Short Paper 2: Analysis of *Courage Tastes of Blood*

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I have neither given nor received help on this work, nor am I aware of any infraction of the Honor Code.

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*Courage Tastes of Blood* is an account of the history of the indigenous Mapuche people of Chile, starting most heavily with the early 1900s. Florencia E. Mallon spent several years working on the book, during which time she struck up a very close relationship with several influential Mapuche people. In her somewhat biased work, Mallon details the significance of the Mapuche’s struggles with retaining land, cultural identity, and economic stability, and she also writes in such a way that the conflicting political ideologies and the global power struggle due to the Cold War can be seen as influential to the way with which the Mapuche’s problems were dealt.

The biggest, most obvious issue with which the Mapuche people struggled was being able to obtain and then retain land of their own. The Mapuche are a Chilean indigenous people who were tied to their land in more ways than one—both culturally and emotionally. Sharing the same land their ancestors shared allowed the Mapuche people to maintain a sense of cultural identity. Unfortunately, however, in the early part of the 1900s, the Mapuche did not “legally” have possession of the land they inhabited, and many of them were forced to relocate; in the process, they were stripped of more than just the soil on which they were accustomed to living. This led to another problem the Mapuche faced: along with their land, they left behind a portion of their aforementioned cultural identity. The seizure of “their” land was, understandably, a frustrating, heartbreaking, and generally emotionally draining thing for the Mapuche to endure. As Mallon herself wrote, “[u]nder such extreme conditions, it is not surprising that people sought out explanations from a divine power” (Mallon 79). The Mapuche were fearful of the future as well as emotionally battered; therefore, they sought solace in God. “[I]nterest in the Anglican church began to increase” dramatically among the Mapuche people beginning in the 1960s (Mallon, 79). This movement exemplifies how the Mapuche began to show signs of willingly abandoning parts of their traditional culture. When people abandon traditional ways, maintenance of a culture becomes increasingly difficult. It was easy for them to begin this abandonment, however, because so much of their culture was tied to the original land they had inhabited. Without it, they were spiritually and emotionally depleted.

In addition to their lack of land and loss of culture, the Mapuche also suffered greatly from poverty. Poverty was detrimental to the Mapuche families, particularly the children. As Mallon wrote, “Hugo, the eight-year-old boy who could not go to school ‘for lack of clothes,’ remembered poverty as a lack of opportunity for the children, who ‘grow up incomplete, underdeveloped in every way. That’s the sad reality’” (Mallon 67). Hugo was sent by his teacher to his principal’s office so that he would be given some shoes to wear. However, Hugo could not tell the principal his shoe size. The principal, disgusted and knowing that Hugo was Mapuche and had clearly never had shoes before, sent Hugo away. The sheer lack of land Mapuche families had with which they could work and from which they could profit affected every aspect of their lives all the way down to the education of their children.

The Mapuche knew that the answer to all of their problems was to obtain more land; it would allow them to preserve the parts of their culture onto which they had managed to hold, and it would also help them escape their poverty-stricken state. Therefore, they set out to do just that. The Mapuche needed land so they could preserve their culture, so they could farm, and so they could raise livestock. The members of the Nicolás Ailío community engaged in a decades-long plea with the Chilean government for help. They devoted their lives to the improvement of the economic and emotional states of the Mapuche people. They never ceased seeking aid in the form of both land and monetary loans.

In order to obtain more land, the Mapuche people began applying for land grants. Their laborious effort paid off, and their application was approved. They received a portion of land, and the community of Nicolás Ailío was able to spread out. Some of the people from the original Nicolás Ailío community had to move to the new piece of land, and the community split into Nicolás Ailío I and Nicolás Ailío II.

Throughout the Mapuche’s struggle for land, one can see some effects that the Cold War had on the indigenous people. The Cold War was a war of ideologies, and there were certainly very different ideologies being tossed around in Chile in the twentieth century. For example, many did not believe at first that the issues the Mapuche faced were of great enough importance to actually give them help. If they did, the Mapuche people would have been given more necessary aid much earlier. Also, the Cold War was more a war of words than it was a bloodbath, which mimicked the “war” of the Mapuche on the Chilean government. People may have been forced to relocate, some injuries occurred, and torture was inflicted, but true battles between opposing military forces were not taking place. The Cold War was a struggle for power, and there was a great struggle for power in Chile during the 1900s as well. With every presidential election came a great deal of ideological change and shifts of power into new hands. For instance, Frei’s and Allende’s Chilean governments focused on agrarian reform, but the Pinochet regime was not in favor of agrarian reform and thus cancelled the movement, making it nearly impossible for Mapuche people to obtain any more land.

It is difficult to make such definite claims about a historical situation when the only resource one has consulted is a work of Radical History. Florencia E. Mallon spent years of analysis and research, including observation and interviewing, getting to know the Mapuche people so that she could write for them an account of the history of their people. In doing so, Mallon got dangerously emotionally close to them. Mallon went so far as to say that, “[t]he history of my relationship with the community is also reflected in my use in the text of “don”and “doña,” Spanish terms of respect….I have come to feel such deep respect for them that I cannot help but refer to them in this way” (Mallon 23-24). Throughout the book, Mallon uses intense language and includes numerous heart wrenching accounts of the struggles that the Mapuche faced in order to appeal to the readers’ emotions. She describes scenes of torture, such as when one of the MIR organizers “experienced two mock executions and numerous beatings, and his testicles were struck with rocks” (Mallon 150). She does acknowledge from the very beginning of the work that her account of the Mapuche’s history is a bit biased due to her emotional attachment to the people. However, acknowledging it does not make it any less true. When analyzing a group of people or a situation, in order to draw accurate conclusions, it is important to have a well-rounded view of the situation. Drawing accurate conclusions about the Mapuche people based only on information derived from *Courage Tastes of Blood*, therefore, is risky.

With that being said, Mallon is a talented historian and put a great deal of effort into doing accurate research and writing an accurate account of Mapuche history. Her work is far from useless. On the contrary, *Courage Tastes of Blood* can be considered a useful and fairly reliable source for anyone who wants to learn about the Mapuche for the purpose of analyzing them or their history. However, in order to maintain objectivity throughout one’s analysis of the Mapuche, *Courage Tastes of Blood* should be read in conjunction with other, more impersonal works.

Florencia E. Mallon’s *Courage Tastes of Blood* is an emotional and personal account of the struggles faced by the indigenous Mapuche people of Chile throughout the twentieth century. Mallon spent several years forming a bond with the Mapuche and was able to hold extensive and detailed interviews with them to get a sense of how they handled the issues with which they were faced. Their struggles for land, cultural identity, and economic contentment, all influenced in some way by the Cold War, impacted who the Mapuche are as a people today.

Work Cited

Mallon, Florencia E. *Courage Tastes of Blood: The Mapuche Community of Nicolás Ailío and the Chilean State, 1906-2001*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2005. Print.