Genocide and isolation

Photo: By Pablo Cingolani. A Yuqui indigenous girl from the Bolivian Amazon. The Yuqui were a people living in isolation until they were contacted by missionaries between 1967 and 1991. Now they are a people in a situation of extreme vulnerability, precisely as a result of this forced contact.

A century ago, in a short story entitled “Tres días en el bosque” (Three Days in the Forest), José Santos Machicado commented: “It would be unimaginable for the Toromonas to abstain from the shrieks and cries that are their custom when they capture a prey or surprise the enemy, and for these cries not to reach the town from such a short distance.” (1) The density of images conveyed by this paragraph paint a portrait of the mentality of the era, when positivist thinking prevailed, Winchester rifles were always within reach, and unbridled ambition in pursuit of wealth shook the Amazon rainforest: these were the years of the capitalist boom fuelled by rubber tapping (1880-1914).

There is a whole romantic and idealistic vision of this very dramatic and yet little explored period of modern history that left its mark on the forested regions of numerous South American countries.

Although rubber tapping may have had a demonstrable influence on the territorial integration of the nascent nation-states lying along the backbone of the Andes – while also precipitating, by contrast, the consolidation of the Brazilian colossus – this cannot and should not overshadow the enormous and terrible social cost that this economic activity brought with it.

In defence of the dignity of the survivors and their current heirs and in tribute to the memory of those who were massacred through violent actions or essentially worked to death through the hard labour to which they were subjected and condemned, it should be clearly stated that what took place in the continental Amazon in the late 19th century and early 20th century was, plainly and simply, a genocide.

The immortalization of these “pioneers” and “industrialists” in the names of provinces and towns, banknotes and monuments is nothing other than testimony to a grave historic omission: that of the full recognition of the Amazon cultures that originally inhabited these territories and the revision of this reading of the past which is merely a perpetuation of the injustices suffered. In the continental Amazon – where the economy continues to be based on feudal or trading-post models, to a large extent – a shameful internal colonialism is maintained by oligarchic and/or business groups.

In Viaje a la región de la goma elástica (Journey to the Rubber Region), written in 1894, Pando, a former president of Bolivia, illustrates an entire belief system: “It is not an easy undertaking to attack them in their villages and chase them through the forest, and only with the help of dogs, and the expert skills of men accustomed to the wilderness (…) can they be caught and overpowered.” The use of dogs is reminiscent of the Spanish conquest of the Caribbean and the Andes, of the terror they evoked among the natives and the humiliations inflicted with them. The hunting of Indians, pure and simple.

Pando's book also celebrates the "feats" of several characters: "Mr. Mouton, whose intrepidness has been put to the test on numerous occasions (…) succeeded in pursuing and catching the savages (Guarayos) and almost totally exterminating their tribe, since only two children managed to escape."

In this climate where the prevailing law was that of survival of the fittest, many foreigners stood out for being particularly sadistic. In 1914, Swedish naturalist Erland Nordenskiöld gathered a series of horrific accounts. A Frenchman had taken children from an indigenous village as prisoners. He camped with his people on a bank of the upper Madidi River. "The children were crying and could not be silenced. Fearing that their cries would draw the Indians, he grabbed the children by the legs and, one by one, bashed their heads against the ground." He later adds: "Throughout the rubber tapping barracks along the Beni River there are numerous Chamas who were sold by slave hunters." Chama and Guarayo are two names used for the same ethnic group: the Ese Ejja.

The ideology that drove the genocide is shameful even to write about: "The savage is a beast that blindly charges when angered, and beasts must be hunted (…) This very thing happens on the Madera River with the tribes of the Parintintines and Caripunas; every year there are attacks, forcing the industrialists to chase and heroically defeat them." This was written in La Gaceta del Norte, the newspaper founded by rubber baron Vaca Diez, and datelined in his Orton rubber company barracks in 1888, at the peak of this ruthless and oppressive orgy that is so reminiscent of the Congo of Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, the classic novel that recounts the horrors experienced by the peoples of Africa faced with the same nightmare: the capitalist invasion of the rainforest.

Confronted with this desperate situation, the tribes of the Amazon sought refuge deep inside the forests, distancing themselves from the big rivers through which the invaders entered the region, escaping certain death and seeking a way to safeguard their freedom, their independence and their traditional way of life.

Nordenskiöld himself reflected on the ethical dilemma of contact with "civilization" in those years of absolute contempt for the "other".

He recounted the story of a Chama indigenous man who came to look for his son, who was working in Cavinas, near the mouth of the abovementioned Madidi River. Thinking about the boy, and whether it would be better for the father to take him back with him, he wrote: "In the rubber tapping barracks he will be just another labourer, he will have to work for others his whole life in exchange for a meagre salary and to have food and clothing. He will learn to get drunk. In the rainforest, there are times of hunger and times of plenty. He will never feel safe from the whites and perhaps from other Indians, either. Perhaps he will have to live like a hunted animal, but he will be in charge of his own life." Given these two options, Nordenskiöld answers his own question with no hesitation: "If I were the Chama, I would take the boy."

The Swede's prophecy was fulfilled, and to very wide extent: the acculturation suffered by Amazon ethnic groups throughout the 20th century is, perhaps, the saddest form of disappearance – in the silence and solitude of a dominant culture that denies their existence.

Isolation saved a small number of indigenous peoples from violent death or invisible but implacable assimilation. Those who fled and isolated themselves continue to live, until today, hidden in certain areas of the forest. The world – or more precisely, the world represented by the UN and a limited number of governments, such as the Bolivian government itself – has adopted laws, resolutions and measures to protect them, so that the last indigenous peoples in a state of isolation do not disappear. It is absolutely crucial for these laws to be fulfilled and enforced, because only some have heard of

them, few understand them, and fewer still feel the depth of this human drama.

Notes:
(1) Taken from Cuentos Bolivianos (Bolivian Stories), B. Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany, 1908. In this small and delicate volume, it is noted that Mr. Herder is a “papal publisher and bookseller”. This literary gem which preserves the views so precisely expressed by the rabidly anti-liberal José Santos Machicado was passed on to me by Fernando Arispe.
(2) The quotes from Pando and La Gaceta del Norte were taken from: María del Pilar Gamarra Téllez. “Orígenes históricos de la goma elástica en Bolivia. La colonización de la Amazonía y el primer auge gomero, 1870-1910”. In: Historia, UMSA, La Paz, 1990, No. 20.

Pablo Cingolani, Río Abajo, Bolivia, July 2013, e-mail: pablocingolani@yahoo.com.ar