

# **TELERAS**

Weavers from Argentina Dry Forest.

**The Fate of the Forest**

Ricardo Paz

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Others sowed for me;  
I sow for others to come.  
(Proverb)

Over a thousand years ago, sitting silently under the shade of a large *algarrobo*\* tree, a woman weaves.

She has no knowledge of her European contemporary who is barely surviving in a dark medieval hamlet far from the refinement of the Andalusian world. Nor can she imagine the Incas who will eventually pass along the Quechua language to the children of her children, nor the Spaniards who will be coming five centuries later with different looms and wools.

A thousand years later, another woman under the green cool shade of an *algarrobo* also weaves. In the gentle cooing of the warm afternoon, what binds these two women together is neither thread nor history, but the shade and the tree.

The *algarrobo* is one of the most emblematic species in the Chaco dry forest, to the extent that its people normally speak of it as «the tree». There are two kinds of *algarrobos*, the white one (*Prosopis alba*) and the black *algarrobo* (*Prosopis nigra*); both are sizeable trees, with imposing trunks with fissured barks when very old. Some specimens of both species have been declared historical monuments in Argentina, and are presumed to be over 400 years old.

## **The Criollo\* Paradise**

The dry-forest region of Santiago del Estero is part of the only dry, subtropical forest in the world, stretching from the SW of Argentina's Chaco region to areas in Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil. In it there are many different species of trees, all adapted to the scarcity of water. Hard timber native trees such as *quebracho colorado santiagueño* (*Schinopsis lorentzii*) and *algarrobo*, along with *the mistol* (*Ziziphus mistol*), the *itín* (*Prosopis kuntzei*) and, further north, the *lapacho* (*Tabebuia impetiginosa*), are the most prominent species, under which lies a dense and thorny undergrowth.

The forest has always been fruitful and generous. Along with the American corn, fruits from mistol, tuna and *chañar*\*, pods from *algarrobo* and wild honey, have been for ages the basic food of its inhabitants.

Rabbits, *quirquinchos*, *vizcachas* and even three species of wild peccaries and *huasunchos* have been forever ingredients in a criollo stew. The forest also had foxes, *pumas* and even ant-eaters species such as the *oso melero* and the *oso hormiguero*, as well as turtles, iguanas (of which the fleshy tail is much appreciated), *lampalaguas*, and *ñandúes*, used in many ways, and abundant fish in the big rivers. All in all the fauna and flora of a unique and generous ecosystem.\*

## Traces of History

For many generations now the inhabitants of the dry forest region no longer are indians but *criollos*, though it has forever been *mestizo*\* country. Centuries before the arrival of the Europeans, the region was inhabited by people of the most diverse origins, lured by the fertile land of the Mesopotamia between the rivers Dulce and Salado. The forest was frontier land, a meeting place for people from the Andes that came down from the North, the people from Chaco to the East and those from the Sierras to the South, the range that separates the plains of Santiago del Estero from the Pampas and Patagonia.

To this melting pot of American pre-Columbian races, the Spaniards arrived in the middle of the 16th century and settled on the banks of the Dulce River from where they started their conquest of land and the foundation of towns in the territory of what is today the Argentine Republic. With their race and culture they also brought clear traces of the seven centuries of Islamic domination of Spain. Moors also came, sheltered by the Islamic norm that allows a Muslim to conceal his religion when his life is threatened and faces religious intolerance. Moors and Jews, who did not want to convert to Christianity nor be returned to North Africa, would choose to go to the New World, contributing their valuable skills to the Spanish expeditions. The Spaniards in turn would rather risk not reporting these false converts as heretics to profit from their skills in a mutually convenient unspoken agreement. The remarkable resemblance between those riders of the Berber desert and the *gauchos*\* from the Pampas plains, in their living habits, their marginal and isolated lifestyles, their horsemanship and dependency on the horse, and their eating habits and apparel, has already been discussed at length in other studies. With the Spaniards came the Jesuit Order, whose vital influence can still be seen in Santiago del Estero as part of the fabulous heritage they left in the region. In 1553 the Spaniards settled on the site where the city of Santiago del Estero is today and, seeing the local inhabitants' expertise with textiles, organized a highly efficient textile industry of such magnitude that only 33 years later Bishop Vitoria was able to start exporting its products. This industry continued throughout Colonial times, though limited to a rural and domestic economy after the expulsion of the Jesuits by the Vatican in 1767.

Remnants from other racial and cultural origins also introduced by Europeans appear vaguely in our national identity because of mixed marriages throughout many generations. An early census carried out shortly after the foundation of the Viceroyalty of the Río de la Plata shows that around 1778 over half the population of the present province of Santiago del Estero was of African origin. This important contribution, though often denied, is however unequivocally present in the rhythm and drum beat of the popular *chacarera*\*, a local music and dance. After three centuries of Spanish Colonial domination and a few decades into the young Argentine Republic, one very important cultural influence was added to this rich variety. Brought by the British along with the Industrial Revolution, towards the end of the 19th century, the region that up to then had been el Impenetrable\*, the Gran Chaco to the North of the Salado River, fell prey to the railway tracks.

British and French railway companies as they carried water on trains were able to move away from rivers and villages on the river banks and, along these tracks and following Buenos Aires

government's policy to conquer territories inhabited by indigenous people, the clearing of forests was started. Thus, new hamlets, settlements and villages changed the province forever and, together with the rest of Argentina, started the 20th century with renewed expectations.

### **A World of Adobe**

The inhabitants of the dry forest live to these days in hamlets and settlements spread out on what is left of their natural environment, far from towns and cities, in a vast plain of forests, salt marshes and deserts. These settlers, used to high temperatures, scarcity of water and subject to long periods of drought, are scattered around a large area, 10, 20 or 30 kilometres apart from one another, with nothing in between but wasteland, cacti and wild forest. In each settlement, a few families live around a well left behind by an old work camp or close to a river that has been a landmark since the times of the Viceroyalty when the *camino real* - the royal road - communicated the Alto Perú - the High Perú, currently Bolivia - with Buenos Aires. Sunchituyoj, Sabagasta, Rumi, Guanaco Sombriana, Toropan ... names of settlements in different tongues where with luck one may find a school and a first aid centre. Between these settlements made up of 20 to 30 houses each connected to each other by a narrow wagon track, a wide open area is often found, man-made clearances a few hundred square meters big with corrals and cultivated fields in each.

The houses are made of adobe, with earthen floor and roof. From a distance, as they come into sight in a forest clearing, they look beautiful and naturally set on the landscape. Walls are built supported by a structure of poles; hollow spaces filled with a mixture of mud and grass and finished off with layers of thick and fine adobe. The same finishing is applied to the ceiling in between the rods of the roof that together with the flattened earthen floor, will keep the rooms cool.

The roof is supported by quebracho blanco (*Aspidosperma quebracho-blanco*) poles on *quebracho colorado* props. These poles end in a fork to support the crossbeams, central rafters made of *quebracho blanco*. On top of this, a layer of canes followed by one of branches and finally a third layer of grass and earth to retain the cool of the night during the harsh midday heat. On the sidewalls, small openings for the torrid air to circulate and a solid door of *algarrobo* wood at the entrance. The houses are usually set near the shade of a big old tree.

Life in these houses is mostly outdoors, under verandas that surround the house, made of branches with the same adobe finish and no walls. Sometimes, a wall is built on one side for protection against the wind as well as back-up for a kitchen that holds a hearth and a chimney. The privacy of each home does not include the veranda where newcomers are always welcomed. Outdoors is man's territory, though sometimes in a corner of the patio a burst of colour or a bundle of half-hidden sticks from a loom may be seen. The world of the woman is indoors and in its semi-darkness, art will reveal itself in the colour and design of handmade bedcovers.

## Folks Produce

The furniture in a home is of essential simplicity: an algarrobo table, a couple of chairs and a bench made from *chañar* or *huiñaj* (*Tabebuia nodosa*) woods, seats made in stretched or braided leather and a bed or cot alongside a chest or cupboard, make up the basic household furniture. Additionally, a *matera chair*\* and a low table will always be at hand to sit by the fire and drink *mate*\*, and offered to the rare guest always welcomed in those lonely regions.

Those living in the dry forest are disconnected from urban and consumer societies because of distances and lack of financial means, so must provide for themselves for their every day needs. There is no stone as the Sierras are far away and tools and kitchen utensils are mostly hand-carved from wood or leather. Metal is rare except tools or objects brought from the world outside. It is a world powered only by man or animal, with no electricity or machines, a world that in its harmony attains the most profound silence.

In it, solidarity is by far a more important means of exchange than money: *minga*, a cultural heritage from the Incas, is the tacit agreement for an exchange of favours. «Today I do it for you; tomorrow you do it for me», as an essential answer for man surviving in that hard environment.

## Mother Earth

In this vast territory of dry forest and deserts, it is easy to get lost and roam for days in a maize of trails that lead nowhere, surprised at not finding any dividing wire fences. It is not that the land belongs to all; it *belongs to no one*.

For the most part of the 20th century, governments and powerful men from the big cities neglected the dry forest of Santiago del Estero, turning it into a forlorn region, an island of trees in the middle of a country only interested in agriculture and cattle. On the first half of the previous century, the British left their forestry exploitation and the property of the land was left to their associates in the big cities.

Large tracts of land became only pieces of paper in the form of titles to properties that were used to legalize and guarantee bank loans to owners who never visited nor toiled its soil. Taxes were never paid and this led to today's undefined situation: land neglected and forgotten by its supposed owners, the State with some property rights owing to unpaid taxes and its actual inhabitants, descendants of those who worked cutting down *quebracho* trees at the beginning of last century. Several generations have since been born and raised in these forests, but hold no title to the land they live on though having every right to it. Because of their living so isolated from outside influence, to this day these people have kept alive their rural traditions and unchanged lifestyle, only threatened by a fierce drought or an unexpected flood caused by the mishandling of the water flow in the cities up river.

## The Weft of Identity

When railways arrived towards the end of the 19th century, they brought with them many novelties. Weavers, inspired by the orientalism in Victorian designs, soon added curves and flowers to their blankets but, as years went by, the powerful nature-inspired designs lost their

initial thrust and textile art slowly sank into oblivion, together with the forest that was being cut down and had been their source of inspiration for more than a thousand years.

During the 20th century, progress brought plastics and any blanket made of synthetic fibre was then considered better than those woven by grandmothers.

The intricate pattern and the vivid colours were no longer reminiscence of home but the ignominious reminder of rural poverty. Shearing, carding, spinning, dyeing and weaving, became «follies of the old», their work no longer describing their world nor an example of wisdom to follow, but the expression of «foolishness from someone who does not understand modern times.»

However strange it may sound, some textiles shown in this book were found covering a henhouse, or as blankets to domestic animals in a stable or forsaken in an abandoned hut for rats to destroy, and were handed over with the indifference one may have for a dirty old rag. Something of no value, remnants of an old and despicable world, irreversibly condemned to oblivion. We have met girls in the forest who were disgusted at the touch of wool for they felt that its contact meant getting contaminated by a detestable and dirty world.

What world was that and what do these textiles represent to a weaver's world?

They represent their identity, and a reminder of their origins: grandmothers made them. It was their work, just as chairs, tables, lashes and saddles were the work of grandfathers. The blanket the weaver gave to her son or daughter when they got married or when they left for good was meant to remind them of their home, their family and their forest. Not only to keep the body warm, but also to keep their hearts warm with the memories of their home and land. To us, inhabitants of the new millennium, these textiles remind us not only of a more natural lifestyle, but of Nature as an essential element from where all life unfolds. This amazing forest from where these textiles come is a source of unity and contact with our deeper roots, not only those in our history, but also those that link us with our natural origins, that as former inhabitants of a once uncontaminated planet.

### **The Fruits of Ignorance**

Our generation has to deal with the disgrace of having been witness and silent accomplices to the destruction of that forest. Where once there were trees, there are only coal ashes, soy stubble and deserts left. The country's farming policy of extending the humid Pampas by cutting down millions of hectares of native forests is clear proof of our ignorance. Ploughing such scarce organic top soil will yield a few harvests before the soil is used up, drained or simply carried away by wind. What reason can be invoked by a country not yet two hundred years old to justify that in less than a century it permitted the destruction of nature in such a large scale, millions of hectares of a forest thousands of years old?

The answer to this cannot be left in the hands of the State. It would be a delusion to expect a more conscientious attitude or assume that, even with the will to do so, the State would have the power and the capabilities to stop destruction. The authorities rarely take note of these abuses and when they do, it is too late and poorly handled. With environmental laws that are never heeded, indictments are rare and punishments are lenient. To make matters worse, up to

now the humble dry forest has not merited the interest of the press nor has been attractive to tourist agencies, as has been the case with the rain forest in the Amazon jungle, tropical beaches or the Patagonia region.

During the latter part of the 19th century, railways needed sleepers and fences needed posts, and it was the dry forest that provided wood and labour to conquer the Pampas and Patagonia. In Argentina's growth and expansion as a young nation, the dry forest provided the raw material it needed for the sake of progress.

For countless years native inhabitants have had to cut trees to sell posts and burn coal, but they have done so as a last resource and as their only means of making some money. As the forest was cut down by axe and chain saw, the noblest species were the first to fall. The tall *quebrachos* and the old *algarrobos* fell first, but now even the younger *itines* are being felled. Ecology was unknown, consequences were not foreseen and the forest seemed to have endless resources.

Today the forest is being levelled down to the deafening rhythm of bulldozers. Its consequences can be seen and no one should turn his back to this. Only a mere 30% still stands of the fertile forest that was there at the beginning of the 20th century, and still deforestation continues unhindered. Today, for the sake of «progress», land is needed to plant soy, just as years back it demanded wood to produce coal for industry, posts for fences, sleepers for railway tracks and tannin for leather. Over the last decade, to take advantage of the soy boom, the surface of native forests that have been razed down to the ground has tripled and Argentina stands out for having cleared three times more than the international average. Small farmers are not to blame for this. In order to satisfy their basic needs, they themselves sometimes are forced to cut down and sell the shade in their own yards. Nor is the bulldozer driver to blame. Those to blame and bear full responsibility for this devastation are those «land owners» who are not even there where the forest is being cut down for their only concern is their stingy, selfish gain.

After almost twenty years of close contact with the people from the dry forest, it is clear to me that what they ask for most is jobs. Having to face their everyday need for subsistence makes it difficult to convince anyone on the long-term benefits of an education and since cutting down trees is the only paid job these men are offered, they take up their chance for dignity of food for the day and forget about hunger for tomorrow. Faced with the irrevocable industrialization of agricultural land, they know that when no more forest is left for them to live on, their only options will be to move to small towns or settle in shanty towns in the big cities and face its degrading future.

### **The other Fate**

We should not remain indifferent or accept with resignation that these forests are doomed to disappear. The only possibility for preserving them appears to be for environmental organizations or private capital in the hands of conscientious entrepreneurs to acquire large tracts of land for preservation.

Bold and tenacious visionaries capable of comprehending the urgency needed to stop this devastation and face the well-known mismanagement by the State with its restraining bureaucracy, its short-sighted regulations and its anarchy-imbued ambiguity.

Projects to protect these few remaining forests and sustainable reforestation will surely receive proposals for selective eco-tourism and rational exploitation of its immense organic richness. But for these proposals to be successful, they will need support from non-governmental organizations and foster the formation of other such organizations to work closely with the inhabitants of the dry forest. These people born and raised there know better than anyone how to preserve and make it sustainable - not to mention their most valuable know-how on living and surviving with very little water.

Handcraft production is one more very important element with which to meet this challenge. Just as the rich tradition of wood and leather craft is essentially men's labour, textiles have the added advantage that the whole family is gathered around the loom and the weaver. Everyone can weave and anyone, from the eldest to the youngest, can spin, dye, card and make skeins; while the men not only can take care of the sheep and the shearing, but also build workshops, looms and wooden tools.

**«Ama sua, ama llulla, ama qella»**

«Don't be a thief, nor a liar, nor an idler» ancient people would say in Quechua. Facing this global, technological and ultra-competitive world, the best protection these people have against it is in the innate, ancestral wisdom of their culture. The fact is that in order for them to defend it they must continue living in the forest they anyway do not wish to leave, and learn how to protect it.

They are however also partly to blame for the present situation and they will have to acknowledge and accept the fact that the forest is no longer inexhaustible. «They are doing away with it,» they darkly state, but very few even plant native species in their yards. The easy way out is to expect every solution to come from the State or from the landowner which amounts to leaving their fate in the hands of others and not on their own effort. They will have to give up the apparently reliable welfare assistance from the State and assume their share of social responsibility. Provided they are willing to carry out this gigantic task of helping to save the dry forest, they will have to get organized and their leaders will have to be disciplined and highly professional. If asked will they be able to do this or if it will be worth it, they will have to acknowledge in all honesty and in a conclusive way that the bulldozers are gaining ground over the last remnants of their thousand year old paradise.

*This book is our own stone of David.*

*With this book we face the bulldozers.*

*And these textiles are our flag.*

Were this miracle to happen, then it will be the duty of the forest people to look after what has been reconquered. It will depend on them, on their own will and commitment and on the pride they have for their culture and their love for the land.

They will have achieved their goal if, one hundred years from now, a girl goes on weaving under the sweet rustle of a scented *algarrobo* tree.

## Notas

**criollo/a.** Normally, son/daughter of Spaniards born in America; a person of pure Spanish descent born in Spanish America. Here *criollo* is used in its popular form as a synonym of native or local, the product of a cultural amalgam of indigenous and Spanish.

**mistol and tuna.** The fruits of anyone of the many species of the cacti genus *Opuntia*.

**chañar.** The legume tree *Geoffroea decorticans*.

**quirquincho.** A burrowing Edentata similar to an armadillo.

**vizcacha.** *Lagostomus maximus*, a large burrowing rodent similar to but bigger than the chinchilla.

**huasuncho.** Small cervid of the genus *Mazama*.

**lampalagua.** Boa constrictor, similar to the mythical *Anaconda*.

**ñandú.** Fast-running flightless bird similar to ostrich, belonging in the genus *Rhea*.

**mestizo/a.** In old Spanish «mixed». A person of combined Native American and Spanish ancestry.

**gaucho.** The nomadic horseman and cowhand of the Argentine Pampas, who flourished from the mid 18th to the mid 19th century and has remained a folk hero similar to the cowboy in western North America.

**chacarera:** folk rhythm and dance originated in Santiago del Estero.

**el Impenetrable.** In Spanish *impenetrable* means the same as in English. Region so called because of its dense and thorny forest, inhabited by native hostile tribes until the end of the 19th century.

**matera.** Low chair used to sit by the hearth and drink *mate*, very popular among *criollos* in Argentina.

**mate.** Popular infusion prepared from dried leaves of *yerba mate* (*Ilex paraguariensis*).

**minga.** Antique traditional agreement for interpersonal cooperation.