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Review of: Pierre Clastres, Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians (Paul Auster, Translator)

Abstract

Review of the book: Pierre Clastres, Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians (Paul Auster, trans., Zone Books 2001). Translator's Note and Forward. ISBN 0-942299-78-7 [352 pp. \$15.00. Paperback, 5 Cambridge Center, Cambridge, MA 02142-1493].

Keywords

native peoples, cannibalism, Paraguay

Pierre Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians* (Paul Auster, trans., Zone Books 2001). Translator's Note and Forward. ISBN 0-942299-78-7 [352 pp. \$15.00. Paperback, 5 Cambridge Center, Cambridge, MA 02142-1493].

In his forward to Pierre Clastres' *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, translator Paul Auster claims that it is "nearly impossible not to love this book....[i]t is not some dry academic study of 'life among the savages'.... [i]t is the true story of a man's experiences."¹ Auster is right — Clastres' account, and Auster's translation of it, is a beautifully written and riveting narrative.

Clastre tells the story of a people whose way of life is endangered. With photographs, drawings, and vivid observations, Clastres brings the reader to the Paraguayan forests where he lived among the Guayaki from 1963 to 1964. Just as powerfully, he reveals his own feelings about living with the Guayaki. Nearly forty years have passed, and Clastres himself died in 1977, yet his words have an authenticity that make this work of political anthropology compelling reading even today.

In nine chapters, each focusing on an important component of Guayaki life, such as birth, death, religion, and sexuality, Clastres portrays the daily lives of the Guayaki and his reactions to working among them. One of the many examples of Clastres' artful weaving of his story with that of the Guayaki is shown in his chapter on cannibalism. After months of investigating, during which Clastres uncovers nothing that confirms historical accounts of Guayaki cannibalism, Clastres concludes that European religious emissaries fabricated these stories to justify exploiting native peoples.

Then one day Clastres chats quietly in the dense afternoon heat with an ancient woman, plying her with sweets as he goes through his routine of questions about her family members. Practically asleep, with flies buzzing around, Clastres writes that he hears the woman state that her daughter was killed and "then they ate her!" Clastres wakes up: "I was like a hunter tracking an unhoped-for prey.... I almost lost my breath."² To keep the woman speaking, he calmly proceeds: "I asked

¹ Pierre Clastres, *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians* 8 (Paul Auster trans., Zone Books 2001).

her who had eaten her daughter, how she was cooked, and how she had been eaten.”³

Clastres recounts his mixed emotions about this new knowledge. He feels betrayed that the Guayaki misled him about their cannibalism, is delighted to learn more about their practice, and gleefully anticipates his delight in confronting those who lied. But as he discovers more about Guayaki cannibalism and how the Guayaki had been forbidden to speak about it by conventional Paraguayan contacts, he sets aside his own anger and frustration and gently portrays the practice. In doing so, he leads the reader to understand how the Guayaki cannibalism ritual is as significant and legitimate in their world as many Western rituals are to Westerners.

This chapter on cannibalism illustrates Clastres’ gift of telling a story about himself, a people who will die, and Western assumptions. Fortunately for the reader, this gift is present throughout the book. *Chronical of the Guayaki Indians* beautifully fulfills translator Auster’s promise, “Clastres writes with the cunning of a good novelist....the result is not just a portrait of the people he is studying, but a portrait of himself.”⁴

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² *Id.* at 319.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.* at 8.

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