

# Who Killed Jules Crevaux?



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# Who Killed Jules Crevaux?

Murder in the Bolivian Chaco

*Isabelle Combès*

**Preface by Francis Grandhomme**

**Introduction by Diego Villar**

**Translated by Nora Scott**



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## Introduction

# The Seventh Circle (in the Chaco), or Murder Considered as a Method

*Diego Villar*

As the pathologist in a detective novel might say, standing before a body that is still warm—I'm thinking here of Max DeBryn, or perhaps of the short-tempered Dr. Pasquano—a few facts are clear. We know, for instance, that the renowned explorer Jules Crevaux, “the South American Livingstone” who had just successfully crossed Guyana, the Amazon, and the Orinoco, was murdered along the Pilcomayo River on April 27, 1892. Just a few days into their journey, the party of five Frenchmen, two Argentinians, nine Bolivians, and a native interpreter was attacked by an unknown Indigenous group, resulting in the death of several expedition members. The description of the scenery is also apparently clear: the drama unfolds in an area of the Bolivian Chaco claimed at the time by both Argentina and Paraguay. These young republics were seeking to consolidate their presence in a region which was largely Indigenous territory, while the liberal governments of Bolivia were desperately organizing expeditions to secure some sort of access to the sea. Meanwhile a series of secularizing policies was antagonizing the religious missions that had spearheaded regional colonization, the Indigenous communities were migrating en masse to the northwest of Argentina to grasp the favorable opportunities for work, and the various ethnic groups in the Chaco were coming to realize that they needed to join forces in the struggle against

the whiteman. In such a volatile situation, it is no wonder that the smallest spark could provoke violence, and indeed the general turmoil in the Chaco presented—in the words of one of the privileged witnesses of the time—“an Iliad of sins, crimes and scandals, revenge, cruelty, outrages, thefts, arrogance, and the law of might makes right.”<sup>1</sup>

The chaotic nature of the scenario, which at first sight could be attributed to the general situation or to the very ambiguities of the colonization process, was not, however, the only factor complicating the external perception of a region like the Chaco—described from the very outset as a space of miscegenation, trade, multiculturalism, and multilingualism, where “everything is mixture”<sup>2</sup> and the principles of political, economic, or social organization that define other cultural areas of Amerindian ethnology are not clearly drawn.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, at least from the external point of view, the uncertainty, chaos, and general turmoil are by no means accidents but are in the very nature of the region. They are not things that happen in the Chaco; they *are* the Chaco. The murder of Crevaux in 1892 goes some way to reinforcing this perception. The tragedy provoked as much shock in Bolivia as it did in Argentina and France, home of the expeditionary party; but as the detective/ethnohistorian Isabelle Combès remarks, the actual murder is in fact the only reliable information we have. The general commotion prompted by the Crevaux myth is a vanishing trail of rumors, legends, snippets of information, forgetfulness, misunderstandings, half-truths, lies, opacities, exaggerations, and even blatant falsifications.<sup>4</sup> In a plot in which nothing can be assumed to be true, all versions are to a certain degree plausible, the actors are both victims and detectives, and everyone—Indigenous peoples, explorers, colonists, military men, missionaries, guides, interpreters, cooks, witnesses—accuses everyone else: just as in detective novels, the suspense is maintained by suggesting at every step that the culprit is someone else.

The very uncertainties that infuriate the ethnologist or the historian are sure to delight the reader of the detective genre. Behind this choice, however, I glimpse something more than mere literary affinity. Timidly the author claims that the only common denominator behind the tangle of conflicting pieces of information, opacities, and nonsense involved in the Crevaux myth is that, each in his own way, the explorers present themselves as icons of civilization and progress. The narrative trope is undoubtedly correct but it seems insufficient, which is why I would venture a little further. In this sense, the decision to choose the detective format is not exactly innocent. Let us recall that, for a reflexive practitioner of the detective story, such as Jorge Luis Borges, the genre is equivalent to

functional architecture or figurative painting.<sup>5</sup> In other words, unlike free verse, impressionist painting, or the sentimental novel, it is a genre that avoids chaos and owes its efficacy—frequently outstandingly popular—to the fact that it preserves a set of classical virtues: identifiable characters, fixed rules, logical order, elements adapted to produce a certain effect, and a structure with a beginning, development, and conclusion. In other words, the unexpressed goal of a long line of descent stretching from Poe to Chesterton and Bustos Domecq, or from Holmes's heroin injections to Morse's glasses of ale and whisky, and even Wallander's Alzheimer's, would be to preserve the illusion of order in times of chaos. In Borges, but also in the works of a group of intellectuals from the first half of the twentieth century who orbited around him (Bioy Casares, Manuel Peyrou, the Ocampo sisters), there was in fact a pedagogical and political decision to promote the detective genre as a tool to foster rational thought: an ideal of playing by the rules but, at the same time, a critical apparatus accessible to all, designed to manage chaos in an era of mechanical reproduction of irrationalism, propaganda, and fraud.<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, venturing beyond the stated intentions of Combès, the heuristic invitation to take the detective novel as a beacon may shed light on the latent spirit of the inquiry. Beyond the charm of the plot, as in the adventures of hairdresser Isidro Parodi, Father Brown, or Auguste Dupin, what we can take from this book is basically a lesson in method that, like the best of them, slips surreptitiously into the reader's conscience. With the days of the evolutionist anthropologies, of the tales of *Naturvölker*, or the tidy typologies of the *Handbook of South American Indians* long gone, we are now well aware that nobody continues to claim that the Indigenous peoples of South America are or were "people without a history" or "cold societies" frozen in time and reluctant to change.<sup>7</sup> What is not so clear is the very nature of this "temporal revolution" and the precise relationship of those societies, and their specific regimes of historicity, and the diachronic processes.<sup>8</sup>

This is where, I believe, this book makes a contribution. When academics speak of "ethnohistory" they generally refer to a series of problems defined by a more-or-less canonical historiographic agenda, recorded in places where there happened to be Indigenous peoples: the missions at X, the frontier Y, the impact of this or that reform in Z.<sup>9</sup> The gaze is focused on the "process," and it is basically immaterial whether it involves the Toba, Tapiete, Wichí, or Nivaclé. This book, on the other hand, aims to forge a true historical anthropology, or perhaps an ethnohistory in which the stress clearly lies on the prefix "ethno": a narrative

that rewrites the Indigenous version of the event by following a logic that eludes the designs of governments, functionaries, scientific societies, religious orders, social classes, and armies—not because the rigors of the academic modes or political correctness of the day require it, but because it is a history in an Indigenous key.<sup>10</sup>

First, in this type of analysis it does definitely matter whether those who killed Crevaux were Tobas, Chiriguano, or Wichí: in fact, each of the groups and factions that compose those ethnic labels has their own particularities, and it is not at all the same whether Crevaux was shot, stabbed, drowned, or scalped. Second, Indigenous peoples are viewed in all cases as actual protagonists, and not secondary figures or supporting actors in great processes they are unable to fully appreciate or understand. Third and perhaps most important, they are protagonists who have followed their own agenda—as practical or idealistic as any other—and not icons, emblems, or allegories of something else: resistance to colonization, economic marginality, ethnicity, ecology, ontology, Indigenous metaphysics. Much to the despair of observers, the Indigenous actors are, in fact, often unperturbed about presenting their voices or points of view as testimonies, or about presenting themselves as victims, or as spokespersons for any idea, culture, or community; this is simply because they are not just mere embodied political positions, epistemologies, or ecologies. And this is precisely what makes them credible: the fact that they are persons driving forward their own agenda, to mediate, negotiate, consolidate prestige or power, avenge an offence, seize opportunities, defend a territory, survive. As powerful as the network of influences spreading through the marginality of the Chaco may be, the “white world” was also being transformed by the actions of Yallá, Yahuanahua, Calaeta, Catuna, Calisin, Cuserai, Pelocolic, Caligagae, Iñiri, Cutaicoliqui, Socó, Cototo, El Rengo, Mandepora, Autagaicoluqui, Cutiguasu, Iramaye, Chiriqui, Oleoncito, Icuru, Blanco, or Tatuyuruy. According to Combès, the decisions, strategies, and even the whims of each one of them has as much thematic weight as those of the French explorers, Argentinian military men, or Italian missionaries. Their motivations—surely multicausal—are appreciated in much the same way as the classical historian assesses the official policy of colonization of a hitherto savage frontier. It is thus not a question of vindicating or criticizing this or that action by characters such as Ibarreta, Thouar, or Crevaux himself, in which the Tobas or the Chiriguano incidentally appear; it is the fact that the travelers, functionaries, soldiers, missionaries, and even national and international heroes—whatever fame they may have garnered in the *Société*

de Géographie in Paris—appear as supporting actors in the bizarre “Far West” of the Chaco, and even end up dying for some obscure reason they never know: revenge, the kidnapping of a woman, the ill humor of this or that native leader, failed diplomacy, or a setback in a petty exchange.

Her intention to rewrite regional and national history in Indigenous code was already present in works such as *Etno-historias del Isoso*, in which Combès analyzes centuries of micropolitics by Chané and Chiriguano leaders in the foothills of the Andes. Far from following a consistent political strategy over the years, the leaders manipulated the Indigenous inhabitants (both the Guarani-speaking factions and the groups of Chaco ancestry), the various colonizing agents (*encomienda* authorities, explorers, missionaries, military men, naturalists) and also the republican actors (settlers, farmers, livestock breeders, sugar-mill owners, national armies, functionaries, and, nowadays, NGOs, anthropologists, and development projects).

Combès’s methodological inflection took a deeper step in the exemplary biography of Cuñambo, a Chiriguano leader, *Historia del pérfido Cuñambo*, which reveals at a personal level the game of fleeting loyalties.<sup>11</sup> The son of Captain Maruama, Santiago Cuñambo was baptized in a Franciscan mission and from an early age took part in expeditions to suppress the Chiriguano rebellions, for which the Spanish authorities praised his bravery. But over the years, his affiliations became much more problematic, unstable, and fluid. These were the days of the Plan Viedma, which, against the backdrop of the Bourbon reforms, sought to secularize the missions of the so-called Cordillera Chiriguana: the aim was to end the Franciscan protection of the Indians and open the missions to regional commerce. Franciscans, colonists, and military men accused each other of exploiting the Indigenous peoples, mistreating them, and abusing their womenfolk. On inheriting his father’s position, Cuñambo publicly denounced the exploitation of the military, to such an extent that they accused him of being an agent of the missions, dismissed him, and sentenced him to the stocks. However he then accused the priests of a series of sexual abuses. Then, at the end of the eighteenth century, new Indigenous rebellions broke out, and the Spanish accused Cuñambo of inciting them. But in 1804, the official chronicles show him accompanying the Spanish military again. In fact both the priests and the military are pieces on the checkerboard of an internal confrontation between Cuñambo and another Chiriguano cacique, Potica.

With the wars of independence, Cuñambo’s position became more ambiguous than ever. In 1813, Manuel Belgrano led the army of Alto



Perú out of Potosí to fight the royalist troops. The patriotic general was assisted by the powerful Captain, Cumbay: however, an analysis of the correspondence of the time reveals the constant problems between the independence forces and their Chiriguano allies—one of whom was obviously Cuñambo, who wasted no time in changing sides. He then appears to conspire with the Franciscans against the military, but what actually interested him is his new confrontation with the Indigenous leader, Pedro Guariyu. Cuñambo staged an attempted coup, and everything seems to indicate that he dies at the hands of the patriotic troops.

So it is clear that separating the “patriotic Chiriguanos” from the “royalist Chiriguanos” lacks any diagnostic value. Firstly because the “royalists” seem to be concerned with the fate of the Franciscan friars rather than with the distant and abstract cause of the King; secondly because a character such as Cuñambo changes sides as a matter of expediency (for instance, his confrontation with Guariyu); thirdly, to complicate matters even further, because “barbaric” or “savage” Indigenous fighters, for whom the differences between supporters of the Crown or supporters of independence are of little importance, also appear in the Cordillera, seeking to make the most of the continental confrontation to rid themselves of all the *karai* (whitemen).

Perhaps the crux of the problem is having supposed that the Indigenous captains represented the Chiriguano “ethnic group” or “people” as a homogeneous body, when everything seems to indicate they were in fact fighting over the leadership of the local and regional captaincies, and the alliances with traders, missionaries, patriots, and royalists were means to shift the regional balances of power in their favor.<sup>12</sup> Cuñambo sided with the Franciscans to defeat Potica but then had no qualms about denouncing those very same priests that were his former allies. Similarly, for a period he sided with the royalist band in the war of independence but then joined the patriots and those Chiriguanos who sympathized with neither one band nor the other. His aim was to regain his former freedom—and he does so, now to counteract the growing power of a new Indigenous competitor. The idea of understanding things from the Indigenous point of view reappears here in full: if external agents sought to use him for their own interests, it is clear that Cuñambo also used them to settle internal disagreements in the communities and to dispatch possible rivals for power. Far from genuinely involving himself in the conflicts between Indigenous peoples and white men, missionaries, patriots, and royalist armies, Cuñambo used each situation to promote his own agenda. From this point of view, there is no possible ambiguity since he

was always on the same side: that of Cuñambo. What is most important is that, from that angle, the lability of the character is not seen as a means to give local color to the historical study of the independence process, but that the war of independence becomes just another instrument to shed light on the biography of an extraordinary Indigenous leader.

The analytic possibility of using documentary scaffolding to recreate the points of view of Cuñambo, Yallá, or Cutaicoliqui, and to highlight and prioritize such a perspective over other historical processes—whether they be the Bourbon reforms, the wars of independence, the rise of extractivism, the Chaco War, or decolonization—is not only a question of scale (bringing the lens nearer and focusing on the daily minutiae of local microhistory), but a question of profoundly transforming historiography in search of a new experience that is more ethnographic, more symmetrical, and less extractive.<sup>13</sup> This form of understanding South American history not only allows Combès to write a history in Indigenous code of the same spaces that traditional historiography views as “deserts,” “contact zones,” “peripheries,” or “frontiers,” but it additionally allows her to calibrate in a novel fashion the different interfaces and relationships between the local and the global, between external influence and internal adaptation.

That is exactly why this type of analysis offers us a point of equilibrium between two interpretive ideal types, between which the ethnology and the history of the South American lowlands usually alternate. On the one hand, we have those studies that understand the Indigenous peoples (or Creoles or peasants) as mere marginal or subordinate actors whose existence is diluted in the web of external decisions made by the state, national culture, missions, armies, extractive industries, or development projects. From this point of view, there is no real difference between a Wichí from the northern Chaco or a Mapuche from the south of Chile, because what matters is that both are oppressed, invisibilized, or marginalized in a more-or-less passive subordination to capitalism, to religious indoctrination, or to extractivism. On the other hand, we find an exacerbated multiculturalism whose only interest seems to be to trace the semantic, symbolic, and epistemological consistency of the native systems of action and thought: from this perspective, anything that comes from “outside” ends up being absorbed and recycled in culturally acceptable terms, and there is no substantial difference between minor Pentecostal devotion or the Catholic Church, an abusive boss or a national army, a small-scale farmer or Monsanto, since ultimately everything is swallowed up by an all-powerful hyperagency. Against the

first interpretative apparatus, the historical anthropology proposed by Combès suggests that archival work can reveal that the millennialism that drove the Guaycurú revolts had in fact a transfigured cosmological matrix of Tupí-Guaraní origin. Against the second, we realize that the “anti-colonial” resistance of those Guaranís whose culture permeated the north of the Chaco and the foothills of the Andes was not an instance of nebulous metaphysics “against the state,” and that cultural framework combined in *sui generis* fashion with the strategic search for power and legitimacy.<sup>14</sup>

On clearing away over the years the tangle of opaque factors, complex motives, and impossible names, Combès dismantles an opposition that is sitting too comfortably and too easily between—if I may use the Nordenskiöldian expression—“Indians and white men,” and exposes with an almost manic (or detective-like) patience the multiple forms in which one can track the realignment between the fractures in the diverse *karai* factions (missionaries and settlers, patriots and royalists, liberals and conservatives, Frenchmen, Argentinians, and Bolivians) and Indigenous peoples (Chiriguano and Toba, Wichí and Nivaclé, Potica and Cuñambo, Cuñambo and Pedro Guariyu). That is not bad for a book which, after all, offers no more than conundrums, including that of its own genre. We will never know who, where, or how Crevaux was actually murdered; nor will we know if the work that offers the rationale for his murder is a police novel, a historical novel, a history book, an ethnohistory, or an ethnography. What we will know is that it is an enjoyable read and that it is clearly good anthropology—especially if we bear in mind that someone once said that anthropology is either historical, or it is nothing.<sup>15</sup>

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## Notes

### Preface

- 1 Broc 1982a and 1982b.
- 2 Le Bris 2010: 278.
- 3 Known in French as “Qui a tué Harry?” or “Who Killed Harry?”
- 4 For example, *The Dogs of Riga* (2008), which, according to one blurb, “explores one man’s struggle to find truth and justice in a society increasingly bereft of either; their deaths mushroom into an international incident. It is known in French as *Assassins sans visage*.”

### Introduction

- 1 Giannecchini (1898) 1996: 161.
- 2 Alfred Métraux, letter of March 9, 1928, to the Geneva Museum of Ethnography, in Aurois and Monnier 1998: 12.
- 3 Combès, Villar, and Lowrey 2009.
- 4 See, for instance, Novis (1887) 2016; Thouar 1884; Chaumeil 2009; Grandhomme 2022.
- 5 Borges 1996.
- 6 Grieco y Bavio 2016. As part of this undertaking we can mention the detective novels written by Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares under either a real name or a pseudonym (e.g., *Seis problemas para Isidro Parodi*, *Un modelo para la muerte*, etc.), the short stories of Peyrou (*La Espada dormida*, *El Arbol de Judas*), or the novel *Los que aman, odian* by Bioy and Silvina Ocampo, as well as the collection of detective stories directed by Borges and Bioy, entitled “*El séptimo círculo*,” which included titles by

Wilkie Collins, Nicholas Blake, John Dickson Carr, Hugh Walpole, Graham Greene, and so on.

- 7 Hill 1988; Fausto and Heckenberger 2007.
- 8 Taylor 2007.
- 9 Momigliano 2993; Viazzo 2003.
- 10 Stewart 2016; Coello de la Rosa and Dieste 2020.
- 11 Combès 2016.
- 12 Combès 2005.
- 13 Stoler 2010: 47.
- 14 Respectively, Combès 2019, 2005.
- 15 Evans-Pritchard 1950.

## Chapter 1

- 1 Throughout the book, I use the term “Indian” when conveying the colonial viewpoint, since this book hinges largely on colonizer/colonized conflict.
- 2 *Le Courrier de la Moselle* (cited in Grandhomme 2022: 385). A reissue of Crevaux’s work appeared in 1987 under the title *Le Mendiant de l’Eldorado. De Cayenne aux Andes, 1876–1879* (Paris: Phébus).
- 3 *Criollo* means literally “creole.” Since the term has other meanings in English, I have chosen to use the Spanish word to designate the “whites” (or *mestizos*) of the region, as opposed to the Indians.
- 4 Arthur Thouar, “Circonstances qui ont précédé et suivi le massacre de la mission Crevaux,” October 5, 1899, Archives Nationales [AN], F/17/3009B, dossier Thouar, p. 2.
- 5 Corrado 1884: 428.
- 6 *Tratado de paz entre los blancos de Salinas y los Tobas, 1859*, Archives Franciscaines de Tarija [AFT] 1-878.
- 7 Report of Fr. Mauricio Monacelli (San Francisco, February 10, 1878), AFT 1-2376, f. 5v.
- 8 Corrado 1884: 471–73.
- 9 In colonial times, the Spanish called the Chiriguano leaders, and Indian leaders in general, “capitaines.”
- 10 Letter from the Prefecture for Missions to Fr. de San Antonio (San Francisco, January 10, 1878), AFT 1-2375.
- 11 Campos 1888: 112–13, 123.
- 12 Braunstein 2006.
- 13 Paz Guillén 1886: 26; Campos 1888: 104.
- 14 Baldrich 1890: 199n1.
- 15 Letter from Manuel Othon Jofré to Jules Crevaux (Tarija, March 6, 1882), *El Trabajo* [Tarija], March 9, 1882, pp. 3–4.
- 16 Baldrich 1890: 204, 272, italics in original. See Bossert 2012.