

Mapuche sacred dance

Cireneo Matulac

THE sound of the trutruka, a tribal instrument like a bugle that is popular with the Mapuches awakened me. I got up, washed my face, put on my jacket and shoes and started walking on the muddy trail in the direction from which the trutruka sounded. Its cooing melody pierced the thick winter mist that covered the landscape. I breathed the damp air of southern Chile.



Artwork by Jayne Macholan

AS a Columban student from the Philippines, I had the privilege of getting to know some of the people in the *Mapuche* (people of the land) communities in Puerto Saavedra where Columban missionaries are working. I was spending two years in southern Chile on my first missionary assignment as part of the student formation programme. As a sign of welcome and friendship the Mapuches invited me to be present at their traditional religious rituals.

The Mapuche people inhabited most of southern Chile before the Europeans arrived. Throughout their history of resistance to the colonisers they retained their cultural and religious traditions. These were integral to their struggle for self-identity within the wider Chilean culture. Among their traditions were sacred dances and rituals like the one to which I was invited on that foggy morning.

When I reached the sacred ground where the prayer was to be held, people were already gathered around an altar

called the *rehue*, an anthropomorphic figure made from a tree trunk. It leaned on a *maqui* tree, one of the Mapuches' sacred trees.

The people greeted me with gestures, welcoming me without a word being spoken. There was an atmosphere of silence, maybe because the *rogativa* (prayer of pleading) was about to start. A child offered me *maqui* branches that I could use during the prayer. Everyone knelt on the ground. The intercession started.

The voices of the five prayer leaders filled our surroundings as they prayed with chanting voices. They

didn't chant the same words, but each of them uttered different prayers.

The varying tones of their voices merged, accompanied by the primal beat of the drum that they call the *kultrung*. The drum rhythm, the human voices and the sound of nature were fused into one harmonious rhythm. I felt I was breathing the beat into myself.

They faced the eastern sky to welcome the sunrise. The rising sun hid behind thick clouds that spread just above the horizon. Yet the sunlight diffused everywhere in this part of the world.

Suddenly, everyone stood and waved the branches in their hands. In loud voices, they said the *hipo-afapan*, a call for the forces of nature to provide their bodies energy and strength. It was a prayer thought to echo throughout all the corners of the *mapu* (earth).

Down on their knees again, they continued praying and recited the *hipo-afapan* several more times. I didn't know the meaning of the words because they were spoken in their local language and not Spanish, the national language that I had learned.

Nevertheless, I seemed to grasp the sense of their language. The sound of the bugle, the whispers of nature, the wind, the chirping of the birds, the rustling of leaves



This Mapuche tribal chief, his wife and their daughter display the items used in a Mapuche prayer ceremony.



Traditional dances, like this one in Puerto Saavedra, Chile, are an important part of the Mapuche culture.

kept me in touch with the sacredness of their ritual.

The ritual included gestures that were unpretentious but profound. The five men leading the prayer drank from a cup of wine before blessing the *rehue* by sprinkling it with the wine from their mouths.

The wine was passed to everyone and each person drank from the same vessel. Afterwards, they danced around the *rehue*, circling it four times. Their feet stomped the earth in time with the drum.

The two-hour ritual was like a new year celebration held on the winter solstice celebrating the cycle of the birth of the sun. It was also a prayer to ask God, the Father and Creator (*Chao Negenechen*) for abundance during the upcoming harvest.

The beginning of the New Year is the birth of the whole creation. But it also is a reminder that people must live under the care of the Creator and in harmony with nature. ■

Cireneo Matulac is presently continuing his studies for the priesthood in the Philippines