

“Political Advocacy and Religious Allegiance: Catholic Missions and Indigenous
Resistance in Paraguay, 1982-1992”

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Despite the famed Jesuit missions that thrived in Colonial Paraguay until 1767, the Catholic Church since then has had minimal success attracting indigenous converts. The principal reason why native people rejected church efforts is that they correctly associated Catholicism with national society, which harbored deep-seated prejudice against the natives. As late as 1960, Mbyá chief Remigio Benítez in Caaguazú rejected baptism into the Catholic Church. As the leader explained, “Sure, allow myself to be baptized so that when they [non-Indians] see me pass by they point at me and say: ‘see that imbecile avá [native] who puts on airs of being civilized!’”¹ Catholic workers themselves recognized their denomination had failed to “convert the pagan *indígenas*.” As career missionary José Seelwische argued, “civilizing and educating them towards a Christian way of life [had] not succeed[ed] in any way to convince *indígenas* to abandon their superstitions, pagan rituals, and primitive customs. Missionaries felt their work was impossible.”² By the 1960s, Catholic efforts to gain native adherents were at their worst.

Traditional approaches to missions in Latin America have emphasized the role of the missionaries and presented them as conveyors of civilization to the backward native peoples. By ignoring the important role that indigenous peoples themselves played in shaping their interaction with missionaries and outsiders, earlier studies helped to relegate native groups to a non-historical past as passive recipients to outside influence. Studies since the 1980s have sought to correct earlier work by integrating anthropological views that considered indigenous perspectives and goals. By drawing from social history and ethnohistorical examinations, this work fits within recent trends in the field and seeks to explain Catholic proselytism with indigenous agency in mind.³ This paper will argue that the Catholic Church employed political advocacy to increase its influence among indigenous peoples in Paraguay. At the same time, though, native groups actively took advantage of Catholic support in their own struggle against the regime. In the end both allies were instrumental in Stroessner’s 1989 overthrow.

While at an all-time low by the mid-twentieth century, Catholic missions in Paraguay received a boost in 1958, when the young Stroessner regime designed an integration program to clear indigenous peoples off tribal lands and incorporate them further into national society. The state relied heavily on Catholic agencies to assist native communities in raising living standards and to culturally change native groups. In 1965, the director of the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DAI) asked the Vatican for a mission “to take charge of the catechization of the 40,000 remaining *indígenas* that live in our country, “without pastors and professing their native religions.” Strapped for funds, the regime requested that the mission “be supplied with the economic means to strengthen the socioeconomic bases of native families.”⁴

Both Catholic and Protestant missions agreed by 1965 to cooperate fully with the regime’s plans for integration, but the Protestants shared a much more successful history of proselytism within native groups. The Anglicans, for instance, had proselytized

¹ León Cadogan, “En Torno a la Aculturación de los Mbyá-Guaraní del Guairá,” *América Indígena*, 20, No. 2, (April, 1960), 148.

² José Seelwische O.M.I., “Los Misioneros y la Autogestión de los Pueblos Indígenas,” unpublished manuscript, 1991, AENM.

³ See, for instance, Erick Langer and Robert H. Jackson, *The New Latin American Mission History*, University of Nebraska Press, 1995, 190.

⁴ Zarate and Dr. Ezequiel Alsina, president of the AIP, to Monsignor Dr. Victor Righi, apostolic nuncio for the Papacy in Rome, Asunción, January 11, 1965, INDI, Carpeta 110, CEE, 1958-1969.

successfully in the Chaco since 1888. Between 1964 and 1970 nearly 900 people, almost the entire Enxet tribe, joined the Anglican Church.”⁵ During the 1960s, native settlements within the Mennonite Colonies experienced messianic movements and increased participation within that Protestant denomination.⁶ The best way to explain the successful Protestant proselytism was that like for Quichuas in Chimborazo Ecuador, Protestantism served to forge a new ethnic identity in opposition to rural Catholic peasants.⁷ While Anglicans and Mennonites reported mass baptisms and promised the state to prepare a trained and willing population of workers, Catholics were not able to follow suit.⁸

In March 1965, in a desperate measure, the Catholic Episcopal Conference (CEP), finally asked the pope to send missionaries to catechize 25,000 indigenous people in the eastern dioceses of Villarrica and Encarnación. Completely ignoring that the three Guaraní tribes in the area already shared a horticultural tradition, the bishops pointedly asked that missionaries be prepared to guide the Guaraní groups towards an agricultural lifestyle.⁹ Broad ignorance of cultural differences directly hampered proselytism efforts.

The Vatican overlooked Paraguay for the moment because it was involved in the Second Vatican Council of 1962-1965. Pope John XXIII called on his congregation during these meetings to defend human rights as a new way to evangelize the modern world.¹⁰ When Latin American bishops met in 1968 at Medellín to consider the pope’s suggestions, they agreed to participate in politics and emphasize social justice to increase influence within the lower classes. Following the conference, bishops in Paraguay shifted from evangelization to economic assistance to influence rural peoples: “action with the *indígenas* must be primarily economic and cultural rather than evangelical,” bishops decreed.¹¹

Regardless of trends in the broader Catholic Church, in 1968 the regime marked ten years of integration efforts by thanking all missions for their assistance to indigenous people. “Missionaries in present day Paraguay have laid the foundation for the true *indigenista* activities in our country,” the presiding colonel declared, and attributed the natives’ survival to mission labor.¹² State adulation, however, could not cover the fact that Protestant missions had grown rapidly while Catholic missions had largely failed.

Regardless of its poor influence among native groups, as a result of Medellín the church adopted a critical position towards the regime. In January 1969, the Conference of Bishops (CEP) met with Stroessner and asked him to improve human rights, and Archbishop Bogarín publicly positioned the church firmly against the dictatorship and its abuses of human rights. The church’s radicalization brought a swift response from security forces, who closed a Catholic seminary, expelled Jesuit priests, canceled food

⁵ Stephen Kidd, *Religious Change: a Case-Study Amongst the Enxet of the Paraguayan Chaco*, unpublished thesis, University of Durham, 1992, 111.

⁶ Wallis, *op. cit.*, 41.

⁷ Blanca Muratorio, “Protestantism, Ethnicity, and Class in Chimborazo,” in Norman Whitten, ed., *Cultural Transformations and Ethnicity in Modern Ecuador*, Urbana, 1981, 520, 522.

⁸ Barbrooke Grubb, SAMS missionary, 1908/9, cited by Kidd, 61.

⁹ CEP Bishops to the archbishop of Asunción, March 25, 1965, AENM.

¹⁰ Scott Mainwaring and Alexander Wilde, eds., *The Progressive Church in Latin America*, Notre Dame, 1989, 10.

¹¹ Meeting between Catholic administrators and Alfonso Borgognon, December 14, 1967, AENM.

¹² *Ibid.*, 348.

and clothing shipments from the US and violently repressed students who protested with church support. On December 8, when the president had traditionally led thousands on a thirty-five kilometer trek to the Virgin of Caacupé, the church instead staged a dramatic protest. Catholic bishops replaced the pilgrimage with a vigil of penitence in protest of state repression, where the most distinguished cleric of the day, Secundino Nuñez, explained the church's new anti-regime stance. During the vigil security forces beat up a priest and severely injured students in an attempt to squelch the non-violent demonstrations.¹³ While at first only a nuisance to Stroessner, the church's new position severely crippled the DAI when Catholic charities sharply curtailed contributions of food and medicine to the regime and its native charges.

After declining to support state work with indigenous people, the church focused instead on organizing *campesinos* into agrarian leagues and base communities. The regime associated such activities with communist efforts and cracked down violently on religious lay workers in the countryside. After one very severe period of repression in 1970, Bogarín again asked Stroessner to respect the church's rural organizations and stop "persecuting" Christian *campesino* leaders.¹⁴ When this plea failed, the conflict grew severe and bishops accused the regime of ignoring peasant conditions, land reform and of torturing prominent bishops and religious workers. To show their displeasure, in 1971 church elders even excommunicated one of Stroessner's ministers and the chief of police. Security forces in retaliation murdered several priests that worked with the peasant leagues, expelled others from the country and clashed with students and lay workers.¹⁵

As the Catholic hierarchy became more critical of the regime, Protestant agencies increased their cooperation with the Department of Indigenous Affairs. By the year's end, most Protestant missions expanded their mission activities and the regime facilitated this growth. The DAI waived custom duties for medicine and tools for the indigenous people and authorized Protestants to initiate new proselytism in native settlements. In 1971, the regime praised its "close bonds" with Protestant missions and promised such cooperation "improved and facilitated the DAI's work to acculturate our indigenous peoples."¹⁶

The Catholic Church realized that one way to counter growing Protestant success and increase its influence within indigenous communities was to adopt human rights advocacy. In 1971, German anthropologist Mark Münzel denounced the dictator for attempted genocide against the Ache, a nomadic Guaraní group in Eastern Paraguay that the regime had tried to settle permanently. The Catholic hierarchy jumped at the chance to criticize the state and call attention to human rights. In May 1972, the Catholic University held a conference that addressed the situation of native peoples in Paraguay. Münzel was the primary speaker and called on Paraguayans to help improve deteriorating conditions at the Ache settlement and in native communities throughout the country.¹⁷

Following these encounters, Paraguayan scholars and Catholic activists began to use the Ache situation as a way to criticize the state integration policy and the regime.

¹³ Miguel Carter, *El Papel de la Iglesia en la Caída de Stroessner*, 59.

¹⁴ Miguel Carter, *El Papel de la Iglesia...*, Asunción, 1991, 70.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 76.

¹⁶ Ejercicio del Año 1971, DAI # 6, January 21, 1972, INDI, Carpeta Memorias, 5.

¹⁷ "Persigue Hoy Conferencias sobre Indigenismo en la Universidad Católica," *ABC*, May 31, 1972, n.p.

The director of the anthropology department at the Catholic University, Miguel Chase Sardi, declared that the regime's integration policy was genocidal.¹⁸ Münzel's spouse Cristine and Jesuit anthropologist Bartomeu Melià, general secretary of the Catholic Missions Team (CEP) 1972-1976, together wrote an ethnohistory of the Ache that also labeled the settlement as ethnocidal.¹⁹ The Catholic University published the articles and extended church support to the campaign against Ache integration.

Bartomeu Melià's position as director of Catholic missions helps explain why the church adopted indigenous rights as a weapon against the dictatorship. Melià had in 1969 conducted doctoral fieldwork among the Avá and Mbyá Guaraní. The Jesuit's encounter with Guaraní spirituality completely changed his view of proselytism, for he discovered that the indigenous people led profoundly spiritual lives without professing Christianity. Melià found that prayer, justice, contemplation and mysticism were already foundations for Guaraní historical consciousness and ethnic identity. Native society was permeated, Melià argued, with "Christian" principles such as mutual respect, and relative economic and political equality.²⁰ The priest held that since the Guaraní already led a religious live-style it was not necessary to catechize them but instead approach and learn from the native spiritual experience with respect and humility.

Profoundly influential, Melià used this premise to bring Catholic proselytism in line with Vatican II and Medellín.²¹ The Jesuit instructed missionaries to encourage indigenous people to once again practice their tribal rituals. After Catholic workers applied Melià's instructions at the mission of Akaraymí, the Avá Guaraní recommenced the visible practice of their *jeroky ñembo'é*, or prayer-dances and a wave of tribal ethnic identification spread to other Avá Guaraní communities.²² Catholic missionaries started to support indigenous distinctiveness, which raised ethnic pride within Guaraní groups.

Following the conferences at the Catholic University, ethnographer Chase Sardi, Melià and reporter Luigi Miraglia spoke out with increasing frequency about what they by now all referred to as "the genocide."²³ Melià declared, "the Ache reservation is an Ache graveyard." Chase Sardi added, "the Aches of the reservation are real prisoners in a concentration camp."²⁴ This last denunciation was especially threatening because Chase Sardi had worked in the U.S. under a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship and enjoyed international connections.²⁵ Encouraged by Melià and daring scholars at their university, Catholic bishops and other regime opponents also denounced the settlement of

¹⁸ Miguel Chase Sardi, "Apéndice, 1972, para la situación reciente de los Guajakí," *Suplemento Antropológico*, 6, (1971 [actually published in 1972]), 37.

¹⁹ Bartomeu Melià and Christine Münzel, "Ratones y Jaguares," *Suplemento Antropológico*, 6, (1971), 145.

²⁰ Alejandro E. Kowalski, "Aceptar al otro como Constituyente de uno mismo," in *Después de la Piel, 500 años de confusión entre desigualdad y diferencia*, Posadas, 1993, 37-39.

²¹ Bartomeu Melià, *El Guaraní: Experiencia Religiosa*, Asunción, 1991, 9.

²² Chase Sardi, *op. cit.*, 278.

²³ Chase Sardi published his report on recent Aché conditions in an appendix to his article "La Situación de los Indígenas del Paraguay," the *Suplemento Antropológico* 6 (1971), 37. Miraglia did so in the *ABC* (July 23, 1972) 1; and Melià in an interview with *La Tribuna* entitled "Melià: Los Indios Están en Estado de Cautiverio," (February 7, 1972), 13. Cited by Münzel, *The Aché Indians, Genocide in Paraguay*, 61.

²⁴ Münzel, *Ibid.* 55.

²⁵ Miguel Chase Sardi was a professor of ethnography and the coordinator of the Center for Anthropological Studies at the Catholic University of Asunción. He visited the U.S. between Sept. 1, 1971 to August 31, 1972. Gordon Ray, Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, to Garret Sweany, Consul, U.S. Embassy in Asunción, New York, August 25, 1971, INDI, File 122.2, CEE, 1959-1973.

the Ache in the Parliament, to the Holy See in Rome, to human rights organizations in Europe and eventually even to the United Nations.²⁶

The rise in church exposure of indigenous rights abuses not surprisingly coincided with a rapprochement between the Catholic hierarchy and the state. Exhausted by regime oppression, the church proclaimed a “Year of Ecclesial Reflection,” to improve relations. Ultimately part of a conservative backlash in the Vatican, the shift reflected the difficulty of sustaining an anti-regime stance over a long period of time. The growing activism by radical sectors of the church had caused serious breaches within the Catholic hierarchy and state repression had thinned the numbers of the Paraguayan clergy. In their shift to the right, Catholic bishops even distanced themselves from the Agrarian Leagues. In 1974, Archbishop Rolón finally shook hands with President Stroessner at the national cathedral for the first time in years, signaling an end to the standoff.²⁷

In the years immediately after Münzel’s charges of genocide, NGOs expanded their projects to defend native rights and lands in Paraguay. Human rights organizations and religious agencies pressed the dictatorship to alter and improve its integration policy for indigenous people. Missionaries supported indigenous autonomy rather than national integration. Clearly, native rights was a area where the church could remain conveniently socially engaged without further endangering its tenuous relationship with the dictator. In April 1974, the Catholic University launched the most ambitious NGO effort in favor of indigenous lands and political rights, the Marandú Project. *Indigenistas* and their church sponsors began to inform indigenous groups (Marandú means “information” in Guaraní) about the national government and their legal rights. The Marandú team also created a pan-indigenous council to lobby the regime on behalf of native land rights.²⁸ Over the next three years, *indigenistas* created projects to work with all five Guaraní tribes and thus improved native access to legal, medical and educational assistance.

Meanwhile, the charges of genocide continued to grow and embarrass the regime. Faced with deep cuts in US military and humanitarian assistance, the dictator finally tried to threaten his opponents into submission. In May 1974, Minister of Defense General Marcial Samaniego forced representatives from the government cabinets, religious agencies, educational institutions and even a diplomat from the U.S. embassy to sign a public decree that Münzel’s accusations had been false.²⁹ Almost immediately, Catholic workers declared that they had signed this disavowal against their free will. Later that same day, the Conference of Catholic Bishops called for an exhaustive inquiry of the Ache case. “The Department of Missions... denounces, based on concrete evidence, properly investigated, the existence of cases of genocide against the Ache Indians.”³⁰ Still more, bishops demanded an “exhaustive investigation of this matter with particular regard to the situation of several Indian groups in Paraguay, whose survival is seriously imperiled.”³¹ Despite the relaxation of tensions with the regime, the church still used indigenous affairs to criticize the regime and its social policies.

²⁶ “La CEP Estudia Informe Sobre Masacre de Indios,” *La Tribuna*, June 30, 1972, 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Infanzon to Bartomeu Melià, Asunción, April 17, 1974, INDI, File 110, CEE, 1974. “No hay genocidio en el Paraguay porque no hay intención de destruir grupos indígenas,” *ABC*, March 9, 1974, 7.

³⁰ CEP statement, May 8, 1974, cited by Arens, *Genocide in Paraguay*, 142.

³¹ *Ibid.*

It was leaders within the Catholic missions team and at the Catholic University that spearheaded the NGO activities on behalf of native communities and rights. The Marandú Project successfully raised political awareness within native groups and in addition informed national society about indigenous communities in its midst. One of the project's most successful endeavors was to bring together native people from Paraguay with indigenous leaders from throughout the nation and Latin America. In October 1974, thirty native leaders discussed their socioeconomic situations and finally issued a strong call for improved attention by national governments, respect for indigenous languages and cultures, and especially the ability to own property communally.³² Native leaders created a council for indigenous communities throughout the country that began to meet and lobby for native lands and rights. Successful native organization, however, quickly raised animosity among ranchers, in the dictatorship and even from those Catholic bishops who owned land and had close ties to ranching interests. Finally, security forces crushed these private initiatives in December 1975, when it raided the council's headquarters at the Catholic University and arrested leaders and promoters. Security forces held and tortured director Chase Sardi on charges that he managed a communist cell and released him only seven months later after pressure from foreign human rights advocates.³³

Despite blatant attempts at intimidation, however, the accusations of genocide refused to disappear. Instead, Paraguayans and the church employed Münzel's charges to criticize the dictatorship's policy of integration in its severest form. *Indigenistas* blew the charges out of proportion in an effort to assist the indigenous people. Ethnographer Miguel Chase Sardi, in fact, readily acknowledged that the German anthropologist had exaggerated his accusations about the Ache situation:

It is true that Münzel was a liar. Münzel lied and exaggerated some things. But those exaggerations made international pressure so intense that General Samaniego called us in and asked, 'what can we do to change Paraguay's image?' I recognize that Münzel lied, but I believe that by lying he helped the indigenous people. He exaggerated, one can not say lied, but instead exaggerated. That was his weakness. He put more poison than was necessary.³⁴

When pressed, Chase Sardi admitted that Münzel had exaggerated his accusations, most evidently when he later framed the Ache abuses as part of a deliberate genocidal plan to exterminate the entire indigenous population. The Catholic establishment, however, added its voices in the belief that a concerted effort, with appropriate international support, might actually improve both the Ache situation and regime treatment of indigenous peoples.

At the 1979 Puebla Conference in Mexico, conservative bishops quieted radical sectors of the church throughout Latin America. Even as the church became less critical of the state, its hierarchy realized that defending land rights might be a way to secure

³² "Se inició ayer en San Bernadino reunión de líderes indígenas de la selva tropical," *ABC*, October 9, 1974, 14; "Parlamento Indio pidió se devuelva tierras a tribus con títulos de propiedad de las mismas," *ABC*, October 15, 1974, 9; Colombres, *Por la Liberación del Indígena*, 248.

³³ Miguel Chase Sardi, interview, Asunción, August 16, 1995.

³⁴ Miguel Chase Sardi, interview, Asunción, August 16, 1995.

greater influence in native communities. In Paraguay, bishops adopted a more pragmatic, less confrontational, approach to the dictator. Still, the church actively challenged the regime to improve native conditions, especially the growing demands for ancestral tribal lands. In August, 1979, Catholic bishops pressured the regime to rapidly solve a growing demand by Toba Qom for their ancestral territory:

The missionaries among indigenous peoples, gathered in a study group at Ipacaraí, appeal to the corresponding institutions for them to quickly resolve the indigenous Tobas' anguished search for land. We trust that authorities do not seek the Toba's deaths when they do not pay attention to their appeals. We reaffirm our firm support of the Tobas in their many years old continuous appeal for these lands that they need for their habitat.³⁵

The strategic letter again employed Münzel's successful method for drawing attention to indigenous affairs: bishops threatened that if the state did not answer the Tobas' request it would be directly responsible for their physical extinction.³⁶

Beginning in the late 1970s, when the regime developed the lush territory that bordered Brazil for export crops and ranching, its conomic programs threatened native settlements even more seriously than before.³⁷ In 1975, Paraguay put into place a fifteen million dollar development project in the Department of Caaguazú that titled lands, opened roads and built health care facilities to encourage campesino settlement. While it boosted export crops, the project forced indigenous groups to divide communal territories and eventually pushed five local Mbyá groups, 280 families, off of their ancestral lands. Between 1978 and 1986, Stroessner invested US\$ 4.47 billion into fifteen rural projects that expanded the production of export crops.³⁸ In 1979, the regime initiated a \$54.3 million development program in the Caazapá Department and titled lands, created health centers, and build roads to assist small farmers.³⁹ The dictator, however, completely ignored in his development plans the 400 Mbyá families in the department, sedentary horticulturists who raised crops and worked as peons for ranchers.⁴⁰

Besides the extension of export crops, during the late 1970s the regime also resorted to large construction projects to boost the economy. Most significant were the hydroelectric plants at Yacyretá and Itaipú, which riased the nation's GNP by over ten percent annually between 1977 and 1980.⁴¹ Although the growth earned Stroessner electoral points and political support among the wealthy, it was disastrous for native communities and the rural lower classes. Infant mortality rate rose to almost fifty per

³⁵ CEP to Marcial Samaniego, Juan M. Frutos, Galoise S.A., Asunción, August 31, 1979, INDI, File 122.2, CER, 1979.

³⁶ Paraguayan Episcopal Conference to IBR, Marcial Samaniego, INDI, and La Galoise, S.A., August 31, 1979, INDI, File 122.2, CER, 1979.

³⁷ Baer and Birch, *op. cit.*, 787.

³⁸ The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the U.S. government financed these projects. Ramón Fogel, *op. cit.*, 31, 135-136.

³⁹ "Se prepara un proyecto de desarrollo rural de Caazapá," *ABC*, August 7, 1980, 16.

⁴⁰ Ramón Fogel, *op. cit.*, 62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 795.

cent, eighty per cent of the rural population still lived on dirt floors, and real wages for rural campesinos actually declined, despite an increase in the demand for labor.⁴²

Given deteriorating conditions in native communities and Catholic attempts to increase influence among rural populations, it is clear why the church chose native land claims to make a stand against the regime in the 1980s. The Enenlhit group that had begun in 1978 to demand access to tribal lands at Casanillo in the Northern Chaco built their demands on Catholic advocacy. The Catholic Mission Team, especially director Seelwische, mediated on the Enenlhit's behalf with the regime.⁴³ When the church threatened to cite the case as a human rights violation, it added weight to the native claim and forced the regime to finally expropriate the territory in November 1979. When the ranching company begrudgingly opened the gates, three hundred Enenlhit camped outside to increase the state pressure joyfully rushed in and cleared a road. The people were ecstatic: Father Seelwische experienced the dramatic event and recalled their great joy at finally being able to occupy Casanillo.⁴⁴ By the close of 1980, the Enenlhit were the first native group to have reclaimed lands from a prominent ranching company.

There was no escaping, however, that expropriating land so an indigenous group might support themselves flew in the face of plans for integration. After firing the director of the state Indigenista agency, who had lobbied for the Enenlhit, soldiers moved the native group over fifty kilometers away in trucks to a barren, dry plot completely unsuitable for either raising crops or for ranching.⁴⁵ Catholic bishops immediately launched a campaign on the natives' behalf and denounced the removal as a form of genocide.⁴⁶ The media added its support; never before had an indigenous conflict claimed so much daily news. All the major papers except Colorado Party media published frequent articles about the indigenous group that overwhelmingly supported their ancestral right to Casanillo and pressured the regime to reverse its decision.

The Catholic hierarchy had taken a firm stance Enenlhit rights and did not easily give up its struggle. Following the defeat, bishops reaffirmed the importance of native cultures and argued that indigenous people had the right to retain a distinct way of life. The church especially promised to tolerate indigenous religious expressions. Natives "were already on a path towards salvation when practicing their traditional religion," bishops declared in a novel shift of position, and "their own rites were adequate sacraments of salvation."⁴⁷ Finally, church leaders firmly promised to support indigenous land claims:

⁴² "Los ricos ganan 144 veces más que los pobres en nuestro país," *Última Hora*, December 2, 1980, 3. See also, Baer and Birch, *op. cit.*, 795, as well as Arens, "The Forest Indians in Stroessner's Paraguay: Survival or Extinction?" *Survival International Report*, London, 1978.

⁴³ José Seelwische, interview, Asunción, June 29, 1995.

⁴⁴ Seelwische, interview. See also "Mañana ocuparán tierras de Casado, en Casanillo," *ABC*, December 14, 1980, 18.

⁴⁵ "Casanillo está disponible pero buscamos sitio mejor," *Hoy*, January 7, 1981, 21.

⁴⁶ "INDI impidió ocupación de las tierras de Casanillo, En el Kilómetro 220, la tierra es inhóspita," *ABC*, January 6, 1981, 13. "Traslado es forma de genocidio," *ABC*, January 9, 1981, 13.

⁴⁷ José Seelwische, O.M.I., "Una interpretación del indígena desde las categorías de la Iglesia," *Acción*, 13, No. 51, (August, 1981), 23-25. See also Catholic articles from the period: "El indígena como persona," *Última Hora*, August 8, 1981, 7; "El indígena es una persona adulta, madura y educada," *Hoy*, August 7, 1981, 15.

We promise to work arduously for your lands. But we cannot promise beforehand when we will solve the problem. When we missionaries labor to assist the communities in securing their own lands, we do so in order that communities may live the way of life and religion that belongs to them. We never desire to pressure so that our religion is adopted. 'Land cannot be sold for religion.'⁴⁸

The church's detailed plan for social action attacked growing economic inequalities and positioned the church firmly behind indigenous, peasant and labor groups.⁴⁹ Bishops promised to struggle for indigenous lands "with all our strength and all the means within our grasp." At the same time, however, they also cited examples of indigenous groups who had found fulfillment of their tribal beliefs within Catholicism. In return for their denomination's advocacy, priests invited indigenous groups to explore participation in what was by far the largest religious denomination in Paraguay.

The Catholic Church honored its pledge to indigenous peoples and during the 1980s worked arduously on behalf of native land claims. Most of the serious struggles over land occurred in Eastern Paraguay, where development projects and ranching tried to clear natives off of tribal territories. In dozens of conflicts, the church represented indigenous people legally and supported their demands to the regime and national media.

One important battle over land began in August 1981, when Mennonite leader Isaac Hildebrand burned Mbyá homes and told the people to leave the Sommerfeld Colony. Conservative and prosperous settlers from Manitoba had in 1946 purchased 33,000 hectares in Caaguazú Department from the government and had initially used the indigenous groups within the large property to build their farms and workshops.⁵⁰ But when Mennonites grew to 1,400 in the late 1970s, settlers tried to open new farm and ranching areas for their children by clearing the Mbyá off colony land.

The Mbyá people had depended on horticulture, so they immediately denounced the intrusions to Catholic advocates in the capital. Leader Anselmo Miranda declared to the press, "they soon use heavy equipment to clear a path through the woods. This way they will destroy our crops. This is because they hope to introduce cattle, but for that they will need to pass over our houses..."⁵¹ Other Mbyá leaders traveled to the department capital of Villarrica, where a sympathetic judge ordered the Mennonites to halt their destruction of indigenous crops and homes. Máximo González told reporters,

I have been on this land for over twenty years and it is mine, I will raise crops on it, even though it bothers these Mennonites. They are not even Paraguayans, but they carry more weight than a paraguayo [sic]. Even the constable is afraid of them, because they have money. Why their Christ, if they leave their brother without food? This is an evil religion, if it teaches wickedness and hatred.⁵²

⁴⁸ "Carta de los Misioneros Católicos a todos los Pueblos Indígenas del Paraguay," December 1, 1981, AENM, 7.

⁴⁹ R. Andrew Nickson, "Tyranny and longevity: Stroessner's Paraguay," *Third World Quarterly*, 10, No. 1, (January, 1988), 246.

⁵⁰ Joseph Winfield Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay*, Scottdale, 1953, 48, 50.

⁵¹ "Mbyá denunciaron presiones de colonos Mennonitas," *Dialogo Indígena Misionera*, 2, No. 6, (November, 1981), 5.

⁵² "Desalojo de Mbyá en Sommerfeld, Le Rezan a su Diós pero nos dejan sin pan," *Hoy*, September 8, 1981, 16.

González's outburst seems to have been a calculated attempt to secure support within the *Paraguayo* population. Not only did the leader build on local jealousy of Mennonite prosperity, he also appealed to popular patriotism and reminded authorities that these outsiders nevertheless exerted significant political weight. Finally, the leader appealed to the anti-Protestant sentiment so prevalent in non-Indian Catholic society, especially in rural areas. Clearly, natives found identification with Catholicism at times convenient. Soon the natives had state and private agencies, as well as the Catholic Church hierarchy, pressuring Mennonites on their behalf.⁵³

Even while lobbying the state on behalf of the Mbyá, the church assisted the indigenous groups in the Chaco. Both the Toba Qom and Enenhit groups who had lost their bid for land turned for help to the Catholic Missions Team. Working through Paraguayan businesspersons, in October the church covertly purchased 15,000 hectares at Casanillo for the Enenhit.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, the Tobas had located a rancher willing to sell land near Paratodo and the church purchased 7,700 hectares for that native group as well. In November, the Toba group joyfully returned to their tribal homelands.⁵⁵

The successful cooperation between the church and indigenous groups must have made the regime worry it was losing control of integration. The very next month Congress enacted into law a progressive indigenous rights bill. Although Law 904 dramatically increased the state *indigenista* agency's power over the native population and sharply curtailed the potential benefits to native people, the bill did promise to respect indigenous cultures and return their tribal lands.⁵⁶ While the regime saw the law primarily as window dressing to placate opponents, however, native groups and Catholic advocates capitalized on the new legislation.

Widespread opposition to state integration, even when framed within progressive legislation, clearly altered native groups, uniting diverse tribes with a common resistance and cause. The Catholic educational establishment provided a forum for native people to make their interests known to the wider society. In November, 1983, Western Guaraní leader Severo Flores explained rising native unity to a group at the Catholic University:

In general we perceive the whites as trying to satisfy themselves, taking advantage of indigenous people in every possible way, when it suits them, as they did in times of the conquest... the native sees or perceives... that they came to take indigenous lands, to steal what we owned on this continent,... this is clear enough evidence for *indígenas* to have a clear understanding of the surrounding society... Native groups that still survive today... [oppose] the paternalistic tutelage and every acculturation plan put forth by the enveloping society. And for the whites, it is no longer the time to speak in place of the *indígenas*,... because they have much to learn from us if they are in the business of building an American culture or culture of a specific nation. Because indigenous persons today know what they want, know what they do, know what they ask for, and with even greater clarity, what they do not want. The indigenous person always

⁵³ Miguel Chase Sardi, *et. al.*, *Situación sociocultural, económica juridico-política actual de las comunidades indígenas en el Paraguay*, Asunción, 1990, 373.

⁵⁴ Father José Seelwische, interview, Asunción, June 29, 1995.

⁵⁵ "Nuevo Horizonte para los Toba Qom," *Diálogo Indígena Misionero*, 2, No. 6, (November, 1981), 12.

⁵⁶ "El Senado aprobó la creación del estatuto de los indígenas," *Hoy*, December 11, 1981, 8.

respects another group's culture, and for this reason wishes that their own culture be respected.⁵⁷

Flores showed that increased resistance was transforming indigenous consciousness. The leader situated indigenous groups securely outside of national society. Natives adopted a discourse that presented *Paraguayos* as oppressors and tied them directly to the European conquest and depredations. More importantly, Flores argued that indigenous protests had specific agenda that differed from the state plans for cultural integration and economic development. Indigenous people were aware that by opposing regime's plans, they were proposing distinct models for society based on their own ways of life and world views.

In the early 1980s, a second Enenlhit group began to demand the return of their ancestral land. A large number of this nation, one of the more numerous tribes in the Chaco, had moved in the first half of the twentieth century to ports on the northern Paraguay River to labor in tannin factories owned by the Casado Company. By 1970, the hardwood quebracho trees were depleted and most of the native labor force unemployed. The indigenous people began to demand that the state return the tribal lands it had sold to Casado with the natives inside. After passage of the indigenous rights bill, in 1983 the Enenlhit at Puerto Casado sent their chiefs on the expensive boat trip to the capital on six occasions to press the regime to return their homeland at Riacho Mosquito. Their urgency grew when Catholic workers discovered that the Casado Co. was trying to sell the land in the U.S. and Europe.⁵⁸ Recounting in great detail the difficulties their people faced for lack of land, this time leaders appealed directly to high regime authorities.

We urgently need these lands. Our people cannot continue to exist. The difficulties that our brothers at Puerto Casado must endure are many and serious, such as the lack of food and work, illness and severe treatment. Many brothers work only to get a bit of meat to feed their family. That is to say with Gs. 18,000 per month [U.S. \$36] they must feed and dress an entire family. But even more do not even have work and must recur to hunting and fishing... in order to subsist. If they give us lands, our ancestors' territory, we will cultivate and live on them as did our fathers and grandfathers... Given our situation of extreme needs, we come to request that we be allowed to take ownership of these lands and begin to farm and raise cattle on them.⁵⁹

Reviewing their critical economic conditions, the Enenlhit promised to contribute to agricultural production. Their pleas bore fruit: in November, the regime finally asked Casado to sell Riacho Mosquito for the Enenlhit. The powerful business refused.

The INDI sided with Casado and tried to manipulate, coerce, and divide the leaders. Time and again, natives refused to accept INDI negotiations and rather outmaneuvered the state agency. Clearly frustrated, on October 9, 1984, the regime forbade Catholic lawyers from attending a meeting with the Enenlhit at the Department

⁵⁷ Severo Flores, "Las comunidades indígenas frente a la sociedad nacional," *Suplemento Antropológico*, 19, No. 1, (June, 1984), 98-99.

⁵⁸ Casaccia, Gladys, and Vázquez, Mirna, *La Lucha por la Tierra en Defensa de la Vida, El Pueblo Maskoy frente a Carlos Casado S.A.*, Asunción, 1986, 40.

⁵⁹ "Nuestro pueblo no puede seguir así," *Última Hora*, January 5, 1984, 10.

of Defense. Then the state forced the Enenlhit to accept far less land than their original claim. Later, Catholic lawyers managed to overturn the coerced agreement by a small technicality.⁶⁰ Distinctly aware of who were their supporters and enemies, the Enenlhit broke off all relations with the INDI.

To improve their leverage, the Enenlhit elicited assistance from *Paraguayos* who also opposed the regime. By this time the public had embraced their cause as one way to counter state programs and support for the native group reached unprecedented levels. In 1984, 250 citizens signed a statement asking the regime to expropriate Riacho Mosquito for the Enenlhit. Next the Paraguayan Lawyers College and the Directive Council of the Catholic University wrote letters on behalf of the struggling group.⁶¹ Never before had an indigenous movement attracted so much attention from the media. Almost every day newspapers, even those that were officially pro-regime, supported the Enenlhit cause and denounced the INDI.⁶² In May *El Pueblo*, increasingly censorious of the regime, charged that the institute had become a huge bureaucracy, full of “experts” who every day were more opposed to the indigenous interests.⁶³ Paraguayans clearly used the Enenlhit campaign as a convenient way to criticize the ruling party and dictator.

Although the Enenlhit mobilized widespread national support in support of their cause, indigenous groups were still competing against significant odds. Peasants had by this time organized themselves into an important rural force and had forced the church to take sides. Organized by into over ten agencies and supported by the church, in the first ten months of 1985 *campesinos* invaded thirty-one private properties and forced nearly 300,000 Brazilian settlers to return to their country of origin.⁶⁴ Peasant organization caused difficulties for indigenous groups because the Catholic Church also supported the *campesinos* that often competed for the same land.

Throughout 1985, it was the Mbyá who most faced a rush of non-Indian settlers. By this time the state had surveyed native communities in the Caazapá Project area and had parceled them out to settlers, many recent arrivals from Brazil, for export crops. The project laid 230 kilometers of new and improved roads that tied the isolated forest areas into national transportation systems. Contrary to original stated plans, logging companies tore roads into the steepest terrain and settlers cut fields into the forest, strung fences and brought in cattle.⁶⁵ The rush of colonists forced fourteen Mbyá communities to abandon their ancestral lands throughout the year.⁶⁶ The regime promise to title native lands only made the land grab worse, since settlers rushed to strip forests before they were surveyed.

The only option that remained to the Mbyá lay with the Catholic Church, and its lawyers begged companies to respect native forests though communities still lacked legal titles to their land.⁶⁷ The Missions Team pleaded with the lending agency, the World Bank, to pressure the regime to fulfill its promises and threatened that otherwise the bank

⁶⁰ Mirna Vázquez, interview, Asunción, October 20, 1994.

⁶¹ Two-hundred Public Citizens to General Martínez, INDI, Asunción, October 4, 1984, AENM.

⁶² See, for example, “Maskoy: No ejecutaron hasta ahora la mensura,” *Noticias*, April 27, 1985, 13.

⁶³ “Los Maskoy han sido engañados por IBR e INDI,” *El Pueblo*, May 30, 1985, 2.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁵ Richard Reed, *Forest Dwellers, Forest Protectors, Indigenous Models for International Development*, 1997, Needham Heights, 83.

⁶⁶ “Indígenas en áreas del Proyecto Caazapá,” *Diálogo Indígena Misionera*, 6, No. 17, (April, 1985), 3.

⁶⁷ P. Wayne Robins, S.V.D., ENM, to Trans-Lumber S.A., Asunción, November, 1985, AENM.

would be guilty of genocide.⁶⁸ Ultimately, neither Catholic advocates nor the World Bank swayed the dictatorship, and the work in Caazapá continued. Carlino Núñez, Mbyá chief of the Ranchito community, described his people's sense of loss after a rancher had sold their land and *campesinos* had overrun his community:

We live in these woods that belong to us, that the creator gave us. The authorities also say that the land we use belongs to us, but the owner wants to sell his lands to Brazilians and Paraguayans, and they want to evict us because we are poor, we do not have money. It is money that is now the boss, and poor people cannot have land. All that is left to the poor is to die. As the Brazilian colonists clear the woods, the animals disappear. For all these reasons I was traveling to Asunción, to speak with officials at the INDI. They assured me that the land problem was already resolved; they gave us hope, but we continue to wait. Already two months have passed and they do not appear...⁶⁹

The Mbyá were desperate because their livelihood had disappeared along with the trees; the state program had destroyed their economic self-sufficiency. Still, Núñez showed a glimmer of hope: he had appealed for understanding and still awaited regime assistance.

The most widely-publicized indigenous struggle for land in 1985 for which the church mediated on behalf of a native group occurred in Alto Paraná Department, near Itakyry. Over one hundred Mbyá lived in the community of Paso Romero, by this time part of a 75,000 hectare La Golondrina ranch. The landowner, Blas Riquelme, had close ties to the regime and until 1984 had been president of the Chamber of Industry. For ten years after purchasing the property Riquelme had pressured the Mbyá to leave their ancestral territory. When the indigenous group stepped up requests to the IBR for land titles in the early 1980s, the rancher renewed his efforts to evict the natives. In July 1985, ranch hands finally gave the sixty-seven Mbyá families twenty-four hours to abandon their homes. Since most of the men were working elsewhere, women, children and elderly Mbyá escaped across the swollen river Acaray to the woods. One community member walked fifty-five kilometers to Itakyry in search of help from the police; his story made the national newspapers.⁷⁰ La Golondrina posted soldiers at the ranch gates and promised to burn the Mbyá houses if the people ever returned. Still, the Mbyá had nowhere else to go and eventually made their way back to their former community.

Pressured by the Mbyá and their Catholic bishop advocates, the INDI started negotiations with La Golondrina, and Minister of Defense Samaniego himself spoke with Blas Riquelme on behalf of the Mbyá.⁷¹ Perhaps not surprisingly, the official negotiations quickly failed. The rancher offered to give a different plot to the Mbyá, land of poor quality outside of their homeland, and continued trying to evict the natives from his property.⁷² Ranch hands next started to physically abuse the Mbyá men and women. As harassment continued, one day early in October Riquelme's manager, Antonio Rotelo, forcibly dragged the tribe's religious leader, Porfirio Fariña, from his home. Rotelo

⁶⁸ Wayne Robins to W. W. Clausen, president of the World Bank, Asunción, December 30, 1985, AENM.

⁶⁹ Ramón Fogel, *op. cit.*, 91.

⁷⁰ "Denuncian desalojo de 100 indígenas de una estancia," *El Diario*, August 8, 1985, 41.

⁷¹ "Denuncian quema de capueras en Paso Romero," *Hoy*, September 24, 1985, 19.

⁷² "Armados desalojaron a los indígenas," *Hoy*, October 19, 1985, 18.

pushed Fariña onto the narrow log bridge over the nearby river, shouting all the while that his people were to leave the ranch. The manager hit Fariña repeatedly with his rifle butt, and even fired shots close to his head. Removing Fariña's clothing, Rotelo finally threatened to castrate the shaman with his sharp machete.⁷³ After Fariña timorously made his way home, the entire community awaited the rancher's next move in fear.

The Mbyá group did not have long to wait. The following day Blas Riquelme himself, accompanied by armed thugs on horses, rode up to the native community for the final eviction. To terrorize the people, first the men beat the Mbyá men and raped several of the women. Next they pushed over the people's houses with tractors and set them on fire. The people again fled in terror to the adjacent woods. One couple returned later to collect some possessions. Rotelo forced them into the trees and raped the woman in front of her husband.⁷⁴ After that violent act no Mbyá dared to return, and the entire group abandoned their homes.

United by their expulsion, the group immediately sent their leaders to regime authorities, newspapers and Catholic advocates in Asunción. The Mbyá defenders denounced the "arrogance, violence, and power of the large landowners" and insisted that the regime honor the Law 904.⁷⁵ Chief Ignacio Perõ clearly presented his group's plight:

We, the Mbyá, need the return of our woods. The land we occupied belongs to us... we have always been there. It is not just that someone evicts us only because they have money. The INDI should find a way to return the land that has been taken from us. It cannot be that we are beaten and our wives raped in plain sight of the authorities, and no one steps in to defend us.⁷⁶

As had other indigenous groups, the Mbyá at Paso Romero showed a clear understanding of class differences and of their low position within national society. The indigenous people claimed their ancestral lands by right of ancestral occupation, and highlighted their own need of these resources for continued survival. Chief Perõ concluded with a marked criticism of state complicity with the foreign landlords. Graphic and emotional reports of abuses such as these successfully raised public support. With assistance from Catholic advocates, the Mbyá raised enough popular outcry over Paso Romero to attract the attention of even foreign human rights agencies. Together the allies forced the INDI to purchase 1500 hectares for the Mbyá adjacent to Riquelme's ranch in May, 1986.⁷⁷

By 1986, it was not only indigenous people who opposed the regime's schemes to develop the countryside. Significant numbers of Paraguayans were fed up with the worsening economy, evidence of widespread corruption and the constant, heavy-handed repression. The church led the opposition by political activists, students, workers, and urban poor against the continued repression. In January, bishops proposed a popular

⁷³ America's Watch Committee, *Paraguay: Latin America's Oldest Dictatorship Under Pressure*, 59.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁷⁵ The nongovernmental *indigenista* agencies that signed this article included the following: The AIP, the API, the Catholic University, the Friendship Mission of the Disciples of Christ, the Paraguayan Anglican Church, the Catholic Missions Team, the Alto Paraná Prelature, the Chaco Apostolic Vicariate, the Pilcomayo Apostolic Vicariate, and the Diocese of Benjamín Aceval. "A La Opinión Pública," *El Diario*, November 3, 1985, 6.

⁷⁶ "El líder Mbyá solicita que las autoridades intervengan," *Hoy*, October 24, 1985, 21.

⁷⁷ "Comunidad "Mbyá" aceptó el asentamiento de 1.500 Has," *Última Hora*, May 30, 1986, 16.

discussion on a political opening. The regime refused to participate in the so-called *Diálogo Nacional*, claiming the church should not become involved in politics.⁷⁸ Throughout the year, anti-regime rallies that demanded political change shook the nation. In March and April, when the Authentic Liberal Radical Party held mass meetings in the interior, hundreds of peasants risked arrest in order to show their support. The Colorado Party quickly mobilized the *Macheteros de Santaní*, the feared Colorado peasant militia, to repress the rural uprisings. Priests led four large rallies of protest in the capital and at the end of May, 2,500 priests and lay workers paraded through Asunción and demanded social justice and a political opening. In June, when 3,500 youth marched in support of the *Diálogo Nacional*, police broke up these rallies with cattle prods and billy clubs.⁷⁹

The protesters again used forced indigenous integration to criticize the regime for human rights abuses. The Catholic Church launched a “national campaign” on behalf of the Enenlhit and distributed a logo advocating their right to ancestral lands. Labor unions, base ecclesial communities, and even campesino organizations added their support. In November, ten-thousand people signed a petition to expropriate Riacho Mosquito for the Enenlhit. Catholic lawyers clinched their case by showing that Casado had recently defrauded the government of U.S. \$ 3.7 million and had never paid for much of its 5.5 million hectares in the Chaco.⁸⁰

Peasant organization, especially when it conflicted with native interests, attracted attention to indigenous demands for land. As rural tensions escalated throughout 1987, the Enenlhit also heightened the stakes of their struggle. To force the regime to deliver on new promises, natives asked even more organizations to join their campaign. A large labor union and the AIP declared their support of the Enenlhit claim, and the Catholic Church presented 3,000 additional signatures to the Congress.⁸¹ Despite this show of support, though, the Enenlhit were cautious. René Ramírez declared that while the state had promised an expropriation, after having received so many false pledges his people would not believe the vows until they held the actual land titles in their hands.⁸²

Indigenous lobbies and popular pressure finally got the best of the weakened regime. On July 30, the Senate unanimously expropriated 30,103 hectares at Riacho Mosquito from Casado Company and gave them to the 300 Enenlhit families. To legitimate their action, senators cited the “largo y doloroso proceso de los indígenas.” Even more importantly, the debate over the expropriation included the repudiation, by minority deputies, of the violent police brutality which had the previous day led to over fifty arbitrary arrests.⁸³ Like it had at Casanillo, the regime granted land to the Enenlhit in an attempt to diminish growing anti-government opposition.

Still, the Enenlhit campaign for ancestral lands stands as a monument to native organization, resistance, and close cooperation with the Catholic Church. By demanding to recover territory and pressing against impressive odds, the natives repudiated the state integration program and demanded a chance to recuperate their economic independence.

⁷⁸ R. Andrew Nickson, *op. cit.*, 246.

⁷⁹ John Hoyt Williams, “Paraguay’s Stroessner: Losing Control?,” *Current History*, 86, No. 516, (January, 1987), 26.

⁸⁰ “Más firmas incurrieron en fraude,” *El Diario*, November 28, 1985, 11.

⁸¹ “Nuevas muestras de solidaridad para con Maskoy,” *Hoy*, July 22, 1987, 21; “Otras 3,000 firmas dan su apoyo a los maskoy [sic],” *Última Hora*, August 21, 1987, 16.

⁸² “Sólo habrá solución si tenemos nuestras tierras,” *Última Hora*, July 20, 1987, 19.

⁸³ “Senado aprobó expropiación,” *El Diario*, July 31, 1987, 11.

The Enenlhit and Catholic advocates had secured support from many NGOs and labor organizations, signatures from thousands of non-Indians and abundant media coverage. Thus, in what was to that date the most celebrated case in Paraguayan history, a native group successfully forced the regime to expropriate and return its ancestral territory.

Even though it surrendered in a few cases, the regime's response to indigenous mobilization was still unambiguous. The dictator opposed native attempts to secure land, and the National Indigenista Institute held fast to integration. Although the weakened regime was unable to simply make troublesome protests disappear, it tried to destabilize communities that continued some measure of economic independence. Between 1984 and 1986, the state divided Avá Guaraní and Paĩ Tavyterã settlements when it exploited previous divisions and bribed leaders to extract lumber.⁸⁴

Continued abuses in the countryside fueled further resistance in the capital. In August, the church announced that Pope John Paul II would visit Paraguay in 1988 and would meet with indigenous groups at a Catholic mission in the Chaco.⁸⁵ The prospect of a papal visit encouraged further demonstrations. By October, 1987, collective protests reached an unprecedented pitch as people responded to the worsening economy and the recent lifting of the siege. On the thirtieth, the church united all of the opposition into a massive show of power. Catholic schools closed their doors, and Archbishop Rolón led thirty-five thousand workers, students, laypersons, and priests on a silent march through the capital to the National Cathedral. This was the largest demonstration against Stroessner in his thirty-four years of power and it united almost all levels of opposition against the regime. The people demanded an end to state repression, corruption and the growing economic crisis.⁸⁶

Catholic advocacy of human rights not only supported popular opposition to the regime; church activities again made a difference for struggling indigenous communities. It did not take too many years for legal advocacy to reward the church for its efforts to increase influence among native groups. Church advocacy integrated indigenous movements into the growing anti-regime protests and buttressed native resistance, but also elicited greater indigenous sympathy for the Catholic church.

In December 1987, indigenous people participated for the first time in the annual pilgrimage to the Virgin of Caacupé. Every year thousands of faithful Catholics made the hilly fifty kilometer pilgrimage from Asunción to visit the saint. For the first time the church welcomed indigenous people to Caacupé and allowed eight different tribes to read scriptures in their own languages to the entire assembly. Lucio Alfert, the vicar who led the mass, decried the theft of native lands and promised the pilgrimage would show indigenous people that while they had been excluded in the past, they were now true members of the church and nation.⁸⁷ In pronounced opposition to the state, the church challenged natives to help create a new Paraguay of justice, peace, and liberty.

During the pilgrimage a member of the Enenlhit group which had just won back the land at Mosquito Creek declared his devotion to the Catholic faith: "I am a believer in God and the Virgin, we are Catholics. We pray often and have faith. We always pray

⁸⁴ "Denuncian que el INDI reconoció a falso líder," *La Tarde*, September 22, 1987, 26. See also "El Instituto Paraguayo del Indígena a Cinco Años de su Creación," 11.

⁸⁵ "El Papa estará con los indios," *El Diario*, August 31, 1987, 18.

⁸⁶ "Miles de laicos hicieron marcha pública de denuncia," *Última Hora*, October 31, 1987, 10.

⁸⁷ "Harán misa en idioma de indígenas," *El Diario*, November 26, 1987, 20.

the rosary and ask to obtain our lands, we tried for so many years and for so long that finally we succeeded.”⁸⁸ Close cooperation with legal advocates over land and native rights had encouraged some indigenous people to identify with the Catholic Church.

As more indigenous people relied on Catholic legal advocacy and joined the faith, opposition to the regime drew both groups still closer together. Late in 1987, political parties in Paraguay prepared for upcoming presidential elections, when the aging dictator intended to win an eighth consecutive term. In preparation the church published the *National Dialogue*, in which indigenous peoples had called for respect, social benefits and education that tolerated their distinct ways of life yet also prepared them to function within national society. Obviously cooperating with the regime’s political opponents, native leaders reiterated a need for independent subsistence and had even asked to be considered legitimate and “authentic nations” within a more free Paraguay.⁸⁹ Despite widespread opposition, in February, the seventy-five year-old Stroessner swept elections for an eighth consecutive time. The corrupt electoral victory made the dictator the longest-serving head of state in Latin America and the third longest leader in the world.

Despite the regime’s success, indigenous groups and the church still had more opposition in store. Late in the afternoon of May 17, 1988, eight thousand indigenous people from Paraguay, Argentina and Brazil welcomed Pope John Paul II to the Chaco. Natives had chosen René Ramírez, from the Enenlhit who had reclaimed ancestral territories at Riacho Mosquito, to present their message to the pontiff. Accustomed to addressing authorities, the chief proudly conveyed the clear native statement to the pope:

Whites say we should become civilized. We invite the whites to be civilized and respect us as people, respect our communities and our leaders, respect our lands and our woods, and that they return even a small part of what they have taken from us. Indigenous people wish to be friends with all Paraguayans. We wish for them to let us live in peace and without inconveniences.⁹⁰

The loss of tribal lands featured prominently in the oration and Ramírez accused the regime of failing to defend indigenous properties.⁹¹ The presentation was a strong repudiation of the regime’s attempt to clear native peoples off their lands and integrate them into *Paraguayo* society. Pope John Paul II responded in very sympathetic tone:

I have heard your testimony of the great problems that affect you. I know the difficulties and suffering your fathers have faced in the past and that you also find in the present hour. In your communal lives you often face poverty, illness, and social abandon. But giving up to despair will be of no benefit. Faith must take you to assume these responsibilities with a new perspective... Your desires for improved social conditions are just. Above all you wish to be respected as persons and that your civil and human rights be recognized and honored. I know the great problems

⁸⁸ “Emotiva Presencia de Indígenas hubo en Caacupé,” *El Diario*, December 7, 1987, 8-9.

⁸⁹ “Conclusiones del Diálogo Nacional; Indígenas aspiran a que se reconozca su presencia,” *Última Hora*, January 21, 1988, 16.

⁹⁰ “Discurso de bienvenida dirigida a su santidad Juan Pablo Segundo,” unpublished mimeograph, Mariscal Estigarribia, May 17, 1988, AENM.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

you face; in particular your need for land and property titles. For these I appeal to a sense of justice and humanity by all those responsible to favor the most deprived

The native people's encounter with the pope scored several victories for the indigenous cause, but also for the first time showed abundant indigenous support for the Catholic Church. Not only did the pontiff offer his encouragement and sympathy to indigenous people, he recognizing their land struggles and called on those responsible to respect the "most dispossessed."⁹² When the dictator bid the pope farewell the following day at the President Stroessner International Airport, he referred to the "special attention" his government had given to the native population. John Paul II responded, in front of the television cameras, with a gesture of surprise that clearly showed his disbelief. By indicating his displeasure the pope added fuel to the dictator's critics.⁹³ As if to confirm the loss of support, the state immediately tried to discredit the native message.⁹⁴

Indigenous people themselves drew strength and inspiration to continue their resistance from the pope's words. Natives especially had heard the pontiff call on the state to improve their land situation. Time and again indigenous groups recalled this message, especially those from areas where tension over land issues was high. Felix Cabrera, a Mbyá from one of the embattled communities at Sommerfeld, declared: "I really enjoyed the part where he argued that indigenous people should be given the lands they need." His friend Anuncio Duarte appreciated the pope's concern for his people: "The Pope came to see all the indigenous people because he loves them. He manifested that we live oppressed in our communities. That affirmation made me very happy because it shows his preoccupation for us." Santiago Centurión, also from Sommerfeld, hoped that his peoples' land claims would now carry more strength: "we have hope of receiving titles to our land and for what we say to carry more weight." Silvio Flores, an Mbyá from Yby Ybaté in Caaguazú, recalled: "I really liked when he affirmed that we are owners of these lands and that we are all equal. Our reality is the need to have more land to cultivate... We also need for them to respect our authorities and our person." Other native people predicted the papal visit would improve their situation. "If the Pope had not come we would have remained as until now, without support. The father of the church requested that they give us the land, even though a little but that they be ours, so we can grow crops. This is most important for us." The pope's message additionally encouraged indigenous people to demand their legal rights. Vicente Gauto, from Yhaguary in Sommerfeld, affirmed "the Law 904/81 is often not respected and this aspect should be taken into account, because we know that in that way the native is neither respected as a person." Finally, the occasion provided indigenous people with another chance to express their struggle for land: "[the Pope] came out of love for us. We came to see him so he will know that we live broken lives. It is urgent that they return the land and the woods to us."⁹⁵ These testimonies show that the pope's message, while without legal authority, encouraged the indigenous people to continue resisting state integration,

⁹² "Juan Pablo II se pronuncio a los indígenas," DIM, 9, No. 29, (July, 1988), 15.

⁹³ Miguel Carter, *El Papel de la Iglesia en la Caída de Stroessner*, Asunción, RP Ediciones, 123.

⁹⁴ "Le hicieron leer el mensaje al cacique," *El Diario*, May 21, 1988, 10.

⁹⁵ "El Papa Trajo Esperanza, Dicen indígenas Mbyá," *Diálogo Indígena Misionera*, 9, No. 29, (July, 1988), 11.

mestizo prejudice, and the loss of their lands. In the following months, native groups redoubled their efforts to defend their territories.

Indigenous requests following the encounter took on an urgent, desperate character. Mbyá from Yvy Pytá, in San Pedro, arrived in Asunción late in May to denounce the deforestation of his people's land. The leader's visit brought to a climax a long struggle.

We are poor and have many family members to feed, we cannot constantly leave our community to inform what is happening in our lands. To get to the highway we need to walk twenty kilometers, sometimes we have no way to pay the fare because we do not do odd jobs anywhere... All of this is especially distressing to me. I have gone and come too many times with and without documents but I have never obtained a true solution for my community's problems.⁹⁶

The Mbyá leader asked authorities to evict those who were deforesting his people's lands. Clearly indigenous people had taken advantage of the current climate which the pope's visit provided to press their demands for land with renewed vigor in the capital.

Those few indigenous groups that had recuperated territories, and therefore greater economic autonomy, provided a successful example to other communities and the *Paraguayo* majority. In June, René Ramírez reported that the five Enenlhit groups which had recently settled again at Riacho Mosquito had successfully begun to farm their lands:

We cultivate a few seeds such as beans and corn from which many families have already benefited. The land on which we are is dry, due to the climate, but we have slowly organized ourselves. Some members of the community have planted lemon, grapefruit, oranges... which will serve in the future for our nutrition. Most families have constructed their homes from palm logs on the sites they chose to live. For my part, I regularly visit their homes to talk with them and listen to their concerns. Moreover, our nutrition has improved relative to the earlier period when we lived close to the factory. But the most important is that we now are on our land. All this is especially valuable to us because we have been able to triumph over different obstacles to take up permanent residence in the place where our ancestors lived.⁹⁷

The Enenlhit occupation of Riacho Mosquito showed other native groups the benefits which owning land might provide: greater tribal organization, agricultural self-sufficiency, and improved living conditions. Most significantly, the indigenous group had clearly changed. Instead of relying solely on hunting and gathering as their ancestors once had, the Enenlhit now farmed for a living. But the struggle with *Paraguayos* had also shaped their consciousness to the point where they now identified the occupation, and even the different use of the lands, with their indigenous heritage.

The rise of indigenous demands for land and the Catholic advocacy on the natives' behalf drew enough negative attention to erode the regime's staunch opposition to indigenous rights. Early in June 1988, after persistent lobbying by Mbyá from Morombí and their Catholic lawyers, the dictator ordered the Senate to expropriate land

⁹⁶ "Delatan Robo de Madera de sus Tierras," *Diálogo Indígena Misionero*, 8, No. 28, (July, 1988), 8

⁹⁷ "Los Maskoy cultivan su tierra," *Diálogo Indígena Misionero*, 9, No. 29, (July, 1988), 5.

for the indigenous group that Riquelme had evicted in January.”⁹⁸ When the dictator left the following day to speak at the United Nations on the topic of disarmament, he carried with him a recent and ready example of state action on behalf of indigenous rights. The irony of such token grants, set within greater plans for integration, only magnified the contradictions within the declining regime. At the same time, such appeals showed the extent to which natives and their Catholic advocates had influenced the dictatorship.

Conclusion:

This paper has argued that in order to extend its influence among Paraguay’s indigenous population, the Catholic Church adopted political advocacy of native human rights and land claims. The church also employed indigenous rights as a convenient and particularly effective way to criticize the ruling Stroessner regime. Catholic efforts were ultimately effective. Not only did political advocacy and the papal visit attract public attention and help focus anti-regime opposition, it increased further indigenous participation in the Catholic organization. By the time of Stroessner’s collapse in 1989, more indigenous people than ever before in the twentieth century participated in the Catholic religious organization.

At the same time, though, indigenous communities capitalized on Catholic advocacy to improve their access to the national justice system, to draw the attention of foreign human rights observers and to secure support from non-Indian society. By taking into account indigenous agency and goals it becomes apparent that natives were in no way passive recipients of Catholic indoctrination. Instead, indigenous groups actively shaped their relationship with missionaries, the church and national society. When they did accept a religious identity that situated them within the national majority, it was for specific reasons and with distinct goals. Ultimately these choices helped native groups thwart or at least counter the regime’s integration policy, which obviously presented indigenous people with social and political prospect much more threatening than identification with the Catholic Church.

⁹⁸ “Expropiación de tierras para indígenas Mbyá Apyteré, *Última Hora*, June 4, 1988, 10.