



*"Where are the men that used to run like guanacos? Where are the women that used to sing like birds?"*

Lola Kiepja, Selknam

## The Uttermost Part of the Earth

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*"It is a paradox that of the Western world: it cannot know without possessing and it cannot possess without destroying"*

Hernán Vidal



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# The Uttermost Part of the Earth



## Museo Etnográfico "Juan B. Ambrosetti"

# The Uttermost Part of the Earth

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At the arrival of the first white explorers, Tierra del Fuego had been occupied by different groups of hunters for more than eleven thousand years.

## The land hunters of the Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego

The land hunters occupied the northern steppes as well as the woodland areas in the South of the island.

At the time of the first contact with Europeans, in the 16th century, they were an independent and well differentiated ethnic group, known as **Selknam** or **Ona**.

Their main economic activity was guanaco hunting, using bows and arrows. They also caught foxes and birds, and gathered wild fruits, berries and mushrooms. In the coastal areas they exploited maritime resources. They hunted the coruro -a small rodent- as well, for food and warm clothing.

Men were in charge of hunting and making weapons, while women's responsibilities included looking after their homes, moving domestic utensils from one residence to another and raising the children. The Selknam protected themselves from the cold weather wearing long guanaco or coruro skin cloaks with the fur on the outer side, and leather moccasins. Adult men wore a triangular cap made of guanaco skin called "koschel".

The Selknam of the northern region built light huts as semicircular shelters (to keep the wind out), with wooden poles and covered with skins. The southern groups, who exploited woods of lenga, coigüe and canelo trees, raised conical huts made of trunks.

Among objects of daily life were baskets made

of vegetable fibers, leather bags and stone, wood and bone utensils.

In contrast to this simple technology, the Selknam had a rich and complex cosmogony, expressed through ceremonies, art, myths and legends.

## The sea hunters

In the cold and rough waters of the western archipelagoes, the sea hunters captured sea mammals, and fished and gathered shellfish.

Their ancestors had arrived to the island's damp and lush environment about 6000 years before the present.

In the 16th century there were two ethnic groups of sea hunters: the **Kaweshkar** or **Alacaluf**, scattered among the islets, fiords and channels of the eastern portion of the Strait of Magellan and northwards throughout the western littoral, and the **Yamana**, on the coasts of the Beagle Channel and southern islands up to Cape Horn.

The sea hunters lived in small family groups, who spent most of the day together at sea, hunting sea lions, otters and birds, collecting shellfish and fishing.

Their canoes were made of tree bark, sewn together by vegetable fibers or whalebone and calked with moss, algae and paste.

Although an important part of their daily life was spent on the canoes, on land they lived in circular huts made out of sticks planted in the ground and covered with sea lion skins or branches.

They wore a loincloth and a short cape made of sea lion or otter skin which covered their shoulders and part of their back and they smeared their bodies with animal fat mixed with colored clay for protection against the cold.

Finding a beached whale was usually the momentous occasion in which several families could meet and camp together: it was the time to celebrate their social ceremonies.

The technology of the sea hunters consisted of bone harpoons to hunt sea lions, awls, projectile

points and other stone instruments and baskets made of vegetable fibers.

## Other people's gaze: Chronicle of an announced extinction

Explorers, travelers and anthropologists imagined Tierra del Fuego as the place where time had remained unaltered for nature and humanity; a confined territory due to its geography, archaic societies without contact with the outside, a prison for criminals and a shelter for adventurers. The atmosphere of deep exotism surrounding Tierra del Fuego stimulated abundant iconography which, in spite of the luxuriant fantasy that inspired it, has left us a double record: that of the lifestyles of the original inhabitants and that of the way in which they were seen.

European seamen and expeditions came into contact with Fuegians, starting with Magellan's voyage in 1520. Missionaries and settlers came to the territory. During the second half of the 19th century a rapid process of extinction of the original population of Tierra del Fuego began, caused in part by the introduction of infectious diseases and by persecutions.

After some decades native society had been reduced to some small groups that disappeared and merged into the national society, pushed aside by poverty, intolerance and discrimination.

**Cover illustration:** "28-year-old Toín, who saved my life". Photograph by Martín Gusinde, 1923. In *Die Feuerland Indianer I* (Tafel VI, Bild 12. Gusinde, Mödling-Wien, 1931. Austria).