

An Indigenous Leader and his Missionaries: A Biographical Account of the Salesian Mission of Puerto Casado, Paraguay, in the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

This article narrates the history of the Salesian mission of Puerto Casado in the Paraguayan Chaco, from its foundation in the 1920s to the end of the century, by following the life story of René Ramírez, a Maskoy representative and one of the most relevant Paraguayan indigenous leaders of the last decades. In particular, it focuses on how Ramírez emerged as a leader, how he successively negotiated his political power within the mission, and how he finally decided to break his alliance with the church in order to be able to forge a space of political autonomy on the same level as non-indigenous people. Through this specific case study, the article also shows how the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the Barbados Symposium of 1971 implied a fundamental change of direction for the Catholic missionaries in Paraguay in their way of relating to indigenous communities, leading to important struggles and alliances at a local level.

Keywords: Salesian missions; Chaco; indigenous territories; Barbados Declaration; Maskoy

Resumen

El presente artículo relata la historia de la misión salesiana de Puerto Casado en Paraguay, desde su fundación en los años 1920 hasta finales del siglo veinte, a través de la biografía de René Ramírez, representante Maskoy y uno de los más importantes líderes indígenas paraguayos de las últimas décadas. En particular, intenta mostrar cómo Ramírez consiguió un papel de liderazgo en la misión, cómo negoció su poder político y cómo finalmente decidió romper la alianza con la iglesia local para conquistar un espacio de

autonomía política que lo posicionaría a la par con representantes políticos no indígenas. A través de este estudio de caso, se quiere además subrayar como el Concilio Vaticano II (1962-65) y la conferencia de Barbados (1971) implicaron para los misioneros católicos en Paraguay un cambio de dirección importante en su manera de relacionarse con las comunidades indígenas, además de mostrar cómo este cambio pudo generar nuevas alianzas y luchas a nivel local.

Palabras Clave: Misiones salesianas; Chaco; territorios indígenas; Declaración de Barbados; Maskoy

I met René Ramírez for the first time in 2004, in *Pueblito Indio Livio Farina*, the indigenous neighborhood of the town of Puerto Casado. Puerto Casado, located on the eastern edge of the Paraguayan Chaco, on the bank of the Paraguay River, was founded in 1889 in order to process and commercialize the vast reserve of quebracho trees in the region's hinterland.¹ The town takes its name from Carlos Casado del Alisal, a Spanish-Argentine entrepreneur who, in 1886, had purchased 5,625,000 hectares of land from the Paraguayan government and christened them "New Spain." As specified in the foundational act of the new territory, Casado's company would bring to the Chaco region "progress and the regeneration of the Indians,"² sharing this task a few decades later with the Salesian missionaries. Livio Farina was a Salesian missionary who lived there from 1928 to 1941, and whose name is synonymous with the indigenous settlement of Puerto Casado.

During my visit to the area, I was looking for René Ramírez because I had been told that he was an important indigenous leader, and because he was famous in Paraguay for being "the indigenous representative who spoke to the Pope" when John Paul II visited the country in 1987, during the last years of Stroessner's dictatorship: his speech in front of the Pope had become a milestone in the struggle for indigenous rights in Paraguay. But finding him proved more difficult than I expected: for two days I knocked at his door only to hear his daughter tell me that he had just left. It was only on the third day that he finally stopped denying that he was inside. Later on, when we became friends, he explained to me that he was testing my patience and my tenacity. He found it funny and laughed a lot about it. A few years later we became *compadres*—by that time, I was visiting as part of my PhD fieldwork—as I helped him baptize his granddaughter in spite of resistance on the part of the local missionaries, who were worried about the status of René's daughter as a single mother. Through his friendship and the informal conversations that we had on the patio of his house and that I recorded between 2004 and 2016, I learned about his life and how it

was influenced and transformed by the establishment of a Salesian mission in Puerto Casado, which is the focus of this article.

Ramírez’s trajectory also provides broader insights on the internal dynamics between indigenous people and the Salesian missionaries of Puerto Casado in the twentieth century. On the one hand, the aim of this article is therefore to highlight, through the use of direct testimonies, the way in which Maskoy people themselves describe the presence of the missionaries in Puerto Casado and these missionaries’ relationship with them. On the other hand, it focuses on how an indigenous leader negotiates leadership and political power in the context of a Salesian mission, by examining how Ramírez eventually decided to distance himself from the church in order to create for himself an autonomous political space that he could not have generated otherwise. I argue that the particular negotiation of power described in this article is coherent with leading theories on indigenous personhood in the South American lowlands, which claim “that the self who belongs to a collective is an independent self,” and that Amerindian people “who notably value their ability to be social, have as well an antipathy to rules and regulations, hierarchical structures and coercive constraints.”³ In fact, I will show how Ramírez never abdicated personal autonomy and the refusal of subordination even while attaining a prominent political role inside the local Salesian mission.

The Salesian Mission in South America and Paraguay

The first ten Salesian missionaries of the order of Don Bosco disembarked in South America on December 14, 1875 on the shores of Argentina.⁴ The Salesian congregation was a new one, whose constitution had been approved by the Holy See in 1874, but it quickly expanded its reach throughout Latin America: by the end of the nineteenth century Salesian missions were to be found in Uruguay, Chile, Ecuador, Venezuela, Peru, Mexico, Bolivia, El Salvador, and Paraguay, and had the double objective of supporting the education of Italian migrants to the region and of bringing their civilizing message to indigenous people,⁵ following the mandate of the First Vatican Council of 1869. Since the establishment of the first mission in Patagonia, moreover, the missionaries were accompanied by the feminine wing of the congregation: the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Hijas de María Auxiliadora). In South America they opened the “Schools of Arts and Crafts and Vocational Training” where they taught different activities such as carpentry, shoemaking, binding, tailoring, cattle ranching, and agriculture.

Missionaries has described Patagonia as an “empty” (in the sense that the state was absent from the area at the time) and “uncultivated” land to which

the missionaries could bring “progress” and “redemption.”⁶ Missionaries could accurately characterize the Paraguayan Chaco in similar terms. At the end of the nineteenth century, in fact, the Paraguayan Chaco was a vast and still unexplored land: the town of Puerto Casado had been established on the edge of an indigenous territory inhabited by an extensive variety of different ethnic groups, whose members would soon be incorporated as part of the local workforce.

As early as 1879, Don Bosco had already discussed with the Paraguayan government the possibility of sending ten Salesian missionaries and Daughters of Mary Help of Christians to Paraguay,⁷ in order to educate the youth in the capital city and to “christianize the savages that covered the immense territory from one extreme to the other . . . naked, ignorant, and deeply unhappy.”⁸ Moreover, Matías Alonso Criado, Carlos Casado’s ally and the honorary consul of Paraguay in Uruguay, had also been a strong supporter of establishing the congregation in the Paraguayan Chaco. In 1888, Alonso Criado personally asked Pope Leo XIII to act as a mediator with Michele Rua (Rector Major of the Salesians), in order to bring the religious congregation to Puerto Casado. He suggested that, in addition to contributing to civilizing the Indians and educating the youth, the Salesians would limit the influence of the Anglican Church that was gradually “invading” the southern Chaco⁹ and that, in 1891, would officially open its first mission in Makthlawaiya.¹⁰ In 1925, the first Salesian mission was finally established on Napegue Island, a few hours downstream from Puerto Casado, and in 1928 another one was established in Puerto Casado itself.

Birth

As written on his identity card,¹¹ René Ramírez was born on August 5, 1946. Despite being registered on his certificate as belonging to the Guana ethnic group, his parents actually belonged to two different ethnic groups and they only met because of their connection to the Casado Company: “My father was Angaite, he came from there [the south] and began to work here in Casado, in a cattle farm. He worked on a horse. My mother was Guana and she came from Casilda, Vallemiti.¹² They met in Casado, on a payday.”¹³ Again, when referring to his birth, Ramírez frames the event as related to the company payday:

I was born in Puerto Casado, right where the old butcher of the Carlos Casado company is. People went there on payday. They stayed there for two or three days and then went back to work [in the cattle ranches of the region’s hinterland]. My mother was pregnant and I was born there . . . There was a health care center

in Pueblito [the Salesian mission], but people preferred to do it [give birth] there [close to the company administrative office], under the tree, as no one bothered you [*nadie molesta*] there.¹⁴ And then they all left. Every two months they all met for payday, and then left again.¹⁵

In the first half of the twentieth century, the stories of the life and death of indigenous people were already marked by their work for the Casado company. According to Fisher-Trueuenfeld,¹⁶ at the beginning of the century there were 1,000 workers on Carlos Casado's lands [including the factory and cattle ranches], 400 of whom originated from indigenous groups. At the time, the inhabitants of most indigenous settlements belonged to the same ethnic group, even though members of different groups could be incorporated inside a settlement through marriage.¹⁷ As Ramírez explains: "Before the missionaries arrived, each nation [ethnic group] stood by itself, but then the missionaries arrived and they all got mixed up."¹⁸ Based on this data, it is thus legitimate to assume that the indigenous workforce was directly hired by Carlos Casado S.A., without the mediation of missionaries. When the missionaries arrived in Casado, indigenous people were already there, and the missionaries' objective was rather to "rescue them from [the misery of] their settlements and to civilize them," and even to protect them from the Paraguayans themselves.¹⁹

In 1925, the missionaries had settled down on the Napegue island—approximately a two-day journey by boat from Puerto Casado—where they got in touch with a small group of "wild" Enxet people who were settled there at the time.²⁰ Only a few years later, Father Livio Farina was sent from Italy to the Chaco and, in 1928, with the financial support of the company, he built the still existing church of Puerto Casado. The close relationship between the Salesian mission and the Carlos Casado S.A. was engraved onto the church itself. The three bells, still reputed across the region for their beauty, bear the names of Carlos Casado's daughters: Genara, Casilda, and Margarita. They were made in Italy in 1929 by the Bragozzi firm and probably shipped to Puerto Casado soon after. Inside the church, which is dedicated to María Auxiliadora, three big Italian statues of saints welcome the visitors from the apse behind the altar: San Carlos (named to honor the founder, Carlos Casado), San Ramón (for Carlos' wife Ramona), and San José (for Carlos' second-born son and president of the company from 1891 to 1943, but also from his brother's name). Together with the priests, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians also arrived in Puerto Casado in the 1920s. They received a large house from the Casado family which, according to most people, was the first house that José Casado (Carlos Casado's second-born) built for his wife and which has now officially been donated to the nuns.

A series of pictures taken in Puerto Casado by the Argentinean doctor Carlos De Santis in 1932, just before the Chaco War, portray Livio Farina in front of the church with a small group of indigenous people, whom he claims belong to the Sanapana tribe.²¹ It was Father Farina who according to Eloy Mayor, René Ramírez's brother-in-law, defended indigenous people during the Chaco War (1932-35), when six Bolivian airplanes attacked Puerto Casado and killed four civilians.²² As he narrates, his grandfather believed that the priests were the ones who prevented them from being hit by the bombs:

This is what my grandfather told me,²³ I have recorded it here [in my head]. Two planes arrived to throw bombs over the factory. There were plenty of soldiers over there in the factory. They shot with their machine guns. It was hard. All indigenous people ran into the church, but they also wanted to throw a bomb on the church. There was a priest inside the church, Livio Farina, and he was praying a lot . . . Thanks to the missionaries we weren't hit by the bombs, that's what my grandfather explained to me.²⁴

Although indigenous—possibly Sanapana—people were attending church services as early as the 1930s, the Salesian mission of Pueblito Indio Livio Farina was only inaugurated two decades later, when a group of Enxet arrived in Puerto Casado guided by a missionary from the Napegue island. According to Eloy Mayor, the last survivor of the Enxet group that moved from Napegue to the river port, the “María Auxiliadora” mission of Napegue closed in 1932. After that, some of the indigenous people moved to the Anglican mission of Makthlawaiya and some others to the recently formed Mennonite missions of the central Chaco. His family chose to follow the Salesian priest, Don Rivero, and moved to Puerto Casado in the second half of the 1940s, where both him and his father immediately began to work in the tannin factory:²⁵

Before coming here I was living in María Auxiliadora [the mission in Napegue island]. There was an Uruguayan priest, *pa'i* [priest in Guarani] Rivero was his name. “Let's go there [to Casado]! You are going to grow up in Pueblito [the name of the mission in Puerto Casado]!” He put a cross in the middle [of Pueblito], we came. It was all bush here [in Pueblito]. Other people came, from the cattle ranches. They didn't know anything. We settled here [first], the rest came from Pinasco, Sastre... We had a meeting last week and I said: “I founded Pueblito, I did not come from Pinasco or Sastre. We planted a huge cross right over there, in the middle, which is still in the cemetery.”²⁶

It is unclear why Livio Farina did not establish a proper mission, and why the church was built prior to the founding of Pueblito. In any case, René Ramírez's description of the priest is harsh on this figure:

This *pa'i* Farina, they [indigenous people] say he had problems. He was in Puerto Sastre when they [the Paraguayan population] suspected a young indigenous boy of having stolen his money. They hit the boy a lot, or he was killed by the police, I can't remember. The boy's grandfather was a strong, powerful shaman, and he caused harm [*hizo rematar*] to the priest. In about six days he [the priest] was dead. This is the story that people told me... How bad their [the priests'] behavior was! They didn't even ask the boy if it was true or not... and they did the same with José Iquebi [an Ayoreo boy who was kidnapped by some workers and rescued by the priests]. They suspected him of stealing money and left him without water... and he wasn't even guilty . . . It's not that bad anymore, but before, they [the priests] did whatever they wanted.²⁷

According to the Salesian Bulletin, Livio Farina died in 1940 of a sudden "intestinal paralysis."²⁸

In 1948, the Salesian missionary Bruno Stella arrived in Puerto Casado from Italy, possibly during the same period as Father Rivero, the Salesian missionary that Mayor mentioned in his testimony. The anthropologist Branislava Susnik ascribes the founding of Pueblito Indio Livio Farina to Father Stella [and not to Father Rivero, as Eloy Mayor does]:

Father Bruno Stella, the Salesian priest of Puerto Casado, identifies the difficulties of his missionary work in the Indians' instability. In order to constitute a compact group of Christian Indians, he founded the "Christian village" [Pueblito Indio Livio Farina], where he gathered together indigenous people from different ethnic groups (Enxet, Angaite, Sanapana, Tobas, Chamacoco). This mixing of indigenous people should result in a common indigenous Catholic consciousness, instead of the old relationship with their own pagan people. It is difficult to foresee what the result of this experiment will be. Father Stella is convinced that his enterprise will be successful, but he forgets that the indigenous people living along the Paraguay River are being influenced by white people working in the factories and on the docks. He won't be able to solve this issue through the Salesian method of soccer, movies, and singing.²⁹

Bruno Stella explains this experience in his own words:

When I arrived there [in Puerto Casado] about thirteen years ago, the Indians were in a deplorable state. They had learned only evil and vices from white people. They worked in a tannin factory and they received in exchange some grains and lots of rum. Everyone got drunk, even women and children. People died of hunger and tuberculosis. I buried 40 people in the first 5 months, excluding newborns. The demon reigned over there . . . All of that has changed now. In Puerto Casado, 70 families of baptized Indians form a community that is the envy of all. There are no longer orgies or wild dances, sorcerers or evil spirits. Baptism has transformed these souls. Hatred has surrendered to love.³⁰

In the Salesian Bulletin of 1954, a temporary visitor described the mission as a monastery where order and discipline have created a harmonious environment and where indigenous people docilely abide the priests and nuns. At the same time, he underlined that not all indigenous people had settled down in the mission, as those who were not willing to give up the consumption of alcohol were not accepted inside the mission and continued to live in *toldos* [traditional settlements], that he defined as “repugnant.”³¹ A “common pot” [*olla común*], was available in the mission, feeding the children and the elderly with the discarded meat from the company butcher. As Faustino Ramírez, René’s cousin, explained to me: “In Pueblito there were three big pots of food for the children: they ate *cocido* [tea with sugar and milk] in the morning, and in the afternoon they ate corn, beans, intestines, heart, head, paw, liver and kidney. You can still see one of these pots in Machete.”³²

The Salesian Bulletins of those years register plenty of divine interventions. Father Stella, for instance, emphasized the variety of miracles that he experienced during his stay in Casado: “The knife that should have killed a missionary stops miraculously right in front of him without even scratching him; a snake injects its mortal poison which turns out to be innocuous; a tiger takes docile backward steps in front of the missionary . . . around twenty soldiers who came at night in the Indian village to ransack and harm the Indians depose their weapons in front of the missionary and raise their hands in the air so that he can lead them to prison.”³³ Eloy Mayor also recalls the latter episode: “[When we arrived in Puerto Casado] Father Bruno Stella, an Italian, was here. He worked here and took care of indigenous people, and when the soldiers came inside here to create trouble [*macanear*], he hit them with a whip and they went back to Mariscal [a Paraguayan town and former army barrack located in the central Chaco].”³⁴

In sum, the first-hand testimonies of both the Maskoy and Salesian sources show that, from the 1920s to the 1940s, the Salesian missionaries were able to consolidate a good relationship with the Casado company and to establish personal relationships with a few indigenous families, to whom they provided food and protection. When René Ramírez was born in 1946 under a tree, close to the company administration offices, the Salesian missionaries had already been present in Casado for about twenty years, even though Pueblito Indio Livio Farina would only be founded two years later. Ramírez's parents worked for the company but had no relationship with the church and lived in proximity of the cattle ranches of the hinterland. The decision to live inside the mission was the prerogative of a restricted group of indigenous families (around 40). Born outside of the mission, it is only as a grown up, after his father died and he had to take care of his mother and sisters, that Ramírez would decide to move inside Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, under the influence of the missionaries.

Encounter with Giuseppe Squarcina and Incorporation into the Mission

In the first half of the 1960s, René Ramírez moved to live inside Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, where Father Giuseppe Ballin and the Salesian cooperator [*coadiutore*] Giuseppe Squarcina were in charge of the indigenous mission, together with Father Pietro Gaddi who was in charge of the parish. Bruno Stella, the official founder of the mission, is last mentioned in a Salesian Bulletin in 1964, and it is not known if Ramírez ever met him in person, but it is certain that Ballin continued to live in Pueblito until the end of the 1990s. The decision to move inside Pueblito seems to originate from the death of Ramírez's father and the ensuing necessity to take care of his mother and his sister. More specifically, it is motivated by his encounter with Giuseppe Squarcina who facilitates his incorporation into the mission and initiates a close relationship with the young René.

This is how the Salesian Bulletin of 1960 describes Squarcina's role in Pueblito: "It is necessary to keep the Indians away from idleness and from the street, and to teach them how to earn their bread honestly through work. This is the role of the assistant brother, Mister Giuseppe Squarcina. The day has no hours for him. He is the sacristan, the assistant in the chapel for the Indians; he teaches to the little Indians in the morning and to the adults in the evening. To keep them busy throughout the day, he raises chickens and cultivates the garden. He created an agricultural garden where the kids learn how to work."³⁵

It is Squarcina, and not Giuseppe Ballin or Bruno Stella, whom René Ramírez remembers as an important figure in Pueblito:

It was a relative of mine who brought me here [from the cattle ranches to Pueblito]. The priests and the nuns were asking him who my family was, and when they decided to put me to work, I worked in the vegetable garden. I planted lettuce, peppers, carrots, onions... with José [Giuseppe] Squarcina . . . I wasn't a bad kid, I didn't go anywhere. I always took a book and read, took another book and read... that's how I learned so much. They always told me to read and read, my teacher always told me to read. Whatever happens, you have to read. If he were still alive [Squarcina], he would have paid for my secondary school, I would have paid for my studies. But he died in Ypacarai. He ate something bad and he died. He was young . . . I always talked to him, and he always advised me. I told him: "I thought about your advice, yesterday, and it's true, I need to learn much more things."

"You need to move forward [in your life]," he told me.

He oriented me. Every year, for the New Year he used to send me gifts: a watch, a shirt, some trousers . . . I was baptized when I was 20 years old. [Father] Ballin baptized me. I didn't know the church and I had to think thoroughly about it, what baptism was for. He asked me: "Are you going to be baptized?"

"Yes, I am."³⁶

Giuseppe [José] Ballin, who like Bruno Stella arrived in Paraguay in 1948 and lived in Puerto Casado from 1954 until the 1990s,³⁷ was always remembered with love and affection by the Maskoy people I had the opportunity to talk to. When I visited him in a retirement home for old missionaries in Italy in 2016, he told me that he had taught only two things to indigenous people: to cultivate the land and to pray. His vegetable garden in Pueblito, where the little kids spent the whole day working with him on the land, is one of the most cherished memories among adult indigenous former factory workers. I once asked Luis Mayor, "What was the happiest moment in your whole life?" The indigenous leader answered, "When we were little and we worked with José Ballin in his garden."

On the other hand, the highest placed members of the hierarchy of the Salesian movement seemed to have a critical stance on Ballin. In an informal conversation with Father Carlo Giacomuzzi—himself a Salesian missionary in Paraguay—whom I met when I was visiting Father Ballin in Italy, he drew a comparison between Father Ballin and Father Gaddi, both of whom were present at the same time in the Puerto Casado parish. While Father Gaddi, he said, built churches and schools in the region and left a durable and concrete legacy in Paraguay, Ballin only organized soccer games and cultivated the land. And yet, while Gaddi is

never evoked in the memories of indigenous people, Ballin keeps coming up in family pictures and private narratives. While Gaddi was a public figure who frequently travelled to other parts of the country, Ballin lived inside Pueblito in modest quarters close to the vegetable garden and had an intimate day-to-day relationship with its inhabitants.

Antonia Melgarejo, for example, a Maskoy teacher, explained to me that after her father died from the beatings he received while working on repairs of Casado's railway track, Ballin became her second father. He would visit her often and tell her to take care of herself and to avoid drinking. Her husband, José Portillo, still remembers with affection the time when the priest was living with them in Pueblito, between the 1970s and 1980s: "Every December we did *choqueo* [an indigenous ritual dance], and *baile flauta* [flute dancing]. In that time they respected us and no white people could enter in Pueblito. The *pa'i* [Father] Ballin was there. There was a carpentry workshop and a vegetable garden where young people worked. Pa'i José was our *ru* [in Guarani], our father when we were young. He really loved young people, and he would call us with a loudspeaker when we had to go to work, or he drove us around with his tractor."³⁸ When Antonia married José, the Father offered them a ticket to travel by boat to the nearest town, Concepción, and a wooden chair that he had built, and which they still have in their house.

Even though the relationship with Squarcina was abruptly interrupted by the latter's early death, René Ramírez remained in Pueblito, living with his mother and sister. He was baptized by Giuseppe Ballin and in the following years he became a trade unionist first, and soon after, the *cacique principal* [general leader] in the indigenous struggle for land against the Casado company.

Becoming a Leader

After settling down in Pueblito and strengthening his relationship with Squarcina—who became like a father for him—and after spending two years studying as a seminarist in the eastern part of the country, René Ramírez started to work as an employee in the house of a company administrator thanks to a recommendation from Father Ballin. He also married an Enxet girl from the Mayor family, one of the first to settle down inside the mission. His ties with the missionaries became stronger and stronger:

Father José Ballin recommended me for three months, I was 17 years old. And then they gave me a stable job. I wasn't married yet. She [the future wife] was from here [Pueblito], and had no

father. Gertrudis Mayor was her name, Eloy Mayor was her uncle. She knew Napegue, that's where they came from with priests and nuns. I've never been there . . . Ballin introduced me to the [human resources manager of the] factory, Oscar Arduino Mendoza. He [Oscar Mendoza] is already dead. I was working in his house, sweeping the patio and bringing him food [in the factory]. His wife was also really nice. She took care of me, she gave me food, before I worked for the Casado company. But then I stopped working there, when I began to work for the company. It was Saturday when I went to see him [Mendoza]: "I'm working for the Casado company!"

"Congratulations! Behave properly!"

He was a big director in the company. He helped me with my schooling, gave me a dictionary. He gave me notebooks, pens. "Whatever you need, just ask me! You are my student." He was a teacher, even though he didn't teach at school. He even bought shirts and trousers for me.³⁹

As with Giuseppe Squarcina and Giuseppe Ballin, Ramírez remembers his relationship with Don Mendoza as a personal relationship of care based on trust and affection, and he remembers Don Mendoza as a generous man. In an informal conversation he also confessed to me that he had worked very hard for the company in order to live up to Father Ballin's expectations, but his relationship with the missionary was about to change.

In 1971, a group of South American and European anthropologists, among them one Paraguayan (Miguel Chase-Sardi), attended a conference on the Island of Barbados. The meeting, sponsored by the University of Bern in Switzerland and by the World Church Council, produced a revolutionary document that would provide a frame of reference for many struggles to follow. The Declaration of Barbados pointed the finger at the colonial relationships that continued to dominate the Latin American continent, and signaled to the responsibilities of both the churches and the national governments in the suppression of indigenous rights and the genocide that was affecting indigenous people in different countries. According to Susnik and Chase-Sardi, the "non-alienated"⁴⁰ indigenous people—those who continue to be capable of thinking autonomously from white people—began at that point to make efforts to forge an alliance with missionaries and humanists. These efforts culminated in the Marandu Project, which was launched in 1972, in Stockholm, during a forum of the United Nations.

Sponsored by the Catholic University in Asunción, the Marandu project aimed to inform indigenous peoples about their rights and to offer them concrete

opportunities to meet, discuss and organize. The Paraguayan anthropologist Miguel Chase-Sardi and the Jesuit anthropologist Father Bartolomeu Melia, among others, helped in writing the project. This is how Marilyn Renfelth, a Paraguayan anthropologist who at the time was a young student of the Catholic University, remembers the arrival of the team from the Marandu Project in Puerto Casado around 1973:

We talked to [the Salesian] Monsignor Obelar, who was the bishop's vicar in the Alto Paraguay area, and they gave us permission [to stay in Pueblito], and so we left . . . There was a workers' union there, but indigenous people had no access, because the trade unionists did not want to accept them in the union. We began to talk about labor rights, and the trade unionists ended up joining us... There we were, talking about labor rights right in the middle of Puerto Casado! . . . We slept in the nuns' house, in the *Pueblito Indígena*. The nuns had very strange ideas about what indigenous women had to learn. They taught them to sew, to embroider, to wash clothes. Their idea was to transform them into good domestic employees. That's what they had in mind and they succeeded. The idea that they could study was not taken into consideration... but indigenous people really got into it [the workshop]. They were so eager to ask questions! They asked about their salaries, that were different for indigenous and non-indigenous people, and for the Paraguayan trade unionists it was normal that indigenous people had to be paid half of what they themselves received . . . Eight or ten days into our stay, they started to get nervous that we were talking about rights, and they threw us out of there. The [Casado] company wanted us to leave, and the Monsignor [Obelar] came and told us to leave Puerto Casado, saying that we were supposed to talk about rights in general and not about labor rights, and that we wanted to initiate a revolution, etcetera . . . and so we left. They started saying that we wanted to do like the Che Guevara in Bolivia, and turn indigenous people into guerrilla fighters, but this was far from the truth. . . I think we planted a seed there, that didn't disappear only because we left. And I think that's the reason why we all ended up in prison after that.⁴¹

Despite his position as a professor of the Catholic University, in 1975, Chase-Sardi was accused of being a Communist, and then imprisoned and tortured by the Stroessner regime. The office of the Marandu Project at the Catholic

University was searched and closed down. Despite the repression, after the visit of the Marandu project in Pueblito, René Ramírez became the first indigenous worker to join the employees' trade union (Asociación de Empleados) of Carlos Casado S.A. and, in 1977, the company finally removed the differentiation between "Christians" and "indigenous" in its payroll, by unifying them under the category of "working citizens."

In 1979, though, René Ramírez was suddenly accused by Father Ballin of being a Communist. The origin of the accusation was a letter he had received from an "American professor," whose identity I never managed to find out, and that was intercepted and opened by the missionaries before Ramírez could do it himself. In the letter, the professor thanked him for the hospitality he had received in Pueblito. The accusation deeply affected Ramírez, and as he told me: "In that period I took distance [from Giuseppe Ballin], I stopped talking to him. When they told me that I was a Communist I stopped going to prayer, and I only went to church every so often."⁴²

At the same time, during those same years, as a consequence of the Second Vatican Council and the Barbados Declaration, some sectors of the Catholic and Protestant missions of Paraguay had engaged in a process of self-critique. They dismissed the paternalist attitude of the old missionaries towards indigenous people and accepted and valorized even the most ostracized indigenous traditions, such as shamanic practices, as part of the *Pastoral indígena*, the Catholic religious practice.⁴³ Some missionaries began to collaborate with indigenous people in order to help them obtain a legal title for their ancestral lands. In 1983, during a seminar of the *misioneros indigenistas* (indigenist missionaries) in Ypacarai, the missionaries recognized that "land" was the main problem of indigenous people in the country, and wrote in their report that "Without land, there is no hope for life."⁴⁴

The Paraguayan Episcopal Conference and the Fight for land during the 1980s

At the end of the 1970s, after the *Equipo Nacional de Misiones* decided to support the indigenous population of Puerto Casado in their struggle for land against the Casado company, the organization produced a series of reports on the situation of indigenous people in Pueblito Indio Livio Farina.⁴⁵ According to them, indigenous people in Puerto Casado were suffering from severe malnutrition and were on the edge of a cultural collapse. Out of the 484 people residing in the mission, only 36 adults had a more or less stable job in the factory, and most of them were unemployed.⁴⁶ In his reports, Swiss anthropologist Walter

Regher offers an interesting analysis of the spatial distribution of the indigenous population in Puerto Casado and of the power relationships that this distribution implied.⁴⁷ First of all, Regher underlines that only 73 households are located inside the Catholic mission, while 37 are located in the so-called “paradise tree valley” and 35 in the “carob tree valley.” The settlements located outside of the mission are called *tolderías*, and people are usually settled there according to their ethnic group. For Regher, the biggest problem faced by those living inside the mission is not a generic loss of identity but the absence of political leadership, which he associates with the loss of a sense of community. “All our old leaders [*caciques*] have died,” he reports having heard from people. In the report he explains this internal fragmentation as a consequence of the kind of relationships that indigenous people established with “white people” (*los blancos*). Both in the context of the workplace and the mission, in fact, indigenous people had a personal relationship with their employer or the priest. This was a departure from past practices, he argued, where group leaders acted as intermediaries with society at large.

It is noteworthy that Regher never mentioned in his reports the name of René Ramírez, by then the only indigenous representative in the factory’s trade union, and president of the “Don Bosco youth” in Pueblito. This omission might be due to the tensions between Ramírez and Father Ballin at the time. In any case, according to Ramírez, the church tried to convince him in any possible way to assume the leadership of the struggle for land. Because the land claim was supported by the *Equipo Nacional de Misiones*, an organization that gathered all the different congregations of the Catholic Church that had representatives in the country, missionaries from other parts of the country got involved in the process:

Amadeo Benz⁴⁸ came to see me from Filadelfia, and he told me that two girls [Myrna Vásquez and Gladys Casaccia, the lawyers hired by the Catholic Church] would come and talk to me. They came and looked for me “to coordinate the work,” they told me.

“Nice. What kind of work?”

“The struggle for land.”

“Good. I will find two people who can work with you. We will tell the priest [Ballin] and the nuns.”

But the nun told me: “Why are you not going to...[assume the leadership]?”

“I can’t do it now, and there’s a reason, something bad I heard about me.”

The nun talked to Monseñor Velásquez and he came at five. At six I joined him and we talked, the two of us. He asked me: “Why

don't you want to talk about working on the land claim with the two girls?"

"Look, I don't want to. My name was sullied and I need to calm down. I'm going to find two people who can work with them."

He didn't like that, as he knew that some people were really strongly opposed to the missionaries. He insisted again: "Ok, we are going to have a meeting in the afternoon with the rest of the community."

But I said: "No! I can't do it now." It was a tough moment. I showed the piece of paper [the letter he had received from the U.S.] to Gladys Casaccia [one of the lawyers] and she saw that it didn't say anything. He [the American professor] was only thanking me for hosting him in my house, but they took it so badly. When the letter arrived here and they [the priests] saw my name on it, they just opened it. They were jealous. They always wanted to control everything. This is why, if someone comes here, I always ask: "Are you with me or with them?"

"Well, with you!"⁴⁹

The meeting with the two lawyers and the community finally took place, and Ramírez, who was in his thirties by then, was elected 'general leader' [*cacique principal*] in the struggle for land. In order to fight as a unified group, and to come to terms with the mixed ethnic background that many of them had, the indigenous population of Casado—that originated from the Enxet, Sanapana, Toba, Guana, and Angaite ethnic groups—decided to give themselves a common denomination and to be called "Maskoy." This is how Ramírez summarizes the beginning of the struggle:

I had my own group, I was the president of the Don Bosco youth group. There was a meeting and the people decided to vote for me. I didn't want to accept initially because it's a huge responsibility. I thought I wouldn't be able to do it because I was too young, and I didn't know how to deal with these sorts of things. But people said: "No! You need to start learning! You're not going to be alone, we are going to be there with you." And that's why I accepted, up to now. They still trust me because I never sold myself. They know I was offered money plenty of times, but I never accepted it.⁵⁰

The Maskoy struggle for land of the 1980s is the result of a fruitful alliance between the Catholic Church and indigenous people in Puerto Casado. Historically, it is also the result of the Second Vatican Council, the Barbados Declara-

tion, and the national Law 904/81 that aims to defend the rights of indigenous people over their ancestral lands. For the Maskoy people, it is also the result of the active involvement of shamans and their auxiliary spirits in the context of the struggle. I have discussed in another article the emphasis that the Maskoy people placed on the political role of shamanic practices in the struggle for land during the 1980s, and its silencing on the part of the Church.⁵¹ After a delegation of indigenous leaders representing the different Maskoy ethnic groups—together with the lawyers hired by the ENM—made numerous trips to Asunción, and with the legal assessment of the lawyers of the Catholic Church, in 1987, following nearly nine years of struggle, 30,113 hectares of land were expropriated in the name of Maskoy people: the Indigenous Territory Riacho Mosquito was legally born. The struggle for land marks the peak of Ramírez's position as a privileged interlocutor and ally of the Catholic Church. Thanks to his role as a mediator, the success of the expropriation can be thought of, more broadly, as the result of a virtuous collaboration between the Salesians and the indigenous people of Pueblito. As historian Harder Horst writes in his book, "Although securing land for the Maskoy was another attempt [on the part of the dictatorship] to dampen rising opposition, the [Maskoy's] campaign still stands as a monument to indigenous organization."⁵²

In the Maskoy narratives of the struggle for land that I recorded, the role of the local missionaries is barely mentioned, and only the work of the two young lawyers hired by the Paraguayan Episcopal Conference is underlined and valorized. Myrna Vásquez, in particular, is remembered with great affection: "We really regret not having a picture of her," Varcilicio Ojeda, a Maskoy ritual flute player, once told me, "or we would have built a statue for her."⁵³ The two lawyers and the shamans, according to Ramírez, had been the main supporters in the fight against the company.

When Maskoy people settled down in Territory Riacho Mosquito, the Salesians supported them by providing food and tools for a limited period of time, although their presence and support gradually shrunk in order to let indigenous people develop their new settlements independently of the church. This change in the Salesians' attitude—which, according to conversations I had with local activists, had been a conscious decision on the part of the church—has been experienced by some of the Maskoy as a form of abandonment. Others experienced it as part of a process of gaining back their autonomy after many years of economic and political dependency.

On May 16, 1988, the year before the end of Stroessner dictatorship, John Paul II visited Paraguay. René Ramírez was chosen by the Catholic Church to represent and give voice to indigenous people, and when the Pope gave a speech in the Santa Teresita mission of the central Chaco, Ramírez gave his own speech

against the Stroessner dictatorship and in support of the rights of indigenous peoples. In a now famous passage, he told to the audience: “White people say we should become civilized. We invite white people 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.”⁵⁴ After delivering his speech, René Ramírez was persecuted by the government and went into hiding in Territory Riacho Mosquito until Stroessner was finally overthrown in a coup in 1989.

Conclusion: Seeking out Autonomy

Despite a generalized expectation that René Ramírez would keep his leadership position and settle down with his family on the new territory, his life took the opposite direction. After the end of the struggle, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina had in part become a regular indigenous neighborhood. Surprisingly to all, Ramírez went back to his house in Pueblito and took distance from the church, taking on an active political role as a member of the Liberal Party. In fact, while working for the Casado company he became a member of the *Partido Liberal Auténtico*, that was at that time the official opponent of the dictator’s party (the *Partido Colorado*).

My argument in this paper is that this decision should be interpreted as a reaction to the kind of relationship that the Salesian missionaries established with indigenous people, and with indigenous leaders in particular, since their arrival in Paraguay. Although, as Marie Morel correctly argues in her paper,⁵⁵ the missionaries had always valued and recognized indigenous leaders as key interlocutors in the evangelization process, and had paid tribute to their position of power through exchanges of gifts and official legitimization, they also encouraged the isolation of indigenous people from non-indigenous society and always related to them primarily as “indigenous.” René Ramírez represented for them an important leader but still an indigenous one. His political power made sense for the church primarily in the context of the indigenous society: he was and would always be a leader of indigenous people, and not of the non-indigenous population to which the missionaries themselves belonged. With his relationship with Liberal Party, on the other hand, something completely different happened.

In 1991, during the years of democratic readjustment that followed the fall of Stroessner’s dictatorship, Ramírez was elected to the National Constituent Assembly. In an informal conversation with senator Domingo Laino, at that time the head of the Liberal Party in Paraguay, he told me that he and René Ramírez had become friends during the years of the dictatorship, when Ramírez hid him

on a few occasions in his house in Pueblito. During the conversation, Laino directed my attention to the fact that unlike the other indigenous representatives who became members of the Constituent as representatives of the indigenous population, Ramírez was the only indigenous person in the country to be a member of the Constituent as representative of a national political party and not of the indigenous population of Paraguay. By strengthening the alliance with senator Laino, Ramírez distanced himself from both the indigenous population of Casado and from the local missionaries, who were expecting him to settle down in Territory Riacho Mosquito and to lead the re-colonization of the land on the part of the Maskoy people. This decision was the result of an autonomous political choice, and was initially met with suspicion and disappointment by the Maskoy.

I suggest that René Ramírez's long political trajectory should be considered not only as a struggle for the recognition of indigenous rights (a struggle that he shared with the Salesian missionaries who surely had played an important role in transforming him into a leader), but also as an individual struggle for the recognition of indigenous people in their ability to become leaders of the non-indigenous society, a task that went beyond the missionaries' expectations for indigenous society.

Notes

- 1 The grinding and processing of the *quebracho colorado* tree (*schinopsis balansae*) yields a substance called “tannin,” which was used worldwide to tan leather, especially until the 1920s. See Peter Stunnenberg and Johan Kleipenning, “The role of extractive industries in the process of colonization: the case of quebracho exploitation in the Gran Chaco”, *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 84: 3 (1993), pp 220-229.
- 2 Gabriela Dalla Corte Caballero, “Las tierras del Chaco paraguayo, entre Carlos Casado, Matías Alonso Criado y Carlos Pastore”, in Liliana Brezzo, Alfredo Boccia Romañack and Domingo Rivarola (eds.), *Carlos Pastore Goiburú, 65 años de la lucha por la tierra en el Paraguay* (Asunción: Centro Paraguayo de Estudios Sociológicos, 2014).
- 3 J. Overing and A. Passes, “Introduction. Conviviality and the pening up of Amazonian anthropology”, in J. Overing and A. Passes, *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: The Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native Amazonia* (NY: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.
- 4 The “Societas Sancti Francisci Salesii,” or Salesians of the Don Bosco congregation, was founded in 1859 by Father Giovanni Bosco in Turin. The original aim of the congregation was to provide education and support to the impoverished youth of Turin, an industrial town located in the north of Italy (for more information, see the review: “Ricerche Storiche Salesiane”).
- 5 V.L. Bedmar and García, “La labor socioeducativa de las misiones salesianas en América y España en el siglo XIX y los albores del siglo XX”, *Historia de la Educación*, 36 (2017), pp. 65-82.
- 6 M.A. Nicoletti, “La “Patagonia salesiana”: de territorio “ad gentes” a territorio de misión”, “X° Jornadas Interescuelas,” Departamentos de Historia, Rosario (2005).

- 7 Marie Morel, “Una etnografía salesiana 1890-1930: Cuatro décadas de encuentros y desencuentros de misioneros e indígenas en el Alto Paraguay”, in *Paraguay en la historia, la literatura y la memoria: actas de las II Jornadas Internacionales de Historia del Paraguay en la Universidad de Montevideo* (2011), p. 295.
- 8 Monsignor Luigi Lasagna, “Paraguay [letter to Father Michele Rua]”, *Bollettino Salesiano*, anno XVIII: 8, (1894), pp. 173-174.
- 9 Gabriela Dalla Corte Caballero, *Empresas y tierras de Carlos Casado en el Chaco paraguayo: historias, negocios y guerras (1860-1940)* (Asunción: Intercontinental Editora, 2012).
- 10 Wilfrid Barbrooke Grubb, *An Unknown People in an Unknown Land: an Account of the Life and Customs of the Lengua Indians of the Paraguayan Chaco, with adventures and experiences met with during twenty years' pioneering and exploration amongst them* (JB Lippincott Co., 1911).
- 11 As it was released in 1978 by the Indigenous Groups Association (Asociación de Parcialidades Indígenas).
- 12 Casilda owes its name to Carlos Casado's mother, María Casilda del Alisal. Apart from being the name of a large cattle ranch near Puerto Casado, Casilda is also the name of a town that Carlos Casado founded in Argentina, close to Rosario.
- 13 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 03/08/2016.
- 14 I interpret Ramírez's expression as a way of saying that indigenous people were not under scrutiny, and were free to give birth as they pleased.
- 15 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 15/05/2016.
- 16 R. V. Fisher-Treuenfeld, *Paraguay en Wort und Bild* (Berlin, 1906) quoted in CEP (Paraguayan Episcopal Conference), *Tierras para los indígenas de Puerto Casado, Paraguay* (Manuscript, 1983).
- 17 According to Susnik, indigenous groups in the Chaco tended to marry “women ethnically different from their tribe” whom they had obtained through incursions into enemy territory. Branislava Susnik, *Etnohistoria de los chaqueños (1650-1910)* (Asunción: Museo Etnográfico Andrés Barbero, 1981), p. 143.
- 18 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 03/08/2016.
- 19 Morel, “Una etnografía”, p. 229.
- 20 “Letter of the Salesian missionary Don Emilio Soza Gaona to Don Rinaldi, Puerto Napegue, Alto Paraguay, October 1925”, in *Bollettino Salesiano* (gennaio 1926): 1.
- 21 Gabriela Dalla Corte Caballero, “Los indígenas sanapanás, Carlos Casado y las fotografías de de Sanctis”, *Rosario, su historia y región*, Año XIV: 127 (2014), pp. 8-10.
- 22 Valentina Bonifacio, *Del trabajo ajeno y vacas ariscas. Puerto Casado, Genealogías: 1886-2000* (Biblioteca Paraguaya de Antropología, Vol. 108. Asunción: CEADUC, 2017).
- 23 Interview with Eloy Mayor, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 30/06/2015. As Eloy Mayor claims that he arrived in Casado with his family at least ten years later, it is not clear if he is referring in the interview to his grandfather by blood or to an elder member of the community; in the first case, though, we would be pushed to assume that his grandfather arrived in Casado before him, as he got there with his family only after the Chaco War was over.
- 24 Interview with Eloy Mayor, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 30/06/2015.
- 25 Interview recorded and transcribed by Gauthier Le Masson, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 2014.
- 26 Interview with Eloy Mayor, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 30/06/2015.
- 27 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 15/05/2016.

- 28 *Bollettino Salesiano*, anno LXV: 2 (1941).
- 29 Branislava Susnik, *Condiciones para el establecimiento de misiones en Paraguay* (Buenos Aires: Katoliski Misijoni, 1954). Spanish version by the Andrés Barbero Museum in Asunción.
- 30 *Bollettino Salesiano*, anno LXXXV: 21 (1961).
- 31 Modesto Bellido, “Villaggio o monastero”, *Bollettino Salesiano*, anno LXXXVIII: 9 (1954).
- 32 Interview with Faustino Ramírez (René Ramírez’s cousin), Riacho Mosquito Territory, 15/07/2016.
- 33 *Bollettino Salesiano*, anno LXXXV: 21 (1961).
- 34 Interview with Eloy Mayor, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 30/06/2015.
- 35 *Bollettino Salesiano*, anno LXXXIV: 5 (1960).
- 36 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 20/08/2008.
- 37 Giuseppe Ballin, *Floritas de un misionero* (Asunción: Editorial Don Bosco, 1998).
- 38 Interview with José Portillo, Indigenous Territory Riacho Mosquito, 06/07/2015.
- 39 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 15/08/2015.
- 40 Branislava Susnik and Miguel Chase-Sardi, *Los indios del Paraguay* (Madrid: MAPFRE S.A., 1995), pp. 325-326.
- 41 Interview with Marilyn Renfelth, Asunción, 05/09/2016.
- 42 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 20/08/2008.
- 43 Susnik and Chase-Sardi, *Los indios del Paraguay*.
- 44 CEP (Paraguayan Episcopal Conference), *Tierras para los indígenas de Puerto Casado, Paraguay* (Manuscript, 1983).
- 45 The *Equipo Nacional de Misiones*, today *Coordinación Nacional de Pastoral Indígena*, was created in 1969 in order to generate a stable network between indigenist missionaries from different congregations, anthropologists, and indigenous people. The ENM has been recently renamed CONAPI (<http://www.conapi.org.py/>).
- 46 CEP, *Tierras*.
- 47 W. Regher, “Informe 15/07/1980”, in CEP, *Tierras*.
- 48 Eugen Amadeus Benz, a Franciscan missionary of the *Equipo Nacional de Misiones*.
- 49 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 15/08/2015.
- 50 Interview with René Ramírez, Pueblito Indio Livio Farina, 15/08/2015.
- 51 Valentina Bonifacio, “Meeting the Generals. A Political Ontology Analysis of the Struggle for Land of the Paraguayan Maskoy in the 1980s”, *Anthropologica*, 55: 2 (2013), pp. 385-397.
- 52 René Harder Horst, *The Stroessner Regime and Indigenous Resistance in Paraguay* (University Press of Florida, 2007), p. 131.
- 53 Interview with Varcilicio Ojeda, Indigenous Territory Riacho Mosquito, 05/07/2015.
- 54 René Harder Horst, “Political Advocacy and Religious Allegiance: Catholic Missions and Indigenous Resistance in Paraguay, 1982-1992”, Manuscript prepared for delivery at the 2000 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association (2000).
- 55 Morel, “Una etnografía”.