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SACRED SITES OF THE AMAZON

Abstract. Scientists have studied different aspects of the complex reality of the Amazon Basin. Among the main areas of research are such topics as social organization, cosmology, mythology, ecological adaptations, and conservation of the tropical rainforest. One aspect that has not been addressed sufficiently is the archaeological investigations of the sacred sites of the Amazon. Due to their importance, this is why the sacred petroglyphs were chosen as the topic of our research. This article attempts to present the state of archaeological investigations in the Colombian Amazon and the importance of the sacred petroglyphs for our understanding of the Yucuna Indian culture.

Keywords: Petroglyphs; Amazon; Yucuna; myth; ritual; sacred; ethnography.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, scientists have studied many aspects of the Amazon Basin. Their studies have advanced our understanding of the complex reality of the area. Maybury-Lewis (1979) investigated native social organization. Levi-Strauss (1981) elaborated a general system of cosmology and myth. Other researchers like Hugh-Jones (1979) clarified the problem of ecological adaptation of the indigenous community of the Amazon. Many books have been published about the challenges of the conservation of the tropical rainforest (Castro J. Pereira, Eduardo J. Viola, 2021).

However, many aspects of the rich Amazonian reality have not been studied sufficiently. One of these is the archaeological investigation of sacred sites in the Amazon area. For this reason, the situation of archaeological investigations in the Colombian part of the Amazon and the importance of the sacred petroglyphs were chosen as the topics of this research. This study at-

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tempts to illustrate the state of archaeological investigations in the Colombian part of the Amazon and the importance of the sacred petroglyphs for our understanding of the Yucuna Indian culture in the Colombian Amazon.

The first part of the research will give a general description of the area of the Amazon and the situation of archaeological investigations. The second section of the paper will concentrate on a specific area of the Amazon – the Colombian region. The last part of the paper will focus on sacred petroglyphs from the water rapids of the Miriti River and their significance in understanding Yucuna mythology and culture.

1. THE AMAZON IN GENERAL

It is easier to understand the problem of archaeological investigations in the Amazon by briefly reviewing the Basin as a whole. The Amazon Basin is the most extensive area of tropical rainforest in the world. The great Amazonian Valley is divided among six South American countries, Brazil, Peru, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela. The rainforest occupies a vast area of 5,897.79 square kilometers (Dominguez, 1987). The Amazon River runs through this region of tropical forest. The Amazon is not a single river, but a complex network of watercourses that together run more than sixteen hundred kilometers. The main course of the Amazon is the largest river in the world in volume of water: it is nearly 4,000 miles long. The amount of water carried by the Amazon is incalculable. It discharges at its mouth some 200,000 cubic meters per second (Meggers, 1989a). Most of this water comes from the torrential rain that falls on the Amazonian forest. Of course, rain does not fall all the time. The year alternates between rainy and dry seasons. The seasonal variation has an important impact on the Indigenous way of life (Carneiro, 1989).

Amazonian soils are not rich. In most parts of the Basin, whenever the forest is destroyed, the soils are depleted within as little as a year. Soil degradation and depletion of the limited nutrients have forced societies in the Amazon to avoid building large community settlements and to move tribal areas to new places (Schultes, 1989).

One reason we know so little about the origins of Amazonian societies is due to the absence of appropriate kinds of stones. Almost everything in the area was manufactured from wood, bone, tendon, plant fibers, seeds, feathers, and other perishable materials that were destroyed by the hot and humid

climate. The main direct evidence of human presence is provided by paintings and engravings (petroglyphs) on rock surfaces (Meggers, 1989).

Kurt Nimuendaju and Erland Nordenskiöld were the first to initiate archaeological investigations in the Amazon area. Erland Nordenskiöld notes that the Amazon region's cultural materials are from the Andean zones of South America. According to Nordenskiöld (1930), the Amazon Basin has its own civilization. Despite the lack of archaeological investigations in the Amazon Basin, most archaeologists concentrated their attention on the Andean zone. After twenty years of research, Howard in his analysis of population ceramics in lowland South America notes that Amazon had a large, highly variable, and complex ceramics inventory (Howard, 1947). A review summary of archaeological data from the Amazon was presented a year later in the third volume of the *Handbook of South American Indians*. The authors reemphasize the lack of archaeological research in the Amazon Basin (Meggers, 1948). In volumes 3, 4, and 5 of the *Handbook of South American Indians*, J.H. Steward presents ethnological data that influenced the archaeological investigations and interpretations of the lowlands data. Steward introduced a new terminology for the culture of the Amazon: the culture of the tropical jungle (Steward, 1948).

In the fifties, Clifford Evans and Betty Meggers undertook archaeological investigations of the Amazon areas in Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, and Guianas (Meggers and Evans, 1956; Evans, Meggers and Cruxent, 1958, Evans and Meggers, 1961, 1968). Among the topics they studied were geographical origin and dispersion of ceramics. Following the discovery of pottery, the archaeological situation improved. Although the vessels are fragile, fragments are not only durable but also encode various forms of information. Distinctive decorative techniques and motives serve as tracers of migration and diffusion (Hilbert, 1968). Meggers and Evans propose the scheme of four stylistic horizons. First, the Horizon Zoned Hatching (Hachurado in Zones) (500 B.C. to 500 A.D.) includes the ceramic center of Anatuba in Morajo and Tutisheinyo in Peru that would have had its center of origin in the Andean area. Second is Inciso Horizon Amhoncon (100 to 800 A.D.) with the ceramic complex found in Orinoco and Upper Amazon. Third, the Polocromo Horizon (600 to 1,300 A.D.) was found in the Napo River on Marajo Island with its origins in the Andes in Colombia. Finally comes the Inciso Punteado Horizon (600 to 1,500 A.D. (Meggers and Evans, 1961).

At the beginning of the sixties, Robert Carneiro published several articles in which he used the data of his investigations among the Indians from Bra-

zil. According to his interpretation of the data, despite the poverty of the Amazon's soil, the Indian population could form bigger tribes because of the unlimited jungle area (Carneiro, 1960). On the other hand, Donald Lathrap, using Carneiro's data and his investigations, demonstrated that the natural environments of the Amazon area are not identical. In the Amazon, there are poor and rich areas, some of which can sustain large groups of people. The diversity of the natural environment was the reason for the migration of the Arawak and the Tupi-Guarani (Lathrap, 1970). After 1970, archaeologists began to analyze different aspects of the Amazon area, going beyond issues of migrations and the dispersion of ceramic horizons. Myers was interested in the physical patterns of the settlements (Myers, 1973). Anna Roosevelt elaborated upon the possibility of the development of more complex forms of political organizations and leadership among small Indian societies in the Amazon and Orinoco (Roosevelt, 1980). A very interesting interpretation of the cultural diversity of the Amazon was presented by Meggers. According to her theory, the cultural diversity of the area can be explained by analogy to the emergence of the next species of animals and plants and by geographical isolation (Meggers, 1977).

We now have at least some preliminary information about the Amazon in general. However, archaeological investigations in the Colombian part of the Amazon are fewer in number. The next part of the paper will present a summary of the conditions of archaeological investigations in the Colombian lowland areas.

2. COLOMBIAN PART OF THE AMAZON

The Colombian Amazon is nearly one-third of the land size of the Republic of Colombia. Many of Colombia's tributaries are incapable of navigation because of rapids and waterfalls, for example, the Caqueta or Apaporis Rivers. These natural obstacles have helped to reduce penetration by boats from Brazil and, with some exceptions, settlers in great numbers have not left the fertile Andean highlands to colonize the jungle areas. As a result, the Colombian Amazon remains one of the less disturbed and anthropologically most traditionally intact parts of the entire Basin of the Amazon. According to census density, the population is 0.75 per square kilometer. Most of the inhabitants are Indians (Ochoa, 1989).

The major rivers in the Colombian Amazon are the Putumayo, Caqueta, Apaporis, Miriti, Vaupes, Guaviare (see Map 1), and a very short part of the Amazon River. The Caqueta River flows serenely for some 580 miles of its length through low banks, but it encounters rocky interruptions that cause rapids in Araracuara and La Pedrera. The rapids have connections with the mythological world of the Yucuna tribe. The Caqueta River has several tributaries: the Orteguaza, Yari, and Miriti – home of the Yucuna Indians. In the area where the Yucuna tribe is located, there are two rapids closely related to tribal beliefs and sacred sites (Gutierrez, 1989).

One of the first references related to the topic of archaeological investigations in the Colombian part of the Amazon was made by Father Marcelino Castellvi, a Franciscan missionary from Spain. In 1933, Castellvi founded “CILEAC” – the Center of the Linguistic and Ethnological Investigation of the Colombian Amazon. His Manual of Ethnographic Investigations was very important in the field of collecting ethnographic data about the area. One of his archaeological discoveries was the rock portion of an Indian lance made from black stone (Castellvi, 1941-2).

The first archaeologist who began the investigations in the Colombian region was Eliecer Suilva Celis. In 1962, Silva Celis found two big rocks with petroglyphs, the first in El Canto and the second in the Hacha River. His descriptions and explanations are related to the importance of the Caqueta River as a means of communication between the Andean Mountains of Colombia and the Amazon River (Silva, 1963).

However, the first systematical archaeological investigations were done by Charles Bolian in 1968 and 1970. Bolian located 15 sites on the border of the Amazon River and the Loreto Yacu River, tributaries of the Amazon River. The ceramic material found in the area belongs to the same complex of simple forms. Most of the ceramic material was considered as stages in the development of the ceramics of the actual Ticuna tribe. Some parts of the recovered ceramics are attributed to the “Barrancoide” tradition. According to Bolian’s calculation, there are some similarities between ceramics from the Amazon River and ceramics from Chemay of the Beni region in Bolivia (Bolian, 1972). This implies migration and close connections between Andean and Lowland Indigenous communities.

The first archaeological investigation in the Caqueta and Miriti Rivers, the area of the Yucuna Indians, was done by Elizabeth Reichel and Martin Hildebrand.

3. LA PEDRERA AND MIRITI REGIONS

The investigation conducted by Elizabeth Reichel and Martin Hildebrand took place in 1974 in the villages called Cordoba, La Pedrera, and parts of the Miriti River. They found approximately 664 ceramic fragments that were classified. According to Reichel, the ceramic materials found in the area of La Pedrera and Cordoba are similar to the ceramics from the Napo River (von Hildebrand, 1976).

Stone is a material difficult to find in the Amazon. In many places, stone was replaced by monkey bones, stingrays, hardwood, and bamboo (Carneiro, 1989). Luckily, in the area of the Yucuna tribe, there are several lithic sources. These places, like Cordoba, Chimboraso, and Tequendama are very important in Yucuna mythology. They are sacred sites. Stone has been a very important element of the Yucuna culture, because from this material, stone axes were made. Stone axes in the past had a critical function in a commercial exchange between the Yucuna and other tribes such as the Tanimuca and Letuama (Palma, 1984). In the area of La Pedrera and Cordoba, it is relatively easy to find stone axes. According to Testavin (1923), the stone of the area was a basic material in commercial exchange between the Teffe (Brazil) and La Pedrera cultures.

Stone is also a very important component of the Yucuna culture because their surface was used for decoration, providing a base for petroglyphs. Reichel described the petroglyphs from 14 sites in La Pedrera village. The petroglyphs from this area reveal symbolic figures related to local mythology. The Yucuna Indians incorporate special places such as water rapids, big stones with special shapes, and petroglyphs into their mythology (von Hildebrand, 1975). Some of the elements of the natural environment become sacred in the Yucuna culture. For the Yucuna, one of the most important mythological figures is Yurupari, with whom several petroglyphs in the Miriti River are directly related. It is easier to understand the importance of these petroglyphs at the Yucuna's sacred sites and their daily lives in the context of Yucuna culture.

4. THE YUCUNA CULTURE

The Yucuna Indians live in the area of the Miriti River and some of them in Cordoba and La Pedrera; they are found in a small village located close to

the Caqueta River. There are four main tribes in the area of the Miriti River: the Yucuna, the Matapi, the Tanimuca, and the Letuama. Every tribe speaks a different language. The Yucuna belong to the Arawak linguistic family, while Tanimuca and Letuama are Tucano languages. During the Peruvian-Colombian conflict (1933-1934), many Matapi Indians were killed. Since that time, the Matapi speak the Yucuna language. The Yucuna tribe from the Miriti River has 800 members. The entire tribe is spread out in family groups that generally live in what the Yucuna call "maloca," a large multifamily house. The Yucuna Indians share some of their cultural characteristics with the rest of the Northwest Amazonian people. They prepare gardens in clearings. The basic subsistence for the Yucuna is the garden yucca plant, cultivated by women. Usually, a man is responsible for preparing the land for cultivation. Thus, a man has to cut trees and clear the garden in the traditional "slash and burn" fashion of the tropics. The men spend a great deal of time on these activities. Monkeys, tapirs, wild pigs, and birds are their frequently hunted game. The usual hunting method is using a blowgun, lance, and, in modern times, a cheap hunting rifle (Jacopin, 1988).

For the Yucuna people, the center of their biological, social, and ritual life is their house (*maloca*), which represents the structure of the universe for the Yucuna. Before a maloca is built, the ground is carefully selected and "cured" or blessed, so the space becomes sacred ground. The maloca is divided into three parts. The first part is the central area of the house used for celebrating rituals, where the most sacred rituals of the tribe are performed, including the Yurupari initiation rite. The second is a public space used for daily activities such as preparing coca or yucca. The third area is a private part of the maloca reserved for family life. According to Yucuna tradition, only some members of the community can have a maloca. People who have malocas have more advanced knowledge about the mythology and ritual life of the Yucuna community (Hildebrand, 1979).

Yucuna cosmology is represented by the structure of the Yucuna house, the maloca. The levels of the roof of the maloca represent a model of the Yucuna cosmos. In ascending order, first, there is a heaven of jungle food for the sacred owner of the animals. Second is the heaven of the vulture. Third is a heaven of the spirits of the dead. Fourth is a heaven of music. Fifth is a heaven of four immortal Yucuna ancestors. Sixth is the heaven of "Tupana" (a supernatural being-god). For the Yucuna people, the cosmos is like plates that are united by air, water, smoke, and light that are circulated by a cosmic river, where the river, sun, and moon navigate in their boats (von Hildebrand,

1989). This is common for a tribal society with a dynamic, constantly moving vision of the cosmos. The general vision of the Yucuna cosmos is directly related to a system of myths. According to the Yucuna, a myth is considered knowledge of the world. Myths explain the existence of everything. Yucuna mythology is a system of many myths that are interconnected and interrelated. The most important are the creation myths of the four Kaypulaquena creators (a collective name). The Kaypulaquena myth tells how the Yucuna's world was created. Each of the four mythical personalities is responsible for some part of the Yucuna world. The Kanuma myth explains why and how the Miriti River's waterfalls originated. This myth is closely connected to a very important Yurupari myth and ritual.

The following part of the paper will present the Yurupari myth and its connections with the Kanuma myth, and also how both myths relate to the sacred petroglyphs found by the author in the water rapids in the Miriti River.

5. THE YURUPARI MYTH AND SACRED PETROGLYPHS FROM THE RAPIDS OF MIRITI

The information that will be presented in this section of the article was collected during fieldwork among the Yucuna. The fieldwork was done between 1982 and 1989 in the area of La Pedrera and the Miriti River. For this research, 56 Yucuna informants were interviewed. All of them participated in the Yurupari ritual multiple times. According to the Yucuna tradition, every member of the community who wants to participate in the initiation rite should learn the Yurupari myth before the initiation rite. Knowing the Yurupari myth is a basic condition for participating in the Yurupari rite. After a long time of collecting different interpretations of the Yurupari myth, we were invited to participate in the sacred Yurupari initiation rite. It was unusual for an outsider of the Yucuna community to be part of the most sacred ritual of the Yucuna tribe. During the preparations for the Yurupari initiation rite in the water rapids of the Miriti River, we found sacred petroglyphs directly related to the Yurupari and Kanuma myths. The finding of the sacred petroglyphs in the Miriti River's waterfalls offers a unique opportunity to explore the complementary ongoing relationship between myth, ritual, and petroglyphs. The petroglyphs from the rapids of the Miriti River can be understood in the context of the Yurupari myth.

For this paper, a typical version of the myth, according to Miguel Yucuna, one of the most experienced shamans of the tribe, was chosen. The following Yurupari myth illustrates the history of one of the tribal heroes.

Many years ago, he (Yurupari) came with his sister by boat from “down” (very far away) to visit the Yucuna people. Yurupari sang so beautifully that people flocked from near and far to see him. Yet, the people who had heard him returned to their homes and ate fish, then they fell and died because they did not respect a new norm Yucurpari gave them. According to Yurupari’s new law, the Yucuna were not supposed to eat a certain kind of fish. It was the condition “to grow” and be alive. The people who did not eat the prohibited fish survived. However, many members of the Yucuna tribe did not follow this rule and died. Therefore, the Yucuna ancestors decided to kill Yurupari. He knew about it and said, “I know that you want to kill me, but it is impossible to kill me with poison and arrow, because I am the owner of all things, you can kill me only by flames.” Yurupari’s sister advised the Yucuna people to kill her brother in a special way (face down) in order to protect the world from destruction. So, Yurupari was killed in a grate pyre, because he was bad and killed many Yucuna people. Yurupari, however, continued singing to the last, and, while the flames were already licking around his body he sang: “Now I die, my people, now I leave this world.” When his body swelled from the heat, he went on singing to the last in a beautiful tone “Now my body breaks down, and I am dead.” He died and was consumed by the flames. His soul rose to the heavens. From his ashes, after some days, there grew a long green leaf, first a “chontadurito,” “yarumo,” “balso,” and finally the proper “chonta” (a kind of local palm tree). It grew perceptibly larger and larger; it spread, and the following day it was already a tall tree, the first “chonta” palm. At the same time, many tribes from the area had a big meeting. They were the “grandfathers” (ancestors) of the Macuna, Miranias, Tanimuca, Letuama, and Yucuna. During the meeting, the chonta tree was cut by members of the Yucuna tribe. When the chonta fell, Yurupari sang, and his voice was heard by his sister who came and was killed by the Yucuna people. The Yucuna “grandfathers” observed parts of her body that became the models to make big flutes of chonta wood. The flutes were distributed among the Indian tribes from the area. The original melodies that Yurupari sang at the beginning should be repeated during every Yurupari initiation ritual (Miguel Yucuna – informant, 1988).

The most elaborate of all Yucuna rituals is that known as the Yurupari celebration (Mich, 1994, 1995). It is also, of all the rites, the most dangerous, and only a few shamans have the power to conduct it. At one level, it is a rite of initiation for young Yucuna boys into the men’s cult of the sacred

flutes. Since knowing about the Yurupari myth and participating in the Yurupari ritual is forbidden for women, the ritual also serves to manage the tensions between gender relations in the community. The Yurupari complex, myth and ritual, has always been for the Yucuna the symbol of sacred reality and power.

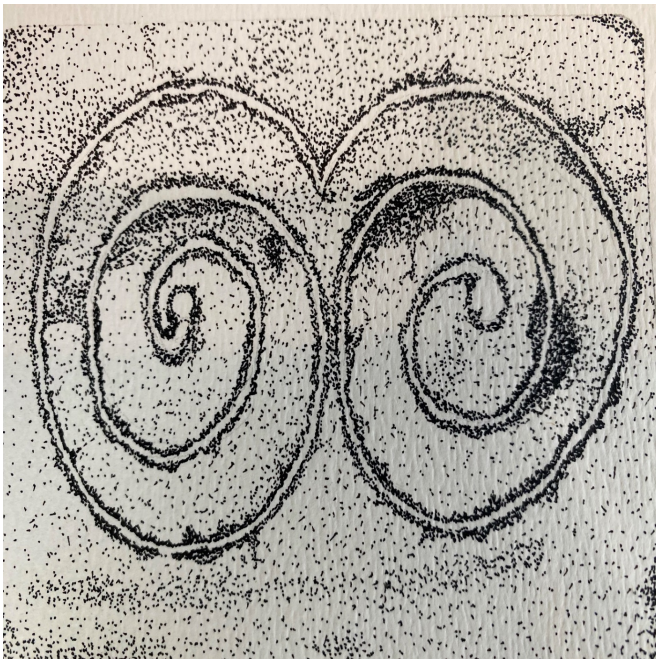
According to Miguel Yucuna (one of the informants), in the beginning, women had control over Yurupari. They had Yurupari flutes and played them. The Kanuma myth according to Miguel Yucuna (one of the key informants) explains how men took Yurupari instruments from the women.

In the beginning of the Yucuna world, women had the Yurupari. They lived close to the Miriti's water rapids in a big maloca (a symbol of the high position in the Yucuna community). During that time, the men were like women; they worked in the manioc gardens and made cassava bread. They had bends in their forearms like women and they menstruated. The women had control over the world. The Yurupari they owned symbolized their power. Among the women from the Miriti River lived one man named Kanuma. He stole the Yurupari instruments from the women. For this reason, the women were trying to abandon Kanuma and come down the Miriti River. Kanuma did not want to live alone and attempted to stop the women by forming the first water rapid of Tequendama. However, the women continued coming down, therefore, Kanuma created a second water rapid in Chimboraso. At the time of the beginnings, the rocks were bland. When the women stopped to rest, they carved Kanuma's ugly face on the rocks (see Petroglyph #1), some elements of the decorations of the Yurupari flutes, and parts of the Yurupari body. Kanuma was not able to stop the women (informant Miguel Yucuna, 1988).

The petroglyphs that were found in the area of the water rapids of the Miriti River are closely connected to the Yurupari and Kanuma myths. On the rocks of the Miriti water rapids, some petroglyphs illustrate some elements of the Yurupari and Kanuma myths. One of the drawings on a rock is a decoration of the sacred Yurupari flutes. These drawings (see Petroglyph # 1) seem to symbolize the eyes of Yurupari's sister.



Petroglyph # 1



Petroglyph # 2

A similar decoration can be observed on the Yucuna's Yurupari flutes. The drawings that seem to be the eyes of the Yurupari sister are not the same as those on the Yurupari flutes. However, Yucuna people interpret these symbols as the eyes of the Yurupari sister. The next petroglyph at the Miriti River is a drawing that is considered by the Yucuna Indians as a Kanuma face (See Petroglyph # 2). There are two interpretations among the Yucuna related to Kanuma's face. The first version interprets the distorted shape of Kanuma relating it to the Kanuma myth. When the women left Kanuma, they were angry, therefore, they painted him with a distorted face. The second interpretation explains the deformation of Kanuma's face as a consequence of consuming too much coca.

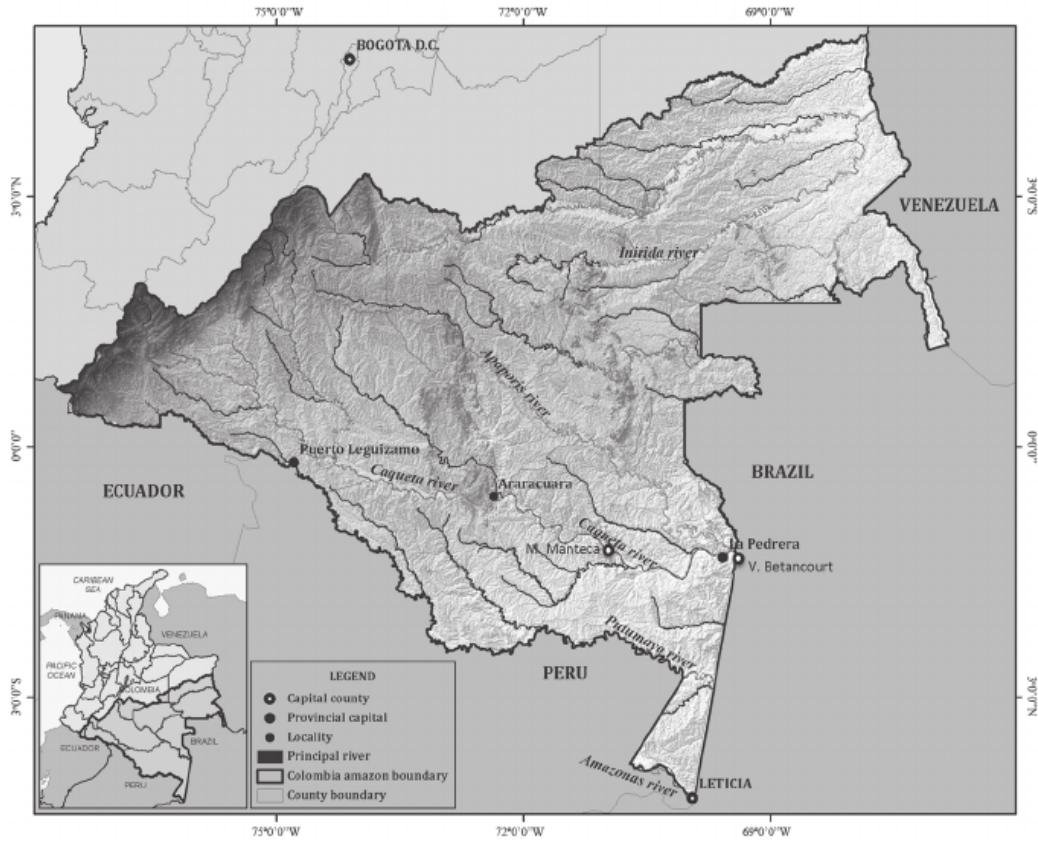
The reality of the petroglyphs is considered by the Yucuna people as a sacred place. It is a place where sacred Yucuna mythological heroes passed by, creating a sacred tribal mythology that is performed during a sacred ritual of Yurupari. The women cannot ever visit this sacred area. Also, the boys who did not pass through initiation rites cannot visit or come close to a sacred site. There is a Yucuna tribal consistency between the petroglyphs, the myth, and the ritual.

On the rocks of the water rapids from the Miriti River are more petroglyphs related to Yucuna mythology and rituals. Some Yucuna informants indicate that some of the decorative elements found on the Miriti water rapids (See Petroglyph # 3) are decorations found on the Yucupari flutes used during the initiation ritual. In many cases, the petroglyphs from the Miriti make it difficult to interpret the meaning without familiarity with local mythology.

The primary goal of this paper was to present the situation of archaeological investigations in the Colombian part of the Amazon and the significance of the sacred petroglyphs from the Miriti River in the understanding of the Yucuna culture. The archaeological investigations in the Colombian Amazon have been sporadic and without any general project. In this study, I have shown that ethnographic data serves to decode archaeologically significant sacred petroglyphs. As it was possible to see, the petroglyphs from Miriti, a Yurupari myth, and the ritual were critical elements in the process of establishing the sacred site of the Yucuna community.



Petroglyph # 3



Map 1

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ŚWIĘTE MIEJSCA AMAZONII

Streszczenie

Region Amazonii był badany przez różne dyscypliny naukowe i z różnych perspektyw. Naukowcy przeanalizowali organizację społeczną, kosmologię, mitologię, adaptacje ekologiczne i ochronę tropikalnych lasów Amazonii. Jednym z obszarów, które nie zostały wystarczająco uwzględnione, są badania archeologiczne świętych miejsc Amazonii. Dlatego jako temat tych badań wybrano obecność świętych petroglifów w Amazonii Kolumbijskiej. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą przedstawienia stanu badań archeologicznych w kolumbijskiej Amazonii oraz znaczenia świętych petroglifów dla naszego zrozumienia kultury Indian Yucuna. Badania te wykazały, że dane etnograficzne są kluczem do odszyfrowania ważnych archeologicznie świętych petroglifów.

Słowa kluczowe: petroglify; Amazonia; Yucuna; mit; rytuał; święty; etnografia.