[Working Paper] ***The Legend of the Yurupary: Bridge for an Amazonian Theology?***

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In his travels through the Amazon during 1850, the renowned English naturalist Russell Wallace, coauthor with Charles Darwin of the theory of evolution, was the first to describe this legend: "One of their most singular superstitions is about the musical instruments they use at their festivals, which they call the Jurupari music. These consist of eight or sometimes twelve pipes, or trumpets, made of bamboos or palm-stems hollowed out, some with trumpet-shaped mouths of bark and with mouth-holes of clay and leaf. Each pair of instruments gives a distinct note, and they produce a rather agreeable concert, something resembling clarinets and bassoons" (Wallace 1890).

This draws my attention how Wallace engages in conversation with the natives and asks them about a creator God. He writes, "I cannot make out that they have any belief that can be called a religion. They appear to have no definite idea of a God if asked who they think made the rivers, and the forests, and the sky, they will reply that they do not know, or sometimes that they suppose it was 'Tupanau,' a word that appears to answer to God, but of which they understand nothing" (Wallace 1890).

From my experience living in the Amazon jungle and sharing life with different communities, I can attest that the term *Tupanau* is used for the creator God of the universe—especially among the Ticuna tribe, who recognize the God of the Bible as *Tupana*. The SIL Ticuna–Castilian dictionary, compiled by Doris and Lambert Anderson, contains hundreds of examples using the word Tupana (Anderson 2017).

Wallace continues his story by trying to explain the meaning of the word *Jurupari*, with which our study legend was baptized: "They have much more definite ideas of a bad spirit, 'Jurupari,' or Devil, whom they fear and endeavour through their Pagés to propitiate. When it thunders, they say the 'Jurupari' is angry, and their idea of natural death is that the 'Jurupari' kills them. At an eclipse they believe that this bad spirit is killing the moon, and they make all the noise they can to frighten him away" (Wallace 1890).

Although Wallace mentions evil spirits or the devil, we must take into account that the linguistic meaning may vary, since in this region (Vaupes) there are more than a dozen indigenous languages. Betty Osorio, in the *Journal of Social Studies* (*Editorial El Malpensante*), explains that this name has different meanings: "The word Yurupary enters the Colombian literate culture with the meaning of cultural hero that subdues the matriarchy, while in the indigenous historical context it has at least two possible meanings" (Osorio 2006; my translation). Osorio explains the influence of the Catholic missionaries who gave it the meaning of demon or an annulment of the sacred, while also highlighting that the indigenous meaning refers to the denial of information—that is, it is a type of empty response, an indigenous or local dialectic. Or, as Osorio terms it, "an act of linguistic resistance" (Osorio 2006; my translation).

On the other hand, some linguists and anthropologists have sought the meaning from the possible linguistic relationship that it may have with the various languages spoken in the Brazilian, Colombian, and even Venezuelan Amazonian regions. These scholars point out that the German explorer Alexander Von Humboldt mentions a mysterious ritual in which participants use flutes and from which women are forbidden to participate or even hear the music of the flutes; if they do, even by mistake, they must be sentenced to death. "Of those sacred trumpets there are but a small number. The oldest and most famous is the instrument that has been found near the border between the Tomo and Guainia regions. If one of them has the misfortune to see the trumpet, she is condemned to death, without mercy" (Humboldt 1819; my translation).

But what is this strange ritual that includes flutes, transition, indigenous worldview, various meanings, and the exclusion of women? Below I will briefly summarize the description of this ritual that Count Ermanno Stradelli published in the *Bolletino della Societá Geografica Italiana* in 1890.

According to Stradelli, the story goes like this: a great disease killed all the men, and only the women, some elderly men, and a payé (sorcerer) survived. Because of the absence of men, the survivors feared the extinction of the race. In search of a solution, the women gathered at a lake they were forbidden to visit, since it was sacred to Suecy, the goddess who bathed there. The payé noticed their disobedience and cast a spell on the women to become pregnant ten months later. The women gave birth, and one of the newborns, because of her beauty, was baptized Suecy, the name of the goddess. When Suecy was young, she ate the fruit of a forbidden tree (*pihycan*). The juice of the fruit fertilized Suecy and she became pregnant as a virgin.

From this pregnancy came a child who was as beautiful as the sun, and the people named him chief; his name was Yuruparí, which means "begotten of fruit." In order for Yuruparí to receive the attributes of a chief, the community had to look for the stone of the chief, *itá-tuxáua*. This brought division within the community, as some claimed that the men should look for the stone and others asked the women go.

The discussion was long, and after one month, Yuruparí disappeared. When night came, the community heard the cry of a child that came from inside the forbidden tree, but when anyone approached the tree, there was silence. This scene was repeated over and over until the community tired of searching and stopped looking for the boy. The only one who continued the search was his mother, who stayed awake at night and fell asleep at dawn. One day, upon waking up, Suecy noticed that someone had suckled her milk, and this was repeated the following days. Two years later, songs, shouts, and laughter replaced the child's crying, as if Yuruparí was happy, but no one could see him. Meanwhile, Suecy was growing old and weak.

Fifteen years passed, and one full moon, Suecy the goddess went down to bathe in the lake and the entire town saw Yuruparí reappear from the hand of the human Suecy. They gave him the authority of chief, even though the stone of the Itá-tuxáua chief was missing. Yuruparí brought new laws to his people that helped them live in a more orderly way. In the end, he went to the east in search of a woman from the kingdom of the Sun.

This is my own summary and does not contain all the details, but it gives us a first look at the Yuruparí myth. We must note that the indigenous cultures of the Amazon are rich in mythology and especially in myths related to the origins of the Amazonian peoples. However, these myths are not taught in their communities in a chronologically linear manner, and as a result, they need to be compiled and organized to understand the local indigenous worldview.

In my experience as a local representative of the Ticuna culture and facilitator during the Arts for a Better Future courses in Cordoba, Argentina, 2018 (LETRA), Huaras, Perú, 2019 (CILTA), Bogotá, Colombia, 2019 (AC&M), Brasilia, Brazil, 2021 and 2022 (ALEM), helping students connect a goal of the kingdom of heaven to the art of storytelling (Schrag 2021), I suggest that one myth may be enough to carry a message, but the chronological organization of myths and their connection brings the community a holistic understanding that connects not only with the history of the myth but also with the sociocultural, moral, and religious order.

The myth of the yuruparí appears to be not just one myth but a compilation of various myths connected in an orderly chronology. This job of methodically linking the various stories was done by the local Maximiniano José Roberto, who understands that there is an order, thanks to some petroglyphs that Stradelli years ago "meticulously recorded and [about which] took the opportunity to present a paper at the Amaricanistas Congress held in Tunin in 1886" (Stradelli 2020; my translation).

Maximiniano was a mestizo who spoke the Geral language, the area's lingua franca, or ñengatú, and who did the work of collecting the different versions of the myth, comparing and corroborating them with the inhabitants of the different communities. This work was delivered to Stradelli although the Brazilian ethnologist Joao Rodrigues Barbosa, who had also requested the different compilations of the myth and who talks in his book *Muyra-Kytā* about the origins and names of the reforming chiefs as Yuruparí (Barbossa 1889).

Applying the method of Creating Local Arts Together (CLAT), proposed by Brian Schrag and Julisa Rowe, and especially the approach through which the authors invite the facilitators to collect as much information as possible about the culture and its local arts (Schrag 2021), without knowing he was doing so, José Roberto (better known as the Caboclo [Mestizo]) collected "the legend, arranging the various narratives and submitting it to the criticism of different indigenous people, so that today he can ensure the presentation of a faithful exposition of the indigenous legend, of which he has preserved as much as possible, up to the present day. Color of diction, not being foreign to the Tucano or Tariano dialect and knowing in-depth the geral or nheêngatu langauge" (Stradelli 2020; my translation); but the local people also determined whom they would work with, and in this way, Stradelli internationalized the legend by translating it into Italian through teamwork.

Having located ourselves historically and taken a first look at the myth, we will now review some details that raise the question: Could the Yuruparí myth be a useful redemptive bridge for a theological understanding from the same indigenous worldview?

In the first instance, we see the concern on the part of the women in the face of the absence of men who can ensure the continuity of humanity; only elderly men and a sorcerer remained after the others died. A similar event occurs in Genesis 19:25, where the Lord destroys the inhabitants of a city, sparing only Lot, an old man. His daughters also become concerned since there were no men on earth.

On the other hand, we find the figure of Suecy, who disobeys and eats the forbidden fruit of a tree. Could this figure be taken as a representation of Eve's disobedience in paradise? Suecy herself, upon becoming pregnant without having had sexual intercourse and being a virgin, who becomes the mother of a child who later would be a transformed into a chief (tuxáua), could perhaps point us toward Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus.

Upon being appointed chief, Yuruparí receives a *matiry*, a kind of bag in which people carry small necessary items and "where everything necessary to reform customs was found" (Stradelli 1890). Later, the myth tells how Yuruparí took a small pot out of his matiry, which he puts on the fire, and from the "first boil generated a large number of bats, owls and other nocturnal birds that were dispersed through the air" (Stradelli 1890), and from the second boil came more birds, such as parrots, toucans, and macaws. From the third boil came birds like the hawks and the *uará uassú* (eagle). This episode attracts my attention because it is so similar to the way in which the Ticuna people also recount the appearance of animals in the world: from a pot of soup.

Something similar to the ordinance in Genesis to cultivate the land is also mandated by Yuruparí, who "told them about common matters and ordered, especially, that they cultivate the land" (Stradelli 1890). In the same way that Leviticus 11 talks about clean and unclean animals and which can be eaten, so Yuruparí instructs everyone to know the laws, the festivals, and "when you should eat the pihycan fruit. When should you eat the meat of the hunt? When should you eat big fish meat" and other laws. Like the mandate of Matthew 28:19, the myth speaks of "All those to whom an instrument of the Yuruparí corresponded, which would be done on the next full moon, would be obliged to go to teach the Sun throughout all the lands, not only the things already said, but also those that would be taught on the opening day" (Stradelli 1890). Could this be a kind of great commission? These questions arise from a small part of the myth, although its extended form warrants a deeper study that could take years to complete and would require thorough analysis, as shown in step four of Schrag's Creating Local Arts Together.

We must also take into account aspects of artistic and cultural practices. The use of indigenous Amazonian flutes has been displaced by the influence of Andean flutes and academic curricula that include music education using the commercial flute (the plastic soprano flute). On the other hand, interest in Amazonian cultures expressed by the increase in adventure tourism and discovery of Amazonian life have been seen by many communities as an economic opportunity to develop musical presentations that are not necessarily local music but are easier for the tourists to enjoy. Tourists listen to musical performances and buy local musical instruments, such as reproductions of soprano flutes made from local materials. The increase in short-term and medium-term missionaries has brought electric guitars and pianos, which in turn have generated a new indigenous electronic musical movement, including a native techno-cumbia which is mostly sung in the original language, Spanish, or Portuguese. This may serve as the basis of another interesting case study.

A significant portion of Amazon land has received the gospel through the work of various missionaries, such as "Donaldo" (Fanning 2022), who served as a jungle pilot and evangelist for seven years, evangelizing small riverside towns and speaking to Hispanic, Miranas, and Yucuna tribes. When my father, Tiberio Nieto, visited the indigenous communities of the Colombia–Brazil Amazonian border for the first time around 1984, some had already received the gospel, thanks to the pilot whom we would meet in person years later. The pilot was Don Fanning, director of the Department of Global Studies at Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary.

We might conclude that the myth of the Yuruparí, or any other Amazonian myth, can be a doorway to better missiological understanding and even the construction of a local Amazonian theology. These myths are rich in content and allow cross-references with biblical texts, even identifying Christological figure types. It is not difficult to find the work of God in the midst of any community, if we are willing to learn their knowledge.

We must, however, be ready to trust the local culture and its processes. Without the work of Maximiniano, the myth of Yuruparí would not have been known. Local people are interlocutors and even apologists, able to contribute to the search for a local theology. The search for a theological understanding from the local community can also positively disrupt the use of autochthonous art that can be redeemed by a new understanding and purifying stigmatization or harmful qualifications given by the colonization processes, absence of a critical and profound contextualization, or even local practices that go against a healthy worship of the true God.

The Yuruparí flutes could sound again with a doxological meaning that builds bridges to responding to the God who made the rivers, the forests, and the sky, all part of the construction of an Amazonian theology. The myth of Yuruparí can motivate future generations to work in the company of both locals and foreigners for the reconstruction of the various Amazonian cultures and the worship of God from their own culture, participants in the architecture and understanding of a local theology and the use of local arts.

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