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THE STORIES I HEARD FROM MY GRANDMOTHER AND WHAT I LEARNED FROM THEM[1]

AS HISTORIAS QUE OUVI DA MINHA AVÓ E O QUE APRENDI COM ELAS

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Abstract
This article explores the intergenerational denial of Indigenous identity through the life story of Francisca Nunes Maciel, whose family history reflects state-led erasure policies in Amazonia. Analyzing oral narratives from rubber-tapping communities along the Madeira River, we examine how serpent mythology operates as both cultural memory and colonial allegory—mediating experiences of displacement, cultural syncretism, and environmental transformation. The study reveals how Afro-Indigenous cosmologies persist within Catholic practices like litanies and communal work (Puxirum), even as official histories obscure Mura and Munduruku territoriality. Ultimately, these narratives demonstrate Indigenous resistance through storytelling, where myth becomes methodology for reclaiming ancestral connections amid forced integration.
Keywords: Identity Erasure; Amazonian Mythology; Oral History.

Resumo
Este artigo analisa a negação intergeracional da identidade indígena através da história de Francisca Nunes Maciel, cuja trajetória reflete políticas estatais de apagamento na Amazônia. Examinando narrativas orais de comunidades seringueiras no Rio Madeira, investigamos como mitos da serpente funcionam como memória cultural e alegoria colonial—mediando experiências de deslocamento, sincretismo e transformação ambiental. O estudo revela cosmologias afro-indígenas preservadas em práticas católicas como as litanias e no trabalho comunitário (Puxirum), mesmo com a territorialidade Mura e Munduruku sendo apagada. Essas narrativas demonstram resistência indígena através da oralidade, onde o mito torna-se metodologia para reclamar ancestralidade.
Palavras-chave: Apagamento Identitário; Mitologia Amazônica; História Oral.

Francisca Nunes Maciel, my grandmother, died denying she was Indigenous, but this denial is not an isolated case—it is the result of a policy of erasing Indigenous identity implemented by the State from the 17th to the 19th century. The State's project was to exploit Indigenous labor, their knowledge, their traditional rivalries in the pacification of other

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Indigenous peoples, their geographic expertise in territorial occupation, and, ultimately, to exterminate them when they refused to submit to pacification—culminating in the final product: the generalization of the Indigenous identity and their incorporation into the national society.

Even though I never heard my grandmother speak about a specific Indigenous territory from which the Indigenous People her father came from might have originated—he was often seen as a "*caboclo*[3] who, when he put his sandals on the wrong feet, would turn into an Indian"[4]—I grew up hearing many other stories that, once I became an adult, made me see myself as Indigenous and realize that everything I experienced with my grandmother never erased our connection with nature and with an Indigenous way of being.

Among the stories my grandmother told, the one that most captivated me was about my great-grandfather—her father—who fought a jaguar and came out victorious. I used to imagine what he was like, how strong he must have been. I never met him, and it was only after my grandmother passed away, already in my adult years, that I visited the place called Uruapeara, once a territory roamed by the Mura, and now divided into three areas: the Indigenous land of the Parintimtim, the territory roamed by the Mura Pirahã, and a region shaped by a rubber plantation settlement, mostly populated by migrants from the state of Pará—though there are also stories of the place having been discovered by three Portuguese women who founded the families that live there, along with people from different states across Brazil. From this emerged a rubber tapper culture in which Afro and Indigenous traditions prevail in food customs and social ways of organizing. Although Catholicism is strong, it incorporates manifestations of Afro and Indigenous religiosity. The people from the former rubber tapper communities distinguish themselves from Indigenous peoples, but maintain relationships of neighborliness, ritual kinship (compadrios), and marriage. Their cultural practices also reflect Indigenous ways of doing things—for instance, the *Puxirum*, a word from the Tupi linguistic trunk *Ka wahib*, meaning "multitude."

[3] Translator's note:The term *caboclo* originates from the Tupi word *kuri'boka* (later *kuriboca*), which, as noted by Tupí scholar Eduardo de Almeida Navarro, initially referred to the child of an Indigenous person and an African. By the 18th century, it expanded to describe children of Indigenous mothers and European fathers, and later, mixed-race descendants (mestizos) of *caboclos* and whites. Today, it denotes rural Amazonian/Northeastern communities blending Indigenous traditions with Iberian cultural elements. Reference: NAVARRO, E. A. *Dicionário de tupi antigo: a língua indígena clássica do Brasil*. São Paulo. Global. 2013. p. 244.

[4] I heard that from an elder who knew my great-grandfather and still lives in Uruapeara, the place where my family was formed.

The *Puxirum* is carried out among families connected by ties of blood and symbolic kinship, and it takes place during the season for clearing the fields. All the interconnected families come together to work on preparing the land: men weed with hoes and dig holes to plant *manivas* (cassava cuttings); an elder cuts the cassava branches into pieces for planting; *curumins* and *cunhantãs* (children and young girls) carry the pieces in baskets to the women, who place them in the holes and use small sticks to gently cover them with loose soil.

While they work, they talk, joke, and laugh a lot. The day starts early, and after a morning of hard work, there's a break for a snack—coffee with milk and cassava-flour biscuits. At midday, the work ends, and the family that owns the field serves lunch to all the families who took part in the *Puxirum*. In a conversation with one of the elders, I learned that in the past, they would make a drink called *Tarubá*, made from cassava, to enjoy after the *Puxirum*.

My grandmother always told me about the place she came from. She said there was a very beautiful lake there, full of fish—it was a land of abundance, and all her family lived there. She spoke of the litanies and the festivals of the saints, of the bonfires, of the work with rubber tapping and Brazil nut gathering, of the dances where she would waltz and dance the mazurka. She also told me about the *dança do seringador*—a dance created by the elders, with Afro-Indigenous rhythms.

It was only in 2011, four years after my grandmother had passed away, that I went for the first time to Uruapeara, together with my aunt and my mother, who hadn't returned to the place she came from in over 30 years. My mother and I took a bus from Porto Velho, in Rondônia, to Humaitá, in Amazonas, where we met my aunt. From there, we left at six in the evening by boat. We traveled through the night, and early in the journey, as dusk settled in, my mother was introduced to cousins and acquaintances traveling on the same boat.

We navigated the Madeira River all night, and at six in the morning, we began to enter the Uruspeara River. By mid-morning, we reached the vast lake of Uruapeara, and by early afternoon we arrived at the old locality called *Vista Longe*, where my grandmother had lived.

It was in Uruapeara that I saw the women preparing the litanies for Saint Michael, traditionally making sweet and savory cassava-flour biscuits, just as they had learned from the elder women. It was there that I understood that although the litanies is a Catholic practice, it has its own traditional form within the community. The oldest man leads the litanies in Latin,

and the women respond. It is a moment of remembrance of the ancestors—everyone weeps, recalling those who have passed.

That was when I realized that within this form of Catholicism, there is a traditional ritual unique to the community, a way of honoring those who are no longer here. The same happened during other saint festivities I attended in the following years when I returned to the community.

Within this religious space tied to Catholicism, the custom of families gathering, sharing food, and the *mangofa*[5] of one another is preserved — often with themes related to sexuality. But at the same time as they *manga*[6] one another, there is a solemn moment when the "host of the celebration" names the elder who passed down to them the responsibility of continuing the saint's feast. Everyone joins in remembering the former host and takes pride in honoring them through the celebration. All the rituals of the saint festivities felt to me as though I were living out my grandmother's stories.

My experience as a researcher is a search for the history of my own family, and in this search, through the methods of oral history, I collaboratively built a narrative of my grandmother's lived experience, which is part of my book *The Remembered Space: Life Experiences in the Rubber Plantations of the Amazon*, the result of my master's thesis. In this narrative, among other images, a mythical image of the serpent is brought to life. This image appears in the story she tells about her sister-in-law, who gave birth to a creature—through which she explains the disappearance of an island. It is not Uruapeara, but rather a space of transition, experienced during her movement from Uruapeara to other places along the Madeira River, marking the departure from riverside communities to the city of Porto Velho.

> Today, that island where we used to live... it's not even there anymore. Looks awful now, that island... It collapsed, just gave in. Now there's just that big patch of land left. So, when Maria, Pedro's wife, he's my brother, got sick for a while, he took her to see Dona[7] Preta. Maria ended up giving birth to some kind of creature. I didn't even go see it — no way! It was other folks who went, Fermina and Sabá. I didn't go. They buried it right there, on the island. Folks said it was so ugly — Lord have mercy! So Maria was sick, all yellow-looking. They took her to get checked by Dona Preta... And then the mestres there said the whole island was gonna collapse. Mainly the part where we used to live. Said the top part of the island would fall — right where Maria and Pedro were living. And that creature Maria gave birth to... they said it was gonna

[5] Translator's note: A term of uncertain origin, according to most Brazilian dictionary a variation of the word mangação referring to playful teasing, mockery, or banter, often with a sexual undertone.
[6] Translator's note:Conjugated form of the verb *mangar/mangofar*, a word previously used in its noun form.
[7]Translator's note: A form of address used in Brazil as a marker of respect and affection, particularly toward older women or those held in high regard within the community. While English possesses equivalent terms such as ***'Ma'am'*** or ***'Miss,'*** these do not convey the same sense of intimacy and communal belonging inherent in the use in this passage.

> turn into a serpent. Ah, I got so scared! We packed our things real quick and got out of there. Good thing Antônio pulled some strings and found a house for us over in Triângulo. And we left, just like that. And sure enough... it collapsed. The whole thing. Big chunks of land, just falling off."

This fragment of my grandmother Francisca's narrative is not individual, as it is supported by a collective. In this narrative, there is a time and a space that lie between the mythical and the historical, between the social and the cultural. I insist on this image of the serpent, which, in my view, is an element of a mythical theme that has gone through various transformations, carrying meanings within the cultural and symbolic context of a community made up of people from different cultures, but mostly coming from the process of integrating Indigenous peoples into national society. This integration presents opportunities through the occupation of the Madeira River and other rivers in the Amazon, like the Negro River, allowing them to carry, in their very makeup, an Indigenous ancestry that lives on in their imagination and social practices.

Just like the serpent canoe, the Pamuri-maxsë[8] of the Desâna, Pira-Tapúya, Wanâna, and Tuyuka, which is like a large canoe[9], and inside it came the people who ascended the rivers to the headwaters. Upon reaching Ipanoré, it stumbled upon a large rock... Then the people left through a hole. Other serpent canoes, large snakes shaped like boats, may have traveled the rivers of the Amazon and left behind the mark of Indigenous presence.

These serpent symbolisms in the mythology of the Xingu and Rio Negro peoples allow me to draw a connection with the symbolism of the serpent present in my grandmother Francisca's narrative, as the relations go beyond the realm of historical verification and enter the world of symbolic imagination. In this way, I allow myself to imagine that the serpent-canoe slithered through all the rivers of the Amazon, with the peoples of the Madeira River emerging from the same hole, including the Mura and Munduruku[10], two Indigenous peoples who contested the Madeira River as their territory for wandering. And in turn, the individuals who descended from them and integrated into the communities along the Madeira River. (This is within the realm of my imagination, connected to information about the circulation of these

[8] Note from Carvalho (1979): "People in Dacsé: "maxsë" (sing.) "maxsá" (pl.).
[9] **Ibid. note 6.** In reality, a serpent-canoe, called Pamuri-gaxsiru... According to the creation myth of the Desâna. See page 18 of the book *Xingu, Seus Índios, Seus Mitos*, by the Villas Boas brothers, cited by Carvalho (1979).
[10] I am not claiming that the Mura and Munduruku share the same origin myth as the peoples of the Xingu and Rio Negro, but merely referring to the possible circulations of the different serpent symbolisms present in their mythologies.

peoples in the rivers of the Amazon). There are records of the presence of different serpent symbolisms in narratives that lie on the border of historical events (explaining the disappearance of a community, sustained by locality) and mythical explanations throughout the Madeira River.

In the face of commands that were constituted from the extermination of various Indigenous ethnic groups and the circulation of cultures from the Amazonian peoples, from the rest of Brazil, and from different places in the world, what remains are fragments of mythical themes that emerge as explanations for the phenomena of the disappearance of peoples, places, and communities. It is within this reading of the world of the seringal that the fragment of my grandmother Francisca's narrative gains relevance. This is my interpretation, built through the symbolic image of the serpent generated in the liquid of a woman's womb, which, upon leaving this liquid space, destroys the world. Francisca explains the signs of illness during pregnancy, the death of the woman, and the disappearance of her community through this image.

In the text resulting from my grandmother's interview, the serpent appears as a curse of a place doomed to disappear; this image is not an individual imagination, but a collective creation. By updating the image of the disappearance of the place and linking it to the serpent, it brings with it the collective memory of those who were part of the couple that gave rise to the serpent, her brother and sister-in-law, the healer who predicted the disappearance of the place, and the other women of the community who went to see the creature.

Stories of serpents that cause places to collapse are recurrent in the Amazonian imagination, steeped in mythical imagery that has migrated from different parts of the world—while still undergoing transformations through interaction with elements of Indigenous mythologies. One such story, which I heard from my grandmother and which is also told by boatmen and travelers living in riverside communities along the Madeira River, is about an island known as *Terra Caída* ("Fallen Land"), which sank.

According to the tale, during a night of celebration, a giant snake caused the island to sink, and to this day, when boats pass near the spot around midnight, people say they can still hear music, the sound of a party, and a rooster crowing. My grandmother said that the boatmen avoid the area where the community once stood because of the strong whirlpools—and the boatmen themselves confirm this.

This story shares similarities with my grandmother's own narrative: *"There isn't even an island anymore where we used to live… That island looks so sad now… It fell… It fell… What's left is just that big, deep swirl."*

In both narratives, the serpent—or snake—appears not only as a destructive force but also as a form of punishment. Recalling certain fragments from my grandmother Francisca's story, we can perceive hints that not only the woman who gave birth to the creature, but also her husband, was the most punished—though the narrative doesn't make clear exactly why. Still, it is possible to sense that it may relate to something within the couple's relationship:

"Maria gave birth to a creature… They buried it right there on the island. They say it was so ugly, may God forbid!... That the whole upper part of the island was going to collapse, in the place where Maria and Pedro lived. That the creature Maria had was going to become a serpent."

In the second narrative, the one about the island that sank during a night of celebration, there is a strong indication that the community was being punished for staying up all night partying. Throughout the Madeira River, in the stretch from Calama (a former Mura settlement) to Porto Velho/RO (also formerly Mura territory), this story is told repeatedly. Of the three versions I've heard, one adds the detail of an elderly woman who had stepped out to relieve herself, accompanied by her husband, and in that moment, the side of the island where the party was taking place sank—leaving only the old couple, who had stepped away, to survive.

In the book *Visões da Natureza – Seringueiros e colonos em Rondônia* by Carlos Corrêa Teixeira (1999), a narrative with the same theme of the serpent that sank an Indigenous community in the Madeira River is recovered from a record made by Father Vitor Hugo:

> Near Borba, the Carmelites founded, in 1827, the village of Sapucaiaoroca, a name associated with a nearby place said to have sunk into the depths of the river, cursed by the gods due to the misconduct of its inhabitants, the Mura Indians. These people would sing songs so impure and engage in dances so lascivious that they caused their protective spirits to weep in pain. With the founding of Sapucaiaoroca and the relocation of these Indigenous people to that site, it is said that, in the dead of night, the Carmelites were tormented by the incessant crowing of roosters rising from the depths of the waters, as if those anguished spirits lamented the misfortune of the vanished village.

Teixeira (1999) highlights Vitor Hugo's observation that this narrative may have been forged or altered by missionaries who lived in the region with the aim of evangelization. This common strategy among missionaries—of forging or reshaping Indigenous mythology in favor

of Christianization—was often employed to distance Indigenous peoples from their religious rituals. Such interventions may have interfered with symbolic transformations related to Christian myths, potentially explaining the narrative's association of punishment with festivities, behaviors, and practices deemed non-Christian.

This is one possible explanation. However, if we look further, we find that the image of the serpent linked to destruction is not exclusive to Christian or Amazonian contexts. Among the Bataks of Malaysia, as explained in Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant's *Dictionary of Symbols* (2002), the cosmic serpent lives in subterranean regions and is destined to destroy the world.

The serpent appears in the myths of many cultures and carries a wide range of symbolic meanings. In Christian mythology, it represents evil and sin, as seen in the story of Adam and Eve. However, the serpent also embodies images from other mythologies not overturned by Christian condemnation. Thus, the serpent that caused the island to disappear might also be understood as a symbol of transition—marking the beginning of a new life elsewhere—or even as life itself, guardian and regenerator.

Although the serpent generated by a woman from my grandmother Francisca's community did not come from the river, it represents an external enemy, as the community is horrified upon seeing the creature: *They say it was so ugly—God forbid!* That is, it was not one of them and came to destroy the place where they lived.

The serpent generated by the woman is explicitly connected to the womb, which can give birth to either life or death. In this case, it gave birth to death and to an extreme ugliness, which, by evoking monstrosity, may symbolize the distinction between the creature and the people of the community. The womb can be associated with the house due to their symbolic similarities—both represent a feminine symbol, one of refuge, of motherhood, of protection, of the maternal embrace. Three images are intertwined: the womb as house, the house as world. A world destroyed by the serpent.

Connecting the three narratives—the one about the woman who gave birth to a serpent and the two about the place that sank into the depths of the river—I noticed another similarity, albeit with some variations. In all three, there is a sign that marks the submerged place. In the story of the woman who bore the serpent, it is the *bolãozão* (chunks of riverbank churned up

by the backwater); in the two versions of *Terra Caída*, the sign is the crowing of a rooster. Both serve as markers of vanished places and continue to haunt travelers and nearby residents.

Even if, as Teixeira (1999) asserts, some of these narratives were forged by missionaries, this has not prevented the symbolic elements of Indigenous mythology from taking on meaning within spaces that have been transformed and interwoven with various cultures, such as the rubber plantations.

For now, in order to fulfill an academic ritual, I turn to some clues offered by Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked* (2010):

In *The Raw and the Cooked*, there is a beautiful collection of Indigenous mythical narratives that I read with great pleasure—only later realizing that there was a circulation of these narratives when I heard or read other Indigenous stories from different peoples. This is what Lévi-Strauss calls *parallelism*. The stories about serpents—about the giant snakes in communities along the Madeira River—are part of this circulation of Indigenous mythical narratives that endure, even though the Indigenous peoples with their traditional territories of movement may no longer exist along those riverbanks, having either disappeared or been displaced to other spaces. Today, those areas are inhabited by communities who carry fragments of those mythical narratives and by people whose existence results from the disintegration of Indigenous territories.

The stories told by my grandmother—and still told by other elders—do not need to be labeled as myth, tale, or legend, because I find the definition of *myth* as used by anthropologists quite complicated. What truly teaches me about traditions is listening to the stories directly from the storytellers. All I know is that what we call *myth* is part of daily life in these communities. The croaking of frogs during the low-water season of Lake Uruapeara reminds the elders of a time when, they say, frogs could speak. And in that lake lives a great Uruá—a great Snail, the chief of the Uruás—who dwells at the bottom of the lake, and no one can kill him. If they do, the lake—which is a source of life, where people fish, drink water, and travel—will dry up.

To me, this great Uruá who lives at the bottom of the lake is the mythical chief who lives within each person from Uruapeara, the place where my grandmother came from and where she told me so many stories—stories about frogs, about snakes, and others, which served to explain, for instance, the changing seasons of the rivers, from flood to drought. At least,

that's what I learned from the stories my grandmother told me—and what I found confirmed by a collective when I visited Uruapeara myself.

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