

## I.II.3

# The Aché of Paraguay

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## Introduction

The Aché, a Tupi-speaking group, often called Guayaki in earlier literature, are foragers of the forested regions of eastern Paraguay, probably best known as the subjects of detailed quantitative ecological studies (from the 1980s). Early reports emphasized their practice of cannibalism, their white skin, light eye and hair color, beards, and Asian features. Their subsistence practices and technology were considered extremely simple; they were nomads, secretive and evasive. Cultural descriptions focused on high levels of intra-group violence, polyandry, and males who took on female roles. Biological studies have emphasized their genetic dissimilarity to most other lowland South American Indians. After contact the Aché became well known as victims of an alleged policy of genocide. Later work has dealt primarily with human ecology: resource acquisition, food sharing, time allocation, and life history patterns. Aché and Aché-like peoples may have inhabited much of the Parana River drainage in the pre-European era. Peoples like the Heta of Brazil are closely related to the Aché. Many such groups have become extinct. Four isolated, distinct linguistic groups of Aché survived to the twentieth century.

## History

The first recorded descriptions of Aché peoples were made by Jesuit missionaries in the 1600s. Archaeological data suggest foragers with similar technology may have inhabited the area for 10,000 years. About 1000 BP, Guaraní horticulturalists migrated into the region and preyed on the less powerful foraging peoples, perhaps causing them to adopt a more nomadic lifestyle in forested hills away from navigable rivers. Until European conquest in the late twentieth century (peaceful contact period) no peaceful interactions between the Aché and other native groups had ever been reported. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the enslavement of the

Guaraní and their removal to Brazil probably facilitated Aché population expansion. Subsequent extermination of the rural Paraguayan population in the nineteenth century's Triple Alliance War probably contributed to the Aché remaining foragers into the twentieth century (the forest period).

No significant ethnographies of the Aché existed before the present century. A German immigrant, Federico Mainthusen, had pacified one group of Aché by 1910 and published sparse but important observations about them before his World War I return to Germany. The four present-day Aché cultural isolates were first contacted in 1959, 1963, 1971, and 1979. These newly contacted groups were settled on government reservations where scores died in respiratory epidemics. Not until the 1970s were detailed ethnographic studies published. Most important among recent ethnographic research are the publications of Clastres (1972a, 1972b, 1974) and Cadogan (1965). Since the late 1970s ecological studies have resulted in more than forty publications by Hill, Hurtado, Hawkes, and Kaplan.

## Ecological setting

The Aché home range is flat neotropical forest on old sedimentary soils, interrupted by small patches of grassland, *cerrado*, swamp, and *caatinga*. About 80 percent of the area is high mature forest, the preferred habitat of the Aché. Elevation varies from 100 to 300 m through most

### Population

In July 1989, there were 37 Nacunday Aché, 41 Ypety Aché, 54 Yvytyruzi Aché, 498 Northern Aché and 55 children of mixed Aché parents. Each group is distinguished culturally and dialectally. The population is growing at 3.6% per year.

### Location

At the turn of the century the ancestors of individuals in these groups roamed some 60,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the western Parana River drainage. By 1955 their range had been reduced to some 22,000 km<sup>2</sup>. In 1995 they lived on five reservations totaling 130 km<sup>2</sup>. They continue to forage on neighboring private and public lands.



16 An Aché woman extracting palm fiber, 1982. Her ten-month-old infant is carried rather than being set on the forest floor. Photo: Kim Hill and A. Magdalena Hurtado.



17 An Aché man hunting white-lipped peccaries signals the direction the herd is moving, 1981. Photo: Kim Hill and A. Magdalena Hurtado.

of the range. Mean yearly rainfall is about 1800 mm. October–February rainfall is triple that of May–September. Seasons are marked by consistent variations of temperature and rainfall, the mean daily high temperature being about 35°C (January) and mean low 10°C (July). Freezing temperatures occur several nights a year.

The twentieth-century Aché range is bisected by numerous streams and small rivers, none of which exceeds 20 m in width. Forests contain valuable hardwoods but less species diversity than most Amazonian sites. Large emergent trees reach diameters of 1.5 m and heights of 35 m. Fruits are abundant in the warm wet season, and domestic oranges have naturalized throughout the forest in recent centuries. Vertebrate abundance and diversity is lower in Paraguay than most Amazonian sites but game species like armadillos, pacas, and *Cebus* monkeys are found at high densities.

### Economy

The traditional Aché economy was based on hunting mammals, complemented by palm starch, honey extraction, and the collection of palm larvae. Game was

hunted by hand or with bow and wood-tipped arrows, whereas palm products, honey, and larvae were all extracted using a celt-type stone axe. Observations on post-contact foraging bands suggest that meat contributes about 78 percent of caloric intake in the diet, and honey about 8 percent (both obtained by men). Only seven game species (in order of importance: nine-banded armadillo, Capuchin monkey, white-lipped peccary, paca, coati, brocket deer, collared peccary) make up over 90 percent of the game biomass appropriated, more than half being killed by hand. The remaining 14 percent of the diet is made up of palm starch, palm hearts, insect larvae, and fruits (collected mainly by women). Palm products may have been more important in the pre-contact diet. The total daily caloric intake exceeds 2700 calories per capita, making the Aché one of the best fed of foraging peoples.

Energy expenditure among the Aché is also correspondingly high. Men engage in seven strenuous hours of hunting per day. Women forage a mean of two hours per day, and, carrying heavy loads, they move camp an additional two hours per day. Women's remaining time is expended in high-quality childcare.

Resource redistribution within Aché bands is more

widespread than that documented for any other group of foragers. Hunters do not usually eat from their own kill, and nuclear family or kin are no more likely than unrelated band members to receive a share of meat. Honey is also widely shared but vegetable resources and larvae are more likely to be eaten by close kin of the acquirer.

### Settlement pattern

At the time of peaceful outsider contact in 1971, the Northern Aché (population 557) lived in ten to fifteen camps of flexible composition in a territory of 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Adults had access to the entire home range; however, many spent most of their time in certain core areas. Interview census data show that forest residential camps ranged from three to more than one hundred persons at any point in time. The mean number of adult men per camp was 9.2 and the median was 7. Observed camps in the post-contact period have a mean of 11.4 adult men and a median of 9. In the post-contact period Aché camps move virtually every day of the year. Informants indicate that in the earlier forest period, camps often remained in the same location for seven to fifteen days.

Bands often formed around a core bilocal kin group and one or two important men whose names may have identified the band. Bands frequently dispersed temporarily into small, family-group camps for a day or two before reuniting. Sometimes children would be left in a base camp for a day or two with grandparents serving as baby-sitters. Resources from these outings would then be carried back to the central camp. Bands generally camped within a few hours' walk of each other, although members might roam 50 to 100 km from the nearest neighbors for periods of up to two months.

### Domestic organization

Aché kinship terms lump parents with aunts and uncles, and both cross- and parallel-cousins with siblings. There are no clans, moieties, or descent groups. Marriage is forbidden between siblings, cousins, and persons who stand in a "godparent-godchild" relationship (see below). There are no prescribed marriage partners or arranged marriages. Individuals choose their own partners. Most women were traditionally married at least once prior to menarche (first marriage mean age: 15.2 years); men were not allowed to marry until after completion of puberty rites (first marriage mean age: 20.2 years). Divorce was very common in the forest period, with post-reproductive women reporting a mean of twelve spouses in a lifetime. No first marriage ever lasted in our sample period, and most women had

produced children with two to five different men by menopause. Post-marital residence is generally matrilocal when the bride is young, but older couples may reside in bands with any close kin. About 4 percent of all men were married polygynously in a random pre-contact marriage sample; and polyandry was occasionally observed (0.2 percent of marriages). No man in the twentieth century had more than two wives simultaneously.

### Political organization

Aché bands had no formal leaders or leadership positions. One or two powerful men were often referred to as leaders of a band in the sense that they might more emphatically exercise their will on decisions important to them. Nevertheless, band decisions included input from most adult members of both sexes. Individuals who cared most about a particular outcome usually have had the most influence in the final decision. Today, reservation Aché communities have elected leadership positions. Reservation "chiefs" lead discussions about community problems but rarely make decisions without strong community consensus. Chiefs are elected by popular vote of all adults and can be removed whenever a significant minority of the reservation community demands a new election. Votes of confidence in current leadership take place about every four months. To date only men have served as elected community leaders.

### Religion and ritual

Aché informants report that formerly they believed in supernatural beings and "spirits" with diverse properties. These spiritual beings appear not to have been associated with a moral system involving rewards and punishments for those who upheld or violated community moral standards. The most prominent supernatural being in Aché mythology, *Berendy* (burning-illuminating being), assumes both human and comet/meteor forms, and gives some animals their properties and powers. Another important spiritual power is *Krei'i* which sometimes takes the form of shadows or wind. *Krei'i* is involved in healing and dreams. *Anjave* is an evil spirit that causes people harm and accidents. It is possible that these three beings are derived from Christian concepts that have reached the Aché in the 400 years since the Jesuits established a prominent presence in eastern Paraguay.

The most important Aché rituals take place at birth, puberty, death, and clubfights. Children are given the name of an animal that their mother cooked during her pregnancy (a species usually large, rare, or taken in sudden abundance). Birth rituals involve a man who cuts

the umbilical cord, a woman who cares for the newborn child, and others who wash the baby and care for the mother. These birth helpers become the *jary* (godparents), and remain in a ritual relationship to the child and its parents for life. Puberty ceremonies for both sexes include body scarification. Young men's lower lips are pierced at puberty. They are subsequently required to participate in clubfights. Most adult males previously participated. Rituals following the clubfight involved adult female relatives of all participants. Funerary ceremonies involve burial, and the construction of a house over the grave. Some older or "angry" individuals were previously cremated. One of the Southern Aché groups practiced cannibalism into the 1960s.

### Current situation

Two Aché reservations have resident Catholic missionaries; two others have Protestant missionaries, and the fifth, now independent, recently evicted Protestant missionaries. The reservation economy consists of swidden agriculture (primarily manioc, maize, and yams), foraging, and wage labor. Scan sampling shows time dedicated to multi-day foraging has diminished considerably in the past twenty years. The Aché experimented heavily with cash cropping in the 1980s; within a decade they had all but abandoned the activity as unproductive. Wage labor has produced little income recently. A study conducted on two reservations in 1992 showed that mean familial net worth was no greater than it had been in 1980 (Hill and Hurtado 1996). We calculated a mean net worth of \$12 per nuclear family. This included the value of all housing material, clothing, food, tools, livestock, handicrafts, traditional tools, cash stores, and miscellaneous items. Recent economic developments include income-generating activities carried out on reservation lands, especially in the field of agroforestry.

Marriage is now monogamous and divorce rates have diminished considerably. Some ritual activities have been

abandoned (lip-piercing, scarification, clubfighting). Other cultural traits are diminishing (puberty ceremonies, birth ceremonies, singing, body decorations). Evangelical Protestantism is the most pervasive religion, with Aché preachers leading Sunday and mid-week services. Supplanted by Guaraní, the lingua franca of rural Paraguay, the Aché language is disappearing. In a recent interview, community leaders said they intended to maintain only a few traditional customs, including the "godparenting" rituals, traditional diet preferences for game, honey, and insect larvae (not consumed by their Paraguayan neighbors), and an emphasis on extended food-sharing.

### Organization for resistance

The Aché are not well organized to pursue their interests in national or international forums. Few are literate in Spanish; even community leaders are intimidated by low-level government officials. Catholic Church persons have organized regular pan-tribal meetings (with missionary-dominated agendas) between the five reservations. Aché representatives have rarely traveled outside Paraguay, and always accompanied by non-Aché friends/translators/guides. The Chupa Pou reservation has an outstanding land claim which will be settled when the Paraguayan Indian Institute pays the prior owner for expropriation of his land. The Chupa Pou chief also sits on the board of directors for the Mbaracayu Foundation, the organization responsible for the management of the Mbaracayu Forest Reserve adjoining two Aché reservations. Aché foragers have permanent use rights for traditional subsistence activities inside that reserve. The Paraguayan government has offered little in the way of resources or technical help; nevertheless, the Aché have fared well at the hands of Indian rights organizations, missionaries, and small-scale development agencies. Those closest to the Mbaracayu Reserve have obtained modest, long-term help from the Moises Bertoni Foundation, a conservation NGO involved in the management of the reserve. Both communities have also worked with anthropologists to obtain a large USAID grant designed to improve reservation infrastructure.

### Reading list

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"We love to be on the move. We only sleep once in a place, but if it rains we might sleep several times before moving on. When the rain stops, we hit the undergrowth with our unstrung bows to shake down the waterdrops and frighten the jaguars. We are on the move again."

(Bepurangi, 1978)

"If you are hungry, don't think about it. If your child dies, don't think about it. Don't cry. Those who cry a lot will be hit. Those who don't cry, soon will have another child."

(Japegi, 1995)

"My children may one day live in a place of many houses. I will not live there. Here, with the Aché, is my place."

(Achipurangi, 1996)

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