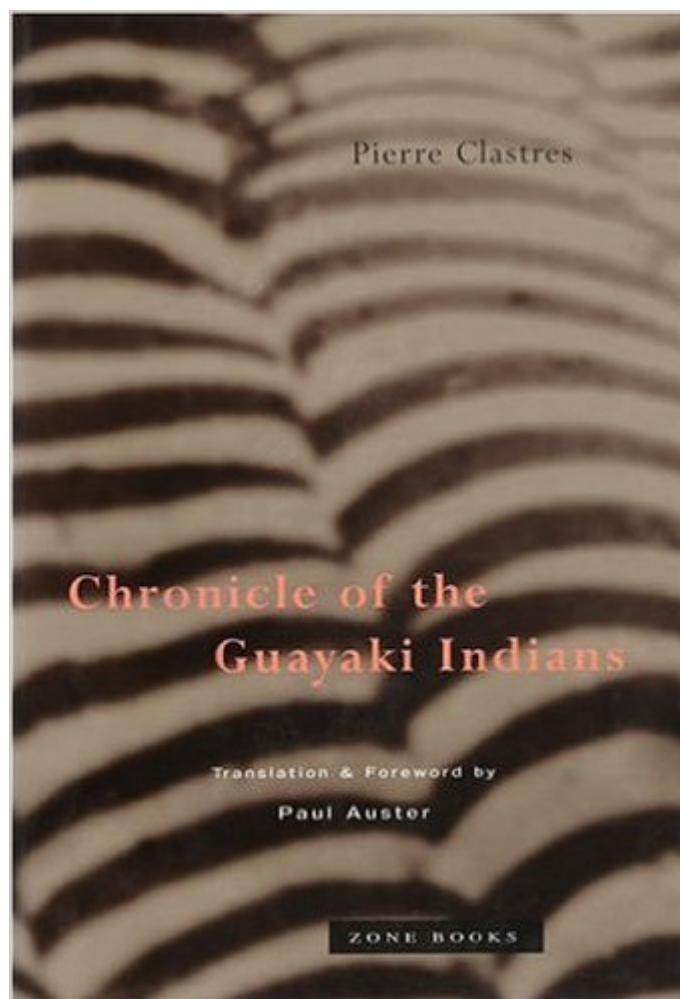


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Chronicle Of The Guayaki Indians



Synopsis

Pierre Clastres (1934-1979) was one of the most respected political anthropologists of our time. *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians* is an account of his first fieldwork in the early 1960s--an encounter with a small, unique, and now vanished Paraguayan tribe. From "Birth" to "The End," Clastres follows the Guayakis in their everyday lives, determined to record every detail of their history, ritual, myths, and culture in order to answer the many questions prompted by his personal experiences. Now available for the first time in English in a beautiful translation by the novelist Paul Auster, *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians* will alter radically not only the Western academic conventions in which other cultures are thought but also the discipline of political anthropology itself.

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Customer Reviews

Pierre Clastres was the last of the cannibals. As an anthropologist, he spent one year among an Ache tribe in Paraguay. He shared their food and shelter, he learned their language, observed their rites and recorded their myths. He was so close to them he became one with them. He absorbed their words and their gestures. He collected their artifacts and snatched pictures of them. He traced their ancestors and named their dead, something many Indians feel very uncomfortable about. He transformed their living bodies into a body of words and sentences. He used them as fodder for his ethnography. He ate them, so to say. He knew that just by being there he was compromising their very existence. By being the participant observer, he was participating in the disappearance of their lifestyle and of their very *raison d'être*. Even if he took their side, his presence made him an

accomplice of their extinction. And yet he chose to stay with them, to bear witness of their fate and, by recording their life conditions, to save their world from complete annihilation. If cannibalism consists of ingurgitating the body of a person to make his spirit reside in you, of transforming your living body into a sepulture for the body of the dead, then Pierre Clastres indeed committed an act of cannibalism. His professor Alfred Mettraux had warned him: "To study a primitive society, it needs to be already in a state of rot." • The fierce Guayaki were in an advanced stage of putrefaction when Clastres came to observe them. They were parked in a reserve camp managed by a Paraguayan ex-soldier who collected subsidies from the state for keeping these hunters-gatherers in a semi-sedentary state. The death rate among them was astounding.

It came as a pleasant surprise to discover that the author of this book was an understudy of Claude Lévi-Strauss for, the latter's *Tristes Tropiques* elicited an intellectual epiphany in this reviewer. This is not to say that Clastres' writing is anywhere near as good as Lévi-Strauss', even though this chronicle of his one year plus association with the Guayaki, or Atchei Gatu, Indians of Paraguay in 1963-64 is a compelling, worthwhile read. Clastres' task was to gather as much information as he could about the tribe's daily life, customs, 'religious' beliefs, family and tribal structures, tool use, etc. In short, or long, everything of note that he can observe. Indeed, the book is brim full of interesting, often fascinating, information and the author successfully brings the tribe to life in the reader's mind. In fact, to examine the life of the Other, you need go no further than this book, for the life these Indians led is so out of the bounds of modern mores that they come off as an altogether different species of human. I know that today it is acceptable only to lament the displacement of the aboriginal population of the New World by the denizens of the Old, but it strikes one that no reasonable person would countenance the Atchei Gatu order of things, assuming that Clastres' account is accurate. Granted some people would celebrate a reality that includes incest, internecine human sacrifice, infanticide, geriatric murder, polyandry, pedophilia, open marriage, and cannibalism, albeit not, evidently, onanism. For most of us, however, the the Atchei Gatu way of life must fill us with revulsion.

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