
Chile: The impacts of monoculture tree plantations on Mapuche medicine

Annexation of Mapuche territory by the Chilean State and the imposition of its legal system on all the indigenous peoples that co-exist in the country have marked deep changes in the way of life of the Mapuche people. Between 1881 and 1907, stripped of their territory, their autonomy and their assets generated as an agricultural and cattle-raising society, the Mapuche people fell prey to hunger and to disease that took around twenty thousand victims.

With millenary experience, the Mapuche people had known how to accumulate a wealth of knowledge in different fields, among them health. The concept of health is not to be found in the Mapuche conceptual repertoire, because it is integrated in all the occurrences of life itself. That is to say, being well, being unwell is health. In every moment lived, however humdrum it may be, the flow of life is evaluated. At each meeting between people, there is time to ask after their state of health, and thus this meeting becomes a constant self-assessment by people about themselves, their family and their surroundings. To be well or unwell consists of the individual as such being in equilibrium with him/herself and with his/her peers, family, and closest and dearest beings. You must also be in equilibrium with your social, cultural, political, environmental, territorial, religious and cosmic surroundings.

Based on this comprehensive concept of health, the Mapuche people developed a vast field of knowledge to help them resolve disease, based on the use of various medicinal resources mainly obtained in the forest. However, both these resources and access to them have been constricted insofar as the constructions of villages, towns and highways, the extension of the railway and the installation of large landed properties brought with them an increase in forest exploitation. Re-arrangement of the territory to suit the interests of the Chilean State also put an end to the traditional routes used by the various Mapuche identities, hindering the exchange of medicinal plants from different ecological environments.

To this was added the discredit that the vast diversity of specialists in Mapuche medicine were subject to. Throughout decades of intervention, from Christian churches and health institutions, real campaigns to discredit indigenous knowledge were carried out, causing a drop in the number of specialists and strong dependency on the official health care system: a discriminatory system, unable to satisfy the needs of the most underprivileged sectors and still less of the Mapuche residents in rural zones with difficulties in access due to the great distances and with barriers set up to ignore cultural diversity.

However, the Mapuche people, whenever possible, preserved wilderness areas or natural ecosystems that were reservoirs of their traditional medicine because they contained a wide range of medicinal plants. Gathering is done under cultural precepts traditionally defined by Mapuche customary law. From this perspective there are places that can be used by human beings for dwellings and production, while there are other places that have “ngen” (a master spirit that looks after the elements that have been entrusted to it). In these spaces it is possible to observe a wide categorization related with the soil characteristics, presence of water, size and existence of certain species, where human beings must act with respect and reverence. If some element is necessary,

permission must be asked from the ngen, taking out what is necessary, paying retribution with something, and praying for its effectiveness.

The existence of these spaces is vital for the continuity of Mapuche medicine, because it is there that the plants develop their newen (force or power) and because it is in some of these places that the Machi – the persons entrusted with carrying out therapeutic ritual and all those actions aimed at specific knowledge of the disease and its eradication – find their materials to prepare the necessary elements to carry out their ritual role (such as the rewe or alter, or musical instruments such as the kultrung whose rhythm marks the different phases of the struggle against the agents that have intervened in unleashing the disease).

Over the last few decades, the consolidation of the neo-liberal model has promoted an economic growth model based on depredation of the environment and the exclusion of various social sectors. With regard to the Mapuche people and their medicine, this has implied a considerable decrease in their therapeutic resources, and even the extermination of some species.

One of the main agents in this depredation has been the expansion of forestry companies that introduced themselves into Mapuche territory, taking advantage of the conditions generated by the Pinochet dictatorship. During this time, not only was the transfer of lands to private companies encouraged but land tenure deeds were granted to community members, thus disarticulating the community system and allowing sale of land to non-Mapuche people, harbouring deceit and abuse.

Forestry companies exploited many native forests and then replaced them with pine and eucalyptus plantations, species of greater profitability due to their rapid rate of growth. In a veritable forestry invasion, the plantations have spread to other spaces, such as the mallines (humid environments where natural grasses grow), grasslands and flat lowland plains (grasslands in zones where there is water) traditionally used for crops. The vast plantations surrounding the communities cause, on the one hand considerable decrease in water courses, aridity in soils and extermination of a great number of medicinal species. On the other hand, in many zones and as a consequence of spraying from the air to control organisms affecting the plantations, water is polluted and impacts are felt on fruit trees, medicinal plants that have managed to survive and on crops. Many animals, birds and insects that maintained the ecological balance have also disappeared. All this has caused disorders in the health of people and domestic animals, leading to a serious deterioration of the Mapuche families' economy.

Extermination of plants in many Mapuche communities together with difficulty in accessing them have currently become a recurring issue in the Machis' discourse, who find their work hindered:

“The remedies of the earth are very important but they no longer exist, they have been exterminated by the wingka (“the other”, white men) by fire and furthermore they have planted pines, they have planted eucalyptus, that is why the remedies have finished, there are no lawen (plants), they have gone” (a Machi from Rüpücura).

Since the arrival of the Spaniards, the Mapuche people have seen their world completely upset and have had to adapt to adverse circumstances in their communities. They have even been evicted to the belts around the cities, where most of the population is now concentrated. However the Mapuche continue to generate mechanisms for resistance to preserve their cultural, linguistic, political and religious characteristics.

Faced by the invasion of their territory by trees that are ending their medicinal resources while

worsening health problems due to contamination, the Mapuche defend their territorial space, firmly express their demands, often having to face repressive forces.

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