

MAPUCHE CULTURE

LOCATION

The Mapuche Indians are a native people of South America, who originally lived in an area around the Aconcagua Valley of Chile, regions south of the island Chiloe and western parts of Argentine Patagonia. They are still the largest ethnic group living in the Americas, even though their numbers have been greatly reduced since the Spanish Conquest. In the Mapuche language, 'Mapu' means land and 'che' means human, so 'Mapuche' stands for 'people of the land.' Before the Spanish came to this region around 1540, the Mapuche were a prosperous people living from hunting, fishing and farming. The regions where they lived were fertile; it was covered with forests, and rich with precious metals and minerals.

HISTORY

The Spanish came to this region around 1540, but they never managed to successfully conquer the Mapuche people. Although the Spanish had more modern weapons, the Mapuche used their knowledge of their land and other clever military tactics to their advantage. The most famous Mapuche leader was Lautaro who lived in the 16th century AD. He had been captured by the Spanish and became a servant to the Conquistador Pedro de Valdivia. During his captivity he carefully observed his enemies and learned about Spanish warfare. After Lautaro managed to escape in 1540, he led his Mapuche army all the way up to the gates of Santiago, capturing and killing the Spanish leader Valdivia. It is said that Lautaro invented guerrilla warfare, a military tactic that would be used in many future South American wars.

The Spanish took much of the land and gold away from the Mapuches, yet because of their fierce resistance they managed to live in relative freedom from colonial involvement until the late 19th century. The Mapuche people withdrew further and further south into Chile and lost most of their land. They were forced into reservations and to this day they had to survive by farming on very small plots of land which wasn't very fertile. Until this day the Mapuche people of Argentina and Chile are fighting to reclaim some of their old territories and keep their culture alive.

RELIGION

The Mapuche are a deeply religious people who view life as a constant struggle between the powers of good and evil. They have a dualist perception of the universe, meaning they view the cosmos as two opposite and complementary worlds in one. One world is the natural world, represented by the earth with its people. The other is a supernatural world which is magical and spiritual represented by the sky. The spiritual world is called Wenumapu, and it is an organized and balanced region located between the clouds and the cosmos. Here the gods, spirits and ancestors live. Next to the Wenumapu is its opposite, the Anka-wenu, a disorganized and chaotic space next to the clouds where evil spirits called Wekufes live. These cause illnesses and suffering to mankind.

The Mapuche worship a heavenly family of gods: Nguenechen, Kushe, Elmapun, Elchen and Ngunemapun. The Machi spiritual leaders keep in contact with the gods and are responsible for combating the power of Wekufu (evil). The Nguillatún, a religious festival, most fully expresses the heart of Mapuche religion. It is celebrated at different times of the year to re-establish the balance in the lives of the Mapuche. This can be in response to natural disasters or social disorder. However, it can also be a ritual to give thanks for a harvest or other good things. The Nguillatún ritual brings the entire Mapuche community together, the living as well as the dead, and is directed principally to the God of the sky, their creator: Chau (also known as Nguenechen).

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

The Mapuche did not have a central government but lived in communities formed by extended families, led by a chief, called Lonko, which literally means 'head.' These communities could be as large as 800 people. The Lonko received great respect and led his people in times of war. Other than the Lonko, the most respected members of the Mapuche society were the elderly and the Machis.

A Machi was a woman who served as a shaman, or medicine woman in religious ceremonies as well as in healing the sick and wounded. She was also known as her people's representative to the gods. A Machi could be recognized by her special ritual clothing and jewellery. During religious festivals, such as Nguillatúns, she danced and performed on sacred instruments such as the Kultrun, a special kind of drum.

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The Mapuche still speak their own language known as Mapudungun. Their rich oral tradition contains many myths and stories, which they pass along in their own language. This is how they managed to preserve much of their culture and traditions up to this day.

CULTURE

A typical Mapuche dwelling had a thatched roof hut, often with a little side building that served as a kitchen. Polygamy was commonly practised among the Mapuche Indians: this meant that one man could marry more than one woman. The children had the task of herding and feeding the farm animals, while both men and women worked on the land. Mapuche men were very distinguished craftsmen, making musical instruments, wooden tools, household utensils, and jewellery. Women were skilful weavers and dyers of wool, they were taught this craft by their mothers from a very early age. Other important cultural expressions were dancing and singing. Good dancers and singers were highly respected by the Mapuche people.

