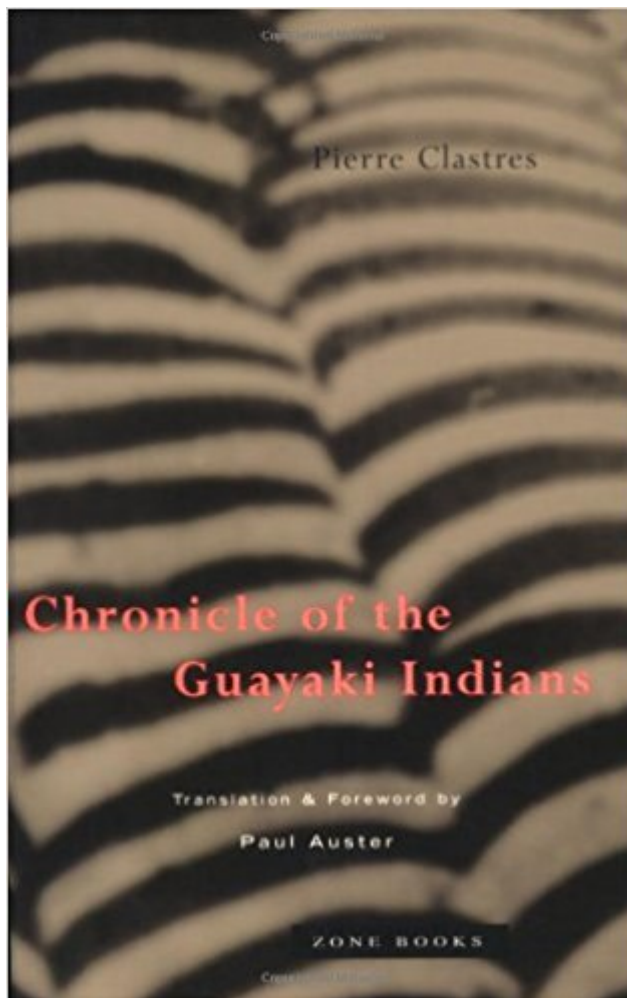


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# Chronicle Of The Guayaki Indians



## Synopsis

Pierre Clastres (1934-1979) was one of the most respected political anthropologists of our time. *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians* is an account of his first fieldwork in the early 1960s--an encounter with a small, unique, and now vanished Paraguayan tribe. From "Birth" to "The End," Clastres follows the Guayakis in their everyday lives, determined to record every detail of their history, ritual, myths, and culture in order to answer the many questions prompted by his personal experiences. Now available for the first time in English in a beautiful translation by the novelist Paul Auster, *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians* will alter radically not only the Western academic conventions in which other cultures are thought but also the discipline of political anthropology itself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In the early 1960s, the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres spent two years living among the Guayaki people of Paraguay, a tiny community of nomadic hunters whose way of life was quickly disappearing. When Clastres arrived in Paraguay, there were only 100 Guayaki left, and their culture seemed doomed by influenza and encroaching civilization. Clastres's description of his encounters with these people is respectful, self-aware, and written with great skill. Paul Auster (author of *The New York Trilogy* and the movie *Smoke*) translated the book from French to English in the late 1970s, sent it to a publisher, and then lost track of the manuscript for 20 years. Fortunately, one of Auster's fans stumbled upon the manuscript in a used-book store in 1996 and brought it to the author, making this publication possible. According to Clastres, the Guayaki were

mild-mannered folk who relished the taste of human flesh. There were far more men than women in the community, which seems sort of sinister. Every June, when the air was cold enough to make the bees logy, all the Guayaki groups gathered for a honey festival, which featured tickling games and many sexual adventures. In short, the Guayaki led lives very different from our own. There is something deeply satisfying about learning the details of faraway, drastically foreign lives. Clastres manages to describe these people's daily lives and traditions without making them seem exotic or sensationalizing their story. Clastres's quiet, detailed observations honor this vanished culture and should be of interest to anthropologists and layman alike. --Jill Marquis --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Little was known about the nomadic Guayaki Indians of eastern Paraguay until Clastres, a French ethnographer now deceased, made contact with them. He lived among them in 1963-64 and documented their history and culture. His study is extremely valuable because it documents the experiences of a group of people who no longer exist. Clastres published the French edition of this book in 1972, and it has been translated by novelist Auster, who originally translated this title in the mid-1970s. Auster's trials and tribulations in getting it published are documented in the section entitled "Translator's Notes" and his story alone is worth the price of the book. The photographs and illustrations greatly enhance the text and provide valuable information. Highly recommended for specialized collections on South American Indians. ?John Burch, Cumberland Coll. Lib., Williamsburg, Ky. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Great book and a great translation. The story BEHIND how this book made it into English is even better.

Pierre Clastres was the last of the cannibals. As an anthropologist, he spent one year among an Ache tribe in Paraguay. He shared their food and shelter, he learned their language, observed their rites and recorded their myths. He was so close to them he became one with them. He absorbed their words and their gestures. He collected their artifacts and snatched pictures of them. He traced their ancestors and named their dead, something many Indians feel very uncomfortable about. He transformed their living bodies into a body of words and sentences. He used them as fodder for his ethnography. He ate them, so to say. He knew that just by being there he was compromising their very existence. By being the participant observer, he was participating in the disappearance of their

lifestyle and of their very raison d'être. Even if he took their side, his presence made him an accomplice of their extinction. And yet he chose to stay with them, to bear witness of their fate and, by recording their life conditions, to save their world from complete annihilation. If cannibalism consists of ingurgitating the body of a person to make his spirit reside in you, of transforming your living body into a sepulture for the body of the dead, then Pierre Clastres indeed committed an act of cannibalism. His professor Alfred Metraux had warned him:

“to study a primitive society, it needs to be already in a state of rot.”

The fierce Guayaki were in an advanced stage of putrefaction when Clastres came to observe them. They were parked in a reserve camp managed by a Paraguayan ex-soldier who collected subsidies from the state for keeping these hunters-gatherers in a semi-sedentary state. The death rate among them was astounding. When Clastres came, the two groups that composed the camp • the Ache Gatu tribe who left the forest two years before, and a group of “Foreigners” who had arrived more recently • numbered about a hundred. One year after, when he left, they were only seventy-five. There were also far more men than women, as girls and women often fell victim from infanticide, from ritual execution or from domestic violence. Pierre Clastres himself was the witness of several deaths, some of them violent, others from disease or by accident. He did very little to prevent them. After he left, he returned to Paraguay several times, but he never visited the crime scene again. The Guayaki fell into oblivion • when Jacques Meunier visited the camp site in 1968, there were only a handful of them left, kept in a squalid state of enslavement by their official protector. They only survived in Clastres’s *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*. To be true, the French anthropologist lent his voice to human rights activists who were denouncing an ethnocide, the organized murder of an ethnic group. He petitioned the Paraguayan state against the inhuman conditions that existed in the camp. He documented the many cases of murder committed by settlers • not all of them “white”: many were mestizos or Indians belonging to the Guarani tribe •, the manhunts for Ache children who were then used as servants or concubines in farmer families, the deliberate destruction of the Ache’s natural environment. Indeed, the very notion of ethnocide, which has now found its way in international law, owes a lot to Clastres’s book. But Pierre Clastres himself was convinced that all this campaigning and petitioning would change little to the fate of the Ache tribe. He had already written their obituary. As for the other Indian tribes or groups who had settled among farmers or city dwellers and adopted a sedentary lifestyle, he had no interest in them whatsoever. They were no

longer Savages. In particular, he held only scorn and contempt for the Protestant missionaries who were interested in "civilizing" the Indians, in extracting them from their squalid condition. No matter how much these missionaries made efforts to educate tribe members in their own language and to encourage the emergence of ethnic leaders among them: for Clastres, they were all accomplices to a collective murder. The quest for the true savage predates the birth of anthropology – think of Montaigne, Rousseau, Chateaubriand – but has been a constitutive project of the discipline since its inception. Indeed, it can be said that anthropology ceased to exist as a distinct social science once this quest had to be abandoned. In classic narratives, the Indian Savage is supposed to deliver a message: of lost innocence, of man's inherent goodness or evilness, of the virtue of frugality. In more recent renderings, the message becomes the lure of sexual freedom, the apology of leisure, a healthier work/life balance, the preservation of the natural environment or, as with Pierre Clastres, resistance against the state. Indeed, there is a stark contrast between the slow death of the Ache tribe and the ideal of the true savage as constructed by Clastres. The first is transient, inarticulate, meaningless; the second is noble, enduring, sophisticated. The real savage had to disappear for his philosophical double to emerge. The political philosophy of Amerindian tribes was already announced by Claude Levi-Strauss when he saw in primitive societies not the expression of a lack – lack of scripture, lack of history, lack of civilization – but of an excess: excess of natural resources, of symbolic rites, of traditions. It is further developed by Pierre Clastres in his theoretical essay *Society Against the State*, with its famous quote: "the history of peoples without history is the history of their struggle against the state. We knew with Diderot that if Tahitians were a happy people, it is because they had no catholic priests. Pierre Clastres tells us that a society rests on an unconscious choice that is political by nature: the Guayaki are free because they chose to ignore the state, to eschew any form of power or authority. Their chief or tribe leader only exists to occupy the structural space left vacant by political power. The chief exerts no power, if one means by it the ability to give orders that have a high probability of being obeyed. Instead of giving orders, he talks and talks and talks. He is the master of discourse: he is charged with the task of maintaining peace and harmony within the community by reminding his fellow tribesmen of the law of the ancestors. Note here the role of structures and of the unconscious in this abstract reasoning: the choice to defend society against the state is an unconscious one, driven by full and empty cases within a matrix. But does it make any sense to ask whether primitive people refuse the state or simply ignore it, whether they want to become capitalists or not? In the sixteenth century the first conquerors were

debating whether Indians had a soul. Pierre Clastres who has studied the chronicles written at the time of the New World conquest reenacts these scholastic debates with questions that resonate with his times, but make little more sense for the ones they were intended to serve. The times when Pierre Clastres was writing were preoccupied by power and by sex. Clastres notes the absence of the first among the Guayaki, but he is very engaged in exposing the second. He is literally obsessed by it: he considers it his professional duty to report on every affair and acts of promiscuousness he is able to witness. To his regret, the Atche keep their private parts private, and sex is not something that is done in public. But there is a lot of gossiping and joking about it, among adults and children alike, and the anthropologist is able to report many cases of adultery, polyandry, illicit pleasures, and quasi-marital unions involving prepubere children. Despite his best efforts, described as scientific curiosity, he is incapable of catching these half-naked Indians in the act of copulating. But he suggests a lot of it is happening around campfires, in the bushes, or down to the river in the forest. He himself is approached by one promiscuous lady who clearly wants to cheat on her husband, but he valiantly resists her invite. Despite the exoticism, the situations he describes sound eerily familiar to a contemporary French reader. When it comes to adultery and promiscuity, these Indians are very French indeed. They seem to be straight out of a boulevard theater play written by Georges Feydeau or Eugene Labiche. Was it worthwhile to go so far away in order to discover a reality so close to home? Pierre Clastres is very candid about his status as a participant observer, and his ability to elicit truth from his informants. Due to his lack of savage skills, and his ignorance of the law of the forest, he is incapable of accompanying Ache hunters in their quest for savage preys. He cannot take part in what forms the center of Ache culture, the true test of a man's mettle: the hunt for wild game in the forest. He is also very clear about his inability to enter the mind of the savages, of knowing for sure what they think. Men in this community are reluctant informers: they answer to the anthropologist's questions only if they feel like it, if they have the time to listen to him, and if they can understand his broken sentences. Otherwise they just ignore him. As a result, the anthropologist has to get his insights from the ones who are ready to be lured by his persistence and gifts of candies: children and old women. But Clastres turns this position of weakness and ignorance into a strength: only the anthropologist can decipher the script that directs and explains the Indians' conduct. The Guayaki themselves live in ignorance of the reasons of their own behavior. They are moved by unconscious forces. Only the anthropologist, trained in the methods of structural analysis, has access to this unconscious. Ethnographers can invoke the legitimacy of science and the authenticity of their experience as fieldworkers: they have been there,

seen things, and published the results of their observations in books and articles. Ethnographic texts require a suspension of disbelief: we are required to take the anthropologist's account at face value. He is the one who has endured months of hardship in hostile conditions, and who has gained the expertise that allows him to speak with authority of "his" tribe. Clastres' text is laced with reality effects that guarantee his privileged access to the Guayaki's experience. He uses many words drawn from their vocabulary so as to attest his language skills. He reports on their myths and customs with the authority of structural anthropology. It is easy for someone who has not been there to claim: I don't believe you. And yet, however hard I try, there are things in his text that I simply cannot believe. What credit is to be given to the rumblings of an old lady, or to the jokes and wordplays of children, reported by someone who has only minimal access to the language and can only report on life in the forest by hearsay? Unlike the cannibal anthropologist, I find the body of evidence presented on the Guayaki's life and experience simply too hard to swallow.

It came as a pleasant surprise to discover that the author of this book was an understudy of Claude Lévi-Strauss for, the latter's *Tristes Tropiques* elicited an intellectual epiphany in this reviewer. This is not to say that Clastres' writing is anywhere near as good as Lévi-Strauss', even though this chronicle of his one year plus association with the Guayaki, or Atchei Gatu, Indians of Paraguay in 1963-64 is a compelling, worthwhile read. Clastres' task was to gather as much information as he could about the tribe's daily life, customs, 'religious' beliefs, family and tribal structures, tool use, etc. In short, or long, everything of note that he can observe. Indeed, the book is brim full of interesting, often fascinating, information and the author successfully brings the tribe to life in the reader's mind. In fact, to examine the life of the Other, you need go no further than this book, for the life these Indians led is so out of the bounds of modern mores that they come off as an altogether different species of human. I know that today it is acceptable only to lament the displacement of the aboriginal population of the New World by the denizens of the Old, but it strikes one that no reasonable person would countenance the Atchei Gatu order of things, assuming that Clastres' account is accurate. Granted some people would celebrate a reality that includes incest, internecine human sacrifice, infanticide, geriatric murder, polyandry, pedophilia, open marriage, and cannibalism, albeit not, evidently, onanism. For most of us, however, the Atchei Gatu way of life must fill us with revulsion. Their tribal life is voyeuristically interesting, to be sure, but also repulsive and reading about it causes one to realize that, as portrayed, there really should be no place for it in our

world. This book though is a worthwhile read. A few comments, the drawings of the native implements are beautifully rendered and the photos are charming. One does wish that the author or translator had given a guide to pronouncing the native words that are liberally sprinkled throughout the text. Finally, one does sometimes question the veracity of this account. It is not so much that the material is sensationalized or beggars belief, but much of what is there does beg questions. For instance, the tribal members have wonderfully descriptive names that are supposedly bestowed upon them according to spiritual connections made before birth, yet surely the sex-hungry elderly woman 'Perechankangi' or 'Vagina of Dry Wood' was not called that from birth. Also, author goes into elaborate detail about the daily life of these forest indians but he encountered the tribe after it had left the forest and it is difficult to believe that his account of their daily life is first hand, observed knowledge, rather than an account of what has been told to him and this is only a couple of the obvious intellectual contradictions that fill the book. In fact, that is the biggest problem with the book. One is forced to question how much of the account is a transmission of knowledge intuited and inferred by the author, I wouldn't dare say manufactured, and how much of it is verified factual information. Still, this makes the book no less readable nor any less recommended.

Contrary to the above reviews, the Guayakĩ- have not "disappeared." At present, they are rarely referred to as "guayakĩ- " (it is offensive to them), favoring the name "Achĩ." Their nomadic subsistence is sadly gone, but many aspects of the culture continue in the Achĩ communities. For a physical anthropological study of the Achĩ-Guayakĩ- and a brief history of the contact, check out Kim Hill and Magdalena Hurtado's "Achĩ Life History." Its out-of-print and hard to find but provides an interesting, albeit academic, complement to Clastres' work.

I was stunned when I first read this book. No point of detail, from the first period of a tribeswoman to stories tales and legends of the Indians, is missed. Pierre Clastres takes the reader with him on a journey which took place in the early 1960's to find a people and place which have now past. His subtle evocation and immersion in a sense of place by concentrating on day to day detail of the indians life is breathtaking. It is worth noting that the translator is the writer Paul Auster, who carried out this translation in the mid seventies when he was impoverished. Due to a series of misadventures his translation was lost and if it was not for it re-emerging almost by accident then it may never have seen the light of day. Paul's illuminating and inspired telling of this aspect of the story is worth reading in itself and is a beautiful piece of writing.

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