

## **The World of Anaconda: the myth of the snake-canoe and its relationship with the stilt villages of eastern Amazonia**

Alexandre Navarro

### **Abstract**

*Amazonian ethnography relies on a world created by an anaconda, an ancestral creator. The story that myths tell is that the Amazon River is the metaphor of an anaconda; a large, meandering reptile. While the Anaconda sails along the great river, it populates the riverbanks, creating the Indian villages along its margins. This is why the anaconda is a snake-canoe. Amazonian societies are classified by archeology as belonging to the Polychrome Tradition of the Amazon (TPA). This research suggests that stilt villagers in eastern Amazonia, where shamanism played a role in communicating with animals, also shared this myth. The anaconda embodied in ceramic archaeological sites is as a memory of this complex indigenous narrative as it develops across time.*

### **Resumo**

*A etnografia amazônica se baseia na criação do mundo por uma Anaconda, considerada uma criadora ancestral. A história que os mitos contam é que o rio Amazonas é a metáfora de uma sucuri, porque tem meandros como esta cobra e é um grande réptil como o próprio rio. Enquanto a Anaconda navega no grande rio, está povoando suas margens criando as aldeias indígenas. É por isso que a Anaconda é uma cobra-canoa. Essas sociedades são classificadas pela arqueologia como pertencentes à Tradição Polícroma da Amazônia (TPA). Esta pesquisa sugere que os povos que viveram em palafitas na Amazônia oriental também compartilharam este mito prístino em que o xamanismo parece desempenhar um papel na comunicação com os animais. A iconografia da Anaconda no suporte arqueológico de cerâmica parece ser uma memória dessa complexa narrativa indígena de longa duração.*

“It was beautiful, covered in patterns, like a beaded bracelet”.  
(A Piro woman's opinion of a serpent in Peru.  
Gow 1999, pp. 303).

## Snakes are in everywhere: an introduction<sup>1</sup>

This article aims to study the representation of anacondas in the ceramic sites of stilt villages in the State of Maranhão in Brazil, taking into account two assertions: (1) snakes are important in non-Western societies, and anacondas were the most telling symbol of this phenomenon, alongside other relationships with non-human beings; and (2) archaeological artefacts from late pre-Columbian stilt villages, notably black patch designs on ceramics, symbolise anacondas, and their distribution is concentrated in public spaces and feasting activities.

Snakes are fantastical creatures. As cold-blooded reptiles, they have developed a complex and adaptive system over the course of their evolution. Although they have poor eyesight, snakes stand out for their sense of smell which is primarily used to catch prey. Their scent system not only guarantees food, but also guides them through the environment. Being the only animal that does not close its eyes when sleeping, the snake appears in mythical narratives as a vigilant being, always on standby. Because many species of snake have sexual dimorphism, that is, the ability to self-reproduce, snakes are also associated with fertility, as well as being much more active in the rainy season. It is no wonder, therefore, that serpents crowned the heads of Pharaohs or appeared in depictions of Mayan enthronement rituals (Lamar and Campbell 2004; Navarro 2007).

In Precolumbian America, the snake motif is associated with creation. In Cahokia, a Mississippian culture from the tenth

to the fourteen centuries, snakes were associated with the aquatic or underworld and fertility, and were being represented as fantastical creatures with deer horns, bird wings, and feline heads. Snakes would be protective animals. Ceremonial mounds are also shaped like snakes (Emerson 1997). In Teotihuacan (AD 1-650), in Mesoamerica, feathered snakes were associated with human and animal sacrifice (Ringle et al. 1998; López Áustin and López Luján 1999). In other Epiclassic sites in the area (AD 800-1000), such as Cacaxtla and

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Anna Roosevelt for her constant encouragement. I would also like to thank the agencies Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa e ao Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico do Estado do Maranhão (FAPEMA), CNPq, and Fulbright Institution for research grants. Finally, I would like to thank the following institutions where I was able to undertake my research: the American Museum of Natural History at New York, the Penn Museum in Philadelphia, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, and the University of Illinois in Chicago.

Chichen Itza, feathered snakes are related to the context of the war, since the reptile's venom, often lethal, was linked to the aggression of these animals. The serpentiform motif is also present in Andean civilisations. Among the Mochica, the sacred world is represented by animals that play an important role in the cosmic order. The nocturnal deity or god of the Milky Way is an anthropomorphic being that carries the celestial dome; it takes the form of a two-headed snake (Golte 2015).

In this sense, these mythical narratives refer to what Lévi-Strauss defines as a "reported history", or a memory through language, which determines the cosmovision of society (Lévi-Strauss 1969). This reported story is often shared across cultures as Art. Art, therefore, has a semantic meaning: it functions as symbolism; it serves to communicate the social, political, and religious values of a given society; it encourages social cohesion and/or provides a control strategy; or, it is associated with ethnic identity (Sahlins 1968; Geertz 1989).

The vehicle for myths in this context was shamanism, understood as "a coherent system of religious beliefs and practices, which try to organize and explain the interrelationships between the cosmos, nature and man" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988: 23). To achieve this, the shaman needs to connect with the afterlife through hallucinogenic plants, especially those of the *Banisteriopsis* genus. The shaman acts as a healer, *curandero*, who is responsible for adolescent sexual initiations and pregnancy; as a dancer, singer, politician, nature specialist, all in all, "a mediator between this world and the supernatural world" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988: 24). The ecstasy of ritual is the shamanic flight in which the use of drugs causes the shaman's spirit to detach from his own body and penetrate other dimensions in which he can act as a healer, interact with supernatural beings or ancestors, or fly over mountains or trees and observe enemies. In this sense, animals that are able to transform, such as the tadpoles that transforms into a toad, or the caterpillar that turns into a butterfly, or the snake that changes its skin, are auxiliary animals for shamans in their spiritual flights (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988).

### **The Amazon snake in the ethnographic approach**

The snakes that populate the Amazonian indigenous imaginary are the *Anacondas*, also called *Sucuris*, snakes of the *Eunectes* genus, of the *Boinae* family. There are four existing species: *E. murinus*, *E. notaeus*, *E. beniensis*, and *E. deschauenseei*, the *E. murinus* being the most common in the Amazon (Mattison 2007). They are constrictors, that is, they kill by strangulation, and have no poison.



Figure 1. Anaconda snake in the Amazon. Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain.

The Anaconda is a shamanic animal in the Amazon. Certain peculiar ecological characteristics of these snakes might explain why they first attracted the attention of indigenous groups, as the specimens can reach up to 10m in length and weigh more than 200 kg, being the heaviest animal in the Amazon. The Anaconda has pale skin with black markings, which is easily replicated through iconography, it is also excellent at camouflage, is fast in water attacks but lethargic on land, nocturnal, it uses its a sensitive tongue for hunting, has powerful teeth and muscles, and the females are larger and more aggressive than the males. Finally, its prey includes mammals such as jaguars, deer, and tapirs (Colthorpe 2009; Roosevelt 2014).

Regarding its cosmological features, the characteristics described above likely contribute to the association between this powerful animal and creation myths, and humanity. For example, according to the Desana, from the eastern Tukano language family, humanity was formed by supernatural beings called “Thunder”, “White Quartz Men”, or even “Grandfathers of the World” (Landa and Lana 1980). The “Third Thunder” was tasked with creating humanity by first creating a large lake (the ocean) in which gained the metaphor of “Canoe of the Future Humanity” or “Canoe of Transformation”, while the chief of Desana became the leader of this boat, the so-called Snake-Canoe. As the supernatural passed by sacred places along the Amazon River – also known as the “White Lake” of the Milky Way –, it built a village. The Third Thunder thus created 56 villages. Ribeiro (2000)

made the following ethnographic observations when conducting research among the Desana:

As it left the Lake of Milk, the boat that was at the same time the Big Snake (and in fact was also the grandfather of the world, the thunder-from-above), went upstream, traveling like a submarine. The elderly call it mupúru, perhaps referring to 'steam' because the ship sailed anyone rowing. In its trajectory, the boat stopped at the Villages that were placed along the river. People entered the Villages, performed ceremonies, and continued their vigil upstream (Ribeiro 2000: 40).<sup>2</sup>

Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971) also reports the canoe-snake myth among the Desana. The creator the Sun, *Pamurí-mahsë*, would send people to Earth. The snake-canoe received a name, *Pamurí-gahsíru*, and was painted yellow with black spots. The inside of the canoe, where the Desanas were, was painted red in allusion to the sun. The journey was long because at each source of the river the Sun created villages and put the Desana to live in them. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971: 41) points out that the Sun was, therefore, “an organizer and legislator” and that the canoe was a metaphor for the uterus, i.e., the anaconda was associated with sex. The author further proposes that these shamanic understandings were provoked by hallucinogenic plants, which led to visions known as phosphenes. Such experiences are common among Indigenous peoples, revealing how the dream world is associated with mythological archetypes (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978). Regarding to the snake-canoe, Ribeiro (1989) reports that in his fieldwork among the Desana, mythology was populated by predatory animals of the land, water, and air, such as the harpy eagle (*Harpyia harpyia*), the jaguar (*Panthera onca*), and the anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*), which are mediated through the mythical act of shamanism, whose snake-canoe symbolizes human ontogenesis, creation, and evolution.

Among the Tukano, Hugh-Jones (1979) notes that the songs of shamans allude to the Amazon River as the terrestrial Anaconda and the Milky Way, the supernatural creator. Many Amazonian peoples compare the supernatural milk of the Anaconda with the milky-colored sap of hallucinogenic plants of the *Banisteriopsis* genus, whose tree trunk is a metaphor for Great Anaconda's body (Hugh-Jones 1979). This magical world is enhanced by music and dance. According to Barcelos, snakes are part of a myth-musical repertoire among the Wauja, in which *Kamalu Hai* stands out, “the gigantic snake-canoe that carries on its back a long series of singing pots” (2011: 1003). This ceramic cookware comes in a range of

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.

different sizes and produce various polyphonic sounds. In this sense, the snake-canoe could imply the origin of ceramic activity among the Wauja.

Among the Tukano, the Anaconda is associated with both the male and female universe. The Anaconda's association with female shamans and Creator deities is common in oral traditions across the region, such as the Shipibo, according to Roosevelt (2014). To this day, certain indigenous groups conceive of the Anaconda as a dangerous ancestral spirit, a master who governs the feminine part of the cosmos, which is the aquatic underworld (Roosevelt 2014). To the Shipibo, the Anaconda is a female shaman (Gebhart-Sayer 1984).

According to Roosevelt (2014), many Amazonian peoples associate the Amazon River with Anaconda because they dominate the aquatic landscape and their meandering movement of rivers mimics their own. Thus, it is common for drawings of Anacondas to appear in communal houses among the Tukano (Cabalzar 2000). In his classic book, *The Cosmic Zygote*, Roe (1982) reported that for the Shipibo, the mythological association between the creation of the world and the Anacondas is also associated with the rituals of healing, divination, ceremonial dances, and the creation of musical instruments. Among other groups, such as the Tupi-Gavião and Panare, the Anaconda is a giant animal associated with the rainbow (Dumont 1977), while for the Timbira, the mouths of two anacondas rest at the ends of a rainbow (Nimuendajú 1946). The rainbow acts as a symbol of disease (Basso 1973), which for Weiss represents "something demonic, repulsive and detestable, as well as the anaconda" (1975: 273). The Anaconda, therefore, inhabits a very large number of Amazonian myths, and is mainly associated to shamanic activities that involve the creation of the cosmos. It also has cultural properties, as it is associated with the natural transformations of aquatic life and the water world. However, it is important to take into account the large distance that exists between the stilt villages in Maranhão and the indigenous peoples of the Northeast Amazon which here will be used as an ethnographic comparison.

### **The snake motif in the Polychrome Tradition of the Amazon (TPA)**

The Polychrome Tradition of the Amazon (TPA) is made up of hundreds of archaeological sites that cover almost 7000km of the Amazon River, from the Upper Amazon, in the Napo River region, to its mouth in Marajo Island. These sites are characterized by their fertile anthropic soils known as *terra preta de índio*, or 'Amazonian Dark Earths', in English. They contain defensive structures, anthropomorphic funerary

urns, and polychrome of ceramics, generally white engobes embellished with red and black paint (Meggers and Evans 1957; Neves 2012; Neves et al. 2014; Neves and Morais 2010). The roots and dispersal of TPA is still debated. For Lahtrap (1970), the answer lies in the Central Amazon, while for Neves (2012), based on Brochado's (1984) research on the Tupis, it is the Upper Madeira. Roosevelt (1991) believes that TPA appears at the mouth of the Amazon, the place, in fact, where the oldest archaeological sites are located.

It is curious to note that little attention has been paid to the iconography of snakes in the polychrome pots found on such sites. Roosevelt (1991) has pointed out that the myths surrounding the Anaconda appear more prominently in the iconography of the Polychrome Tradition of the Amazon, whose serpentine symbols appear as evidence of shamanism, used in initiation rituals, dances, and songs. According to Roosevelt (1991), in the Joanes period of the monumental Marajoara art, the female Anaconda n shaman is represented in effigies of the funerary urns, on which she bears elaborate earrings and clothes with snake motifs. In Pacoval-style ceramic pots from the Marajoara period, between the tenth and eleven centuries, the female shaman has Anaconda skin drawn on her arms, which also decorates her clothing (Roosevelt 1991).



Figure 2. Marajoara ceramic pot with representation of anaconda snakes in reference to the female shaman. Courtesy of Anna Roosevelt in March 2020. The images is 1991: 47.

In a discussion of the mythological aspects of the Anaconda, Schaan (2008) emphasizes that “the animals represented in material culture are precisely those most likely related to the group's cultural history, whose representation provides them to memorize and relive this history on festive and ritualistic moments” (2007b: 6).<sup>3</sup> To Schaan (2008), the snake motif found on these pots are fragmented parts of snake bodies, such as the tail, the head, and the skin. Anaconda motifs are further found on the famous Marajoara pubic covers, used by prestigious women during rituals. Still according to Schaan (2007a), Anaconda skins also appear on the belly of female figurines, which emphasizes the matriarchal power of the Marajoara. The gender dimension and genesis of Marajoaran society is still debated within the archaeological and anthropological literature of the lowlands of South America.

Despite the distance between different indigenous groups along the Amazon basin, Barreto (2008) points to the fact that certain iconographic elements are pan-Amazonian; their symbology is based on the relationship between animals and human beings, elements of which generate narratives and myths among the indigenous groups. In this sense, these mythological histories, which inhabit both the past and the present of indigenous groups, make us think of a “general Amazonian indigenous art with regional variations and regional styles” (Barreto 2008: 22).

Oliveira (2016) mentions that the narratives associated with myths about the snake-canoe can be seen as connected with the creation of various cultural activities, including art and ceramics. According to her, the TPA at the confluence of the Solimões River represents a more rigid iconographic representation system, which focuses on the representation of two-headed snakes in symbiosis with human traits, the reading of which indicates a bodily transformation, confirming the assertion that the snake motif is associated with shamanism in the ancient Amazon. What the author fails to mention is that some of these Solimões River snakes could also be anacondas. Therefore, archeology corroborates ethnography in the sense that it also understands the Anaconda as a shamanic animal.

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<sup>3</sup> Translation by the author from the original in Portuguese.



## The Boca do Rio archaeological site: ethno-historical accounts and ethnography/myth analysis

Stilt Villages are pre-colonial archeological sites from the estuarine region of the Brazilian State of Maranhão (Navarro 2013, 2017, 2018a, 2018b). The 'stilts', or posts, are formed of the sturdy wooden supports on which the villages were built.



Figure 3. Map with the geographical localization of the stilt villages and stilts in dry season. Map and photograph by LARQ Collection.

In terms of the TPA, it is clear that many Amazonian cases hybrids. In the present study, the sites of Marajo and its estuary are considered a hybrid between the TPA and Tupiguarani traditions. This can only add to the argument that Amazonian categories are broad, since the area in question lies outside of that of typical TPA, where Tupiguarani

influence might be expected. The mixing of different Amazonian traditions, peoples, and lifestyles seems to be part and parcel of Amazonian indigenous history, but it also complicates the simple permutation of an underlying artistic or aesthetic, and speaks to how art is used to actively create and maintain identities, as they are reflected in actual objects. In this way, the ceramics of stilt villages can be considered evidence of this cultural hybrid between TPA and Tupiguarani traditions that characterizes Eastern Amazonia. The stilt villages date from AD 800-1000 (Navarro 2016, 2017, 2018a, 2018b), corroborates this archaeological discussion.

Many of the stilt villages' archaeological sites are located in the Turiaçu River basin, which is 720km long and winding in shape, reminiscent of typical Amazonian rivers. Its geographical coordinates are between 0°30'S and 6°45'S, and 47°45'W to 42°00'W, with a surface area of 268,897km<sup>2</sup>. The tributaries of this river form large bodies of water with Amazonian characteristics that flow into the estuary of Maranhão on the coast of *Rias*, which hosts an exuberant mangrove vegetation (Caderno da Região Hidrográfica 2006).

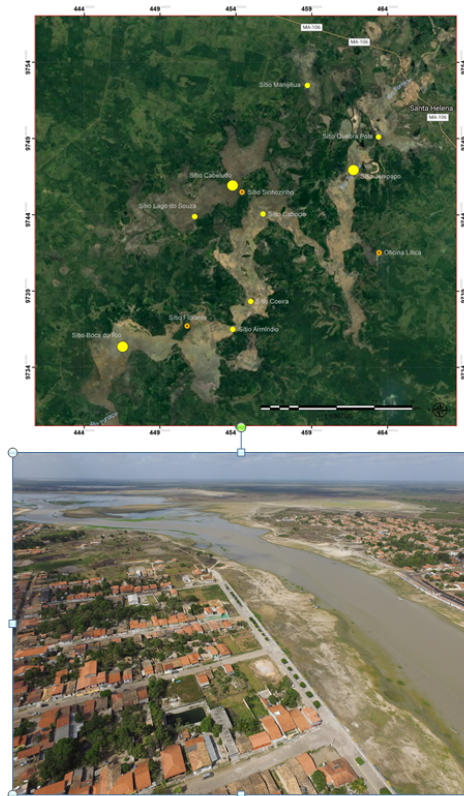


Figure 4. Map of archaeological site in the Turiaçu River and this river as Amazon metaphor. Map and photograph by LARQ Collection.



Figure 5. Pots with white engobe showing hook designs painted in black and rim painted in red, referring to the skin of the anaconda. Photograph and draw by LARQ Collection.

In the polychrome ceramic material that we analyzed, what stands out most is the black, curved or hook-shaped designs (figure 5). The rim of these polychrome pots is painted red. This iconography is found across almost all of the sites along the river. Although abstract, the iconography has a reading sequence in horizontal bands, filling the entire internal space of the pot. The predominance of the color black might suggest that these images refer to the black spots found on the Anaconda snake's (*Eunectes murinus*) back, similarly to what Roosevelt (2014) concluded during her study of Anacondas and female-shamans on Marajo Island. However, anthropological reflection is still necessary, given that we know very little about many of these things, such as how ethnographically described systems reflect the complex and hybrid identities and agencies of the past. Assertions must become heuristic models, or questions, that are open to exploratory interpretations. Thus although the black patches found on the ceramics are highly consistent, and Anacondas are the most obvious candidate, there are many other snakes, creatures, and abstractions they might represent.

The shamanic nature of these archaeological materials is also evidenced by the production of figurines, generally female, which contain small clay balls, perhaps to be used as a rattle. In the lowlands of South America, these are known as *maracas*. According to Zerries, the *maraca* has always been the most important shamanic instrument in non-Andean South American cultures, since “the noise of the little stone or seeds inside is interpreted as the voice of the spirits and its manifestation” (1981: 11).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the *maraca* was considered an idol for the indigenous groups of the lowlands of South America.

These sound instruments are present in the ethnohistorical records of the colonial era (Daniel 2004 [1757-1776]; D’Abbeville 1945 [1614]; D’Évreux 2008 [1864]), and have been recorded by anthropologists since the beginning of the 20th century (Nimuendajú 1946). The *maraca*, therefore, is part of shamanic paraphernalia since it is able to emit sound as a form of communication between the different worlds across which the shaman operates. In this way, the rattle functions as a musical instrument that plays while hallucinogens are ingested to alter the shaman’s mental and psychological state (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988). For the Warao, who still live in stilt houses in the Orinoco delta in Venezuela, *maracas* have spiritual powers and their representation of human forms refer to the ancestral shaman who visited heaven and was gifted with this instrument: the Great Spirit from water peoples (Wilbert 1973).

Several of these figurines were collected in the stilt villages. One in particular is worth highlighting: an owl with anthropomorphic traits. The bird could be an auxiliary animal to the shaman in what Reichel-Dolmatoff (1988) calls “shamanic flight”, which, as said before, refers to the detachment of the spirit from the human body. In this context, the owl helps the shaman to fly. In addition, it could also serve as a messenger animal, since this particular bird stands out for its great ability to see. In fact, the figurine draws attention to the owl’s eyes: the all-seeing shaman (Navarro 2018b). Thus, the shaman sees everything.

One of the main characteristics of these plastic-decorated ceramics bowls is the presence of animals that are native to the lacustrine landscape, such as small rodents, armadillos, capybaras, wild boars, monkeys, fish, and frogs. There is no serpent-shaped bowl appliqué. In this way, it seems that these peoples gave greater prominence to the Anaconda, as it only appears in painting, rather than in the form of effigies.

On one of the largest settlements of the Boca do Rio archaeological site, polychrome ceramics with typical hook-shaped black lines were collected where the highest

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<sup>4</sup> Translated by the author from the original in Portuguese.

concentrations of stilt houses were found, i.e., the ceremonial *plazas* (Navarro 2018a) (Figure 6). Since this representation appears only in painting and not in appliques, its use seems to have been quite restrictive, making it impossible for the pots to have been decorated in any other way. This further strengthens the connection between the stilt villages and TPA, and corroborates existing analyses regarding the hierarchical structure of the villages. While greater concentrations of ceramics were found in the ceremonial *plazas*, spaces of domestic residence, i.e. *malocas*, were almost devoid of painted ceramics. To further ratify this hierarchy, the ceremonial plaza of Boca do Rio's archaeological site was also home to a frog-shaped jade pendant, called *muiraquitã*, whose raw material does not exist in Brazil and was possibly imported into Brazil from the Caribbean via the Lesser Antilles and the Guianas (Boomert 1987; Costa and Angélica 2002; Rostain 2010; Meirelles 2011; Costa and Meirelles 2012; Navarro et al. 2017).

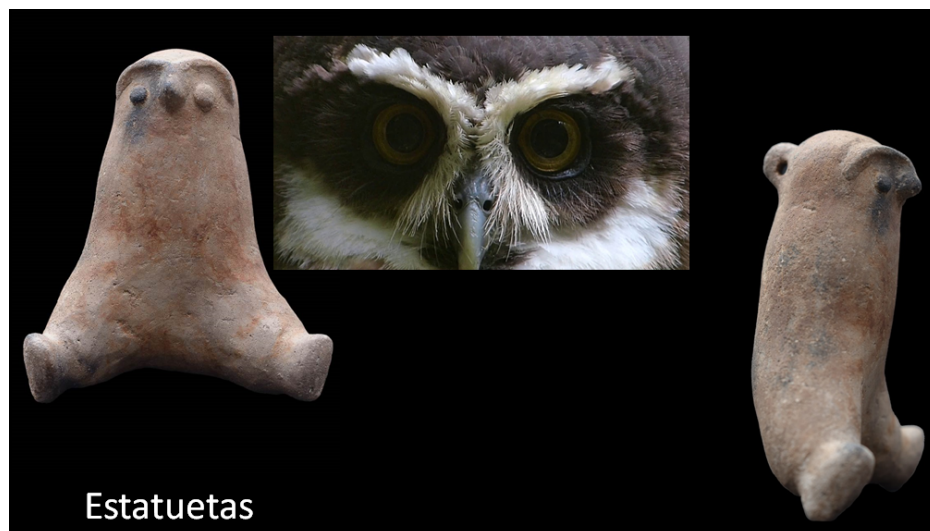


Figure 6. The Boca do Rio archaeological site and the dispersion of polychrome ceramic in the largest nucleus of stilt houses. Map and draw by LARQ Collection.

Ceramic analysis reveals that the rounded shape of these pots means they were likely to have been used for drinking liquids during rituals (Burke et al. 1971; Arnold 1985). In this way, the largest group of stilt houses within each settlement might have been used as a space for feasts, understood as a collective ritual activity where food and drink are consumed (Dietler 2001). According to the same author, these feasts give rise to a set of social regulations that were vital to the maintenance of collective social life; spaces in which the group's ideology is reproduced, relationships are negotiated, and power is competed for.

Dietler (2001) considers these festivals a powerful form of ritual activity, which is why they left behind indelible markers of the rituals that took place, such as rites of passage, calendrical commemorations, and myths and funerals, providing ample archaeological records. Thus, food and drink are commensal feasts of “embodied material culture, that is, special form of material culture produced specifically for ingestion into the body” (Dietler 2001: 72).

According to Hayden (2001), the main function of these feasts was to create solidarity and cooperation between people, allowing them to mobilize labour, create cooperative relationships and alliances within the group, and establish reciprocal political relationships. Of the various types of feasts of past societies, Hayden believes that the most important ones were symbolic in nature, where prestigious materials and other archaeological indicators were produced. Thus, the festivals promoted a “social unit” (Hayden 2001: 39), which promoted cooperation between families, lineages, and clans, both within a given community and with more distant regions. Feasts could also be used in emergency situations, such as intervening in the weather, diseases, and other catastrophes where the presence of the shaman was essential to balancing or neutralizing the chaotic order.

In this way, the polychrome ceramics and the female figurines are evidence that these central spaces of the stilt villages were host to symbolic feasts, where myths like that of the snake-canoe were told to unite social groups and preserve their ideology. They may have been used as drinking pots in rituals. Ceramic rounded pots were also found among the Desana. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971) showed that, similarly to the stilt villages, these pots were decorated with the Anaconda design and used for consuming *yajé*, a drink made from the hallucinogenic plant *Banisteriopsis caapi* and used during shamanic rituals. The shape of the ceramics indicates the consumption of liquids in these bowls.

By drinking from these utensils, the shaman would be able to recall primeval myths which they could then socially perpetuate. In this sense, the iconography of ceramic pots is not only the snakes motif; it is the very memory of ancestral life in colors, connecting them to a mythical history. It should be remembered that it is not only a question of the representation of ancestral beings, but, as Lagrou (2010) reminds us, the object refers to the idea of agency or the power of the effects that these artifacts produce, more than its own image. The artifacts’ characteristics had agency in time immemorial. In this way, it is about the iconic characterization itself, that is, the semantics of their visual association. Therefore, the snake represented inside the ceramic pots would be the Anaconda itself sailing the river in its canoe, i.e., a stone allusion to the primordial times of the snake-canoe myth.

As Guss (1990) pointed out when postulating the relationship between myth and artifacts, the objects act as “subtexts” that allow us to understand how a given society functioned. The author argues that artifacts imitate primeval objects, as they are copies of the primordial world. In this way, the Turiaçu River might have been interpreted by indigenous groups as a microcosm, similar to the creation myths surrounding the Amazon River, in which the sinuosity of a water body is represented by the colossal body of an Anaconda, or supernatural anaconda; the female shaman, or mother of fish; a creative deity. In the mythological sense, therefore, every stilt village could have been created by the Great Anaconda that traveled its course in a canoe and populated its navigable course. This aquatic world, similar to that of the Amazon, found fertile ground for the spread of this myth.

Returning to Lévi-Strauss (1970), the archaeological language of the stilt villages’ ceramics would promote a discourse to perpetuate the myth of the snake-canoe in the Amazon, being recalled because “... a myth always concerns past events: before the creation of the world or during the early days. This is simultaneously related to the past, the present and the future” (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 229). This author also highlights culture as an aspect of human interaction with the environment as a set of relationships that are reproduced through symbolic phenomena, represented by beliefs and narratives that promote imagination and mark memory.

## Conclusion

Myths provide cultural explanations for understanding the world. They contain creation stories which provide the building-blocks needed to understand the universe. They are memories; vehicles of cosmological messages and identities (Sahlins 1968, Lévi-Strauss 1980, Geertz 1989). Snakes are important because they serve as a root metaphor for myths and stories alike. They are typical across TPA, and are present in highly abstract variations in Maranhão, asserting once again a common Amazonian ontology. Thus, certain Amazonian iconographic elements are, in fact, pan-Amazonian, whose symbology is based on the relationship between animals and human beings (Barreto 2008).

The black curvilinear iconographic motif set atop the white engobe and red rim is a recurring theme in the ceramic bowls of stilt villages’ archaeological sites, and is interpreted as a representation of the black spots of the Amazonian Anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*). The use of black is a clear reference to the skin color of the reptile, the engobe to the yellow of the belly, and the red an association to the Sun, as demonstrated by Reichel Dolmatoff in

her study of the Desana (1978). Thus, the iconography of archaeological ceramics from stilt villages could be interpreted as a language, a primitive mythical memory of the Anaconda as human ancestry in the Amazon (Lévi-Strauss 1980).

Ethnographic comparisons suggest that these bowls were used in shamanic rituals. The fact that these pots, with their exuberant decoration, are concentrated in the most hierarchical sectors of the sites, i.e. those with greater quantities of stilts, confirms that these spaces are ceremonial *plazas* with the function of bringing people together in rituals, parties, or important collective events. The female figurines that act as rattles also corroborate the shamanic nature of these settlements, where sound is the shaman's way of communicating with other worlds.

Among other things, these spaces within the stilt villages were used to perform rituals and festivities that perpetuated the narrative of the snake-canoe and united the group that shared the "reported history" or memory (Lévi-Strauss 1969). It is necessary to carefully analyze the iconography of the Polychrome Tradition of the Amazon (TPA) and the Tupiguarani Tradition: there are many snakes in the ceramic pots, but they are usually hidden, mimicked, and anthropomorphized with human or animal body parts. The bright colors of the Anacondas, as well as their ecological characteristics such as constriction and their large size, played an important role in their selection as symbols of the snake-canoe. After all, there is nothing better than a strong and large animal to use as a transport vehicle to populate the villages. Its ability to swim like a canoe corroborates the idea that the Anaconda is appropriate for this narrative. The Anaconda was granted greater status within the animal hierarchy, and thus only appeared only in paintings, rather than effigies.

In this way, the Anaconda is a shamanic animal. The snake changes its skin, just as the shaman changes the world by consuming hallucinogenic drugs. The myth of the snake-canoe may allude to aspects that have never even been discussed in the literature on this subject. Since the shaman is in control of nature, placing the Anaconda inside the ceramic pots might also have acted to maintain ecological balance: protecting the animal would prevent the Anaconda from taking revenge on the people. Thus, shamanism is cultural ecology. Furthermore, as Roosevelt (2014) argued, the aquatic environment was conducive to perpetuating this myth, since Amazon Indians live in an environment surrounded by water. In this sense, the lake landscape where the stilt villages are located was ideal for the propagation of the myth. Therefore, the myth has an ecological basis. The ceramic bowl itself may be an allusion to the canoe, while the snake drawn inside acts as the crew, as reported in some versions of the myth. In this way, the narrative might refer to the history of the act



of fishing. Such a myth was able to take hold thanks to the abundant aquatic landscape surrounding indigenous Amazonian groups, including the stilt villages. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1976) is thus correct in postulating that Amazonian myths are also an ecological response to adaptive cultural processes.

Within this context, the Turiaçu River, home to the stilt villages, could be the representation of the Amazon River itself, a microcosm reproduced in its regional variation. Its winding course, similar to Amazonian waters, emulates the body of the Anaconda, which, by serving as a guide for the canoe, allowed the great serpent to populate with villages. Even though we do not yet know whether these snakes from the stilt villages also symbolized the power of preeminent women of social and political standing - as Roosevelt pointed out on Marajo Island -, archaeological and ethnographic comparisons across the Amazon have allowed us to conclude that stilt villagers shared the myth of the snake-canoe. Archaeologists should therefore include the snake motif as yet another defining feature of the Polychrome Amazonian Tradition (TPA) of the lowlands of South America.

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