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## The Rise and Fall of an Indigenous Homeland

The Itiyuro River Basin in Argentina

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One morning at dawn, in September 2016, the Chané of Campo Durán heard a thudding sound coming from the state road that separates their community from the adjacent forest. On inspection, they found a group of men unloading a truck replete with wooden posts, which they were then planting in the ground in order to build a fence on the opposite side of the road. The news spread quickly through the village, and a group led by the *mburuvicha* (headman) approached to inquire what the men were doing. Stepping forward, one of the intruders announced that he was the new landowner and that he was fencing off his property. To which the Chané replied that it was part of their territory: “We were born here, and no one can push his way in.” Pulling out a bundle of papers, the man waved them in the air. “But you have none of these papers,” he admonished the group. The Chané blocked the path of the fence, and the incident culminated in the arrival of the police and the departure of the supposed landowner, who left, threatening to return the following day to complete his task. He did not return, and the posts were left lying by the side of the road. The Chané took them back to their village and used them as firewood because, they said, the wood came from trees that had been logged on their land.

A few days later, the *mburuvicha* gave me his insight into the altercation. He said a neighboring settler, on hearing that the Chané were making

headway with their land claim by securing “good papers” that would ensure the demarcation of their territory, had hastened to sell his holdings for a pittance to another local settler who chose to try his luck.<sup>1</sup>

Not unlike Brumaire’s farce, the episode is a repeat of similar events that punctuate the history of Chané lands in the Itiyuro River basin. The following pages give an account of that history, from its nebulous beginnings at the end of the eighteenth century, when the Itiyuro River was barely a mark on one or two maps, to the Chané’s territorial dispossession at the beginning of the twentieth century. By highlighting the contrast between oral ethnohistory and documentary sources, the Chané’s memory of their traditional territory may be elucidated, along with their understanding of the causes behind their loss of that territory and their perception of the means they envisage for its recuperation.

### The Unknown Itiyuro Basin

The Chané are an indigenous group in northwestern Argentina, with a population of scarcely two thousand distributed mainly in two communities: Campo Durán, a small cluster of households overshadowed by an imposing oil refinery on the banks of the Itiyuro River; and the former Franciscan mission of Tuyunti. A few other settlements are scattered across the river basin and at the foot of the Aguaragüe mountain range. Situated on the western edge of the Chaco, the region once formed part of the Bolivian provinces of Salinas and Gran Chaco, subsequently coming under the jurisdiction of the Department of Orán and since 1948, that of San Martín, both in the Argentine province of Salta. At an altitude between 300 and 600 meters above sea level, the Itiyuro basin ecosystem is characterized as a foothill forest, an ecological transition zone between the Andean Yungas and the Chaco Plain.

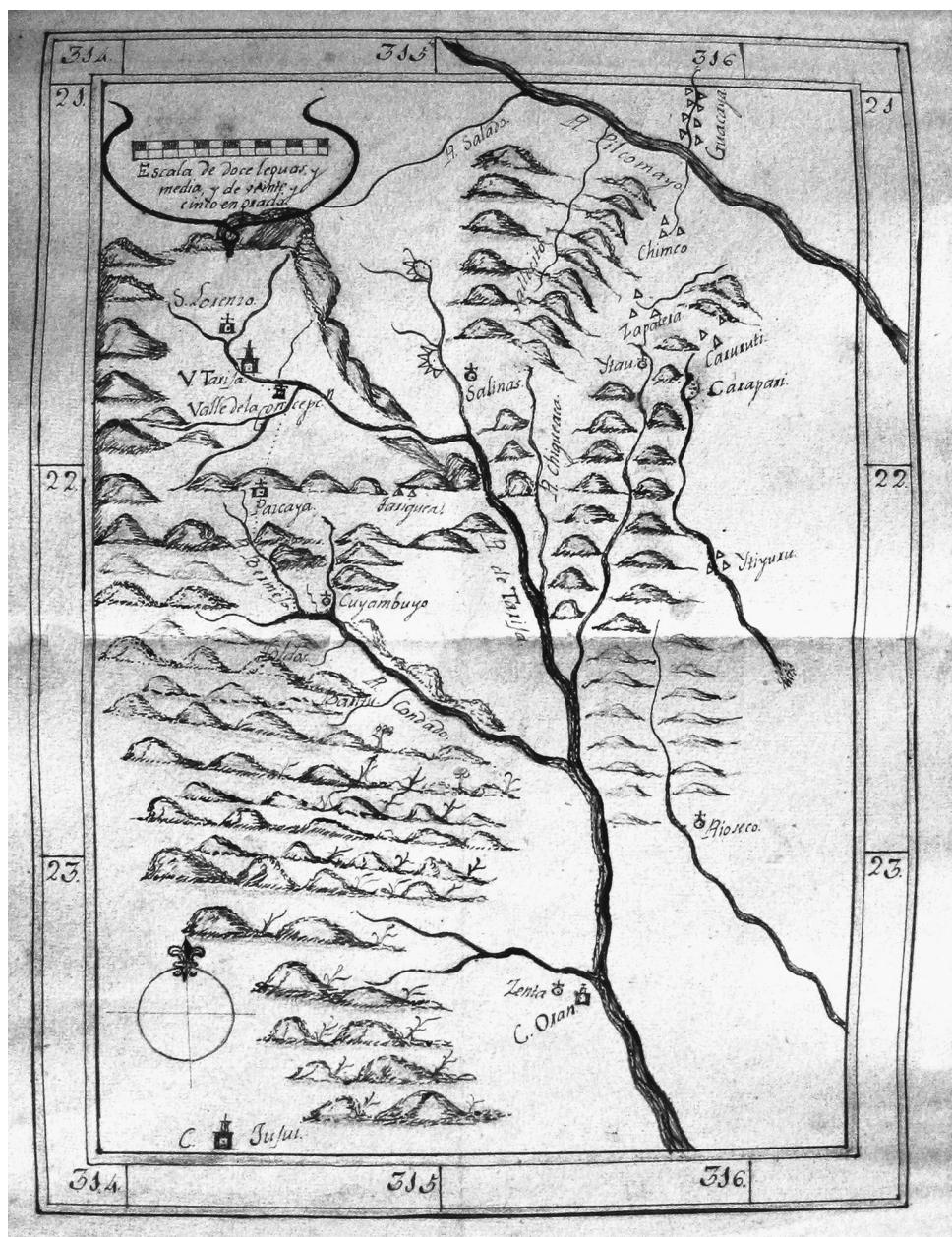
The Chané’s presence along the course of the Itiyuro is attested to since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. Until the end of that century, however, the area remained almost terra incognita, an ill-explored hinterland between the Bermejo and Pilcomayo Rivers that marked the limits of colonial and early republican exploration of the western Chaco. During the colonial period, incursions into this northern frontier zone had been few, as commerce and communication between Buenos Aires and the viceroyalty of Upper Peru followed either the highland Humahuaca route or the valleys of the Andean foothills. No known route traversed the

low-lying Itiyuro basin, and indeed the river does not appear on most maps until well into the nineteenth century. So it was that in 1921 the engineer in charge of plotting the course of the railway line that was to skirt the foot-hills lamented the “defects of the existing maps” (Montagne 1941, 137).

In large measure, the Itiyuro and its inhabitants first appear indirectly, in documents referring to neighboring areas. The Chané’s inconspicuousness was to a great extent the result of their not integrating into the townships founded between the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. Added to that, they succeeded in resisting missionary influence until well into the twentieth century. Thus, in documents of the 1790s relating to the upper Itiyuro’s Itau and Caraparí districts, the Chané were mentioned only as a vague threat issuing from the obscure Chaco periphery, as bitter enemies of the local Chiriguano people and frequent allies of the Pilcomayo River Toba.<sup>2</sup>

Franciscan and military chronicles concur in the story they tell with regard, respectively, to the Itau and Salinas missions and the Caraparí fortress. In those regions, the enemy Chiriguano had become “Indian allies” open to being reduced to mission residence and evangelization, while the Chané were adversaries as “wild” and “uncivilized” as the peoples of the Chaco.<sup>3</sup> Their resistance was no longer the mere urge for freedom that thwarted all attempts at installing missions among them in the central mountain range; they had resorted to taking up arms. And their objective appeared to be that of bringing to an end the established pattern of interethnic relations. To this aim, they availed themselves of the Toba incursions into the upper reaches of the Pilcomayo that in the last years of the eighteenth century forced the retreat of Chiriguano villages in the Caiza region.<sup>4</sup>

Documents of the period record the names of at least two Chané villages—Caipependi and Sanandita—on opposite banks of the upper Pilcomayo. But it is well known that other Chané settlements existed to the south of the Pilcomayo, in the little-known Caiza Plain.<sup>5</sup> In 1795 a friar of the Itau mission reported that “the enemy Chané and Toba heathens who are advancing towards Itau have their villages to the east and to the south of the Reduction, and when they disperse they head in that direction.”<sup>6</sup> Some years later, Father Comajuncosa (1971 [1800], 142) confirmed the friar’s (imprecise) indications, stating that to the south of Caraparí were “the Chané and Mataguayo nations.” Given that the said two villages of Sanandita and Caipependi were located to the northeast of Itau and Caraparí, who were those “enemy Chané” living to the south?



Not by chance, that same friar was the author of one of the first maps featuring a previously unreported river and indigenous village: Itiyuro. And some years later Father Comajuncosa was to make what appears to have been the first precise reference to “the barbarous Chané Indians of the Itiyuro” some “sixteen leagues” from the Seco River mission (1884 [1810], 180).

One hundred years later, in a short note published after his 1908–1909 Chaco expedition, Erland Nordenskiöld wrote, “on the banks of the Itiyuro I found part of an isolated tribe that calls itself Chane” (1910a, 97). While such villages undoubtedly had formed part of the Chané network to the south of the Pilcomayo (Combès 2007), it is safe to say that their territory extended beyond the traditional limits of Chiriguánía in the lowlands, abutting lands inhabited by the Wichí (Palmer 2005, 50–51). Their singular distribution reflects two features of Chané history in the region: their distance (or enmity) with regard to the Chiriguano and their proximity (or alliance) vis-à-vis their Chaco neighbors. At the same time, their isolation protected them against the progressive installation of military and missionary outposts and, above all, against the expansion of cattle ranches on the Caiza Plain during the nineteenth century (Langer 1987, 308).

The late eighteenth-century perception of the Chané as “barbarous Indians,” wild enemies like their Chaco allies, was to change in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1843–1844 President José Ballivián (1841–1847) sent expeditions commanded by Generals Magariños and Van Nivel to make the Chaco stretch of the Pilcomayo frontier secure. Magariños explored the Caiza Plain, following a southerly route skirting the foothills, and allocated lands for colonization (Lista 1881, 30). On the banks of the Itiyuro he encountered the Chané captain Paragua, “principal cacique of all those peoples,” who requested of him legal title to the lands inhabited by his people. Magariños consented, and in 1846 President Ballivián himself endorsed the land transfer with his signature in the course of an inspection of the region’s fortresses. From the documentary evidence consulted, the transfer comprised an area of some 20,000 hectares in the Itiyuro basin, from west to east, from the “Itaki Outlet” to the “Itiyuro Narrows”; from north to south, from the river to the “Jakatimbae gorge.”<sup>7</sup> According to Father Corrado (1884, 463), cacique Paragua proved from then on to be a “loyal friend to the Christians.” The following pages trace the subsequent history of the territory with which he was endowed.