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## Review/Reseña

Ticio Escobar, *The Curse of Nemur. In Search of the Art, Myth, and Ritual of the Ishir*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007.

## Aesthetics and Performance of the Ishir of Paraguay

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Ticio Escobar conceived this book not as ethnography but as a reflection on the art of the Ishir (also called Chamacoco) of the Paraguayan Chaco. The result, however, turned out to be both, artistic analysis and ethnographic account. Escobar offers a personal interpretation of the Ishir religious and ritual expressions. He retells the Great Ishir Myth—the epic of the *anábsoro*—and their Great Ceremony, with vivid and beautiful descriptions of their body painting and featherwork. These people, Escobar says, are obsessed by colors. To restate the oral stories, the author interviewed Tomárahó and Ebytoso-Ishir men and women with the assistance of indigenous translators, collected individual drawings, took extensive field notes, and very illustrative photos of Ishir rituals and regalia.

Escobar also substantiated his interpretations with citations from two other ethnographers who studied the Chamacoco-Ishir culture in depth, the Paraguayan Branislava Susnik and the Argentine Edgardo Cordeu. The culture of these people has been also studied by earlier ethnographers and by linguists. This excellent English translation of Escobar's work makes the Chamacoco known to American readers, since most of the previous studies have been published in Spanish.

Escobar's book reveals the complex richness of Chamacoco culture through a narrative that preserves what the Ishir myths have evoked on the author, according to his own cultural tradition and language. Escobar offers his reading of the Ishir's artistic expressions with the hope of inciting other readings and suggest other possible points of entry. He values indigenous culture and wants to promote respect for ethnic difference. In 1988 Escobar, who is a lawyer, published a report of human rights violations in Paraguay that dealt with the ethnocide of indigenous peoples. According to Escobar, indigenous peoples are not only the most exploited and humiliated inhabitants of the country; they are also great artists and poets, creators of worldviews, and inventors of alternative ways of feeling and thinking about the world. Escobar condemns the oppression of these men and women and repudiates the ransacking of their natural resources. He also advocates their right to keep indigenous symbols and the expressive culture that has been persecuted, mutilated, and deeply wounded but that even so continues to imagine common paths and to daily heal its historical wounds.

The indigenous peoples whom Paraguayans call the Chamacoco but who call themselves the Ishir (although they do not refuse the other name) dwell in the northeast of the Paraguayan Chaco. They speak a Zamucoan language related to the language of the Ayoreo of northern Chaco. Until recently, they were hunter-gatherers who also practiced some horticulture. Zamucoans were unique among foraging peoples in the Gran Chaco because their societies were organized in clans. Today, the Chamacoco comprise about one thousand divided in two groups, the Tomárahó who live in the forests, and the Ebytoso who have settled on the banks of the Paraguay River. The Tomárahó remained apart from the influence of Paraguayans and missionaries—at the cost of near extinction—and were able to preserve

a large body of myths and ceremonies. The Ebytoso were converted to Christianity and only lately have been able to regain the expression of their cultural and spiritual traditions from exchanges with the Tomáraho. During the Chaco War (1932-35), the Chamacoco helped the Paraguayan soldiers to fight the Bolivians, but when the war ended, they lost their territories and had to negotiate ethnic survival with the Paraguayan settlers. "Now our territory is that of the company, a Tomáraho man said, we live there but it isn't ours; it does not belong to us and has become an enemy place that is killing us off. Before we were brave and strong, but cohabitation with Pataguayans has tamed us." The Tomáraho worked in the logging camps of the tannin company Carlos Casado and barely survived, ill and malnourished. In the 1980s, community activists managed to resettle them near the riverbank, in a land that INDI (Instituto Nacional del Indigena) had previously secured for all the Chamacoco. Both groups, Ebytoso and Tomáraho became neighbors in the new settlement called Puerto Esperanza, and they strengthened mutual ties. The groups also received medical attention and agricultural technical assistance. Today the Chamacoco find sustenance by planting manioc, sweet potatoes, beans, corn, squash, and watermelon. They hunt, fish, and gather honey and carandá palms for sale. They produce crafts and find employment in nearby towns. The mortality rate that was decimating the groups has been halted. They continue to practice their ceremonies and trust in the shamans to sustain a communal way of life.

The main body of Escobar's book is devoted to the myths, ceremonies, shamanic stories, and artistic expressions of the Chamacoco. Escobar's narrative repeatedly points to similarities and differences between these Zamucoans and other indigenous peoples in the Gran Chaco. Interspersed with field notes and commentaries, the author describes rituals, the use of feathers and body painting, and shamanic mythology and paraphernalia. As Michael Taussig writes in the preface, this book differs from most ethnography in its focus on art. This carefully crafted narrative will be of interest to readers interested in literature, art criticism, the comparative study of shamanism, the practice of anthropology, and the role

of indigenous peoples, the First Peoples, in shaping our understanding of the Americas.

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