

Dear friends of the work of *Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet*,

For the past twenty years, the Enlhet Institute *Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet* (Growing Our Language and Knowledge) dedicates its work to assisting the Enlhet people to look at themselves and to reflect on their identity and history. This work is necessary because the colonization of their land over the last hundred years has created the impression that the Enlhet are not capable of living independently in the modern world. Please find more information about the background of our work on our [website](#).

Today, I would like to share with you a report of our recent work with *Sa'kok-Nay'*. *Sa'kok-Nay'* was born around 1925, before Low German-speaking Mennonite settlers claimed the Enlhet land from 1927 onwards. In her accounts, she describes her family's experiences at the time of the Mennonite immigration and illustrates the consequences this had for the Enlhet. Even before the arrival of the settlers, Paraguayan surveyors came to the area where *Sa'kok-Nay'* lived with her family. Her father, whom the Paraguayans called Kazike Guasu, was the leading person in the area, and the surveyors asked him to guide them through the Enlhet territory. Together with other men from his group, he showed the strangers the surrounding area, carrying their equipment for them.

A little later, around the time of the Chaco War (1932-1935), a military road passed close to Kazike Guasu's village; *Sa'kok-Nay'* speaks of the violence perpetrated by Paraguayan troops against the Enlhet. The fear of the soldiers was relativized when a smallpox epidemic broke out towards the end of 1932, wiping out entire Enlhet villages within a few weeks. Now the Enlhet were no longer hiding from the soldiers; they were fleeing the disease. We estimate that more than half of the local population fell victim to the war and the smallpox epidemic.

During the turbulent decade of the war, the Mennonite settlers consolidated their new villages and established others. In 1938, they made the hometown of *Sa'kok-Nay'*, *Pa'aeklha'pe'* their centre and named it Loma Plata. They built their grocery store – now a large modern supermarket – in the clearing where the Enlhet had celebrated their festivals until then, and told Kazike Guasu to move the grass-house village at the edge of the clearing to a new location further away. As a result, it soon became clear that with the



*Sa'kok-Nay'*, 2008

presence of the immigrants, the Enlhet could no longer move around their land and use it as they had always done. Soon Kazike Guasu began to help slaughter the cattle whose meat the immigrants consumed. For his work, he received remnants such as stomach, head or feet.

It was customary among the Enlhet to visit each other constantly; Kazike Guasu also received frequent visits from Enlhet in the surrounding area. The changes in their respective lands made it increasingly difficult to live as usual, and as time went on, more and more of the Enlhet visitors stayed permanently with Kazike Guasu in Loma Plata, the capital of the Mennonite colony. Because the so-called “Indian camp” in the centre of the city was regarded as a nuisance, the immigrants assigned the Enlhet a place on the outskirts of the city where they were to live. As Loma Plata grew, the so-called “Indian camp” was moved again. Today, Loma Plata is a modern city, and the Enlhet live a few kilometres away in *Peesempo’o*, for which they hold the land title as a group. The place *Pa’aeklha’pe’*, where *Sa’kok-Nay’* spent her early years, only lives on in the accounts of the Enlhet elders.

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*Sa’kok-Nay’* also recounts that she and other women collected firewood in the forest near *Peesempo’o* and carried it home on their backs. Once, the Mennonite owner of the forest stopped the group on their way back and asked threateningly, “Why are you stealing? You don’t have permission to collect wood here.” *Sa’kok-Nay’* replied, “This area belongs to my father’s land. I know all the places here by name. This is not your land. It is you who lacks permission. You do not have permission to own this land.” *Sa’kok-Nay’* adds an observation to her account, “This man must have thought I was like so many Enlhet who don’t know how to reply when they are antagonized. But I was able to answer him. I am old and I know my father’s story.”

*Sa’kok-Nay’* passed away in 2015. In her lifetime, an outside perspective of the Enlhet and their land has become entrenched, one that matches that of the immigrants. It is seen as normal that a modern supermarket made a seemingly meaningless clearing disappear. It is read as a sign of progress that also benefits the Enlhet. People do not realize how outrageous it is that the leading person of the region was carrying the tools for those who were surveying his land as their auxiliary, because strangers wanted to take possession of it. It is considered the normal course of events that the immigrants took over the land of the Enlhet without thinking about how they thought and felt about it. Therefore, it is not questioned that the indigenous people have remained auxiliaries for progress in the Mennonite colonies until today. It is not only the land that has been taken from the Enlhet. They have also lost extensive opportunities to shape their lives autonomously. In a sense, the immigrants have usurped their future. When the father of *Sa’kok-Nay’* welcomed the newcomers as guests, none of the Enlhet could have imagined that the settlers could displace them.

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People have asked me why I speak of a displacement of the Enlhet by peace-loving Mennonites. In the numerous publications of the immigrants things look quite different. There, one reads that the Mennonites helped the Enlhet, gave them food and built settlements for them. According to those texts, the Enlhet are better off today than they were in the past. This is indeed the view of many Mennonite settlers to this day. They overlook the fact that the people whose land they have claimed for themselves might have their own view. This too is a displacement.

For coexistence between the former owners of the land and the immigrants to come into balance, to become shared living, a multifaceted process has to occur that demands commitment from the new masters in the land as well as from those who have been made their auxiliaries. As for the Enlhet, as *Sa’kok-Nay’* has made clear, it is necessary that they know who they are and that they can express it. To help with this, we provide a space for Enlhet accounts.

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Today it seems normal to many Enlhet that they are auxiliaries of a future that is largely shaped by Mennonite and Paraguayan society. This paralyses the shaping forces within their own society. Knowledge of the past, however, challenges entrenched perceptions; it makes us realize, for example, that it is not normal that the Enlhet live crowded on the outskirts of the city. Insights of this kind enable a new view of the present, allow the Enlhet to imagine a different future for themselves, and can therefore help to overcome this paralysis.



Such knowledge of the past can only be passed on within Enlhet society itself. The accounts of the elders are an important basis for the communication process that is necessary for this. The men and women who knew and experienced a world outside of life in the immigrant colonies have died by now, but their accounts remain alive in our audio and audiovisual publications, which are accessible [online](#).

Of course, there are many Enlhet who are not interested in these accounts. For the Enlhet's relationship to their own history and to themselves, it is not necessary that everyone should be interested in the past or in their own tradition. What is important is that a communication process takes place in Enlhet society in which everyone participates. When the knowledge of some flows into the society's conversation, a general awareness of one's own history is formed.

At the same time, there are many who are interested in the history of their people and appreciate our publications of the elders' accounts. These people are often older. However, this is not a disadvantage. They can

contribute to the social conversation more easily than young people with an independently formed awareness of history. But even among younger Enlhet there is a growing consciousness that knowledge of one's own history allows new perspectives on the present and can thus open up unknown possibilities for the future.

Since the death of the men and women who shared a world that has disappeared, the Enlhet have increasingly asked for their accounts. In the coming years, we will gradually make our extensive archive of Enlhet accounts accessible to the Enlhet in their language. Already, we are constantly expanding our online [video library](#), la *Biblioteca de la memoria hablada*, The Library of Spoken Memory. The accounts by *Sa'kok-Nay'* will form the beginning of the written publications.

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In 2021, it is not only the accounts by *Sa'kok-Nay'* that have kept us busy. Throughout the year, I have visited the Guaná three times for a week to continue working on the dictionary of their language with the last two remaining [speakers](#). Each time, it takes several weeks to work through

the information I gather in a week.

In March, McGill-Queen's University Press in Canada is scheduled to publish the English translation of *¡No llores!*, a collection of Enlhet accounts of the Chaco War period (1932-1935). Accompanying the translation process of *Don't Cry: the Enlhet History of the Chaco War* took me some time.

In 2021, a chapter I wrote back in 2018 was published in *Re-imagining the Gran Chaco: Identities, Politics, and the Environment in South America* by Florida University Press. The text presents accounts of *Maangvayaam 'ay'* and is titled "[They Only Know the Public Roads." Enlhet Territoriality during the Colonization of Their Lands.](#)

Lastly, I would like to mention that Lanto'oy' Unruh, a member of *Nengvaanemkeskama Nempayvaam Enlhet*, is working with the [British Museum](#). As a photographer, he was asked to give insight into Enlhet life today.

This is an update of our work. We hope to take some important steps in the coming year with the publication of Enlhet accounts.

I wish you a happy new year!  
Yours sincerely,



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We would be happy to keep you informed about the progress of our work. Please contact us via nempayvaam@enlhet.org if you would like to receive our newsletter.