


## The rivers and their fantastic beings from Amazonian literature

 <https://doi.org/10.56238/sevened2024.018-027>

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### ABSTRACT

The research deals with the elements that unite the popular imagination and the rivers of the Amazon. The river has unrevealed secrets that allow the creation of supernatural narratives and phenomena, providing the formation of a unique literary identity, surrounded by mysteries and fantastic beings. From this arises the objective of understanding the role of the river and its aspects in the construction of Amazonian literariness. Documentary research was used, which was guided by three types of reading: exploratory, analytical and comparative. The research was based mainly on Loureiro's literary theory, published in *Cultura Amazônica: uma poética do imaginário*, which uses a plurivalent methodological approach, passing through aesthetics and socioethnoanthropology, to "wander" through the Amazonian culture. As a result, three themes related to the mythological apparatus of the Amazonian aquifer were selected: the Boto, seducer of the Amazonian waters; the fearsome snakes of the Amazon; and the enchantments of the waters. Each category formulated sought to debate the origins, forms and symbolic representations of its contents. Thus, the present work intends to contribute to the expansion of studies on this theme and to form a small theoretical framework that allows us to understand the meaning of local mythopoetics in regional cultural formation.

**Keywords:** Myths, Legends, River, Imaginary, Literary identity.

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## INTRODUCTION

Discussing the myths and legends that permeate the rivers of the Amazon is not a simple task, since a multitude of narratives made by different authors in different contexts have always been part of Amazonian daily life since the dawn of humanity. Stories are never told in the same way and we will never have the *truth* about the mysteries of the waters. Considering the complexity of understanding the essence of the Amazon, we can use Literature and literary studies as valuable tools for understanding this culture in particular. The expression of literary art emerges as the only one capable of deciphering the intertwining between the real and the imaginary contained in the myths and legends of the Amazonian imaginary.

The Amazon has two historical characteristics that can explain the origin and transformation of its narratives: isolation and mystery. Founded on extractive work and cabocla settlement, the region has an intense connection between man and nature. The riverside dweller, isolated from the chaotic world of the cities and surrounded by the mysteries inherent to the forests and rivers, seeks explanations of his daily life from oral tales and customs of his ancestors, mixing reality and myth. According to Loureiro (2015a), writer and theorist of Amazonian literature, this meaning of life allows the formation of an isolated universe where myths and aquifer legends merge with reality and form a society with unique characteristics that differentiate it from the rest of the national set.

In particular, the river has a multitude of unrevealed mysteries that allow the creation of supernatural narratives and explanations for everyday situations. Hence the scientific interest in exploring this specific point of the mythological universe of the Amazon region and exposing an image of it in this work. As the objective of this explanation, we identify two fundamental aspects for this work: to understand the symbolism of the waters and their relations with the myths and legends of the Amazonian rivers; research some myths and legends related to water contained in Amazonian literature in order to form a small cultural collection. Based on the statements initially presented about this magical environment and on the studies of Loureiro, Cascudo and other researchers and poets who deal with the Amazon, this study aims to understand the role of the Amazonian waters, the river as a symbolic element and its mythological aspects in the construction of Amazonian identity and literature.

Starting with the theoretical conception exposed and aiming at achieving what is proposed, the research was organized as documentary, that is, exploratory, analytical and comparative reading, which focuses on literary publications written by authors who discuss Amazonian themes, using myths and legends related to the river as a source of inspiration and as an element of the text. We delimited the importance of these different types of reading during this study primarily, but also of others, in the exploratory reading of varied works and academic productions of literary theory, as well as prose and poems by authors who contained the proposed theme.



This work will deal in three moments: the river, the authors, prose writers and poets who stick to its mysteries and symbols, as well as some theorists who study the meanings of the aquatic element; the narratives wrapped in the river, which surround this fantastic universe, as well as the metamorphosis of some of its beings, in order to preserve and value its mythology, which comes from the first men/women of oral culture who inhabited this planet; of the fantastic of Amazonian literature, citing and commenting on some wonderful beings, namely, the Boto, seducer of the Amazonian rivers, the enchantments of the Iara and the Vitória-régia, and the Cobra-Grande, the serpent that navigates in river waters, bringing fear to its inhabitants.

### **THE RIVER: ITS MYSTERIES AND SYMBOLS**

Water, in addition to being materially linked to the existence of life, constitutes an element inscribed in the symbolic domain, evokes imaginary aspects, cradles dreams and is a source of poetic inspiration according to Cunha (2000). The author broadens the perception, reporting that this fluid is in all fields: in myths and history, in nature and culture, in life and death. We have, therefore, the perfect scenario for the emergence of fantastic beings, societies and entities coming from within the submerged mysteries of the rivers. The dolphin, the snakes, the Iara, the enchanted islands of Marajó are supernatural creations that, at the same time, symbolize the sacred and the imaginary, explain the existence of everyday customs and behaviors. Traditional narratives constitute sources of historical, ethnographic, sociological and legal information, indicating that the tales represent a "living document, denouncing customs, ideas, mentalities, decisions and judgments" (Cascudo, 2004, p. 10).

From Cascudo's reading, important works are extracted, in addition to short stories, legends that may reveal fears to subliminally symbolize marks imposed by colonizers, which later served for educators to use them as an instrument to control children, with chilling beings such as Matinta Perera, Cobra Grande and other entities. Thus, it is inferred that such narratives are a form of cultural preservation that contain essential elements of the identity of the riverside dweller. The theme of this research is mainly worked on by Loureiro (2015a), who addresses the foundations of the Amazonian imaginary and its implications.

The presence of the river as an element of Amazonian literary writing stands out in a striking way. It can be found in different nuances: in the form of a street by the hands of Ruy Barata in the song "Esse rio é minha rua"; as the home of several fantastic creatures according to the reports of Monteiro (2007), as a source of nostalgia for Jurandir (1997) in one of his novels; or as the "home" of creatures such as the Acauã, a mysterious enchantment narrated in short stories by Inglês de Sousa (2007), and of the mythical Amazonian serpents. Whatever the figure, one fact is certain: the river is a rich source of literacy and a primordial component of Amazonian culture.



Loureiro dialogues about what he calls the Amazonian world and about the importance of rivers in the cultural formation of man, stating that the river is the origin of man, that is, a place of countless symbols and meanings, intimately intertwined with the destiny of ordinary individuals. For Loureiro (2015a), such aqueous flows constitute an essential cause of the life of the riverside dweller and confer an *ethos* to the existence of the native. The author cites Bachelard (1998, p. 17), who expands Lour's view of the meaning of the river: "In this way, water will appear to us as a total being: it has a body, a soul, a voice. More than any other element perhaps, water is a complete poetic reality."

Expanding the debate, Loureiro (2000, p. 8) describes:

Rich in plasticity and innocent magic, the Amazonian nature reveals itself as belonging to a mythical age, full of freedom and telluric energy. It is situated in cosmic time in which everything springs up as in the primeval sources of creation: the forest, the rivers, the birds, the fish, the animals, the man, the myth, the gods. It is in this context that the imaginary establishes a communion with the marvelous, becoming a propitiator of epiphanies. Under the sfumato of reverie fertilized by the contemplation of the river and the forest, looking at the horizon of the waters that seems to him like the line that demarcates the eternal, the man of the Amazon has been dominating nature while being dominated by it.<sup>2</sup>

Studying the mythological and legendary accounts of Amazonian rivers is a fundamental part of understanding the Amazonian imaginary and the affirmation of regional identity. Myths and legends are, therefore, a mixture of fantastic narrative with elements of the reality of the riverside man, serving as an instrument for the debate about social problems and about the way of life of the man who survives on the banks of the rivers (Ribeiro; Belo, 2020, p. 53). The world of the rivers is that of the interior, far from the capitals, perhaps, therefore, it is a complex task for the city dweller to understand the intertwining between the caboclo and the river. The following passage, by Loureiro, clarifies a little more about such mysteries:

This magical world that glides on the surface of the waters obliged, at the time of its occupation or the formation of the cities, conquerors, dreamers, doctors and adventurers who, in the shadow of the magnitude of its opulence, idealized a bridge in infinity, the connection between two opposite, disparate, irreconcilable worlds.<sup>3</sup>

To understand the mysteries of rivers, it is important to analyze the metaphorical perspective because, symbolically, the river refers to numerous meanings. Chevalier and Gheerbrand (1988, p. 781) relate the river to life, fertility, death and renewal. The fluidity of the waters refers to the course of life and its end, death. Fertility comes from the fact that, without the water from the rivers reaching the inhabitants, it is impossible for the natural resources necessary for man to exist. Finally,

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<sup>2</sup> LOUREIRO, João de Jesus Paes. Reverie meditation: between the river and the forest. In: SIMÕES, Maria do Socorro. Belém: IFNOPAP, 2000, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> LOUREIRO, João de Jesus Paes. Amazonian culture: a poetics of the imaginary. Belém: Cultural Brasil, 2015a, p. 214.



the concept of renewal can be explained by the philosopher Plato about the words of the pre-Socratic Heraclitus (540-470 B.C.), when he stated that it is not possible to enter the same river twice (Souza, 1996), that is, just as the river is renewed, man is also never the same as before, and that, therefore, he is in constant transformation.

## THE MYTHS AND LEGENDS SHROUDED IN RIO: TRANSFORMATION AND PRESERVATION OF AMAZONIAN MYTHOLOGY

The fantastic world that makes up the vast Amazonian literary framework is populated by several myths and legends that, in addition to serving as a literary source, are useful to have a conception about the origin and constitution of the society of this region, especially of long-lasting conflicts, taking into account that the Amazon belongs to a colonized country. The fantastic story called myth refers to the narrative of creation and origin, to a sacred story, whose characters are supernatural beings, usually gods and demigods (Eliade, 1972); or it constitutes an account of man's search for truth, for the meaning of his existence and the meaning of life since the dawn of time (Campbell, 1990). Lévi-Strauss (1957) believes that the study of myths serves to elucidate important aspects of human behavior and action. Narratives considered legends, on the other hand, always refer to an oral or written text, with the use of the marvelous through which real episodes are transformed, through popular creativity and poetry, into narratives that belong to a specific region and that remote to the beginnings of the first generations that inhabited the planet.

Amazonian mythology goes back to the beginnings of the so-called *discovery* by Portugal, an erroneous term because there were already societies inhabiting it, in formed societies, living according to its *ethos*. Chronicles dating between 1600 and 1700 narrate the presence of the powerful country of the Amazons (Icamiabas) which, according to reports of the time, made by the first explorers, lived at the top of the course of the Rio Negro. Carvajal, who accompanied Orellana on his expeditions on the Amazon River, claimed the existence of a community whose warriors were commanded by a small number of women: the country of the Amazons (Porro, 2020).

This was initially a Greek myth that remained in the imagination of Spaniards still in the Andes (Porro, 2020). As in other legends and myths, other authors have taken it upon themselves to expand and flourish stories about the indigenous warriors, the first nations to suffer conflicts between cultures, resulting in new beliefs, such as that of the myth of the Icamibabas, the bearers of the *muiraitã* (Melo, 2004). Teixeira, in the preface to the book that deals with Loureiro's Amazonian culture, points out the importance of the various peoples who once inhabited the Amazon region, confirming that any author who ventures to write about it, "whether in the field of poetry, prose, philosophy, history or other sciences, will not fail to come across the Amazon built by foreigners" (Loureiro, 2015a, p. 11).



The Amazon is, therefore, the result of the combination of cultures of various origins. The counterpoint between native and colonizer is a fundamental characteristic for understanding the transformation of the Amazon and its literary languages. After all, many have traveled through it at different times (because, until today, Brazilians and foreigners are looking for treasures supposedly lost in distant locations) and with different objectives in search of deciphering the unknown and the unusual, as well as other riches, let's say pecuniary (Carvalho, 2006). It is no coincidence that the region became known by several designations during its history, such as "green hell", "paradise lost", "eldorado", "country of the Amazons", "paradise" and "lands without evils" (Loureiro, 2015a, p. 22). From the concepts exposed, this research sought to collect as many myths and legends as possible related to the rivers of the Amazon in order to form a small theoretical framework on the subject, since it is inexhaustible. As a result of the investigation, we cataloged narratives related to the river, considering the diversity of views in the works of the main literati of this immense region.

### **THE FANTASTIC AND AMAZONIAN LITERATURE**

To enter the universe of Amazonian enchantments, it is necessary to consider the path of some theories of the category of the fantastic in literature. Its definition, however, is not easy to answer. At the beginning of the journey, in the eighteenth century, writers such as Hoffman and Eichendorff already used this term to designate a genre, but the fantastic gained strength in the nineteenth century with the writer Allan Poe, who even built a model of structural composition for texts of a fantastic nature. Todorov (2004), representative of French structuralism, proposes in his work a new understanding of the fantastic, becoming a primordial theoretical contribution to studies dedicated to this literary category between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in Europe.

Todorov conceptualizes the fantastic as a hesitation between the natural and supernatural worlds within the events of a narrative. He states about the fantastic that those who "perceive it must choose one of the two possible solutions"; it is either an "illusion of the senses, a product of the imagination, and in that case the laws of the world continue to be what they are; or else the event actually occurred, it is an integral part of reality" (Todorov, 2004, p. 30, 31). That is, the laws of this parallel reality are unknown to the reader.

The process of assimilation is the means by which certain elements are introduced into the imaginary, as in the case of Amazonian culture (Carvalho, 2014). Thus, the author explains, giving as an example Christian catechesis as an attempt to erase the superstitious character of the riverside man, resulting in the integration of elements from two different cultures. This process of assimilating exogenous culture, at first seeming strange, but interconnecting the new culture to the old, making the two one, and establishing "the local imaginary, in which children, from an early age, hear from



older people the fantastic stories, legends and mythical narratives, full of mysticism, animals, sorcerers and shamans (Carvalho, 2014, p. 222).

### BOTO: THE SEDUCER OF AMAZONIAN WATERS

The Boto is one of the beings that are part of Brazilian folklore, especially in the North region. On the Amazon River, the dolphin's cycle is loaded with a vast loving memorial. According to Cascudo (2012a), he is a conqueror and the father of thousands of children, *daughters of dolphins*. Legend has it that the red dolphin appears in the dances of the riverside communities dressed in white and seduces young married and single women, involving them in a Dionysian ecstasy capable of taking them out of reason and leading them towards the pleasure of the sensual moment.

The only identifier of the Boto would be a hole that he would have in the middle of his head, but the white hat prevents people from seeing this specific trait. If the woman becomes pregnant because of her involvement with the cetacean, she is not condemned by her husband and the community. In this case, the understanding and acceptance of the act is seen as something inevitable, the result of the relationship with the supernatural (Loureiro, 2015a). The Dauphin is a lubric symbol, since since classical antiquity it has been dedicated to the Greek goddess of love Aphrodite or Venus, in the Roman version.

The hybrid appears "snoring in heat, next to the resplendent goddess. Venus, the sea goddess, has her most popular evocations indicating a predilection for her origin" (Cascudo, 2012a,

p. 143). It is in almost all depictions of Aphrodite's birth. The folklorist comments on the direction that Couto de Magalhães gave to the dolphin through his material collected from reports. For him, the aquatic animal is the incarnation of the protective spirit of fish, the Uaiuará. The being that transforms into the Boto is a great amateur of the indigenous women and many of them attribute their children to the cleverness of the enchanted being.

Transformed into a boy dressed in white at parties, he demonstrates skill with dance and draws attention for his beauty and elegance. He can also appear "in the bedroom and lie in the hammock with the woman who intends to seduce [and] impregnate women who, being menstruating [...]" (Loureiro, 2015a, p. 221) looked at him; either because he rocked the canoe in which the victim was, or from somewhere near the river. Cascudo (2012b) presents other versions of the behavior of this entity in neighboring countries. Although there are many similarities, the absence of singing in the dolphin is an element in common with our culture.

There are two types of dolphins in the Amazon, the pink and the black, each of different species, habits and traditions: the black dolphin (tucuxi) is the incarnation of the protective spirit of the fish, helps the riverside dwellers in cases of flooded canoes and saves them from drowning; the pink dolphin, however, is dangerous (Alves and Pereira, 2007). The dolphin is attributed with stories



of enchantment against married and single girls. And since the nineteenth century, the pink dolphin has been believed to transform itself into the *Don Juan* of the waters (Fares, 1996). Addressing Cascudo, Fares does not find him in texts by chroniclers and travelers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, despite the fact that the colonization of Brazil began in 1500. It was only in the nineteenth century that the naturalist Beates (1864) talks about him, with the belief of becoming a conqueror (Fares, 1996, p. 54).

Its late appearance in the pages of Amazonian folklore leads the researcher to believe that the legend did not originate from the aborigines. First, the relationship between animals and humans was not part of the daily life of the indigenous people; These were also, in general, polygamous, so it would be difficult for a legend laden with taboos about polygamy to be created by them. In addition, it is unlikely that they were linked to the taboo of menstruation. Referring to Caminha's letter, Fares comments that the taboos came here by those who were shocked "by the nakedness of the Indian, to the point of referring to sex as *shame*" (Fares, 1996, p. 61).

Considering that, supposedly, the legend of the Boto was brought by a nation that was scandalized by indigenous nudity and that infused miscegenation in Brazilian lands, the dolphin, as we know it today, is the result of a process between whites, mestizos and riverside indigenous people, that is, colonizer and colonized, settling new interdicts in the culture. The legend is explored by several Amazonian authors, such as Veríssimo, Alcyr Meira, Paulo Nunes and others, especially Siqueira and Larêdo, who present a vast set of works dedicated to this legend.

Due to the process of miscegenation in Brazil, it is possible that there are versions in which the dolphin presents itself as a foreigner, seen in the nineteenth-century short story "O boto", in which it is read that Rosinha, the daughter of a prosecutor, was deceived by a young man described as a Portuguese, with "a white shirt and straw hat, from a foreign factory" (Veríssimo, 2013,

p. 151) and promises marriage to the girl. She was pregnant when Boto dies from an alligator attack, leaving the baby without a father. In view of this, the tapuia nanny, who had facilitated the meeting of the two, decides to tell society that the girl was the victim of a dolphin.

Even after the advent of an exogynous being who infiltrates parties by the river, impregnates girls and settles in the Amazonian imagination, there are also works that, centuries later, sadly express the fact of the abandonment of the Boto in more traditional narrative accounts. This is the case of the writings of Loureiro (2015a), one of the main references on the studies of the Amazonian imaginary, an author whose texts served as the basis for most of our studies. Two important works in relation to the enchanted dauphin will be mentioned here.

In the first, Loureiro (2008) considers the bottom of the river as corresponding to the Greek Mount Olympus, inhabited by the deities that make up his Amazonian theogony in ancient mythology. One of the chapters is dedicated to poetry, as an enchantment of language, discussing the





foundations of poetic art and reflections on the theories of the creation of a poem. The writer presents his "Dionysian Hymns to the Boto", a selection of poems, which celebrate the enchanting cetacean and its sovereignty within an aesthetic stained glass window.

The second is a poetic panel on the Amazon from its culture and history (Loureiro, 2015b). It is divided into three parts, each corresponding to a book that makes up the trilogy: "Porantim" (assorted Amazonian poems), "Deslegendary" (about the virgin Amazon desecrated by the business animal, that is, there is a process of deconstruction of myths and legends) and "Altar em Chamas" (in which he writes about themes related to the Amazonian world). In general, the poems express the loss of the magical character of the Amazonian dauphin, devoid of the enchanting charm. With such a loss of role within the imaginary, the Boto is increasingly evident as an explanatory element for the reality of the riverside dweller in the face of problems such as sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy, incest, etc., as stated in "Deslenda Narcísica do Boto X" (Loureiro, 2015b, p. 198): "Under the syllables of the sun / Under the syllables of the sun / Under the syllables of the sun / the rivers dry up / Boys thrown into the air / become birds. / And they flew. / Others, old detribated chiefs, / rose to the sky and became rain."

In *the boys become birds*, there is an allusion to the cases of babies who, generated by single mothers, are abandoned because they are *the children of dolphins*. The poem "Deslenda Rural V", from the same book, confirms the criticism, as "large landowners" and lawyers "killed dolphins, uiaras, curupiras", according to the excerpt (Loureiro, 2015b, p. 169,170): "The large landowners / hired / gold lawyers / and, cautiously, rented the rage / available from gunmen / Gunmen who, at the decided time, / killed dolphins, uiaras curupiras". This set of poems that make up *Deslenda*, in general terms, expresses the concern of the lyrical self with the death of the Amazonian man, because, for the poet, "when the man is killed, the legend dies". In view of such a statement, we could even say the reverse: when killing the legend – and, consequently, the myth – man himself or a little of him dies, as a human and poetic being, constituted by sensitivity and fantastic imagination.

Juraci Siqueira, author of several books, is also one of the main Amazonian poets who repeatedly use the theme "boto" in his works, calling himself the son of Boto and known as "Juraboto", emerging a literary production bathed in Amazonian subjectivity, so that life and work are confused (Silva, 2015, p. 38, Apud Belo; Mello, 2021, p. 38). In other words, Juraci's poetics emerges from nature and describes cultural elements of the Amazonian world that were present in periods of his existence. The river is one of those elements that are intertwined with the life of the Amazonian subject, in a dialectical relationship, as we can see in the poem "O Boto (des)Encantado", by Siqueira (2007), in which the poet brings out the cosmogony of myth and its transfigurations bathed by the water of the imaginary. The banks of the river, a privileged place in the archives of



Amazonian culture, represent this phenomenon constituted mainly in a collective way (Belo; Melo, 2021).

The writer Salomão Larêdo is part of the Brazilian *fantasy movement*, which addresses contemporary literary phenomena by thematizing fantasy and other aspects of the fictional unusual (Cabral; Tavares; Cordovil, 2020). His book *Chapéu Virado: a lenda do Boto* (Larêdo, 1997), one of the best known when it comes to Boto, tells the story of Chica, an anthropologist who, during a vacation in Mosqueiro, gets involved with a boy who later disappears. Swept away by the memories of a quick and intense affair, the girl decides to look for him at all costs on the island.

Although the seducer of the waters is reputed to attract and manipulate girls, there is in one of his representations the symbolization of the opposite, namely, the appearance of the dolphin as a punishment to those who deserve it. "The Jew's Ball" by Inglês de Sousa (2018) narrates the events of a party organized by a Jew and considered immoral (Sousa, 2018) and, according to the narrator, the participants were, sooner or later, punished for their involvement in the party. At a certain point, a "short, ugly, long-jacketed and collapsed hat" (Op. cit., p. 80) entered the hall and led the most beautiful girl at the ball to a dance. Suddenly, the man drops his disguise, revealing his demonic image and drags the girl into the water, before the eyes of everyone present. The action of this man-boto is different from that of his more diffuse versions, because, instead of dragging the young woman without being seen, the seducer establishes a gloomy atmosphere in the party, resulting in the dispersion of the guests. The action of the dolphin represents a punitive response to the pagan character of the festival, reestablishing the normality of the social order. Other beings of the rivers, whose stories are related to the punishment against those who transgress an order, will be better observed below.

### ENCHANTMENTS OF THE WATERS: IARA, WATER LILY...

"Iara, Mermaid, Ondina, Loreley, Mãe-d'Água, Iemanjá" are some of the designations that Vicente Salles cites, according to Loureiro (2015a, p. 271), who also attributes this myth to *femme fatale*, emphasizing her cultural convergence in the mythical Amazon. The Iara, a legend with an indigenous soul, lives at the bottom of the rivers and attracts young people with its Europeanized face, leaving the tail of a fish submerged in the river, sung and decanted in verse and prose by numerous authors, such as Bruno de Menezes, Marques de Carvalho, Walcyr Monteiro, among others.

Unlike Boto<sup>4</sup>, Iara is equipped with a sensual song and invites the boy enchanted by her to visit the bottom of the river's waters, under the promise of endless happiness in her submerged palace. The imagetic aspect of the Mother-of-Water is expressed in Loureiro, so that the physical

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<sup>4</sup> He does not sing, as pointed out earlier.



characteristics of this mermaid are understood in its sense of epiphany of the waters that the legend represents. The author comments:

Iara's long hair is combed by the waves. Iara herself is presented as if she were combing, in the mirror of the waters, her long and greenish hair. The crescent moon, it is also said, combs the waves of the river. [...] A head of hair that floats on the waves, intertwined in the waves, mistaken for the waves.<sup>5</sup>

It is true that the young men who gave in to Iara's request never returned. Loureiro also points out the relationship of water directly with death, that is, with the desire for suicide, provoked in the victim. Death, however, is not the primary objective of the one who enters the waters, because it is known that, while one is human, one cannot breathe in water. From the physical aspect, there will be a renunciation to the detriment of another form of life. The young man in love with her "Dies to be reborn enchanted, inhabitant of the enchantment at the bottom of the river" (Loureiro, 2015a, p. 274).

Paulo Nunes (2006), writing literary and didactic texts, also mentions, in one of his poems, that there is the promise of a submerged kingdom to the one who renounces life, attracted by hair that is confused with the tangle of water, as in the following poem:

The waters are flames of black and long water lilies.  
A young man listens to the singing [...]  
The flowers of the party bloom with happiness because Uira was enchanted mermaid for  
tchibum... Take the guy to the kingdom  
of the clear waters. (Nunes, 2006, p. 6)

It is important to highlight the presence of the mythical conception of the six o'clock hour, mentioned in the poem as representing the transition from light to darkness. Puente (2013, p. 67) associates the night with the moment of nightmares and revelations, relying on Freud, when he states that sleep appears as a background for the projection of dreams: "In dreams, we have the feeling of accessing another world". Both water and darkness are associated with the image of women, as Chasqui and Machado (2021) point out about water as a symbol and metaphor of the feminine.

This moment of passage is commonly associated by the countryside as an opportunity for the appearance of dark entities, especially due to the fact that the night is condemned in biblical passages, in which its meaning is loaded with negative conceptions. A great representative of a cultural convergence, as Salles (1988, apud Loureiro, 2015a) observed, the legend of the Iara, since its origin, has crossed millennia and has been the subject of several works by literati, including regional ones.

The legend of Iara causes the convergence between cultures and runs through several generations of poets and prose writers. Loureiro (2015a) states that the belief in the existence of this

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<sup>5</sup> LOUREIRO, João de Jesus Paes. Amazonian culture: a poetics of the imaginary. Belém: Cultural Brasil, 2015a, p.274.



*face* that Mãe-d'Água offers is a case of cultural verisimilitude, conceived as a daydream of the Amazonian man, within a continuous imaginal process. Death, as one of the various faces of the Amazon River, is present in other myths related to water. The myth of the Vitória-Régia, in more widespread versions, has plots that culminate in the renunciation of life in favor of the enchantments at the bottom of the river. Traditionally, the story of the indigenous Naiá, who was in love with the moon, Jacy, is told, according to Couto de Magalhães (1940). Gomes and Christo (2020) summarize the three main interpretations of this myth; and, although the Moon is considered a feminine entity, these tell versions that establish the male presence as a representation of the star.

In the first version, Naiá spends her nights walking in the woods, obsessed with finding her beloved. One day, resting on the edge of a lagoon and saw reflected in the waters the image that she was so much chasing. Without hesitation, she dived to meet them and drowned. Shaken by what happened, Jacy tried to compensate for her sacrifice, transforming her into a "star of the waters, a true exuberance of beauty and perfume" (Gomes; Christo, 2020,

p. 267). The palm of the leaves of the water lily is dilated to better receive the caresses of the Moon. Its flowers open at night, exhaling aromas expressing the loving devotion of the *cunhã*.

In the second version, the Moon had the power to transform the indigenous people into stars. Among the *cunhãs*, there was one that wished to be transmuted, in order to materialize its union with the Moon. In love, she tried to reach it, climbing hills and mountains, however, it was only on a day of delight by the river that she noticed its presence. From the depths of the water she saw the reflection of the moon, as in the first story, but this time with an inviting song. He then threw himself into the river, culminating in his drowning. Dismayed, the Moon turned her into a beautiful water star.

The third version differs from the others in that there are other members of the nation around who try to prevent Naiá from going to the water. But it is in vain, since soon afterwards they witness the immediate transformation of the girl into a flower, preceded by a bright light. Pereira (2001, p. 55) makes another narration, inspired by Perudá, "Tupi god of love, like Eros": he tells the story between Moroti and the warrior Pitá, which ends in death by drowning.

Some narratives add to the legend the presence of a sorceress, I *Cunhã Pajé*, who had lured Pitá to the bottom of the waters. He took advantage of his plunge to offer him a new life in the richest of the rooms of the diamond palace, and suggested getting Moroti out of his head. The native woman despaired of this loss and, advised by the shaman of the tribe to save her beloved and break the witch's curse, Moroti threw herself into the depths and disappeared, leaving a plant with white and red flowers on the surface (Abreu *et al.*, 2000).

The danger that dwells in the depths, however, is not limited to hurting only those who sink in the waters. It is possible to find narratives from field research, in which the being who protects the



river amplifies the violence out of the water. A version of the Muirakitã, the sacred amulet of the Icamiabas, offers a backdrop that is very much in line with this aspect of the river, according to the Macurap, inhabitants of the Rio Branco. Mindlin (1999) shows the terrible fight between men and women, according to the song Koman Makurap.

The daughters of the Amazons stole frogs from the lake, without knowing that they belonged to Katxuréu, an old woman of the waters. She admonishes the girls, saying that frogs are not food, but her art (and music), teaches them the song Koman, so beautiful that they present it to their mothers and with this song, Katxuréu convinces the adults, seduced by the song, that she would teach them the song, if they killed their husbands, one a day and took their bodies to make a banquet. Indignant, the men began to live without women, but one of them had hidden his daughters, who were later forgiven, married and humanity grew again. The women in the song Koman, however, differ from those in other versions, in that they could not live without the men. This and other stories of the indigenous peoples of Rondônia are deepened in *Moqueca de Maridos: Indigenous Erotic Myths* (2015), by the author Mindlin.

In Amazonian literature it is also possible to find cases in which contact with the river occurs through a process of punishment that, commonly, comes from an enchanted being who takes revenge on an aggressor of nature. "The legend of Pirarucu", collected by Alves and Pereira (2007), tells the story of Pirarucu, a self-centered warrior, belonging to the tribe of the Uaiás, inhabitants of the southwest of the Amazon, critical of the gods and perverse. One day, while his father, Pindarô, was visiting a neighboring nation, he took advantage of the occasion to kill the inhabitants there. Tupã, observing his wickedness, decides to punish him. Another source says that the reason for the punishment of the "Legend of the Pirarucu", told by Amorim (2016), was different: the reason for the intervention of the indigenous god would have been the attempted murder of a deaf native (Iberê), who cried out for justice to his god.

The body of the indigenous man was dragged to the bottom of the Tocantins River and transformed into a dark, flat-headed fish. About the process of punishment in relation to water, Euclides da Cunha (2011) in "Judas Ahsverus" narrates a ritual performed by rubber tappers during Holy Week and known as Judas' workout, in which a doll made by the Amazonians with old cloths and tied to a raft to go down the river. As he proceeds through the waters, the participants in the rite curse him and stone him until the puppet finishes his trajectory (Cunha; Lucchesi, 2011), a process that demarcates the punitive and purifying character of the river.

However, in the short story "The Witch", by Inglês de Sousa (2007), the opposite happens: the river is thrown against the one who defies the enchantments. Maria Mucuí, a feared character from Paranamiri, in Óbidos, is a victim of Lieutenant Antônio de Souza, who used to invade her shelter to beat her and curse her as an accomplice of the devil. In response to the attacks, Maria takes



part in a flood that floods the city. With the water reaching through his chest, Souza is at the mercy of his wrath. Storms, lightning and thunder are elements associated with the intervention of superior gods, especially Tupã, who was involved in the creation of other legends, such as that of the Pirarucu and the Mapinguari. That said, it is likely that the flood of the English tale also had the endorsement of supreme deities.

It is observed that the aforementioned legends are recurrently constituted in sources that establish death as an aspect associated with water. Death is a multifaceted element in literature and in the regional popular imagination. The river, likewise, which has different faces, since it is accompanied by numerous attributes, consists of a wide "mythical stained glass window", like the Amazonian culture, with narratives that are "lyrical or erotic, naïve or malicious, simple or cunning, happy or tragic" (Loureiro, 2015a, p. 258).

### THE FEARSOME SERPENT OF THE RIVERS

A gigantic serpent inhabits the depths of the riverside dweller's imagination. Cobra Grande, Mãe-d'Água, Mãe do Rio, Boiúna are some of the names by which the feared being is known. The probable origin of the snake dates back to the existence of the anaconda, the gigantic water snake that is capable of devouring adult men and even large animals, according to Cascudo (2012a). The large snake – holder of the night – is often pointed out only as a dangerous animal, however, it sometimes assumes the condition of divinity.

Corrêa (2018, p. 02, 03) points out that the Mãe-d'Água can present itself in three ways: as a serpent of immense proportions or an enchanted being, or even as a bewitched ship. In one of his books, Corrêa (2016) reports on the various types of large snakes that are well known through interviews and oral narrations collected in the Amazon. One of these examples is from Murinim, in Pará, where a popular tells the story of child abductions that occurred there. According to the narrator, once, an açaí seller, mother of three daughters, was approached by a strange lady who wanted one of them, but the mother denied. One day, the praticist left an açaí siding upside down and, at one point, the other, who wanted one of the children, took advantage of an opportunity and hid under the siding. One of the girls went to see the stranger who was hiding there and removed the lid. In its place, there was a snake that devoured her.

The narrative of the Big Snake can be seen in Melo's publication (2021), having been obtained through an oral account. It refers to Aunt Francisca, a character who worked aboard a boat which, at midnight, hits something and gets stuck. At that moment, a whirlwind appears around the vessel. Tia immediately recognizes the phenomenon and associates it with Boiuna. After a few minutes, a pair of glowing eyes burst in, shrouded in darkness, in the middle of the river. Desperate, she begins to pray. Upon seeing the show of respect, the snake leaves.



About the case in which the Big Snake presents itself as a ship, Corrêa (2018, p. 3, apud Hygino Amanajás, 1900) tells a story that occurred on Paçoca Island, in Pará, where there was a huge snake that lived there and, at night, with the entire island, they transformed into a ship. The enchanted ship went up the river sinking the boats it found along the way, leaving the souls of the drowned victims trapped inside it. In this context, the author refers to the image of Charon, the ferryman who, in Greek mythology, transported the souls of the dead to Hades (Corrêa, 2018, p. 3). This phenomenon occurred in both narratives, Loureiro (2015a, p. 240) classified as *semiotic conversion*, in which the vessel becomes the "concrete image of reverie, of the journey to other realities", symbolizing the desire to leave.

Another version of the snake, well known in Brazil, emerged during the modernist movement, in 1931, by Bopp with *Cobra Norato* (2004): a man strangles and steals Norato's skin and wanders through the Amazon rainforest until he reaches Belém, in search of Queen Luzia's daughter. On the way, he comes across trials and enchantments: he passes through seven doors, makes mirongas on the new moon, drinks three drops of blood. Bopp's work materializes the ideals of Modernism in its first phase and dialogues with the mythical potentialities of the Amazon.

In the context of the mythopoeics of the serpent, there is also "Acauã", by Inglês de Sousa (2007): the story of Captain Jerônimo Ferreira, from São Batista de Faro, father of a two-year-old girl. One day, when he was returning from hunting, he deviates from the path and only manages to reach the village when it is night. With the threat of a strong storm, the captain hears the cry of the Big Snake as in childbirth, the noise coming from a river in Nhamundá. He runs and falls on the threshold of his door, scaring away a bird that was singing "Acauã", "Acauã".

When he wakes up, the captain sees a canoe approaching and, when he pulls it, he finds that at the bottom of it there is a child, who rescues him and names him Vitória, bringing him home to raise with Aninha, his other daughter who had left him his wife. While Ana is kind, the other is aggressive and has a devilish look. The sisters maintained a tender and strange intimacy with each other, and in time Ana began to wither away, while Victoria grew stronger. On the day of Aninha's wedding, her sister appears in the church transformed into the figure of a Medusa, with the face of a serpent, the hair of snakes, standing, stiff as a dead man.

Niels (2020) reveals that when the strange girl appears in the church during the wedding, she presents herself as a gorgon, a being with evil powers equal to those of Medusa and Boiuna. Vitória would be the daughter of the serpent – due to the fact that Jeronimo found her in the river after the experience with the Mãe-d'Água and the bird Acauã, whose song signals bad omen. Inglês de Souza's fantastic narrative manages to make the connection between legends from different and distant cultures, uniting elements of Greek mythology and Amazonian culture.



Loureiro (2015a, p. 239) emphasizes that each river or lake has its Mother, who is represented by a merciless and giant serpent. During the night, men can only visualize two circles of fire illuminating the darkness. Such eyes become a stained glass window of the imaginary symbolizing the transcendence and coexistence of the material and the supernatural realm, between the rational and the irrational. Thus, the Boiuna is an example of the aesthetic character of the Amazonian theogony.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Amazon has a strong intangible cultural heritage. The riverside dweller lives with this imaginary, revealing a cosmic affectivity and promoting the aestheticizing conversion of his own experience into signs, a process of cosmo-allegory as a precious archive and essence of an unparalleled culture coming from his ancestors. Among the artistic expressions from this region there is a large collection to be explored by the study of literature regarding mythopoetics, so the expansion of research on myths and legends is necessary and inexhaustible.

The guiding thread of this research was the search for understanding the role of the river and its mythological aspects in the construction of the Amazonian literary identity, focusing on literary publications written by authors who discuss themes of this region and who use the myths and legends related to the river and its entities as a source of inspiration and element of the text. For this, we mainly used concepts worked by Loureiro on the Amazonian imaginary, in addition to the studies of Câmara Cascudo on Brazilian folklore and other authors.

In view of this, through this work, we pointed out, in the first place, the conceptions about the historical context of the Amazon, its transformations in relation to the imaginary and identity, such as the conceptual distinction between myths and legends, the symbolic implications of the river and notes on the fantastic in this literature. In addition, the beings of the Amazonian aquatic universe were explored in the works of regional or non-regional literati (such as Raul Bopp), in order to serve as a basis for literary discussion, using comparative reading to establish relationships between these authors regarding the issues of river mythology, while we also resorted to scholars of regional literature and other areas of knowledge to broaden theoretical perspectives.

Regarding Amazonian myths and legends, research on the Boto, the Iara, the Cobra Grande and other legends revealed, as a result, a multiplicity of aspects directly related to the river. The main aspects found in these tales are punishment, death and purification, multifaceted in their different versions.

In conclusion, the understanding of the symbolism of the waters, holder of different faces, within the mythical stained glass window of the Amazon River, as well as the realization of the research and exhibition of the main myths and legends of aquifers contained in the Amazonian





literature, in order to propose a brief cultural collection and investigate its origin, historical context and its constant transformation, with regard to the mythological elements related to the river.

Such narratives studied in this work brought the enchantment of the category of the fantastic in literature. With them, we can all find delight and a reason to escape from this chaotic and unflavorful world that surrounds us and calls us to reality, this one without the beauty of the mystery of Amazonian beings, Dolphins, Iaras, Big Snakes, today with crueller versions, with rivers polluted by human greed. If we value the Amazonian culture and the beings of the rivers and forests more, who knows, we may still be able to enjoy the power of this other universe, which is, at the same time, close and far from our heads still in great need of magic.



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