
Amazon Women

It is not by chance that femininity is linked to nature, to the origins and to mystery. Women are those who make life, suckle the species, communicate oral tradition and are the jealous guardians of secrets.

When the conquest of El Dorado started, the great boa woman meandered from the memory of time through the Amazon forest. She was the cosmic serpent, the great river with her long and enormous arms of water, with her quiet havens and warm and fertile lagoons.

She told her stories to another great Lady, the Jaguar. To the mistress of lands and trees, of monkeys, tapirs and elks. The Powerful One, the one who gave birth to yopo, to ayahuasca and curare [native plants with special attributes], the mistress of the smell of cinnamon. Together they sent out the message to conceal the splendid cities imagined by Pizarro or Orellana, the golden thrones dreamt of by Vasco Da Gama, the precious stones sought by any other wealth-thirsty Spaniard. They disguised the ispingo [precious wood tree] with mantles of moss and orchids, they hid their children and with the sound of the manguare [drum], they called for the way to be closed to strangers.

Orellana and his men told about tall and strong women, armed with bows and arrows, with massive stone maces and thorny trunks that threatened them from the banks of the great river. These women commanded –so they say– many warrior men. One of them was taken prisoner by the Spaniards, and after questioning him (?) they learnt of the power of these fearful women. They came from over sixty villages, where men were their servants and slaves and they were only allowed to approach them to fecundate them. The man also told them that in their vagina inhabited the many sharp-toothed piranha and if they possessed a woman without her consent, this meant the most effective and painful castration.

The hallucinations and weariness of the Conquistadores, after weeks of terror, mosquitoes and fevers, within the unknown world of the jungle, was linked to the stories and threats of the indigenous man who, to keep them away from his village and the Indian women, did not spare imagination in his stories, told in an unknown language and receiving the creative input of the translator.

Thus was born the myth of the Amazon Women, very similar to Greek mythology but with the “savageness” attributed to the Indigenous people. The myth gave a name to the enormous river and to the surrounding forest.

Beyond the myth and the legend, the Amazons, the women who live in the basin, have been warriors, defenders of the malocas [round houses], and those mainly responsible for conserving the descendents of a people condemned to genocide and systematic disregard. In lullabies and in parsimonious stories to calm fear, they whispered in the ears of their children the history of their people, their origins and values. They taught their descendents to love the great spirit of the forest, while making the thin clay vessels or crushing yucca to make cassava. They showed them the difference between the leaf with serrated edges that kills and the one that is almost exactly like it, that

cures. They instructed their sons on how to guard the fire on their long walks and their daughters to hide the seeds in the folds of their bodies, to plant them in propitious ground when they had finished running away from the usurpers and were deep in the forest.

Thin, small and smiling, only armed with a malicious grin, they disarmed the friars and missionaries with their cross and dressed the cosmic serpent with Mary's mantle. And when it was time to fight cruelly or to poison the water, they did so. When it was time to leave their children in safer hands they did so, shedding no tears, in the hope of saving what was left of their ethnic group.

They were easy prey to slave traffic, to the dogs trained to leave them with no faces, to the lascivious Conquistadores, priests and settlers, to flu and smallpox, but even so, they continued singing to their gods and to their avenging spirits. They lost their husbands, their grandfathers and grandchildren, but continued giving birth to remain in the memory.

They also bled the rubber tree so that the milk –turned into tokens to buy at the rubber-tappers shop– would feed their children. They washed gold and broke rocks looking for onyx and diamonds to fill the chests of the great miners. They planted coca and chose the best leaves to swell the bank accounts of the Capos.

Today their skin is sore from the contact of the mist from crop spraying and the water contaminated by oil and gold exploitation poisons their body; they continue bearing children to resist usurpation.

Today they are the organizers, the teachers, the Indigenous leaders. Today they continue to be the mothers of knowledge, life, continuity, the guardians of the past. The great Amazons.

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