

RIO DE JANEIRO,
THE MILK LAKE
Jaime Diakara

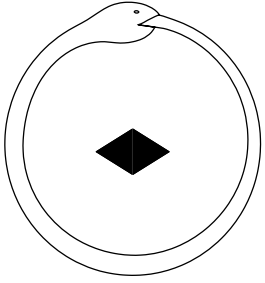
THERE WAS NO WORLD BEFORE

Cycle

1/4



notebooks
SELVAGEM



RIO DE JANEIRO, THE MILK LAKE

Jaime Diakara

Text transcription and edition by Victoria Mouawad
Comments by Francineia Fontes, Daiara Tukando and Álvaro Tukano

Reading cycle of the book

Antes o mundo não existia [There was no world before] 1/4

PRESENTATION

por Idjahure Kadiwel

When I was invited to organise a *Selvagem* reading cycle for the third edition of the book *Antes o Mundo não Existia* [Before there was no world] (2019), by Firmiano Lana (*Umusi Pãrõkumu*) and Luiz Lana (*Tõrãmũ Kêhíri*), I saw the opportunity to extend this invitation and build a broader dialogue, joining hands with a brilliant constellation of indigenous intellectuals and artists, who are currently active in the country.

Antes o Mundo não Existia, first edited in 1980, is the first book written by indigenous authors in Brazil. Developed over twelve years of detailed narration (by Firmiano Lana), writing, drawing, translation (from *Desana* to Portuguese and back, by Luiz Lana) and edition (with help from Berta Ribeiro) work, it opened the way for the launch of the collection *Narradores Indígenas do Rio Negro* [Indigenous Narrators from Rio Negro] from 1995 onwards, as well as for the inauguration of what is now being more consistently asserted as contemporary indigenous literature. Published as part of the *Selvagem* cycle of studies, the new edition was entirely revised by Luiz Lana and also features his unpublished drawings, occupying a prominent place in the transdisciplinary collection of books, as it brings indigenous science, authorship and protagonism into the company of scientists and philosophers.

As an indigenous anthropologist belonging to the *Terena* and *Kadiwéu* Pantanal peoples, I knew that commenting on the creation narratives from another people – particularly stories so densely populated by a multiplicity of beings, events, animals, people, plants and entities – would only be possible by listening to specialists who are familiar with the original territory from which the book comes and of which it is an expression – that is, from within the multiethnic and multilingual civilisation of the Upper Rio Negro, in the north-western Amazon. The first invitation, therefore, was made to Francineia Fontes, my master's colleague at the National Museum/UFRJ, so that she could share the interlocution and the organisation of the cycle with me along this path, inside and outside the live streams. In her

dissertation *Hiipana, Eeno Hiepolekoa* (2019), the **Baniwa** anthropologist, born on the banks of the Içana River, dedicated herself precisely to the work of translating cosmological narratives – or mythology – with her own father, Francisco Fontes, similar to what was done by Firmiano and Luiz Lana, father and son.

This was followed by other invitations, addressed to a generation of anthropologists from the Rio Negro, masters and doctoral students, members of the Centre for Indigenous Amazonian Studies at UFAM [Federal University of Amazonas]. Jaime Diakara, a **Desana** writer and anthropologist, opened the series of dialogues by embarking on a deep immersion into the ancestral journeys of the Transformation Canoe – or Snake Canoe – the original cosmic and metamorphic vehicle from which the first humanities emerged through successive transformations. Populating immemorial territories with their Transformation *Malocas*¹, from what is now known as Guanabara Bay, to the banks of the Amazon River, the cosmological narratives recorded in the book demarcate the presence of ancestral memories about a diversity of geographies of this land, by no means “discovered” by European caravels and crowns, as one should always be reminded.

In this *Selvagem Notebook* dedicated to the first of the four meetings organised around the book *Antes o mundo não existia*, we have highlighted the talks that addressed the Transformation Canoe and the Milk Lake. Álvaro Tukano, leader and master, and his daughter, multi-artist Daiara Tukano, contributed enormously to the thread of this conversation. They also continued to contribute to the other meetings, especially the last one – to be edited soon – in which, together with Ailton Krenak, they led a vast immersion in the multidimensionality of what is called (sometimes quite thoughtlessly) mythology.

According to the immemorial worldview of the original Tukano peoples, the Milk Lake – where the city of Rio de Janeiro was founded – was the first Transformation *Maloca* that emerged in the course of the immemorial ancestral metamorphoses of the Transformation Canoe.

1. The maloca, this large communal house that used to be typical of the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Amazon who live on the banks of the Uaupés River and its tributaries, is a model for thinking over different spatial scales: the house, the territory and the universe itself. Its architectural structure, the materials used in its construction, the way it is built and the blessings that protect it and give it life, make the maloca a sacred and safe place, and the very expression of the cultures and cosmovisions of the peoples who inhabit them. Source: The maloca between artefacts and plants : a guide to Richard Spruce's Rio Negro collection in London / Luciana Martins ... [et al.] ; illustration Lindsay Sekulowicz. -- 1. ed. -- São Paulo : ISA - Instituto Socioambiental, 2021. (TN)

I took up this invitation to delve into the culture of the Desana people through the work of my relatives. They began to leave reports on who we, the *Desana* people, are, through writing, drawings, and storytelling. Luiz Lana, a great activist of the indigenous movement, is my relative. He founded an association to discuss indigenous cultural values, land demarcation and the literary records of the *Desana* people. In my presentation, I'm going to make a small selection as an indigenous anthropologist. Non-indigenous people talk about our narratives as mythology. For me, it's geomythology, indigenous geomedicine.

For us, indigenous people, the telling of stories and narratives is a great laboratory of medicinal information. When you read the book, you realise that it's all a bit summarised, because the indigenous informant himself cannot describe all the things he wants to tell. We, *Desana* indigenous people, consider that the great *Maloca* of the Universe is the place where what we call the origin of life arises, and this is not written in the book. When Luiz Lana states in the book that there was only darkness before, that there was nothing, there was only Thunder before, he means that the Being already existed.

In this absence of nature, he creates another platform in this context: the Earth. In the gourd of the origin of life, cultural heroes emerge. When we talk about the origin of humanity, we are talking about all beings on Earth. That is, the origin of things, in the universe as much as in the River, on Earth, in the Forest. And each being that emerges becomes the owner of its locality.

In the third chapter of the book, Luiz Lana tells us about *Diá ahpikōdih̄taru*, that is, the Milk Lake, in Rio de Janeiro, where the transformation of humanity takes place. For us, Tukano, Desana and other indigenous people, life begins in Rio de Janeiro. That is where the Transformation Canoe emerges, the *malocas* begin to emerge in the Milk Lake. For us, Rio de Janeiro – the site of the first *maloca* – is an important territory. All that beauty, the mountains, the lakes, the beaches where you bathe, are sacred places for us.

For whites, they are tourist attractions. These *malocas* are like great universities, great laboratories, where humanity began to create or acquire knowledge. The *malocas* emerged through dreams, through the exchange of ideas. They had conversations about how the world should be and how to protect the Transformation Canoe. In the book, Luiz Lana talks about 30 small *malocas*, with names that are difficult to translate. I'll talk about the four main ones here.

Some will call the second great *maloca*, in Belém do Pará, the *Marracá² Maloca*. This is where the first dances, the first division of musical instruments, appeared. According to our predecessors, this is why the people from Pará are good at creating music.

The third great *maloca*, *Diá pintun wi*, the Snake Maloca, is in Manaus. If you go to this city, ask about the Educandos neighbourhood. For us, this neighbourhood is a huge *maloca*. This is where some groups began to split up: some stayed in Manaus and others – those who would transform humanity, the ethnic groups of the 23 indigenous peoples of the Rio Negro – travelled on. My father always used to say: Manaus was a great *maloca* where people were sheltered, where food and goods were distributed. That is why Manaus is the centre of the indigenous universe. It sits right at the spot where the Upper Solimões flows in and from where the Rio Negro flows out.

Then comes the next *maloca*, on the Uaupés River, where the first Ayahuasca drink appears, where a child is born and where various languages emerge (*Antes o mundo não existia*, page 34). That is where the language each tribe should speak is established, and where the languages are distributed. It is also the place where drinks, Ayahuasca, are distributed. This is a great *maloca* of wisdom, where we acquire knowledge about blessing. It is a great laboratory for certifying indigenous knowledge. This was the last *maloca*.

Today each of these four *malocas* that I have presented here has its own symbolism for us. The *maloca* is not just a house for the *Desana*. The *maloca* is connected to the universe, on the platform of the Earth, in the riverbed. When the *kumu*, that is, the blesser, is about to do his

2. An indigenous instrument that resembles a rattle, used in ritual contexts by various ethnic groups throughout the Americas. (TN)

blessings before a festival or before building a maloca, he needs to ask permission from the great cultural heroes of the creation of the world. They are the mentors, the mediators of knowledge. If he cannot read the profile of each of them, what powers each of them has, he has no knowledge. One has to know the symbolism behind it. For example, what is that *Yebá Buró* stool? Is it just a simple stool that we sit on? What does the *ipadu*³ gourd represent? Everything has a deep symbolism. When we talk about the Transformation Canoe, for example, there is reference to the woman's body.

For us, the Sugarloaf Mountain is a woman's nursing breast. The lake in the bay is a gourd for her milk. The Amazon River is the Milk River that flows all the way to Manaus.

FRANCINEIA FONTES:

Each object has a symbology. It is not just an object, there is major representativeness that explains the importance of this object, like the gourd, the cigarette, the *ipadu*. On the subject of *malocas*, I thought of an analogy to help you better understand what this means. The streets have names here in Rio de Janeiro. And why do they get a certain name? They are named to honour someone, someone who was important, who contributed to building the city or who caused an impact over that street in some way.

That's what the *malocas* are for us. For example, the Maracá House, the House of Rattles, was created at a time when dances and instruments were developing in that place, and these forces are still present there today. It's nice to draw this parallel to understand the importance of the names of the *malocas*, the sacred places for us. But unlike the streets for you, the *malocas* are sacred places for us. We talk to those places. We bless and heal with that sacred place in mind. I ask permission, I talk to it, so that it can give me a cure.

3. *Eythroxylum novogranatense*: A bush tree from which a substance similar to coca is extracted, but with a lower concentration of alkaloids. (TN)

For us, the importance of the narratives is that demiurge characters, like the Grandmother of the World, were never killed. They just disappeared from the world and turned into a stone, an invisible place. But we know that that place is alive, that it hears us and gives us healing according to our moment. We feel this great presence in relation to these places, these invisible *malocas*. It may just be a well, a rock, a mountain or a hill, but for us it is something very much alive.

DAIARA TUKANO:

My father says that Urca is the House of *Paricá*⁴. With regard to the path of the Snake Canoe, there are narratives that, at least in my clan, predate the landing at the great Milk Lake, that is, in Rio de Janeiro.

The story Dad tells that I like best is about the great ice wall: the Tukano chief, the first man of creation, is rowing the Snake Canoe, steering this great snake. Suddenly, an ice wall appears in front of him. He asks his sister to go up to the house of Thunder and ask the Grandfather of the Universe for advice on how to unlock the way. The sister returns from above with a great message from the Grandfather of the Universe: “The Great Grandfather of the Universe has told you that you have already received all the instruments, all the medicines. Everything you need is already in your canoe”. So, in front of the ice wall, the message from the Great Grandfather is: “Make do!”.

The chief then hits the ceremonial staff, the staff of creation, and breaks the wall. This is how they get through and finally arrive at the Great Milk Lake, which is where humanity first lands. From this landing, they have a party, they drink *paricá*, and they go up the coast, passing through the coast of the Great Shrimps. They then arrive at the roots of the great mother’s milk tree, which is the Amazon. And there is *Açai*⁵ Island, which is equivalent to Marajó Island. And they go up this great milk tree, which is the Amazon basin.

4. *Virola pavanis*, also known as Ucuuba. (TN)

5. *Euterpe oleracea*: a species of palm tree. (TN)

I really like this narrative of Dad's, because it shows that we have met other peoples. Our sacred sites are marked by petroglyphs, drawings carved into rocks. There are petroglyphs all along the coast of Brazil, including Rio de Janeiro. In our "Tukano-centrism", which is the original thinking of our **TUKANO** branch, these places marked with stones are part of our path. And then we go up, navigating this Snake Canoe, passing through Ipanoré, and on to Ecuador, where we still find cousins who carry on very similar traditions. In other words, there was transit between peoples there long before the arrival of European visitors. We are navigating peoples, we come from a historical migration.

ÁLVARO TUKANO:

Many people do not know Rio de Janeiro. Back in the forest, everyone talks about the Sugar Loaf Mountain: it is called **Ohpẽkuã**, the breast of Mother Earth; it is the land of the mammals we are. The strength we still have from the forest, we bring from that region, from Guanabara Bay, which is **Õpeko Ditara**. Pedra da Gávea is the sacred time of the shamans, the spirits, the thunder. The Finger of God is the house of *mirações* [visions]. And the other big snakes that are inside it are our humanity transformation canoes. This is how we are going to keep talking.

The Mother's Milk Lake, the beaches and the forests were all beautiful. The reason for calling it the Mother's Milk Lake is that the first men there designed and carved a huge stone resembling a woman's breast that nurses the men of the Earth. Today, in the Tukano perspective, the Sugar Loaf Mountain symbolises the "mother earth that gives life to mammalian man" – it means a world of abundance, without misery: a world of peace and prosperity.

Excerpt from the book *O mundo Tukano antes dos brancos* [The Tukano world before the whites], by Álvaro Tukano.

IDJAHURE KADIWÉU: Master in Anthropology by the National Museum, from the *Terena* and *Kadiwéu* peoples.

JAIME DIAKARA: Pedagogue, Master in Social Anthropology, writer of *Desana* children's literature and lecturer on *Desana* cosmopolitics. Born in the Tiquié River, son of a *Desana* father and a *Tukano* mother, a relative of Luiz and Firmiano Lana, with whom he shares the authorship of the book *Antes o mundo não existia* [There was no world before].

FRANCINÉIA FONTES: A *Baniwa* from São Gabriel da Cachoeira, Upper Rio Negro Indigenous Land. Born and raised in an indigenous community, she only left her homeland to study for a Master's degree in Rio de Janeiro. She is currently a PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the National Museum/UFRJ, where she continues to research the indigenous narratives of origin.

DAIARA TUKANO: Indigenous artist, activist and communicator from the *Tukano* people.

ÁLVARO TUKANO: One of the main indigenous resistance names over the last four decades, based in the Upper Rio Negro. He was one of the creators of the project *Séculos Indígenas no Brasil* [Indigenous Centuries in Brazil] and is the current director of the Indigenous Peoples Memorial in Brasília. Author of the book *O mundo Tukano antes dos brancos* [The Tukano world before the whites].

SPECIAL THANKS

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TRANSLATION
MARINA MATHEUS

Marina is a Brazilian dance maker who researches the conversation between dance, literature and philosophy. She runs the dance creation platform and publishing house Acampamento, and coordinates the communal English Translation Group of Selvagem cycle of studies.

TRANSLATION REVISION
ANNA BARBOSA

Brazilian translator and interpreter.

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