I was still *mariscando*. I continued *mariscando*, I knew how to look for honey. And the following year, I couldn't go out anymore because I had *trabajo* already, I already produced my *trabajo*. Then, I finished, up to now. Up to now, I don't forage anymore ... I know how to *mariscar*, but since I have my *trabajo*, my *trabajo* helps me.

Hernán, for his part, used to be a skillful *epiáGayaik* and when I met him in the late 1980s he foraged in the bush often. In the early 1990s, at a time when “*trabajo*” was gaining force as a cultural and political value among the Tobas, he was among the many people who began focusing much of their energies on horticulture. He told me in 1996:

It seems that I left the bush. Now, it's not like it was five years ago. It's not like in the past, when my dad was around. I left the bush. It seems that I think that I can't have two *trabajos*, in my field. With just one, my *trabajo*, I'm working well. The bush, it seems that I left it. It seems that I can't stand the heat and the waist pain, anymore. Sometimes I feel like going out. But sometimes that [feeling] passes by fast.

The public value of herding has also enhanced by *la política*. Tomás, for instance, told me that it was important to have the land title “so that we can live a quiet life; so that the new ones can have their goats, their animals.” The accumulation of animals and in particular cattle, has become a strong marker of social differentiation, and the federal government has encouraged it through credits to purchase cattle. Bernardo, one of the recipients of this credit, told me: “I always tell my sons: I want to have cows. If I'm lucky, I want to do it for your own good, so that you have animals.”

For many Tobas, this attempt to adapt to the values and symbols of status sanctioned by the state is full of contradictions and ambiguities, and their praise of “*trabajo*” is often partial and molded by different aspects of their own experiences. These

ambiguities come out often, and it is common to hear people describe with excitement one of their foraging expeditions, then argue that what the Tobas need the most is “*trabajo*,” and at another moment praise the healthy and healing qualities of “bush food.” One morning, for instance, I was talking to Esteban, the farmer who owns the tractor and was one of the recipients of the credit to buy cattle. He was talking with enthusiasm about the benefits of the credit, and added: “Then, we won’t have to go to *mariscar* anymore. Because we already have the fruits of the fields, the cows, the watermelons.” While we were talking, a couple of meters away from us his wife was cleaning up a large number of fish. A few minutes later, when we had changed the subject of conversation, I pointed to his wife and commented: “It seems you’ve been fishing.” He nodded: “Yes, I like fishing. Fish is good for the kids.”

Together with these ambiguities, and in spite of the Tobas’ perception that *la política* is undermining their ability to obtain resources from the bush, on a daily basis most people continue relying on fishing, hunting, and gathering as a source of food. Most have no other choice. Moreover, many people argue that their only way of limiting the evils of “*la política*” and in general “*el gobierno*” is to continue relying on “the bush.”

### **“Our Food is There, in Spite of *la Política*”**

Due to the current fragmentation of their experience of seasonal wage labor, and as new tensions are unfolding in their own lands, the bush is nowadays acquiring much of its meaning of autonomy and resilience from the Tobas’ growing feeling of dependence on the state. Conjuring up the old meanings of *el monte* as refuge from the armed institutions of the state, many people are consequently seeing the bush as the ultimate

haven from “*la política*.” Especially during the periods of enhanced tensions which precede the elections of *concejales* and mayor in Pozo de Maza, people often argue that once the elections are over, once the *mercaderías* distributed by candidates to “buy” their vote are over, and once the dust of political turmoil settles down, what remains is “the bush.”

Thus, many poor Tobas who still rely heavily on hunting, fishing, and gathering, see *la marisca* as a sign of autonomy from the negative influence of “the government.” I was with Roberto in his small village right near the marshes and he commented that the previous day he had hunted a *corzuela*. He then added: “I lived just off that, hunting. I never bother *el gobierno*.” Even men who are actively involved in *la política* see the bush as a place which protects them from its negative influences. In October 1995, right before an election for mayor associated with sharp conflicts and divisions, I was talking to Mauricio, an employee at *la comuna*. At that moment, the *chañar* was ripening in the bush, heralding the beginning of *niaGá*, the gathering season. Mauricio told me, looking at the surrounding bush:

Our food is there, in spite of *la política* ... We don't forget the custom. Some say that we're worst off than the Criollos, but it's not like that. We have almost no disease. You have to look around. We're at the time of our food, this month. The day that we don't have anything, we go fishing, we get fish, and we already have something to eat. But the Criollos don't.

In that election, the Criollo candidate for mayor defeated the two Toba candidates. When a few months later he took over *la comuna* and laid off dozens of employees, Eulogio, a nurse in his mid-thirties, emerged as one of the leaders of the mobilization for “*trabajo*.” In spite of his concern for the lack of jobs, he told me after talking about the

conflicts involving *la comuna*: “But after *la política*, we’re going to have fish, and we’re just going to eat fish all the time. Those who depend only on money, they are going to run out of things.”

While the meanings of partial autonomy which define much of the Tobas’ experience of the bush are being reformulated through the changing circumstances of their historical practice, there is a place which stands in front of their lands like a huge mirror, and which also contributes to shaping the meanings of poverty currently associated with the bush. It is a place which shows them what the bush in their lands is not anymore, and which by doing so invokes blurred images of a past of freedom.

**TWENTY:  
THE "OTHER" BUSH:**

In Utopia there is no poor man and no  
beggar. Though no man has anything,  
yet all are rich.

*St. Thomas More,*  
Utopia (1516)

**The Making of "The Other Side"**

As part of the multiple tensions nowadays shaping the bush as "a place," a process which includes the weakening and fragmentation of their experiences of seasonal wage labor and the fact that they spend most of the year in their own lands, many Tobas often point out the contrast between the bush they tread on an everyday basis and "the other side": *la banda*, the thick bush which extends across the marshes of the Pilcomayo and the border with Paraguay. The very notion of "the other side" is a result of the existence of the international border along the Pilcomayo River. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, the Tobas and the other indigenous groups of the area often made use of both banks of the river and did not see the Pilcomayo as a "limit."<sup>149</sup> Rather, the river was for them a place of convergence for summer festivities and conflict over the control of fishing resources (Gordillo and Leguizamón n.d.). Back then, their main criterion of spatial orientation was the axis upstream/downstream and the distinction between the river and the hinterland.<sup>150</sup> The violent expansion of three different nation-states into the region soon changed this spatial pattern. Late in the nineteenth century, when the area

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<sup>149</sup> Until the beginning of the century, the Tobas and Wichís tended to occupy the right bank and the Chorotes and Nivaklés the left bank. However, they crossed the river very often.

<sup>150</sup> For instance, the Tobas called the Pilagás *tainjikpi*, "people from down the river," and the latter called the Tobas *nachilamolék*, "people from up the river." Most groups of the area also made a distinction between bands of the hinterland and bands which occupied lands on the river.

was still little explored, Argentina had negotiated the Pilcomayo as its northernmost border in the Chaco, in 1878 with Paraguay and in 1889 with Bolivia (even though the border between the latter two was still the object of bitter dispute).<sup>151</sup> Thus, in the 1910s the Tobas noted that the advance of Bolivian troops down the Pilcomayo was restricted to the left bank of the river and that the advance of the Argentinean army went no further than the right bank. Like other groups of the region, the Tobas soon used this cleavage to maneuver vis-à-vis the pressure exerted by the two armies. Thus, after their clashes with the army in 1917 they fled into Bolivian territory and found temporary refuge in the fort of Magariños. In the 1930s, the Tobas' experience of the Chaco War as a huge conflict which took place only on the opposite bank strengthened their awareness that the invisible line traced along the Pilcomayo by the *dokohé* had a powerful effect on the events unfolding on one side and the other.

Consequently, the lands across the river emerged for the Tobas as a place clearly differentiated from their own lands in many respects: firstly, as lands which belonged to another country and which, as a result, were submitted to a different social dynamic; and secondly and most importantly for their everyday experience as foragers, *la banda* emerged after the bloodshed of the Chaco War, like the calm after the storm, as a sort of semi-deserted "wilderness." During the war, the Paraguayan troops forced the *aborígenes* and Argentinean Criollos who occupied the left bank of the Pilcomayo to flee to other

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<sup>151</sup> As a result of the Hayes arbitration of 1878, in which Argentina resigned its claims over the Chaco boreal, the "main arm of the Pilcomayo River" became the border with Paraguay in the interior of the Chaco. In 1889, Argentina signed a treaty of limits with Bolivia, in which their borders in the Chaco became the parallel 22 until its intersection with the Pilcomayo River, and from then on downstream. The border dispute between Paraguay and Bolivia in the Chaco boreal was resolved only with the Chaco War. Consequently, until 1934 Bolivia exerted a de facto jurisdiction over the left bank of the Pilcomayo up to the Patiño marshes (Gordillo and Leguizamón n.d.).

regions. Alfred Métraux (1978: 82, 83) wrote in 1939, while he was in San Andrés: “The Bolivian bank used to be well populated. Today, there is nobody there ... The forest over the Paraguayan bank is greener, thicker, than in our bank.”

In the following decades, the Paraguayan government sold those lands to very large landowners, which in the 1950s and 1960s settled various cattle ranches in the area. However, these *estancias* employed very few people and most of their lands remained uninhabited and covered by thick bush. By then, the *monte* on the Argentinean side was considerably depleted, and the coexistence between Criollos, Tobas, and Wichís and the existence of several villages and towns on the river created a sharp contrast with the Paraguayan bank. In the experience of the Tobas, this contrast was recreated on a daily basis: not only because they could simply *see* the other side from their own villages but also because they regularly crossed the river either to work at the *estancias* or hunt or gather honey and fruits. As we have seen, the floods in 1975 and the formation of the marshes implied an important reformulation of this perception. The Paraguayan bush stopped being a presence almost at the reach of their hand and became a relatively distant place, across the marshes and the lands which separate the latter from the borderline. But *la banda* continued being a constant point of reference and a strong source of cultural images. In this chapter, I will analyze the manifold ways in which the Tobas perceive the Paraguayan bush in contrast to the bush on their own lands, paying particular attention to the semantic density of the places which stand in between, the marshes and the international border, and to the way in which this density provides a fertile ground for utopian images. As part of the haziness of these images, nonetheless, one of the ways in which the Tobas see *la banda* is as a feared place.

### Bones, Souls, “Devils”

On February 7, 1934, three days before capturing the Bolivian fort of Magariños, located across the river from Sombrero Negro and misión El Toba, the commander in chief of the Paraguayan Army, General Estigarribia (1969: 126), sent the following report to the Paraguayan Ministry of Defense:

Those [Bolivian] prisoners declared that a great number of their companions have perished, principally from thirst. All the road covered by the enemy in his retirement is strewn with corpses, and some of them burned —killed by their officers because they refused to continue the march.

Over 60 years later, at the end of 1995, I was talking to Tomás about the Paraguayan bush. He had never been deep inside *la banda*, but he told me what he had heard from other Tobas who had been to the *estancias*: “In *la banda*, there’s plenty of bullets, skulls, bones of the Bolivians. At night, you hear like a town, screams, people screaming over there ... All the *campo* full of arms standing, some in good shape, rifles, carbines, everything. Trucks, plenty of trucks, left there in the bush.” Several men told me similar accounts about the material remains which saturate the interior of the Paraguayan bush with memories and living echoes of the Chaco War. In the 1960s, when they were back from San Martín del Tabacal, Diego and other men used to conduct long forays into *la banda* to hunt iguanas. In 1995, he told me about one of these expeditions:

We went to Toba Quemado to look for iguanas ... We went for about 12 days, with many people. We went there, and we asked for permission at the *estancia*. At night, we arrived at Toba Quemado. We slept there, and we heard the noise of trucks, as if they were very close. [We said:] “What’s that?” And the noise stopped. It wasn’t there anymore. Then, screams of men, shots. But it wasn’t true, we only heard it. The noise of an air-plane too.

Over there, we saw many bones, full of bones. The bullets are there. Over there, there's the head, the feet, everything. We were watching. But there were many iguanas.

These echoes of war still form the background against which the new generation of Tobas experience of work in the cattle ranches. This is often articulated with the presence of multitudes of *payák*, for (as we have seen) the thick forests of *la banda* makes them particularly plentiful of "devils." As Angel put it: "There're many *payák* in Paraguay, for there's no people." I asked Fernando whether there were *payák* in the cattle ranches, and he said:

Yes, because the bush is very closed there. There're tigers too. Over there, it's a very closed place ... At night you hear the sound of an ax in the bush, a sound like a sheep. *Like a sheep?* Yes, because those are the *payák*. There's one who's shouting ... *Did you hear spirits, or noises of the war?* They are in the *estancia* which is like 100 kilometers from here. You hear them at night, the spirits of the war. Over there, people don't stop. And there's plenty of iron. When we passed by, we saw it. There's plenty of cartridges of bullets. *What did you hear?* We heard like screams of the dead ... Farther inside, in the *estancia* González, the souls are even worse ... You hear like a war, shots, trucks.

These glimpses of a war which still resonates in the Tobas' social memory are an enactment of a terror they did not experience personally; but they reverberate a particular chord with their own experiences of terror at the hands of the army, and with their fear of the *payák* which permeate the Paraguayan bush. But what probably makes these echoes of the terror of the Chaco War, deeply grounded in the historicity of *la banda*, most remarkable is that they stand side by side with the Tobas' simultaneous view of the bush in Paraguay as a relative "wilderness" without people, with plenty of wild animals, where "there are many iguanas" near the complete skeletons of Bolivian soldiers. Because the thickness and isolation of these forests capture flashes of what the bush used to be like in

the past, they have become the last refuge of the animals and extraordinary creatures which used to inhabit the world of “the ancient ones.”

### **The Last “Wilderness”: “No People, Many Mean *Bichos*”**

When people depict *la banda*, the accounts of wild animals which have almost disappeared in their lands, like jaguars, pumas, or antas are recurrent. Santiago told me about those lands: “There’s plenty of animals. We got three wild pigs and an anta. There’re almost nothing of these [animals] around here.” Tomás, for his part, commented: “Over there, there’s indeed everything ... There’s no animal lacking: tigers, wild cats. It has everything, but mean *bichos*, tiger, lion. There’s no people, many mean *bichos*.”

This view also includes a wide spectrum of extraordinary creatures, some of them *payák* in nature, which have disappeared from the Argentinean side. Frightened by the “noise” caused by the Criollos, the growing number of vehicles, the explosions for oil exploration by YPF, and the opening of roads and *picadas*, most of them have fled to *la banda*. The creature people mention most often is the *nanaikpólio*, “the large snake,” giant snakes 20 to 30 meters long and one meter thick which had their dens deep in the *viaqádaik* and which in the past made women stay in their houses during their periods because they smell menstrual blood. In 1996, Segundo told me about an encounter he had with a *nanaikpólio* more than four decades earlier:

It’s long, fat like a *yuchán* tree. The eyes look like a *paisano*. I once found it, there, it raised his head. It was mean. I found it and it chased me away. I broke my shirt and my pants. I got all hurt for running in the bush [he showed me scars in his arms]. Now, there

aren't. It's been like 40 years since I saw it ... It fled. Now, there's many people. Not like in the past. There were few people then.

Diego is known among the Tobas for being one of the last men who saw a *nanaikpólio* in their lands. A few years after the floods of 1975, he came across two of them while hunting with his rifle in a *nonakapiGát*, an open section of the bush. Diego had the wind in his favor, the *nanaikpólio* did not smell him, and he was able to walk away from them, with the rifle ready in case they attacked him. He described them to me: "The color was silver, like corrugated iron. The head was watching, watching like an ostrich. There was another one, smaller, but also long. I thought: 'Those are the ones which killed people.'" Nowadays, most Tobas agree that the *nanaikpólio* have disappeared from their lands. Every now and then, some *mariscadores* come across the giant tracks they leave on sandy soil, which they describe as looking like "a tractor track." But as Mariano told me: "They went where there's more silence; they don't like the noise of the trucks."

Another inhabitant of the bush which has disappeared from their lands is *wosáq*, "rainbow" and the storms associated with it. People describe *wosáq* as a jealous and powerful being of a *payák* nature and consequently with superhuman powers. Like the *nanaikpólio*, it is often associated with old menstrual taboos. Thus, some elders tell stories about *wosáq* sinking a whole village into the ground with storms because a careless girl approached the river or a pond while on her period (a "myth" which is also associated with other creatures, as we shall see). Another feature of the *wosáq* is that it defecates colorful pieces of "wax" which have the power of bringing rain. In the past, the *pioGonáq* often tried to obtain them to cause rain. But this was a very dangerous practice,

for anyone who tried to “steal” it would trigger the wrath of the *wosáq*. According to Tomás: “It’s very dangerous when it gets angry ... It has that excrement which is very nice, red, blue, yellow. When somebody steals the excrement, it looks for him. It doesn’t want people to have it. If it gets angry it kills the person. If it gets angry the ground sinks, it makes storms.”

Most people argue that the *wosáq* also retired to the thick forests of Paraguay. I asked Omar whether there was a *wosáq* in their lands: “Not here. But when the weather is cloudy or rainy, we see it from the distance. We see the sun, and we see a *wosáq* which comes out over there; not here, but over there in Paraguay.” Young men who go to *la banda* often see it. Martín told me: “*Wosáq* is not here, because there’re many people. In *la banda* there are, because it’s very quiet over there. When we went to *la banda* to the *estancia* of Ferre, we saw it well. It made storms.” In the past, the “evil bush,” the *viáq hakoiwók* which used to cover parts of the Tobas’ lands was to a great extent defined by the presence of creatures such as the *nanaikpólio* and the *wosáq*. That is why for many people there is no *viáq hakoiwók* left on the Argentinean side, and this type of bush exists only in Paraguay.

In spite of these potential dangers, the abundance of wildlife makes it worthwhile for a number of Tobas to conduct long hunting expeditions to *la banda*, especially to obtain iguana skins. However, since in Paraguay lands are private property, men usually ask for permission from the *capataces* of the *estancias*. Even though they are often allowed to hunt, sometimes they are not. Martín once told me about an incident which brought to light a further tension in the Tobas’ experience of *la banda*: the fact that over there they carry out two practices which stand in opposition to each other: hunting and

wage labor. Martín and three friends, among them Amalio, had gone to Paraguay with the explicit purpose of hunting iguanas. They arrived at “the *estancia* Agrupil,” owned by a man named “Julio,” and since Amalio had once worked for him he went to talk to him.

Martín recalled the dialogue:

We told him that we wanted to *iguanear*. He said: “No problem, but before that you have to *trabajar*.” But Amalio didn’t want to *trabajar*, he just wanted to *iguanear*. But the man got angry. Amalio told him: “No, Julio. I came to *iguanear*.” Then, the man got upset: “Then, get out of here! I don’t like men looking for iguanas around here.”

The four of them then went to the *estancia* which used to be owned by “Ferre.”

There, the *capatáz* “was nice” and authorized them “to kill as many iguanas as you want.”

Martín went on:

There were many iguanas, because there’s no people ... There’re many tracks of *bichos*, plenty of them. Very dangerous because *viaqádaik* ... And right there we began *iguanear* ... We had lots of barbecues of iguana ... We didn’t have dogs, but we looked for the tracks ... We stayed about ten days ... I got 12 skins ... We returned all together. We were not hungry anymore. We had meat of iguana, some honey, and some *provista* [packaged food].

The *monte* in Paraguay is a place where the Tobas are partially able to recreate their experience of the bush as a place of abundance, not only of foodstuffs but also of commodities. These hunting forays into Paraguay, even though conducted in the *estancias*, imply very different experiences from the wage labor they conduct in the same lands. Furthermore, in these hunting trips the fear associated with the bush of *la banda* tends to dissipate. Martín, for instance, had told me on other occasions that the *changos* (young men) who worked at the *estancias* were haunted by scores of *payák*. When he told me about his iguana-hunting trip inside that *estancia*, I asked him about the *payák*. Martín

said: “We didn’t hear anything. Silence ... We heard nothing. We just saw the tracks of the *bichos* of the bush. There were tigers around there.”

For many Tobas, the mirror of cultural production which stands along the border defines their own bush as an inversion of the meanings and images projected onto the thick, wild, feared bush of Paraguay. For while *la banda* concentrates the positive and feared features which used to define the bush in the past, the bush in their own lands emerges as its opposite: as an impoverished place which has been drained of many of its old powers and secrets. As Ernesto put it: “Here, there isn’t *monte-monte*, you see. There’s nothing, no animals, nothing. All those wild animals don’t exist here anymore.” Thus, when Mariano told me that there are no *viáq hakoiwók* left in their lands, he implied that its disappearance pulled out with it some of the defining features of the bush *qua* bush:

It seems that there’s no more forbidden bush ... Because there’s a road which goes to Pocitos ... There’s a road which goes to Churcal. There’s a road which goes to Algodón. There’s a road which goes to Rinconada. There’s a road which comes from Perdida. Then, there’re roads everywhere in the bush. Then it seems that the bush is not the bush.

In the mirror-like inversions which project the memory of a landscape of the past into *la banda*, there is a further and quite remarkable point of opposition between those lands and the bush the Tobas experience on a daily basis. Many men told me that in *la banda*, close to the marshes and still on the Argentinean side, there is now wide “open country,” a grassland like the one which used to cover their lands before the arrival of the Criollos. Exactly like the Paraguayan bush, people see this *nónaGa* as full of wild animals. In 1997, Segundo lent his shotgun to a man who went to hunt there. Upon his

return, the man told him about the remarkable wildlife he found. Segundo told me: “It seems that there are two *leguas* of open country. Many ostriches, wild pigs. Ooh! Lots of animals. Lots!” Along similar lines, Roberto told me about that place, emphasizing the contrast between the two sides of the marshes: “A lot of open country. Not like here. Many ostriches.”

I have never been to *la banda*. However, while I was with Toba men in fishing and hunting expeditions in the marshes, I often saw dense columns of smoke emerging from various points situated on “the other side.” When I asked my companions about the smoke, they always told me that the Criollos were setting fires in order to clear the ground of dry trees for their cattle. Only now, as I write these lines far from the Chaco, I notice the connection between these new *campos* and those fires, and the paradox embedded in the fact that a landscape reminiscent of the past is being partially recreated by those Criollos who decades ago were responsible for its demise.

In the manifold processes of cultural production generated by the existence of the border, the marshes from where I saw that smoke constitute for the Tobas a place densely charged with meaning. By mediating the Tobas’ current lands and the thick bush and grasslands of *la banda*, the marshes condense elements of the two banks in a higher, more complex way.

### **The Other Borderline: “All Type of Mean *Bichos*”**

On the one hand, like the bush on the Argentinean side, the marshes are a very recent spatial configuration; a direct result of the disappearance of the river. As a result,

most adult Tobas see it as an impoverished version of the river and have a nostalgia for the days in which “there was a *ñachi*,” a river, and the marshes simply did not exist as such. On the other hand, like the Paraguayan bush, the marshes are inhabited by a wide spectrum of extraordinary and potentially dangerous beings. Unlike the creatures which now live in *la banda*, they have not fled there looking for a haven but have always had their home in the water, a domain which humans have been less able to control and tame. Thus, even though the international border and the waters of the Pilcomayo do not coincide anymore, the marshes symbolize for many Tobas a new borderline between their own impoverished lands and the places inhabited by creatures of the past.

Some people refer to the creatures of the marshes with the generic term *noGoplék* (literally “people of the water” a term which in this case refers to non-human creatures).<sup>152</sup> The water creatures which the Tobas mention more often are two types of large snakes also associated with stories of the destruction of villages due to the violation of menstrual taboos.<sup>153</sup> One of them is *cháiq*, a very long snake similar to the *nanaikpólio* but which (unlike the latter) lives underneath the water. Its most distinctive physical feature and the origin of its name is a “feather” on top of its head, similar to the top of the palm trees (*cháiq*). In the past, women were also particularly afraid of the *cháiq* because of its capacity to smell menstrual blood. But even though most women nowadays do not follow the old menstrual restrictions, the *cháiq* can still be seen in the marshes. Early in 1996, Daniela, her daughter, and several of her grandchildren were taking a bath in the

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<sup>152</sup> As we have seen, some people also use this term to refer in particular to the *payák* which is “the owner of the fish.”

<sup>153</sup> Since *nanaikpólio* literally means “large snake” (*viborón* in Spanish) people often also use it to refer to the large snakes of the water as well. However, in general the term is restricted to the large snake of the bush, and the *viborones* of the water are called by their more specific names: *cháiq* and *lék*.

marshes when they saw one from the distance. She told me: “Tall like this [she raised her hand to about one meter in height], thick like a tree. A red feather, in the middle of the head. We just ran away. We had no clothes [she laughed and seemed a bit embarrassed]. We were taking a bath. I said: ‘Let’s go, let’s go, just like this!’” The other large snake which lives in the water is *lék*: a very thick but short and light *viborón*, which has the power to open up the earth with his head. This is why in a distant past *lék* was responsible for digging with his head the course of the Pilcomayo River. *Lék*, as we shall see, occupies nowadays an important place in the Tobas’ view of the marshlands.

Other creatures of the water are the *wédaik*, short and black humanoids which can be particularly dangerous, and which according to the Tobas also lived in the mountains of the sugar plantations. They are also of a *payák* nature, and Nicacio described them to me as follows: “Very small, they looked like little monkeys, the little hands like this, just like a person ... They’re mean. If you step on them they’re going to grab you like this.” There is a further group of extraordinary water creatures, formed by *payák* equivalents of animals which are not originally from the Chaco. They are the *pegakpólio*, “the large horse,” *wakapólio*, “the large cow,” and *ketagapólio*, “the large goat.” All of them are much bigger than regular horses, cows, and goats, live underneath the water, and have the power to walk and run on top of the water. But the one which the Tobas come across more often is “the large horse,” the *pegakpólio*. Emiliano saw one once when he was looking after his field, near the marshes: “I once saw a horse which was running on the water, like this, on top of the water. And there was a storm coming from over there, it was raining. It seems that the horse had power. *Payák* ...” Condensing the Tobas’ current view of the marshes as a place full of extraordinary creatures, Tomás told me about it:

“The marshes are the worst, all type of mean *bichos* ... That’s why we don’t get very deep in the marshes. Dangerous, only with boat.”

An important component of the way the Tobas experience these diverse creatures is that they basically “come” together with the floods. Consequently, when the level of the marshes becomes particularly high, people see them more often. In February 1997, for instance, after a higher than average flood, the accounts of fishermen who saw *lék*, *pegákpólio*, or just generic *noGoplék* raised significantly. In August of that year, while I was staying in a farming campsite near the marshes, Martín told me that they heard very strange noises at night: “Like an oil tank, beaten like a drum. We always hear that when the water grows.”

The marshlands is the place inhabited by creatures of the times of “the ancient ones” which is closest to the Toba villages; but it is also the permanent reminder of an absence: that of the river. As we have seen, for many Tobas over 40, “the river” occupies a very important place in their memory. It is a memory of a past of abundance and well-being which includes not only “the ancient ones” but also the Tobas who got to live on the river until 1975. This memory introduces a further, powerful semantic component in the Tobas’ view of the place where the river used to flow, now located between the marshes and the bush in Paraguay. In moments of crisis, the meanings projected into the old riverbed can turn those memories into fragmentary promises of a millenarian return to live “like in the past.”

### The “Return of the River”

Between the end of 1995 and the beginning of 1996 a very severe drought affected the lands of the Tobas and the rest of the northwest of the province of Formosa. In an attempt at stopping the gradual dissolution of the Pilcomayo River into marshlands and guaranteeing the flow of water to both sides of the border, the governments of Argentina and Paraguay had begun in 1991 the construction of several channels about 120 kilometers upstream from the Toba villages. However, due to the fast sedimentation of the channels and to technical problems in their construction, in 1995 most waters of the Pilcomayo began flowing into Paraguay.

By the end of that year, the marshes near the Tobas had almost dried up. The layoffs at *la comuna* at the end of 1995 further worsened the scenario. Without fish, for several months people lived in precarious conditions gathering wild fruits, gradually harvesting their fields, and hunting the numerous alligators stranded in the now semi-dried marshes. When contractors from the cotton farms in Formosa and Salta arrived in February 1996, hundreds of men, women, and children migrated for work and the largest village was left semi-deserted. Meanwhile, the Toba leaders began coordinating a joint mobilization with Wichís and Criollos to put pressure on the provincial government to solve the problem. In those months, the drought and the lack of fish became the Tobas' most pressing concern, and this situation enhanced the social value of *marisca* even among those who in other circumstances would talk about the importance of “*trabajo*.” Hernán, for instance, who in another moment had told me that he was “leaving the bush” because of his *trabajo* in horticulture, told me during the worst moment of the drought:

“In the marshes we have the fish, the fruits. If we don’t have fish, how are we going to feed our kids? Without the food of our own we’re screwed.”

The drought did something else: it triggered interpretations of its causes which brought to light many of the meanings associated with *la banda*, the river, and the state. Firstly, many people interpreted the drought drawing on their long and negative experience with “*el gobierno*” and in particular on old memories of terror. In those days, I was talking with Pablo about the drought and he shook me from the lethargy of the early afternoon heat when he told me, all of a sudden but with a very casual tone: “Maybe it’s *el gobierno* that wants to kill us all.” After a pause, he went on:

They say they closed [the river], I don’t know where in Bolivia ... We’re saying that *el gobierno* is very bad, they want to kill us. *Who wants to kill you?* I don’t know, someone in the direction of Bolivia. Maybe *el gobierno* made a business with Bolivia, with Paraguay. That’s why the water has gone to Paraguay.

Even though in mid-February the belated arrival in the marshes of the annual floods somewhat improved the situation among the Tobas, in the following weeks I heard numerous interpretations with a similar tone, in which people blamed “*el gobierno*” for an intentional plan to “stop” the flow of water, either “to kill” the *aborígenes* or “to make businesses” with the other governments of the region. Eduardo told me a few months later:

The comments say that [president] Menem sold the river, because [he says that] those who live over here are all the *aborígenes* who don’t know how to work, who aren’t going to sell the fish, who don’t pay taxes. That’s what people are commenting ... [The government says that] it’s better if the river passes over there, that they’re going to sell fish over there. Then, it seems that they’re going to harvest money. Thus, they say that the Paraguayans are going to get fish in order to sell it. And the Paraguayans, then they send part of the money [to the Argentinean government]. Because if the river passes over here, we’re going

to fish all day long and they aren't going to get any money. Because we eat, we don't sell. Then, they say it's better that we don't eat fish.

Side by side with these views of the appropriation and commoditization by the state of resources which are still non-commodified and in indigenous hands, many Tobas began interpreting the scattered and confusing news about the channels upstream in a very different light. In particular, some people began arguing that the river would start flowing again, "like in the past," following its old course along the border with Paraguay. These interpretations were very varied. Some people argued that "the machinery" sent to dig up the channels upstream would simply free the old course of sediments and allow the river to start flowing again. Others, by contrast, explained the eventual "return of the river" in terms of the force of the river itself, and in particular of *lék*, the large snake once responsible for the origin of the river and which (according to some) would dig the old riverbed again. Mariano, for instance, told me in May 1996 about *noGoplék* (a generic term for *lék*): "If *noGoplék* comes, there will be a river ... But they say it's closed. The *noGoplék* wanted to come around here, but they closed it." Beyond these different versions and expectations, everybody agreed on something: if the river returned to *la banda*, the poorest Tobas would abandon their villages and move near its banks, where they would live "like before," simply fishing, hunting, and gathering honey and wild fruits; and they also agreed that those who have *trabajo* in the state would not follow them. Emphasizing this contrast, Pablo told me that those "who have nothing" like himself would not come back:

If there's a river like before, those who have no *sueldo* are going to go and aren't going to come back. Thus, they're going to live like before ... When the river comes, people are

going to get closer to the river. They're gonna eat fish and they won't come back. They won't come back ... Those who have a *sueldito*, who have pensions, maybe they won't go. Us, those who have nothing, no pension, no *trabajo*, we're going to go to the river.

Around the same time, Eduardo articulated a similar interpretation of the "return" of the river. Like Pablo, he emphasized that the people "who have nothing" would go to the river "and live a quiet life." Even though Eduardo had a *sueldo*, he included himself among those who would "be present" at that moment:

If there's a river again, then, indeed, you can go to the coast of the river permanently. Then, we can live a quiet life, gathering honey every day, fishing every day. And then, we can live a quiet life. And if we have to do a *changa*, we do a *changa* to buy some *mercadería*. That's why the issue of the water is so important. If *el gobierno* works, then we're going to have water and fish. If I have nothing to eat, then I have to run right away where the river is, and I'm going to eat fish and honey ... The people who have nothing are going to go there. If the river is made again, I'm going to be present. I'm going to teach the kids.

For other employees, however, it was clear that this "return of the river" was something that would not include them. Ernesto told me what would happen if the river returned: "Those who have no *sueldo* are going to go for sure. But those of us who have *sueldo*, and especially those of us who have *vivienda* [brick houses] we can't go out to live like that ... Those who don't have [jobs and houses], they can. We'll go to fish and will return the same day."

Later in 1996, as the Tobas began receiving more news about the construction of the channels and some of their leaders "clarified" that the government had no plans of "making the river again," people's references about "the return of the river" gradually decreased. As Teodoro told me in July: "It seems that there's not going to be a river again; that's the comment now." However, when in February 1997 the floods brought an

unprecedented amount of water, some people argued that *lék* had arrived together with many other creatures; and a few were still hopeful that the river would “return” to its old course. One of them was Andrés, one of the farmers. In August of that year, he told me, emphasizing his identity as “poor”:

Maybe *lék* wants to make the river like in the past, for *lék* is the one which made the river ... Paraguay closed it in those years. That’s why we were suffering, we didn’t have water ... It’s not possible that the river is the only one which saved those of us who are poor. We get the fish, we live with that. It seems that the water doesn’t want to leave those who are the poorest. It seems that the water is guided by those who are the poorest. That’s my idea ... The water broke down everything they closed. It seems that the water wants to make the river in this part ... That’s why we’ve seen *bichos* that aren’t from around here, because the water came with everything. That’s why the *bicho lék* wants to make the river.

The way Andrés articulated this hope on the “return” of the river expressed a clear fetishization of the river. In his eyes, “the water” and *lék* had acquired a will of their own; and not any will, but one aimed at “saving those of us who are poor.” Consequently, it is a fetishization which emerges out of the vital energies which the Tobas see in the places which sustain their daily livelihood in a context of domination. These diverse cultural constructions tie the bush and the river in complex, mediated ways.

### **The River and the Bush**

Accounts such as these bring to light, firstly, the complex semantic fusion between the marshes, the memory of the river, and *la banda*. Because the hope for “the return of the river” made the border not only a limit with another country but also of a *frontier* vis-à-vis experiences of domination. As we have seen, for decades the Pilcomayo River was in itself a limit, as “imaginary” as it was “real,” between the depleted bush of the Argentinean bank and a *monte* full with animals and creatures of the times of “the

ancient ones.” Today, the river is not there anymore. But what remains is the borderline and the regularly recreated experience of *la banda* as an untamed place which has reminiscences of a landscape of thick forests and grasslands inhabited by *aborígenes* independent from the whites. This is why, articulated with the nostalgia of the *ñachi*, during the drought the place where the river and the borderline used to coincide created glimpses of a promise of a return to live “like before.”

“The river” emerged out of this process, at least for several months, as an utopia in the strict sense of the term: as a non-place, a much desired virtuality projected beyond the marshes into a place where nowadays there are only semi-arid extensions of bush and grasslands. This view incorporated the bush in contradictory ways. On the one hand, because it is spatially contiguous to the old riverbed, the bush of *la banda* fed the promise of a “return of the river” with symbols and meanings of the past; it was the background of a wide, untamed territory against which the image of this “return” was projected, against which the latter found a protective shade. On the other hand, and in spite of this, the place which captured those promises of autonomy was the river rather than the Paraguayan bush. This could be expected. After all, “the other bush” is also a feared place haunted by plenty of *payák*, dangerous animals and creatures, living echoes of the Chaco War, and experiences of exploitation in the *estancias*.

But what then is the relationship between the river as an utopian non-place and the *monte* which exists in the Tobas’ lands? The bush that people tread on a daily basis is too close to their own experience of poverty and necessity to feed millenarian dreams of freedom. Nonetheless, impoverished and drained of animals, secrets, and resources as it is, this bush is still what the Tobas have; and for them, this is not little: it is a place where

they have found a partial relief from the wounds of terror, exploitation, poverty, and state domination; which has allowed them to endure against all odds and which will allow them to *mariscar* “until the end of the world,” until that day when the river finally comes back.

## CONCLUSIONS

The meaning of a word is determined entirely by its context ... Contexts do not stand side by side in a row, as if unaware of one another, but are in a state of constant tension, or incessant interaction and conflict.

*Valentin Volosinov,*  
Marxism and the Philosophy of Language  
(1928)

Probably the biggest challenge that I faced while writing this dissertation has been to analyze the Tobas' cultural experiences in a relatively "coherent" way while exploring the uncertainties, the contradictions, the ambiguities which permanently pervade them. We have seen that for the Tobas the bush and the plantation are very far from having a clear and straight-forward meaning. Moreover, the meanings that the Tobas create and recreate about them are deeply contradictory, and the ambiguities which result from these contradictions often pervade the cultural contours of these places with a dizzying confusion. Thus, for the Tobas the bush is (among other things) a place of resilience which enables them to endure experiences of social suffering and domination, a domain characterized by necessity and unrewarding efforts, a place of health and healing, a source of non-commodified abundance, a depleted locality deprived of the secrets and creatures of the past. Along the same lines, in their memory the *ingenio* is a place of disease, death, and terror; a place of sexual "excess" and "freedom" from missionary control, of incredible yet often unreachable forms of wealth. The same tense polysemy applies to the other places central in their experience: the farms where the new generations supplement the poverty of their own villages with meager resources, where they find a relief from the

moral standards of their villages but also fear the haunting presence of the *payák*; the bush in Paraguay, the ambiguous “wilderness” which reminds them of a past of freedom while simultaneously being a feared, dangerous place, linked to current experiences of domination and the memory of the Chaco War.

In my attempt to make sense of these manifold layers of meaning, and in my simultaneous attempt to understand what “dialectics” might mean when taken out of the bookshelves, I learnt that what ties these layers together are the contradictions which, simultaneously, undermine their systematicity. These contradictions are part of historical fields of force and conflictive social experiences which give meaning to seemingly chaotic semantic threads. To a certain extent, this is what Valentin Volosinov (1973 [1929]: 79-81) meant when he wrote that the contexts which give meaning to a word “do not stand side by side in a row, as if unaware of one another, but are in a state of constant tension, or incessant interaction and conflict.”

In the case of the Tobas, the different meanings of the bush and the plantations result from the tensions which oppose the manifold social contexts in which these meanings are produced. Thus, the symbolism of healing rooted in the bush can only be fully understood in terms of the tension between the bush and the Tobas’ experience of disease and death in the *ingenio*, a tension also nourished by the diffuse memories of the terror unleashed by the military among them. The “wild” dancing in San Martín del Tabacal gained its semantic force in its contrast between the *ingenio* and the social control which existed in the mission station, and also in its tension with the alienation which dominated their life in the *lotes*. The perception of the depletion of the bush is to a great extent defined in opposition to their experience of *la banda* as a “wild” forest which

reminds them of a landscape of the past. Since these “moments” are aspects of a dialectical unfolding, we should add “and vice versa” for each of these movements. In other words, the terror of the *ingenio* was simultaneously enhanced by the experience of health and healing in the bush; the social control at the mission station became more apparent due to the seasonal experience of dancing and sexual “promiscuity” in the plantation, and so on.

This permanent dialectic undermines any notion of meaning as an “inner” property of “things,” even if we take what superficially seem to be the features of the bush and the plantations that can be more easily defined as “fixed”: their spatial boundaries. Because the Tobas perceive the “boundaries” of these places depending on the context in which they refer to them. For instance, when a public employee praises the importance of *trabajo* and complains about the hardships of *marisca*, the bush becomes for him a place clearly *separated* from the village where he lives and “works.” By contrast, when a Toba compares the “tranquillity” of “the bush” with the perceived problems of the big cities, the former becomes for him a sheltering place which includes his own village within it. And when somebody like Pablo argues that “we’re not going to die because we have the food of the bush,” “the bush” becomes a dominant spatial presence which condenses the Tobas’ practices and social relations as they are enacted in their lands, and which consequently also includes not only the villages but the marshes as well. We could also apply this exercise to the “boundaries” of San Martín del Tabacal. On some occasions, when people remember the threatening jungle which surrounds the cane-fields, the *ingenio* becomes a place delimited by human labor and separated from the forests and the mountains. But when several generations of Tobas said to each other upon

the arrival of the *waidomá* “let’s go to *kahogonaGá*,” the *ingenio* became subordinated to the dominating semantic presence of “the mountains.”

These multiple levels of tensions and oppositions are a confirmation of Gramsci’s point that “... in real history the dialectical process is separated out into innumerable partial moments” (1995 [1929-1935]: 342). However, this multiplicity should not make us forget that certain contradictions are *more powerful* than others in the way social subjectivity is created and recreated throughout history. In this dissertation, my position has been that contradictions rooted in experiences of labor have a particularly important, but certainly not unique, force in this dialectic. This is the reason why of the diverse meanings I have analyzed, there are some which are realized *more often* than others. The relative weight of a particular meaning lays in the fact that the contexts which produce it are a central component of the Tobas’ practices and experiences. For instance, the fact that the Tobas usually refer to “the bush” not simply as “forest” but as an embodiment of the social relations and practices which define them as *mariscadores* is a clear example of this point: of the semantic force of the practices through which people produce and reproduce their everyday life. Even the meanings of the experience of missionization, in themselves certainly not reducible to forms of labor, were deeply molded by the foraging campsites which the Tobas conducted far from the mission station and by the experience of labor migrations to the San Francisco Valley.

Aside from the predominance of some meanings over others, a further question remains in place. If places mean different things depending on the context of people’s communicative practices: What is the particular relationship which these different meanings maintain with each other? In other words, how do these different meanings

“interact” with each other in practical circumstances? On the one hand, Pierre Bourdieu (1977: 123) is partially right when he argues that “a word cannot always appear with all its meanings at once without turning discourse into an endless play of words.” On the other hand, this does not mean that the rest of the meanings totally disappear from the scene. Rather, when a meaning comes to the fore, triggered by certain practical circumstances, the rest maintain “from the background” a subtle tension with it. This is an important point made by Paul Ricoeur (1974: 71; 1976: 55) about polysemy in one of his brilliant moments of sensitivity to context. For instance, when the Tobas argued that San Martín del Tabacal was a place haunted by “devils” and death, they partially “suspended” their view of the *ingenio* as a “nice” place where they became “rich.” But this “suspension” was never total. In fact, we saw that on a number of occasions people shifted with remarkable ease from one aspect of the memory of the *ingenio*, terror and death, to the other, abundance. This movement occurs because the tensions tying those meanings together never disappear. And they never do because they were part of the *same social experience*, even though the Tobas do not articulate these tensions in a conscious way.

The contradictions which sustain and give shape to all these meanings are not only created in the synchronicity of experiences contemporary to each other but also in terms of a historical unfolding. In other words, these tensions are also the creative force of social memory. This dialectic shapes the content of the Tobas’ memory at multiple levels: in the way “the ancient ones” are remembered in contrast to “the new ones” (“and vice versa”); in the way in which the memory of “wealth” of the *ingenio* informs current appraisals about the unrewarding character of seasonal wage labor; in the way in which

current experiences of poverty enhances the remembered abundance of “when there was a river.”

We have seen that this unfolding of oppositions is also molded by cleavages which make “the Tobas” a far from homogeneous group. Thus, according to their age group, gender, and their location within the incipient differentiation associated with public jobs and horticulture, people often express contrasting meanings on particular places and experiences, something which undermines the very idea of a well bounded “Toba culture.” In this dissertation, I have tackled these cultural cleavages only in some of their broadest expressions, and I am certain that further research could disclose aspects of this differentiated cultural production that I have not looked at, especially with regards to gender. Yet, I believe that I have shown that these cultural cleavages can be at points significant. We have seen that the current incipient differentiation between “poor” and “well off” Tobas, for instance, creates heterogeneous interpretations of the meanings of *marisca*, sharing, or “the return of the river.” Gender is a central component of these semantic fields of power, in a process in which men and women have different appraisals, for instance, on the wage differentiation of the *ingenio*, their relative knowledge of the bush, or the distribution of *trabajo* by the state. The experiences and forms of socialization that different generations of Tobas have gone through have also molded in uneven ways their current subjectivity. Those Tobas who worked at San Martín del Tabacal and grew up interacting with the strong presence of “Alfredo” have different views about the bush, the plantations, or Anglicanism than younger people. The latter, for their part, see the missionaries and the *ingenio* as important yet relatively distant referents and are more seduced than their parents and grandparents by the possibility of having a

*trabajo* and buying *mercaderías*. Throughout these processes, people create not only different meanings but also *competing* meanings, which often lead to arguments over their past, their everyday life, and the larger forces which affect their present and their future. These competing meanings not only express different experiences but also *contribute to creating* those distinct experiences. Consequently, they contribute to creating forms of differentiation. It could not be otherwise, because “the production and reproduction of culture for *any* people in the modern world is an intensely political affair” (Smith 1989: 221, his emphasis).

When the Tobas were a relatively independent hunting and gathering group engaging in frequent skirmishes with the Nivaklés and the Wichís and increasingly aware of the threats which were looming on the horizon, their social subjectivity was as historical and as molded by tensions as it is now. But it was not torn by experiences of exploitation. That subjectivity was the “cultural background” with which “the ancient ones” began migrating to *kahogonaGá*, and it provided them with the concepts, figures, and dispositions with which they tried to understand their new experience of wage labor. Their concept of *payák*, both an evil “spirit” and an alien and non-human condition, captured much of what the Tobas first perceived about the sugar plantations: places which were designed along unfamiliar social and spatial lines. Thus, since at home they attributed most diseases to the direct or indirect (i.e. mediated by a *pioGonáq*) action of a *payák*, the Tobas inevitably explained their first deaths in the cane-fields by the action of the *payák* which inhabited *kahogonaGá*, whose power seemed to reach unique proportions. The leading and protective role that the *pioGonáq* and *haliaganék* played in the fights against the Nivaklés and Wichís also informed the way in which the Tobas

faced those first experiences in the plantations. The *pioGonáq* were those who tried to decipher the signs of these new places, heal those who were falling ill, and on several occasions even kill the “*ingenieros*” who were exploiting them. Back home, as it could not be otherwise, the Tobas also faced the transformations which were affecting their life following the subjective dispositions into which they had been socialized. The “pride” and “arrogance” of the Toba warriors made them face, arms in hands, the settlers and then two Regiments of Cavalry, at a time when they were already aware of the power of the army and the Wichís, for instance, were avoiding a direct confrontation with the military. The Tobas’ previous foraging practices and social relations of production, as well as the values, symbols, and forms of local knowledge embedded in them, were also the basis for the gradual consolidation of *marisca*, the collective use of their lands, and sharing as means of guaranteeing the reproduction of households facing increasing poverty. The examples could go on. What I believe it is important to emphasize is that this process implied more than “culture” informing “practice;” it implied an active *attempt* by the Tobas to *understand* the transformations which were affecting their lives. Jean and John Comaroff (1991: 229) captured much of the creative process the Tobas have been through when they wrote:

In the early stages of colonialism everywhere, indigenous peoples seek by their actions to fashion an awareness of, and to assert conceptual mastery over, a changing world. These are early pragmatic efforts to plumb the depths of the colonizing process, to capture the mysterious bases of the European production of value. They are also ways of creating historical consciousness. Out of the insights they yield come forms of experimental practice that attempt, by testing out relations between new means and ends, to forge both techniques of empowerment and modes of collective representation. For the recently colonized generally assume that there *is* something invisible, something profound happening to them. And that their future may well depend on gaining control over it.

Due to these pragmatic efforts to “plumb the depths of the colonizing process,” the experiences I have just reviewed implied an active creation of new meanings. Thus, the meanings embedded in the Tobas’ previous subjective dispositions, rather than becoming “fixed” and somehow “separated” from their practices, were permanently reconstituted in new contexts. In this unfolding, what the *payák*, foraging, or their knowledge of the environment (to mention just a few domains) meant for the Tobas before migrating to *kahogonaGá* was redefined by the new sets of oppositions into which they were immersed. The figure of the *payák*, for instance, acquired in the cane-fields new dimensions which were absent back home; in the *ingenio*, they became totally evil, distant, and deadly “devils” with which the Tobas had no type of interaction. Due to these new experiences, so was reformulated the figure of the *payák* at home, in a process also shaped by the Anglican missionization and the Tobas’ experience as *mariscadores* living in poverty and interacting with *payák* which provided them with “bush food.” As it could not be otherwise, the new meanings which the Tobas have produced out of these experiences have informed and continue informing their practices in manifold ways. For instance, the imagery of terror associated with the *ingenio* and their internalization of the ethnic hierarchies of the plantation shaped their attitudes vis-à-vis the administration and other groups of workers. And the Tobas’ current valorization of “*trabajo*” is affecting their practical engagement with the bush and also guiding their political strategies.

In any social group, the cultural production included in this permanent unfolding often *intensifies* in moments of crisis, unrest, or mobilization (Smith 1991: 182-183). Thus, for instance, the arrival of the missionaries in their lands, the mobilization for the layoffs, or the crisis triggered by the drought became particularly dense semantic

moments for the Tobas, through which they *looked for* new explanations and guiding symbols in their attempt to act upon the processes that were changing their lives. This is why, as part of a not necessarily conscious search, the Tobas have incorporated throughout their history values and meanings from other social actors: the Anglican missionaries, the Criollos, the Chiriguano workers in the plantations, and more recently the most visible agents of the institutions of the state. On many occasions, the Tobas interacted with these actors, especially the missionaries, with the hope of finding guidelines into a world which often looked to them confusing and ruled by the alien “knowledge” of the *dokohé*. This interaction implied something more complex than a mere “acculturation.” Rather, it was an adaptation to their own cultural experience of concepts and meanings originally not produced by themselves, in a process in which the Tobas gave local meanings, for instance, to Anglicanism, “*trabajo*,” or the fetishization of commodities and wealth.

In spite of this adaptation, I believe that it would be misleading to analyze this manifold cultural unfolding as the Tobas’ “incorporation” of historical changes into “their own cultural terms,” a theoretical position which today is probably best represented by Marshall Sahlins (1981, 1985). For Sahlins (1981: 8, 50) the “structures of significance” which form the culture of any group “incorporate” and “organize” historical events into their own terms, find areas in which they do not “fit,” and *then* go through a transformation. Sure enough, Sahlins emphasizes that culture does change throughout history; but he does it from a perspective in which much of the dynamic of change is dictated by the internal contours of “culture” and with a structuralist terminology that reproduces the rigid dualism he rightly intends to overcome. Already in 1928, Valentin

Volosinov (1928: 84-85) wrote a critique of the subjectivist notion of expression in language which applies to perspectives such as these:

The theory of expression inevitably presupposes a certain dualism between the inner and outer elements and the explicit primacy of the former, since each act of objectification (expression) goes from inside out. Its sources are within ... To be sure, by becoming external, by expressing itself outwardly, the inner element undergoes alteration ... [But] everything outer is merely passive material for manipulation by the inner element. Expression is formed basically within and then merely shifts to the outside ... Starting from outward objectification, the explanation must work down into its inner, organizing bases. That is how individualistic subjectivism understands expression.

Even though this paragraph is specific to linguistics, Sahlins' theory of structural change is based on the same epistemological premise Volosinov rightly criticizes: a "dialectic" between an inner self ("culture") and an outside world ("history") in which the actual force of dynamism and change lies within, within the structure of "culture" incorporating "history" and changing in the process. Firstly, and paradoxically, this position simply inverts what Sahlins often blames "Marxism" for: placing the force of historical dynamism "outside" subaltern social actors. Secondly, by putting the emphasis on a cultural "structure" guiding historical action, this perspective downplays not only people's capacity to *improvise and create* new meanings in active ways but also the fields of force which *create* the very conditions for the production and reproduction of their culture. Thirdly, and in connection to the previous point, an overemphasis on native agency "incorporating change" has also problematic ideological implications, for it often downplays the amount of destruction, suffering, and dislocation brought by colonialism and capitalism. As Jean and John Comaroff (1997: 48-49) have rightly argued regarding the influence of Christianity in Africa:

Some historians have taken to arguing that, far from being colonized by Protestantism or Catholicism, Africans seized these faiths and made them their own; that Christianity, never simply a “European” religion, was easily and comprehensively domesticated by them ... [This thesis] bears a resemblance to that species of revisionism which denies that Africans were ever victims of colonialism; that “African agency” ensured the appropriation of all European initiatives to local ends ... The reduction of the story of African Christianity to one of “native” appropriation alone is at once a mystification and a compression; one which, no less than the alternative that reads the story as a tale of unremitting domination, denudes history of its dialectics.

Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to overcome the dichotomy between “unremitting domination” and “native appropriation.” In doing so, I have tried to undermine the dualism between “inner” and “outer” elements in the Tobas’ practices and consequently overcome the very distinction between their “culture” and their “history.” Thus, I have tried to show them as moments of a single unfolding in which the Tobas’ culture is *deeply historical* and their history is *deeply cultural*. Because the very notion of a “dialectic” between “culture” and “history” as separate entities is misleading and *non-dialectical* in the first place, and reminds us of the warnings made long ago by Georg Lukács (1971 [1923]: 165, 179-180) about confounding dialectics with a rigid duplicity between separate “things.”

Taking these ideas on “culture” and “history” one step further into issues of domination and consciousness, we have seen that the manifold experiences of oppression which have molded the Tobas’ current views of the bush and the plantations have not been politically “illuminating.” It would be problematic, nonetheless, to reduce the manifold dialectic between experience and meanings as a problem of “lack of consciousness,” a “lack” which is often compared to an “ideal type” of social actor which rarely exists in real history (Dunk 1991). Except in moment of crisis, open unrest, and rebellion, most subaltern groups express a political subjectivity which is ambiguous and

shaped by hegemonic values (see Sider 1984, 1986; Dunk 1991; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). To my mind, the analytical challenge we face as ethnographers sensitive to historical fields of power lies in our capacity to appreciate the “half full glass” we are often faced with, and to be aware that the construction of hegemony requires an endless and unplanned political and cultural negotiation, in which subaltern groups can redefine hegemonic meanings, eventually in a critical fashion, through the contours of their own experiences of domination.

In the case of the Tobas, we have seen that their submissive respect for Patrón Costas is simultaneous to their perception of the evil sources of his wealth; that their current attempt to become part of the state bureaucracy stands side by side with their deep distrust of *el gobierno* and *la política*; that the explanations of their poverty as an almost natural condition of their aboriginality is usually as recurrent as their awareness that their history is one of dispossession and loss of autonomy. These oscillations, and the ambiguity which results from them, have been at the core of the Tobas’ practices of resistance: at points fragmented and entangled in their own ambiguities and at points characterized by bold assertions of defiance. The relative effectiveness of these political practices, nonetheless, has been closely tied to the *places* in which they are enacted. And the Tobas have been more successful in pushing for their demands in their own lands, especially when their political actions were guided by the meanings of autonomy and endurance associated with the bush, as was the case during their land claims. The Tobas’ more recent and growing demand for “*trabajo*” is reformulating that previous political experience hinging on the land; moreover, it is creating strains which seem to be undermining the meanings of *la marisca* as the practice which would allow them to

endure “forever.” This process, nonetheless, is manifold and contradictory, and is simultaneously creating new “counter-hegemonic” meanings about “the bush”: as the last haven from the perceived evils of “*la política*.” It is certainly not possible to predict how these complex contradictions will unfold. Antonio Gramsci (1971 [1929-1935]: 438) wrote decades ago that we cannot foresee “the concrete moments of the struggle, which cannot be but the results of opposing forces in continuous movement.” But he wrote something else which also applies to the Tobas’ long and contradictory experiences of domination in the plantations and the bush: that the only thing we can really foresee is the struggle.

**APPENDIX I:  
LIST OF TOBAS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT**

**Note:** every Toba has a single name in their language (usually that of an already deceased grandparent or grand grandparent) and a first and last name in Spanish. Since Toba names have a highly individualized character (for instance, there is usually only one living person with a particular name), I have preferred here to give pseudonyms in Spanish.

**Agustín:** a respected and powerful *pioGonáq* in his mid-eighties.

**Amancio:** a man in his late fifties; lives in poverty.

**Amalio:** a man in his early thirties; a former employee at *la comuna*.

**Andrés:** a man in his late fifties; one of the most successful farmers.

**Angel:** a man in his mid-thirties; an excellent forager and also a frequent *changarín* for the settlers.

**Angélica:** a woman in her late fifties; formerly a *konánaGae* and now a respected healer of “the Holy Spirit;” the wife of Horacio.

**Antonio:** a seventeen-year old boy; the son of Angélica and Horacio.

**Atilio:** a man in his late thirties; a very frequent labor migrant; lives in poverty.

**Bernardo:** a man in his late sixties; a committed Anglican.

**Carlos:** a man in his sixties; a committed Anglican.

**Celestino:** a *pioGonáq* in his late sixties; passed away in 1995 living in utter poverty.

**Claudia:** a woman in her late twenties; wife of a full-time employee at *la comuna*.

**Daniela:** a woman in her late fifties; a committed Anglican; the wife of Bernardo.

**Diego:** a man in his sixties; formerly an active forager and a carpenter. Lives in poverty.

**Eduardo:** a man in his early forties; formerly a *concejal*, now an employee in *la comuna*. In the 1990s, he became a committed Anglican.

**Emiliano:** a man in his mid-fifties; now engaged in horticulture.

**Enrique:** a man in his early sixties; now engaged in horticulture.

**Ernesto:** a man in his mid-thirties; a teaching assistant of the Criollo school teachers.

**Esteban:** a man in his mid-thirties; one of the most successful farmers.

**Eulogio:** a man in his mid-thirties; a nurse.

**Fabiana:** a woman in her fifties; the wife of Tomás.

**Felipe:** a man in his late sixties; a prestigious farmer but not among the better-off ones.

**Fernando:** an eighteen year-old; a committed Anglican and a frequent participant in labor migrations.

**Florencio:** a man in his mid-thirties; an influential political leader.

**Germán:** a twenty year-old man; a committed Anglican; brother of Roberto.

**Gervacio:** a man in his early forties; employee at *la comuna* and actively engaged in politics.

**Gregorio:** a man in his late twenties; the nephew of Reinaldo; lives in poverty.

**Hernán:** a man in his forties; formerly a frequent forager, and now more engaged in horticulture.

**Horacio:** a man in his late fifties; often engaged in politics; now engaged in horticulture.

**Hugo:** a man in his late twenties; frequent forager and *changarín* for the Criollos; lives in poverty.

**Ignacio:** a man in his early twenties; lives in Barrio Toba and goes to the high school.

**Jaime:** a man in his early twenties; a frequent participant in labor migrations.

**Javier:** a man in his early sixties; a respected nurse and for many years an Anglican preacher; in 1997, he became a priest; the husband of Felisa.

**Juan Manuel:** a man in his late fifties; an important political leader.

**Julián:** a man in his late forties; engaged in horticulture.

**Kiko:** a young man in his late teens; lives in poverty.

**Marcela:** a woman in her early forties; a respected healer; lives in poverty.

**Marcelina:** a woman in her late fifties; the wife of Emiliano.

**Marcelino:** a man in his fifties; an important political leader.

**Mariano:** a man in his late fifties; a committed Anglican; engaged in horticulture.

**Martín:** a man in his early thirties; son of Marcelino.

**Mauricio:** a man in his early thirties; part-time employee at *la comuna*.

**Nicacio:** a man in his early eighties; a well known *pioGonáq*.

**Lucas:** a man in his forties; a frequent participant in labor migrations.

**Lucrecia:** a woman in her late forties.

**Luisa:** a woman in her late twenties; the wife of Ernesto.

**Luis:** a man in his late twenties; a frequent participant in labor migrations; lives in poverty.

**Omar:** a man in his mid-fifties; among the most committed Anglicans.

**Pablo:** a man in his early seventies; still an skillful forager.

**Patricio:** a man in his late sixties; with a remarkable interest in the history of the Tobas; a committed Anglican.

**Ramiro:** a man in his mid-sixties; lives in extreme poverty.

**Regino:** a man in his sixties; a committed Anglican who used to be a “non-believer.”

**Reinaldo:** a man in his mid-sixties; he passed away in 1995 living in utter poverty.

**Roberto:** a man in his mid-thirties; a committed Anglican and a frequent forager.

**Ronaldo:** a man in his seventies; lives in Barrio Toba.

**Saúl:** a teenager, son of Amancio; lives in poverty.

**Sebastián:** a man in his late fifties; a committed Anglican.

**Segundo:** a man in his late seventies; still an active forager.

**Teodoro:** a man in his thirties; a nurse; he is engaged in politics but independently from the main political parties.

**Tomás:** a man in his late fifties; formerly a part-time employee at *la comuna*; the husband of Fabiana.

**Valeria:** a woman in her late fifties; the wife of Marcelino.

## APPENDIX II: GLOSSARY

### Terms in Toba

**Cháiq:** large snake of the water.

**DalaGaikpí:** “the new ones.”

**Dingolék:** the *gringos*; the missionaries.

**Dokohé:** the Criollo settlers; white people in general.

**EpiáGayaik:** frequent and skillful forager.

**Hemóik:** stingy.

**Haliaganék:** headman; prestigious leader with shamanic powers; also used to refer to white bosses.

**Kadetá:** “our father;” the missionary; “God.”

**KahogonaGá:** “the mountains;” the sugar plantations.

**KiyaGaikpí:** “the big eaters;” the cannibals of the San Francisco Valley.

**Kohodót:** evil dwarf of the bush (*payák*); the “husband” of *kopeletáGa*.

**Koikolék:** the military.

**Koliá:** “tobacco fields;” San Martín del Tabacal.

**KonánaGae:** “witch.”

**KopeletáGa:** “owner” of the bola verde (a wild fruit); the “wife” of *kohodót*.

**LaheGó:** “the other side.”

**Lakáia:** brothers and first cousins; friends; “brothers” in a Christian sense.

**Laikawá:** “money;” metal.

**Latagá:** *aloja*; wine.

**Lék:** large but short water snake.

**Máik Lacháqa:** sugar plantation.

**Nanaikpólio:** “the large snake.”

**Ndép:** marshlands.

**Nemacháqa:** temporary campsite.

**Népe:** foraging.

**Newoyáq:** “rich.”

**Nimatáq:** drinking feasts of *aloja*.

**NoGoplék:** “people of the water;” “owner of the water.”

**Nomí:** collective dancing.

**NónaGa:** open country.

**NonakapiGát:** relatively open sections of the bush.

**Nontáq:** work.

**Nontanqá:** “place of work.”

**Ñachi:** the river.

**PayaGó:** female *payák*.

**Payák:** evil spirit or “devil;” in their home territories they are also the “owners” of the animals.

**Pegakpólio:** “large horse.”

**PioGóik:** “poor.”

**PioGonáq:** Shaman.

**Toiéts:** “the ancient ones.”

**Viáq:** the bush.

**Viaqádaik:** large bush.

**Viáq hakoíwók:** “evil bush”; thick section of the bush inhabited by numerous *payák* and other dangerous creatures.

**Viáq ónaGaik:** “nice bush”; section of the bush with abundant wildlife, honey, fruits, hardwoods, and without dangers.

**Viyó:** mortar; sugar mill.

**Waidomá:** labor contractor.

**Wédaik:** short and black humanoids.

**Wosáq:** “rainbow.”

### **Terms in Spanish (local and regional meanings)**

**Aborígenes:** indigenous groups; in northwestern Argentina, the term often refers only to the native groups of the Gran Chaco.

**Ancianos, los:** “the old people;” equivalent to “the ancient ones.”

**Antiguos, los:** “the ancient ones.”

**Algarroba:** edible fruit of the algarrobo.

**Aloja:** fermented beverage made out of algarroba and honey.

**Arreglo grande; arreglo:** final payment at the sugar plantations.

**Banda, la:** “the other side.”

**Bañado:** marshes.

**Bebida, la:** “drinks;” alcoholic beverages.

**Bicho:** wild animal; bug.

**Boleto:** ticket that the workers obtained in the sugar plantations as proof of completion of their *tarea*.

**Boliche:** rural store.

**Bolichero:** store keeper.

**Brazos:** “arms;” indigenous laborers.

**Brujería:** sorcery.

**Brujo:** shaman.

**Cacique:** indigenous headman.

**Campamento:** campsite.

**Campo:** open country; grasslands.

**Capatáz:** foreman.

**Capitán:** indigenous leader in charge of mediating with the administration in the sugar plantations.

**Cargo:** public job.

**Cerros:** mountains; hills.

**Changa:** irregular and informal type of wage labor paid by the day.

**Changarín:** somebody who does a *changa*; also used to refer to part-time informal employees at *la comuna*.

**Chango:** young man.

**Colonia; colonia algodонера:** cotton farms.

**Comuna, la:** the municipality of Pozo de Maza.

**Concejal:** elected representative at the municipality.

**Contratista:** labor contractor.

**Criollos:** non-indigenous rural population of northern Argentina; settlers who live in the interior of the Chaco.

**Diablos:** “devils,” *payák*.

**Documento:** I.D.

**Estancia:** cattle ranch.

**Finca; finca porotera:** bean farm.

**Fortines:** small forts.

**Gendarmería:** military police in charge of border areas.

**Hachero:** wood or post cutter.

**Huelga:** strike.

**ICA:** *Instituto de Comunidades Aborígenes*; agency of indigenous affairs in Formosa.

**Ingenio:** sugar mill; sugar plantation.

**Legua:** league; unit of distance, about 4.5 kilometers.

**Lenguaráz:** indigenous translator in the sugar plantations.

**Lote:** lot; sub-units of management in the sugar plantations where the Tobas built their campsites.

**Marisca:** foraging.

**Mariscador:** a frequent and skillful forager.

**Mate:** a type of “tea” popular in Argentina, drunk with a bowl (the *mate* proper, where one places *yerba mate* and pours hot water at regular intervals) and a metal straw (*bombilla*).

**Matacos:** old and pejorative term for Wichís.

**Mayordomo:** labor contractor from the sugar plantations.

**Mercadería:** store-bought food; often used to goods purchased at a store in general.

**Misión:** mission station.

**Milicos:** the military.

**Montaraz:** “from the bush;” bushman.

**Monte:** bush; forest.

**Monte grande; monte fuerte:** thickest section of the bush.

**Obraje:** mobile logging campsite.

**Obrajero:** owner or administrator of an *obraje*.

**Paisano:** *aborigen*.

**Patrón:** boss.

**Peronistas:** members of the *Partido Justicialista*, the party founded by Juan D. Perón.

**Picada:** trail.

**Política, la:** “politics.”

**Poroteada:** bean harvest.

- Proveduría:** store in plantations and farms.
- Puestos:** scattered dwellings where settlers who look after cattle live.
- Radicales:** members of the *Unión Cívica Radical*, the opposition party in Formosa.
- Rancho:** hut; rural dwelling.
- Sindicato:** union.
- Sueldo:** salary; used as synonym for “public job.”
- Tarea:** daily task that workers had to fulfill in the sugar plantations in order to get paid.
- Tarjador:** employee of the sugar plantations in charge of marking the *tarea* fulfilled by the worker in his/her file.
- Toldería:** precarious indigenous village; campsites in the sugar plantations.
- Trabajo:** work; job.
- Troja:** small storehouses for wild fruits and (to a lesser degree) produce.
- Turcos, los:** merchants of Syrian descent.
- Viborón:** “large snake.”
- Vicios:** “vices.”
- Yerba mate:** herb used to drink *mate*.
- YPF:** *Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales*; the most important oil company in Argentina, now privatized.
- Zafra:** sugar-cane harvest.

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