

# Folkloric Narratives of the Peruvian Amazonia

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Peru is a country geographically located in the central and western region of the American subcontinent. Its political, economic and demographic power is not historically founded on Amazonia: although it occupies 62% of Peruvian territory (equivalent to 782,800 square km), it is populated by a scarce 8% of the total number of inhabitants.

In epistemology of colonial West, Amazonia is an inhospitable and extremely aggressive territory, as is qualified in Western narratives, in images of green hell or virgin region devouring non-aboriginal men. However, it is inhabited by 1,786 indigenous communities, grouped into sixty ethnic groups and thirteen linguistic families, each with a singular strategy of territory occupation, and with narratives that present us abundance of cultural variables, including their conceptions of the world, of life and of human being.

In this essay I present four mythological stories that are part of the region's folklore: 1) the Amazon river, name that identifies the largest by water flow and the mightiest river in the world; 2) the Anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*), name of the largest constrictor snake in the world; 3) the Lupuna (*Ceiba Pentandra*), or the tallest and thickest tree in the Amazon; and 4) the creation myth. These stories will sustain the narratives circulating in the region and will be used to define vital aspects of constructed social sense or of universe with their own cultural logic; in addition, they will show the interconnections between living beings and animated nature. Their metaphors, inscribed in local aesthetics, will highlight the memories of the forest and the societies that inhabit it, to one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet, with a wide cultural plurality, but with differentiated cultural practices and conceptions.

*Keywords:* Amazon, Peru, folklore, aborigine, memory, myth, animated nature.

## The Jungle or Amazon of Peru

Selva is a part of Peruvian territory located east of the Andes Mountain range and covered by the jungle biome. It comes in the form of huge plains extending beyond any human horizon and constitutes an important part of South American Amazonia.

Landscape presents abundant and lush vegetation, with high humidity and high altitude, rich in endemic species, and harbouring one of the most biodiverse areas in the world. Amazonia is the largest jungle region on the planet and it extends across several countries such as Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay. Peru spreads on 1,285,000 km<sup>2</sup>, and 62% of it is jungle (782,880 km<sup>2</sup>), what represents 13% of the entire South American Amazonia. Moreover, we are referring to a region where 80% of territory consists of forests and the rest is fresh water in the form of rivers, lakes, lagoons and swamps.

The Amazonian soil is very heterogeneous. It had been formed as a product of the sediments that had been washed away from the Andes, throughout millions of years, and those processes and transformations had produced very varied and nutrient-rich soil. As is to be expected, the origin of this soil is exclusively fluvial.

The extraordinary vegetation that it houses some call the green sheet. It is also called the lungs of the planet due to the amount of oxygen it generates, balancing carbon distribution, and consequently safeguarding thermal and climate stability. Coincidentally, it itself represents one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth.

At the same time, although the largest territory of the country, Amazonia is the most sparsely populated region, since it is inhabited by only 8% of the national population: population index is less than four people per square kilometer. It is interesting that population is equally dispersed throughout the territory and those who had been living there for long periods of time constitute differentiated ethnic groups. Thus, 1,786 indigenous communities, 76 ethnic groups and 68 languages are registered in the National Institute for the Development of Andean, Amazonian and Afro-Peruvian Peoples. These languages form no less than 13 linguistic families, and 21 of the total of ethnic groups are poly-ethnic; the most important of these are: Arawaw, Shipibo-Conibo, Machiguenga, Aguarunas, Aru, Cahuapana, Harakmbut, Huitoto, Jíbaro, Asháninca, Awajún, Pano, Peba-Yagua, Tacana, Tucano, Tupi-Guaraní, and Uro-Chipaya Zaparo.

Regarding its geographical location, the Amazon jungle of Peru is a territory that advances from the eastern slope of the Andes Mountain range in the central and western part of the continent, and extends to the Peruvian border with Ecuador, Colombia and Brazil. The part of the jungle that descends from the Andean Mountain range is known as high or mountain jungle, and the enormous plain covered in vegetation is identified as low jungle.

The region with the above-mentioned characteristics is no less than 20 million years old, and has been formed by movement of the tectonic layers that elevated the ground into what we now know as the Andes Mountain

range, stretching from the Pacific Ocean in the west, to the Amazon basin in the east. Latter is a system of lakes that had been progressively drying up until at least ten million years ago, and as a consequence gave rise to an immense green overlay called the Amazon Rainforest. In these newly attained ecological conditions, diverse species of animals and plants set up colonization of the territory, composing in process one of the most biodiverse regions in the world.

The two large areas in which we have divided the Amazon region are an aggregate of the various latitudinal floors that constitute it and are characterized by high and low jungle.

High jungle. The mountain rainforest is found at average height between 800 and 3,000 meters above sea level, exhibiting warm temperatures at the base and increasingly colder as one ascends, as well as the highest levels of rainfall in the entire country, with up to 5,000 mm per year. Its relief is mountainous and complex, with deep ravines and narrow valleys, all covered with impenetrable jungle.

Low jungle. Between 800 and 80 meters above sea level extends the Amazon plain, an extremely warm tropical forest (annual averages of 28°C) and a very high relative humidity (above 75%), given its frequent rainfall. It is a region of heterogeneous soils and abundant rivers (*Selva peruana* 2021).

### *Fauna and Flora of the Peruvian Jungle*

The Peruvian jungle, as a region of high biodiversity, is inhabited by many species of birds, enough to make the country the second in the world, and the third for the greatest diversity of mammals. Overall, an average of 262 amphibians have been identified, more than 806 species of birds, about 300 different mammals, a total of 697 fish, 180 reptiles, and an impressive 2,500 species of diurnal butterflies. It is pertinent to indicate that the greatest amount of this biodiversity exists only in this region, that is, they are classified as endemic species. When it comes to flora, the region is habitat of at least 7% of the world's flowering plants, and 10% of the world's total fern species (*Selva peruana* 2021).

### *The Amazon River*

The Amazon River is the largest and most powerful river in the world. Its flow-rate is higher than that of the Nile, Yangtze and Mississippi rivers together. It is born in the Peruvian territory from the confluence of Marañón

and Ucayali rivers and has, along its route, more than 1,100 tributaries. Its most important characteristics are the following:

It is a freshwater river located in South America that flows from the Andes in Peru, where the ice provides water at a height of 5.998 meters, to Brazil, where it empties into the Atlantic Ocean. It is located approximately 192 kilometers east of the Pacific Ocean. Its watershed is larger than that of any other river with its 7.05 million km<sup>2</sup>, that is, almost 40 percent of South America, and drains parts of Brazil, Colombia, Bolivia, Ecuador, Guyana, Venezuela, Peru and Suriname.

The average water discharged to the Atlantic is about 209,000 m<sup>3</sup> per second, or 6,591 km<sup>3</sup> per year. Its depth varies; in some areas it ranges from 20 to 50 meters, and in others it reaches 90–100 meters. The river is 1.6 to 10 kilometers wide, although during the wet season it can reach up to 48–50 kilometers (*Río Amazonas s.a.*).



Figure 1: Map of the Amazon River drainage basin

## The Population

According to the 2007 census organized by the National Institute of Statistics and Informatics of Peru, the Amazon population amounts to 3,672,292 inhabitants, 54% of which is urban and the rest is rural population; 52.2% of inhabitants are men and 47.8% women. Although there is exchange and historical interdependence between urban and rural populations, they are dichotomous and segmented as a result of the colonial experience that inaugurated new forms of settlement, such as taking advantage of the most strategic places for communication, close to the richest and most fertile land: it turns out that in all cases it was the riverbanks. Right there, since the invasion of the settlers, the most important cities of the Amazon region flourish today. However, the green plain, impenetrable to western gaze, is evidently prevalent in representations and the imaginary, although the perceptions from within favor the presence of wealth and transcendent stories, such as those that refer to vegetation as economic potential, as indicated by Dancé Caballero when he states that:

The Selva presents an immeasurable wealth for its forests and associated resources (air, water, soil and biodiversity), but also for its indigenous populations that contain a great culture and ancestral knowledge little known and less valued.

Deforestation and forest degradation, as well as indifference to native populations are the greatest scourges of the Amazon's natural wealth and social greatness, which attempts are being made to change, although there is still a long way to go (Dancé Caballero s.a.: 16).

The history of the region is controversial. The first readings speak of a mysterious, inhospitable, impenetrable region, a green monster, that provides the only clear and transparent places to orient oneself at the banks of the river, that are, at the same time, those responsible for the economic life of its inhabitants. On the other hand, when we refer to the population, it is perceived by the traditionally constructed social imagination as communities that live in primitive stages of development.

However, in recent decades, history and archeology have been collecting field information in which perceptions about the region acquire surprising connotations. It is the region with evidence of human presence of more than 5.000 years. There are archaeological remains of accomplished societies settled there for several centuries, whose habitat was a product of cutting and burning the forest, in addition to manipulation of soil to carry out a beneficial

redistribution of certain plant species that could be used by humans: those were also large-scale ceramic producing societies. The current state of land soil indicates that at least 11,8% of its vegetation is derived from anthropogenic activity that demonstrates technical prowess of natives in protecting biodiversity and adapting to local ecological requirements to maintain vegetation and sustainable agriculture that allows them to satisfy their needs.

The command post of the settlement was constituted by the riverbanks, and that remains the same in our days. Riverbanks provide efficient place for communication through possibilities of movement along the river; at the same time supplying abundance of fish to diversify the diet of inhabitants, and nutrient-rich alluvial soil, optimal for agriculture.



Figure 2: An area of the jungle in northeastern Peru  
(Photograph by Álvaro del Campo)

For the European colonists of the early conquest, this was the area that they appropriated, while the indigenous people ran and hid into the thick of the forest, where they escaped persecution. The colonizers did not know how to orient themselves inside the thick vegetation, they could not endure high

temperatures, persistent humidity, effects of insect bites and the skin reactions to the touch of unfamiliar plants – in short, they did not have survival strategies for the deep forest. It is an element that the indigenous people turned into a narrative of protection against the settlers, by naming the region after white or non-indigenous men.

## The Folkloric Narrative of the Peruvian Amazonia

The Amazonian folkloric narrative of Peru is part of a branch of regionalist narratives that have acquired legitimacy in recent decades, during which formal and institutionalized literature opened its doors to other types of literature. In case of Peru, that meant the surge of Andean, Afro-Peruvian and Amazonian literatures that, having existed for centuries, had remained excluded or belittled by the regulatory canons of literary criticism. Somehow, the Latin American “boom” (Donoso 1972; Levinson 2001; Martín 1984; Ocasio 2004), term that denotes the renewal of the Latin American narrative since the 1960s, incorporates such vital aspects of culture of the subcontinent as the magical realism, the fantastic and metaphysical tales and, above all, the critical perception of social reality.

The “boom” meant the abrupt downfall of the rigid writing of classical literary texts and the explosive opening to creativity, as well as for narrative and thematic originality. As a consequence, diverse narratives appeared throughout the continent. In particular, a set of heterogeneous narratives from different social realms in Peru came to light, including ‘invisible’ regions and their narratives, such as Peruvian Amazonia, for example. Provincial sectors of the Republic were also in a difficult position because the capital, the center of power, used to look with contempt at cultural production of the periphery, and used to exclude it therefore. In addition, Andean indigenism monopolized the narratives of subalterns (González 1991) and, as a result, the Amazonian women had to wait more than three decades to be included and taken into account in literary criticism.

At present, it is impossible to ignore these diverse narratives because they represent culture of more than 60% of the national territory, and because they reveal fantastic, mysterious and exotic world integrated into national imaginary, and because their cultural particularity enriches the symbolic capital of the nation.

But social and historical exclusion of the region is also the result of its remoteness and physical isolation. Land connections are scarce for the most part of territory because it is a swampy, excessively humid and flooded area, where it rains most of the year, and all of that destroys land transit projects, except those close to the most important cities. Hence, the

fluvial and aerial communication - through rivers and the air - to few cities becomes privileged means of transport. In this context, state control is very limited and criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, abound in the region. This is another way of exploitation and aggression against the native population.

Even the most advanced pre-Hispanic Andean societies were unable to conquer these inhospitable lands. They failed every time they tried because they couldn't withstand the suffocating heat and humidity, they did not have an immune system capable to fight tropical diseases, because they frequently lost their way, disoriented in the Amazonian thicket, and finally because they could not apply Andean technical and agricultural systems to Amazonian lands. Consequences were even worse for European and Creole invaders, although they controlled the transport and exchange of goods of locals: their attempts at colonization failed every time because natives reacted with political strategy to withdraw into the forest depths, thus becoming unreachable. In spite of that, there is a number of stories about genocide of indigenous population, such those concerning exploitation of rubber, between the 1885 and 1915 (Pineda 2003): it constitutes one of most dramatic historical experiences, when thousands of indigenous people were murdered (Pineda 2000) in their own forests.

The most audacious and accomplished colonizers were unable to enter the Amazon plains. Even after many expeditions into the jungle, in the course of several centuries, they failed miserably. At the same time, a stereotypical and fabulous image of the region was built: it is inhabited by people that live in a primitive state, with bodies barely covered by loincloth and women naked, some of them cannibals, brutal warriors who eliminate everyone who had the bad luck to find them; giant animals and plants, and rivers that look like seas whose opposite bank is too far to be seen, giant snakes that shoot fire from their jaws, destroying the bones of captured animals, and, when blowing, generate eddies that wipe out all signs of life; swamps that swallow up every living being trying to cross it; trees so huge that their crown is impossible to see; carnivorous and poisonous plants, some of them hallucinogenic, whose power could be controlled only by the shamans or wise men of the community; inter-ethnic conflicts are resolved in tribal battles in which the weapons of war are handcrafted spears and blowguns. There should also be included infinite myths and legends, accounts of the origin of the world, the origin of the river, the largest plants and animals of the world, as well as astronomical imaginaries, among others: the whole fabulous and bountiful world is created, inspired by the inhospitable region.

But these images or representations of the world are generated by two tendencies or conceptions. One elaborates how invaders were not able or



failed in their endeavour to colonize Amazonia: therefore it is shown as aggressive, impregnable, and man-eating, as it has been called, in an attempt to explain why the settlers entering their 'virgin lands', exotic and mysterious, did not return. On the other side, and that is less known aspect, the indigenous people have their own version of the world they inhabit. Although they are culturally heterogeneous population, there is a number of common elements of their cultures such as hunting techniques and fruit gathering; positioning of the river as the nerve center of social, political and economic life; the technology for extraction of the fruits of the earth and its high but ephemeral productivity; and, in addition, extraordinary ideological world, expressed in their narratives, that are particular and distinctive characteristic of Amazonian culture.

From the abundance of those narratives generated in the same region, I will present four as evidence of their conceptions of the world – of *their* world – where people charged with humanism are shown, who establish relations of reciprocity and dialogue with the nature they share, who adopt an ecological behavior closely related to contemporary ecological discourses, and who are tributaries of a complex society that establishes unequal and dependent relationships with modern societies, rather than exotic and primitive.

## Narrative About the Origin of the Amazon River

Many, many years ago, there in the jungle lived two orphaned twin brothers who were cared for by their grandparents. At that time, water was very scarce because there were no rivers, streams or lagoons.

The only person who knew where to find water was Grandpa, but he jealously kept the secret. Not far from the grandparents' house there was a pond that was overflowing every day, so every morning the grandfather filled it with water that he brought from that unknown place. The twins had to carry the water from the pond to the house so that their grandmother could cook and prepare the *masato*,<sup>1</sup> the favorite drink of the inhabitants of the jungle.

One day one of the brothers, tired of incessant carrying of water, followed the grandfather to find out where he got it from. He knew that if he asked, Grandpa would never tell him and he didn't want to be discovered while he was watching over him. After much thought, the boy decided to transform himself into a hummingbird so that his grandfather would not recognize him. Flying from flower to flower, he followed him down the path that led into the jungle.

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<sup>1</sup> *Masato* is a fermented drink based on yuca (*Manihot esculenta*, commonly called *cassava* or *manioc*).

When they had walked quite a long way, they came to a gigantic tree from which an immense stream of water gushed out. The boy, happy to have discovered such a well-kept secret, passed it to his brother. The two of them gathered squirrels, rabbits, mice, toucans, and woodpeckers, and asked them to help cut down the tree.

The animals worked all day. But the tree was so big that they could not finish their task. Almost at dusk, when there was little left to knock down, they decided to continue the next day. They were really tired of so much effort. In the morning, they went to continue the work they had started and found the tree without a single scratch. They started again, but on the second day the same thing happened. And the third. And the fourth. The tree almost fell at dusk, but appeared intact in the morning.

Then the twins stalked Grandfather again and thus discovered that he, at night, heals the tree with great care so that the water can continue to flow without rest and therefore the next day it could wake up healthy.

– What can we do so that Grandpa doesn't cure the tree? – said the one who had turned into a hummingbird.

– We must prevent him tomorrow from reaching the tree, so the animals can finish cutting it down – replied the other of the twins, who turned into a scorpion the same night.

So, when Grandpa was secretly going to heal the tree, he stung him on the big toe of his right foot. At that moment, the wounded tree collapsed with a crash and the entire jungle rumbled.

As the tree fell, a large amount of water began to flow out of it. Its trunk became the Amazon River; the branches – its tributaries; the leaves and thorns became the various species of fish that swim in the great river. The multi-colored worms that crawled through the bark of the great tree fell to the ground and transformed into white people, black people, and mixed-race people. That was the origin of all the races that inhabit the Amazon jungle today (Dubovoy s.a.).

### The Narrative of the Anaconda (*Eunectes Murinus*) or Yacumama

The narrative of Yacumama has been known for a long time among the inhabitants of the Peruvian jungle and they were the ones in charge of spreading this story by word of mouth, so that people learn about this gigantic snake that fills them with terror.

Her name means 'Mother of water' (*yaku* – water, *mama* – mother) and it is believed that her cradle is in the great Yarinacocha lagoon (Ucayali,

Peru). She prefers to swim at the mouth of the Amazon River, as well as in its nearby lagoons, since she is the Amazon's protective spirit.

This mythical giant snake is similar to the anaconda, but even larger, possibly more than fifty meters long and with a head two meters wide. She is blind, so she does not mind passing through the dark waters. Through her mouth she shoots huge jets of water that help her to knock down trees in order to move comfortably across the ground, and if she finds a sandwich a hundred meters away, she is able to suck it up.

However, at one point in her life, perhaps after a thousand years, when she reaches a certain size and weight that makes it difficult for her to move, she decides to make a clearing in the jungle, at the foot of the river, to settle there permanently.

She perches her head above the water, waiting for prey, and uses her great power of attraction to hypnotize her victims with her piercing eyes, to hunt them with ease.

Any animal or man that passes near her will perish, because even if they manage to spot her head and start running away, she moves like a flash, catches them with her powerful jaws and swallows them, surrendering afterwards to a placid sleep.

This is the Yacumama, protector of the waters of the Amazon, an overwhelming natural force that hunts during the rain and whose commotion can be heard from afar as she moves out of the water, knocking down trees on her path, giving evidence of her large size (*Leyenda de la Yacumama* n.d.).

## The Anaconda in the Fishermen's Tale

### 1

Fishermen's tales refer to the Great Anaconda as the mother of all the waters of the Amazon. She makes her appearances when the river drops and produces eddies in the middle of the river.

It is said that the Yacumama protects the jungle from outsiders and people who come to deforest it and hunt taking no care of the consequences to the environment.

When a boat enters the jungle and begins to capture species of monkeys and birds for commercial purposes, the Yacumama hears their whistles and songs and comes to rescue the animals. She kidnaps the crew and causes strong storms of rain and mist until the ship is anchored to the shore (*Yacumama* n.d.).

## 2

A man had worked for many years in the Putumayo River basin and decided to return to Iquitos in a boat, bringing timber and cattle in a small raft. Later, a storm broke out and his indigenous helpers told him that it was surely the Yacumama, and that he rather should go to the shore and wait for the storm to pass.

The man decided to continue sailing, despite the difficulties. Suddenly they realized that they were inside a whirlpool in the middle of the river, and it threatened to sink the boat. The crew threw food and brandy into the river trying to calm the Yacumama, and luckily, they managed to escape.

The servants insisted on terminating the journey, but the man ignored it and wanted to go on.

Later on, the storm worsened, the winds became stronger, and a dense blue mist covered the waters of the river, preventing boatmen from seeing the fallen logs and plants hovering in the current.

Then a strong surf hit the boat against the shore, and it got caught between branches and roots of an old tree. Frightened, boatmen could see a gigantic red-eyed anaconda rising and falling from the middle of the river, splashing and creating huge eddies.

At dawn, the storm calmed down and they could confirm that their merchandise and livestock had been lost during the storm. The servants and their patron wept and lamented over their bad luck, and vowed never to underestimate the mystical power of the Yacumama.

According to the riparians, Yacumama has moved away from the rivers and lakes in recent times due to expansion of river transport and, but could appear at any moment so sailors must be prepared and tie their boats to the shore during storm to avoid losses of value (*Yacumama* n.d.).

## 3

According to an ancient legend from Peru, a terrifying reptile had been watching over the waters of the Amazon River and all its lakes since ancient times - a being called Yacumama, which means 'Mother of water'.

Specifically, Yacumama rested in a lake with clear and calm waters, where no man should enter to fish.

But one day, a fisherman got lost and got there unintentionally. His surprise was immense. He had never seen anything like it. The waters of the lake were so clear and serene.

"This lake must be full of fish", he thought.

And the fisherman then cast the nets, thinking of the wonderful booty that he would get. But soon after, his canoe began to stir.

The fisherman met Yacumama. At first, he did not give it much importance, but the shock was increasing and he grew scared. He was going to collect the nets, when the water began to form a strong whirlpool in front of him, and in the middle, he saw a huge snake with yellow eyes and a very long tongue rising from the depths of the lake.

The fisherman dropped his nets and began to row, using all his strength, in the opposite direction from the monstrous being. Terrified, he asked the god Inti for help. He hinted at her to head him towards Lake Titicaca, but, as she advanced towards him, the vegetation that fringed the river began to grow, blocking his way. The snake was following him under the water and the fisherman thought that his end had come.

However, when he had already thought that he was all lost, four tapirs came from the river bank and jumped into the water in an intense fight. The snake then turned around and the vegetation that closed the path returned to its place.

The fisherman took the opportunity to leave the place in a hurry, and after a great effort, he reached another lake where he finally felt that he was safe. The man returned without fish, but at least he had kept the most valuable thing: his life (*La Yacumama. La leyenda que la hizo famosa* n.d.).

## The Anaconda in a Cosmogonic Myth, or the Origin of the Universe

One of the myths related to the great serpent, giver of life, guardian of the waters, as well as myth about origin of the universe, is the legend of the Desano, an Amazonian ethnic group that lives in the upper basin of the Vaupés River, in the border area between Colombia and Brazil, and specifically in the Colombian department of Vaupés and the Brazilian state of Amazonas.

A great ancestral anaconda entered the universe/house through the water gate and ascended through the Negro and Vaupé rivers, carrying within its body the ancestors of all humanity.

Throughout their journey, the remote ancestors transformed into humans. Upon arriving at the Ipanoré waterfall, formed by the flow of the Jirijirimo river, which in the indigenous language means the 'bed of the anaconda', the ancestors divided themselves on earth by what would be their particular territories.

The long body of this gigantic anaconda represents the place of residence, the house or *maloca*<sup>2</sup> and the way in which the different groups are integrated and act, defining their identity, that is, their name, their history and their language.

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<sup>2</sup> A maloca is an ancestral long house used by the indigenous people of the Amazon.

In each clan of this patrilineal and exogamous group, open to the world, the children of the first ancestors of the great anaconda are organized according to a structure in which, chiefs are at the head of the anaconda, in the middle part are the shamans, and at the tail end are the people (Cartay n.d.).

### The Narrative of the Lupuna Tree or the Tallest and Thickest Tree in the Amazon (*Ceiba Pentandra*)

The Lupuna is a gigantic tree which has recently been found useful, since decades ago it was not even used for firewood, and now it is valued for furniture. It is distinguished by protruding from the roof of the forest in the shape of a large mushroom, always swollen at the base of the trunk.

In the jungle, the latter feature is the cause for superstition and respect since, according to the beliefs of many ancient tribes, inside the tree's bulging belly lives the mother, or the spirit of the tree, although some mention her as a witch.

There are many families that say they have lost a female relative in previous decades for not having respected the tree, having absentmindedly approached or, worse still, having used the tree as a shade to relieve themselves.

There are many cases of women who have fallen under the wrath of the tree which was very jealous of the feminine presence. Apparently, the swollen belly of the tree tends to grow, bulge and burst, and breaks the silence of the jungle with a sound that resembles bursting of gigantic balloon. However, in a matter of days, the wound closes as if nothing had ever happened. But the woman who has inadvertently attracted anger of the Lupuna will begin to notice, as the weeks go by, that her belly begins to swell for no apparent reason, imitating the characteristics of the Lupuna. After several days, at the same time when the tree bursts in the jungle, the victim of the Lupuna also dies with her belly burst.

Now, apparently, with the advance of the man who uses the wood of the Lupuna to make furniture and plywood, the spirits of the tree have moved into the Lupunas situated deeper in the Amazon forest, hoping not to be inhabited by other spirits. It is because that the current bursting of the trees closest to man is almost not heard, since their spirits have changed, in search of peace; however, women continue to appear with swollen bellies (Sr. C. *El árbol de lupuna*, n.d.).

## The Lupuna Spell



Figure 3: Kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) in the botanical garden in Rio de Janeiro

In the town we heard about the red Lupuna and we wanted to face it. We knew it was a tree frequented by evil sorcerers, so we went into the forest along a hidden path covered by wet leaves. We were jumping from trunk to trunk to avoid stepping on the spine of the *ñejilla*<sup>3</sup>. Its fine thorns scattered everywhere prolonged our painful walk.

We found palm trees stripped of their mature leaves and trees shedding their weeping sap as silent witnesses of the fact that many people trudged through this jungle. Scarred snakes slid by when they felt our presence, green iguanas and chameleons that change color looked at us in surprise, but did not dare to take a step.

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<sup>3</sup> Ñejilla (*Bactris brongniartii*) is a species of palm native to southern tropical America, belonging to the family of Arecaceae, also known as *black cane*, *chacarrá* or *palm cubarro*.

The suffocating heat and the humidity of the forest made us sweat. And suddenly, under the shadow of the leafy *cormiñon*,<sup>4</sup> an intense relief and a breath of fresh air.

After hours of walking, we spotted the outstanding crown of the red Lupuna.<sup>5</sup> But it was not as close as we thought. We had to walk a few more hours.

Finally, the giant red tree with its characteristic potbellied stem was in front of us. Abnormal belly in the trees. Impressive belly, ready to burst with its sap when abundance allows it. Around the red Lupuna there was no one, neither living being nor spirits. We were struck by the perfect cuts of skillful scalpels on its thick stem. Apparently, someone was skinning its bark to extract some mystery from it.

We had heard that in solitary moments and deathly silence, a sorcerer skilled in binding and unleashing spells often visited her. They say that he hopes that there will be no visitors in the forest so that he can prepare his thick mate with the rope of drunkenness at the foot of the tree.

Then he takes a bowl of the bitter concoction and begins his rite conducted by nasal chants. He turns around in an imaginary circle around the Lupuna. He gestures with his raised hand begging the tree for favors. And from time to time, he moans, as if he were an injured animal, and attracts attention, the snake hiss that he emits when he enters a trance.

When the sorcerer is sure that the Lupuna will grant him the favor, out of his bag he takes a garment of the victim, wraps it with great care, spits a greenish phlegm on it, staggers as he approaches the belly of the tree, and, brandishing his machete, makes a perfect cut that opens the hard bark, so that he can, in the entrails of the Lupuna, hide the clothes of the unfortunate, whose days from that moment are numbered.

Soon, the spell takes effect, the victim, healthy man or woman, begins to swell, especially in the belly. And believing to have gained weight, no one notices the evil, until too late, when there is no longer a remedy for the patient.

We returned impressed after getting to know the Red Lupuna up close, and on the way, we met Don Shanti, a well-known sorcerer. And after having been in the hotbed of evil, annoyed I said:

– Hello, Don Shanti! People say you go to Lupuna every so often. What do you go for?

– I go to punish lack of affection, infidelity, deception. Now I'm going to do a little job for my niece. The poor thing, her boyfriend left her on her wedding day. That I do not forgive. For me it is a mockery. Here on earth, we pay for our mistakes and I make the wretches pay.

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<sup>4</sup> *Cormiñon* (*Vitex pseudolea*) – rusby.

<sup>5</sup> *Lupuna colorada*.



After having listened to his lecture on good and evil, but before he gets upset, we bid farewell to the vengeful sorcerer (*El Hechizo de la Lupuna* n.d.).

## The Creation Myth, or the Narrative of the Big Water Tree (Related by Wilson Ramos)

This is the story about the beginning of the world, when creation was yet to be completed, when there was no water, no light, and no man, at least, to take care of the things of the world. Only the earth, the sky, some animals and fruits existed. It was a confusion; the earth was dark because a huge tree covered it.

Thus, the moment came when Yoí, the first existing father on earth, considered giving up and putting an end to things. In this way he spoke to his brother Ipi, but the younger was very mischievous and contradicted everything that his older brother said, even though he was his sole company on earth.

The sky was covered with darkness. Yoí called his brother and said: "We are going to take all the extant fruits on earth and we'll call the existing animals and announce that we are going to knock down this immense tree called Lupuna."

Then all the living animals on earth began to sting, bite and scrape the tree. A whole multitude of animals that already existed on earth were about to knock down the tree. However, Yoi and Ipi were surprised because they still hadn't succeeded. Then, Yoí sent for the two kinds of squirrels that lived in the world. He ordered the greedy squirrel to climb to the top of the tree to see why it did not want to fall. The little squirrel couldn't make it to the top, only halfway.

Then Yoí sent up the other species of squirrel, which was the climbing squirrel. It was able to climb up tree trunk and discovered the reason of Yoí's and Ipi's surprise. The squirrel came down right away and told Yoí that it was a sloth<sup>6</sup> who with his hands held the sky and with his feet he held the top of the tree and that is why he did not want to fall.

Yoí sent the climbing squirrel back to the top of the tree with chili to throw at the sloth. The squirrel reached the stump of the tree, put the chili pepper in the sloth's mouth, but with no effect. The squirrel came back down and said that the chili was not doing anything to the sloth.

Then, she went back up with some small ants known in the area as *twnw*, whose bite is very strong. The squirrel arrived and scattered the ants on the sloth's body. The pain of the ant bites caused the sloth to let go of the tree he was holding.

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<sup>6</sup> Slow and lazy animal inhabiting the trees (the *Pilosa* order of mammals, suborder *Folivora*, or *Phyllophaga* – 'leaf-eaters').

The tree fell on the world eliciting lightning, thunder and making waters flow. An immense flow issued from the trunk engendering the Amazon River, and from the branches lagoons and tributaries were formed.

Yoí's joy was so great that he got into the water and as the drops splashed him, he became a multitude of fish that filled the rivers. Then Ipí noticed his loneliness and saw that the heart of the tree floated on water. Out of curiosity, he took it, planted it and cared for it with great affection, being always mindful of it. After some time, he ate it and felt something wonderful. When he dropped the seed, a very beautiful lady appeared and told him that she loved him very much. Henceforth, Ipí considered her his wife. They were the first couple that existed in the world.

Yoí returned to the land where his brother Ipí already had a wife. But when Ipí's wife arrived, she disappeared and Yoí felt lonely and sad. One day he went to the port and sat down by the river when, suddenly, a very beautiful young woman emerged in front of him and stayed with him. Thus, Yoí got a partner, while his brother was left alone again.

Yoí thought of organizing all the beings that he had created by clans.

Yoí and Ipí were together when an iguana showed up. They killed it and cooked it right away. When iguana-dish was ready, Yoí distributed it among all the animals that he created. When he distributed iguana to each animal, he named the clan to which animal belonged: the *muchilero*,<sup>7</sup> the heron, the tiger, the macaw, the toucan, the black heron, the ant, the *canangucho*,<sup>8</sup> fourteen clans in total. Likewise, he instructed each one about whom it could marry, making it very clear that, for example, a macaw with a heron could not, as it was a union of two feathers; but a macaw could marry a tiger, it was not a problem, it was skin with feathers. He also established the rule that the children would inherit their father's clan, and by uttering these words, he returned to the trunk of the stick and to the largest river, the Amazon (*El árbol de Agua Grande* n.d.).

## Conclusion

To draw up the conclusions, it is necessary to emphasize that the narrative is employed as a research method that uses the story and testimony as ways to obtain knowledge of the imaginary of people. It is the reason why we have resorted to the narratives of the Peruvian Amazonia to account for a world relatively unknown to modernity, but one that offers original cultural forms that expand the recognition of contemporary cultural plurality.

<sup>7</sup> Cacique (bird – *Cacicus*), or New World blackbird in tropical South America north to Mexico.

<sup>8</sup> *Mauritia flexuosa* or the moriche palm, grows in tropical South America.

In Peru, Amazonian folkloric narratives have acquired relevance in the last four decades and became a part of a narrative renewal or an interpretive shift in which narratives, excluded in the past, are made visible again and brought to consideration of literary criticism. In the case we are dealing with, these are the narratives we identify as Amazonian marvelous or magical realism, because there are three variables combined within: the real, the magical, and the fantastic. To understand these terms, we turn to the *Diccionario Akal de términos literarios*, which defines them as:

In a world that is ours, the one we know, without devils or vampires, an event occurs that is impossible to explain by the laws of that same familiar world. The one who perceives the event must choose one of two possible solutions: either it is an illusion of the senses, a product of the imagination, and the laws of the world remain what they are, or the event occurred. really, it is an integral part of reality, and then this reality is governed by laws that we do not know. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being, or he really exists, like other beings, with the difference that he rarely meets him. The fantastic occupies the time of this uncertainty. As soon as one of the two answers is chosen, the realm of the fantastic is left to enter a neighboring genre: the strange or the wonderful. What is fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a being who knows only natural laws, in the face of an apparently supernatural event (Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*. París: Seuil, 1970, Spanish translation: *Introducción a la literatura fantástica*. Trad. Silvia Delpy. Buenos Aires: Tiempo contemporáneo, 1972, as cited in: Ayuso de Vicente 1997: 152).

In the presented narratives we detect that the relationship between man, nature and divinity, as expressed in the worldview of the indigenous people of the jungle has never been contradictory. Rather, it has allowed man to understand that ancestral life testimonies have been maintained for centuries throughout literary texts converted into life testimonies of the Amazonian indigenous people. For this reason, the weight of the explanation falls on the myths, rites, stories, poems, where the vital forces and their divine correlate are reinstated.

The narratives show us a population that has found a form commensurate to its conception of the environment, able to offer a logical explanation for the presence of animals, plants and natural resources; to generate an internal culture of their principles and behaviors in the environment that surrounds them, to offer a culture of protection of their natural resources against external threats; all of which is synthesized by Ochoa, when he states that:

That is why the indigenous people have a culture of life and a consciousness linked to Nature, an ecological and spiritual vision of existence. That is, a religious worldview of the world that surrounds them, of the world above and below: an animistic consciousness of Nature and the beings that inhabit it; a sacred vision of supernatural space and the forces of Heaven; a cyclical conception of cosmological time; and a spiritual belief in a place and a space in which to be what deep down they are, what every man is, a component of the whole of Nature, a seamless part, without great cultural contradictions or ego dilemmas (Ochoa 2002: 252).

Finally, narratives show us a vital society whose dynamics of life, in the forest, differ from lives of those in the West, and whose always active memories feedback as a result of the intensified communication with the outside world or as a result of their own social mobilization.

These narratives are shown as an alternative which allows us to glimpse and expand the literary plurality of the American continent, whose ancestral worldview has been minimized to ideological parameters of elitist national culture, and its natives considered to be chaotic subjects in literary representation.

By the way, orality is the privileged way in which the knowledge of the population of the Peruvian Amazon is active and transcends the time. Through oral narratives Amazonian people have been recognized and through them they have become intersubjective mediators that have charge of their lives as long as they have a coherent narrative explanation of the world that surrounds them, and that is a primary characteristic for to identification and recognition of Amazonian people as a population with particular ethnic characteristics.

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## Illustrations

Figure 1: Map of the Amazon River drainage basin with the Amazon River highlighted. Date: 25 February 2013, 11:59:10. Author: Kmusser. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amazonrivermap.svg> (16.06.2021).

Figure 2: Photograph by Álvaro del Campo. <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-57404958> (01.07.2021).

Figure 3: Kapok tree (*Ceiba pentandra*) in the botanical garden in Rio de Janeiro. Date: 13 February 2016, 20:09:06. Author: Zezinho68. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kapok\\_Tree\\_Rio.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kapok_Tree_Rio.jpg) (01.07.2021).

## Narrativa folklórica de la Amazonia Peruana

*Daniel Orlando Díaz Benavides*

### Resumen

El Perú es un país ubicado, geográficamente, en la región central y occidental del subcontinente americano cuyo poder político, económico y demográfico se encuentra históricamente alejado de su Amazonia que, ocupando el 62% de su territorio equivalente a 782,800 km cuadrados, está poblado por un escaso 8% del total de sus habitantes.

Para la epistemología colonial-occidental la Amazonía es un territorio inhóspito y sumamente agresivo, como expresan sus narrativas al calificarla de infierno verde o región virgen y devoradora de hombres no aborígenes; sin embargo, habitada por 1,786 comunidades indígenas, agrupadas en 60 etnias y 13 familias lingüísticas, con estrategias singulares de ocupación territorial, la Amazonía aporta concepciones del ser humano, de la vida y del mundo que, entre otras variables culturales, podemos percibir en sus expresiones narrativas.

Para este artículo se presentan cuatro historias mitológicas que forman parte del folklore de la región, cuyos tópicos principales son: 1) el mito de la creación; 2) el Lupuna (*Ceiba Pentandra*) o el árbol más alto y grueso del Amazonas; 3) la Anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*), nombre de la serpiente constrictora más grande del mundo y; 4) el Amazonas, nombre que identifica al río más grande y caudaloso del mundo. Alrededor de estos tópicos se agrupan expresiones narrativas que circulan en la región y definen aspectos vitales de su sentido social construido y de un universo que posee sus propias lógicas culturales. Tales expresiones muestran, además, las interconexiones entre los seres vivos y una naturaleza animada. Sus metáforas, inscritas en la estética local, resaltan las memorias del bosque y de las sociedades que habitan una de las regiones más biodiversas del planeta, con una amplia diversidad cultural; pero, con prácticas y concepciones culturales diferenciadas.

*Palabras-clave:* Amazonia, Perú, folklore, aborígen, memoria, mito, naturaleza animada.

## Усмена проза Перуанске Амазоније

*Данијел Орландо Дијаз Бенавидес*

## Резиме

Перу је земља географски лоцирана у централној и западној области америчког потконтинента. Политичка, економска и демографска моћ Перуа не заснива се историјски у Амазонији: иако она заузима 62% територије Перуа (што износи 782.800 километара квадратних), у њој је настањено једва 8% укупног броја становника.

У епистемологији колонијалног Запада, Амазонија је означена у западњачким причама као негостопримљива и крајње агресивна територија, са сликама зеленог пакла, или као девичанска регија која прождири неаутохтоне људе. Ипак, насељава је 1.786 домородачких заједница, груписаних у шездесет етничких група и тринаест језичких породица, свака са јединственом стратегијом запоседања територије, и с причама које нам представљају богатство културних варијабла, укључујући њихове представе о свету, животу и људским бићима.

У овом раду представићу четири митолошке приче које чине део фолклора овог подручја: 1) река Амазон, име које означава највећу по воденом току и најмоћнију реку на свету; 2) Анаконда (*Eunectes murinus*), име највеће змије удава на свету; 3) лупуна (*Ceiba Pentandra*), највише и најдебље дрво у Амазонији; и 4) мит о стварању света. Приче груписане око наведених тема распрострањене су у овој регији, и биће искоришћене да се одреде кључни аспекти конструисаног друштвеног значења или света с њиховом властитом културном логиком. Уз то, оне ће показати узајамне везе између живих бића и одуховљене природе. Метафоре у овим причама, усађене у локалну естетику, осветлиће сећања на прашуму и на друштва која је насељавају, на једну од најбогатијих регија на планети у погледу биодиверзитета, са широким мноштвом култура али с издиференцираним културним праксама и представама.

**Кључне речи:** Амазонија, Перу, фолклор, аутохтони народи, памћење, мит, одуховљена природа.

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