Localization, history and ecological setting of the People of the Centre

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This document contains basic information and some bibliographical references regarding the localization, history and ecological setting of the People of the Centre. It is a preliminary version.

1. The setting

The North West Amazon is one of the world’s most diverse areas in various respects. Its diversity in botanical and zoological species correlates with a diversity in languages and cultures. Geographically, this region is characterized by a generally flat landscape covered by lush rainforest, drained by numerous small rivers which feed into several large rivers that originate in the Andes and feed into the Amazon, still over 3,000 kilometers away from the Atlantic Ocean. With respect to its human population, the North West Amazon is characterized by a large number of small ethnic groups, often numbering no more than a few hundred. These groups are remarkably mobile, some of them still nomadic, often traveling long distances. A linguistic map of this area truly resembles a patchwork of languages belonging to a number of different linguistic families. These include representatives of some of the larger South American language families, such as Arawak and Carib, as well as a number of smaller language families that are confined to the region, such as the Witotoan languages. In addition, the area is characterized by a large number of isolate (or unclassified) languages, such as Andoke. Within this general setting, there is a definable cultural complex consisting of a number of indigenous cultures that refer to themselves collectively as the People of the Centre. Their original habitat was between the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers in South East Colombia (see Map 1), but an important number of them has been relocated to North East Peru (Map 2, see next section).
2. Recent history

The current precarious language endangerment situation is in part a result of the genocide events during the period that was euphemistically termed Rubber Boom. Starting in the late 19th century, rubber gatherers began to intrude into the traditional territory of the People of the Centre. The most powerful and notorious rubber company, the Peru-based Casa Arana, in effect enslaved the indigenous population in a system that was barely disguised as an exchange of rubber for machetes, axes, pots, etc. (see Casement 1998 [1909] for detailed documentation). The People of the Centre suffered a tragic demographic decline as a result of the atrocities committed by the Casa Arana, which included torture and deliberate murder. Casement (1998 [1909]: 322) estimates that at least 30,000 lives had been lost up to 1909. Around the same time, their population was estimated by Whiffen (1915: 59) at about 15,000 Witotos, 15,000 Boras, 2,000 Ocainas, 2,000 Muinanes, 1,000 Nonuyas, 1,000 Resígaros, and 10,000 Andokes. By the 1930s, the total number of members of these groups was diminished to a total of a few thousand (Paredes Pando, et al. 1979). When in the early 1930s the Colombian government reclaimed the territories to the North of the Putumayo river that the Casa Arana had been operating in, the Peruvian rubber gatherers relocated their indigenous work force to Peruvian territory to the South of the Putumayo river. During this operation, almost all Nonuyas drowned in a shipwreck (see Echeverri and Landaburu 1995). In the 1930s, a few hundred Boras, Witotos, and Ocainas were re-settled along the Ampiyacu River and its tributary, the Yaguasyacu, in Northern Peru. Among these, there was one woman speaking Resígaro. Before she died in 2006, she passed her native language on to her daughters and a son, who are the only other remaining mother tongue speakers of that language.
3. Principal ecological characteristics of the habitat of the people of the centre.

The traditional territory of the people of the centre is located in the North East of Amazonia, in the transition between upper Amazonia with Guyanese influence and lower central Amazonia at a height of 150 to 200 meters above sea level. It basically corresponds to the interfluvium between the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers (between 1 and 2 degrees South Latitude). To the east it borders with the Bernardo River (affluent of the Caquetá) and the Pupuña River (affluent of the Putumayo) at about 70.5 degrees W; in the west it extends towards the upper part of the Cará-Paraná River watershed (affluent of the Putumayo River) at about 74.5 degrees W longitude. Its approximate extension is of 6 million hectares and it largely coincides with the Predio Putumayo indigenous reservation, in Colombian territory (FPR 1999).

The average annual temperature is 25.5 degrees centigrade with little variation between months and about 10ºC of maximum range between day and night (minimum of 22ºC, maximum of 32 ºC). Annual precipitation is 3.200 mm, although in one sector of the Cahuinarí watershed precipitation can reach 4.000 mm, this being the highest precipitation registered in Amazonia except for the area of the Andean foothills. There is no pronounced dry period, although at the beginning of the year the climate is somewhat dryer than during the rest of the year.

During the months of January, February and part of March, precipitation is inferior to 150 mm (up to 20 days without rain) whilst in the following months it is superior to 200mm, May being the rainiest month with 350 mm (no more than 8 days without rain) (Neyra et al. 1996).

The general topography is relatively flat although some hills emerge such as the Cerro de la Fariña and the Cerro Maine Hanari, rocky relicts from the extreme south of the formations from the Paleozoic and Precambric of the Guyana Shield. The rest of the area corresponds to the sedimentary plain of the inferior and superior Tertiary of Amazonia, mainly composed of leached clays and quartz sands.

It therefore includes poor soils, with a preponderance of sand in the most undulating sectors (high tierra firme) and a domination of clay in the flatter sectors, where soils are relatively less poor (low tierra firme). These two physiographic types never flood. In contrast, the alluvial plains that extend along the Caquetá, the Putumayo and minor rivers are flooded during almost five months of the year (May to the beginning of September). These zones (rebalses) cover less than 10% of the region (IGAC, 1999).

The two main rivers (Caquetá and Putumayo) have their origin in the Andean range and are northern affluents of the Amazon river. They have been catalogued as white water rivers with a relatively high intrinsic richness. The Bernardo, Cahuinari and Aduche rivers (affluents of the Caquetá) and the Pupuña, Igara-Paraná and Cara- Paraná rivers (affluents of the Putumayo) are clear to turbid water rivers. The suspended materials correspond to ancient clays and therefore their intrinsic richness is low (Walschburger et al. 1990). A notorious characteristic is the large complex of black waters oxbow lakes (formed by ancient meanderings) of the Cahuinari watershed, habitat of great importance for various species of turtles and caimans (Hildebrand et al. 1997).
The region is mainly covered by well-developed humid tropical forests in a good state of conservation. The low tierra firme forests present one of the highest diversities of trees in the world with 243 species per hectare (Duque et al. 2003). In this kind of forest and in the areas surrounding the rivers, human settlements are found and it is the area that is most used for agricultural activities, hunting and gathering. The high tierra firme forests are less diverse than the previous ones and are mainly used for hunting purposes. The indigenous inhabitants extract numerous products from the floodable forests such as rods, vines, lianas and poisons for fishing and bark for dances and rituals. Of almost 1000 tree species sampled by Sanchez et al. (2001), in these three forest types, 84% are used for some purpose by the indigenous inhabitants.

Other types of vegetation, which are more localized and with a reduced extension, are palm forests and savannahs associated with the ancient hills. The former, which grow on flooded organic soils, are dominated by the canangucho (Col.) or aguaje palms (Pe.) (Mauritia flexuosa), with a major fruiting period in August, and are special places for hunting tapirs, danta (Col.) or sachavaca (Pe.) (Tapirus terrestris) during that time of the year. The savannahs are an important source of medicinal plants and are considered sacred places. Within these, the savannah of the Upper Cahuinarí, the traditional habitat of the Muinanes, has the largest extension.

In the entire region, and especially in the Cahuinarí river watershed, there are numerous salt licks salados (Col.) or colpas (Pe.), places in low tierra firme forest with a high concentration of certain salty substances and fine clays (Lips et al. 1991). These are visited by numerous animals (tapirs, primates, parrots, amongst others) during certain times of the year and are considered to be mythological places by the indigenous inhabitants: it is prohibited to make settlements close to them and there are ritual restrictions for hunting activities (Wilms 2001).

The main mammals consumed by the local inhabitants are the tapir, two species of wild boar (Tayassu tajacu; T. Peccari), two species of deer (Mazama americana; M. guazoubira) and three species of rodent borugo (Col.) or majás (Pe.)\(^1\) (Agouti paca), the guara (Col.) or aúñje (Pe.) (Dasyprocta fuliginosa) and the tintín (Col.) or punchana (Pe.) (Myoprocta acouchi). Various species of primates are also consumed such as the churuco (Col.) or choro (Pe.) (Lagotrix lagotricha) and the maicero (Col.) or fraile (Pe.) (Cebus appela). Occasionally they consume anteater bears (Myrmecophaga tridactyla) and armadillos (Col.) or carachupas (Pe.) (Dasypus sp.). Amongst the most commonly consumed birds are the gallineta or panguana (Col.) (Tinamus major; Crypturellus sp.), the paujil (Crax sp.), and pavas (Penelope sp. and Aburria sp.) (Walschburger et al. 1988).

In the dry season the meat and eggs of two species of turtles are consumed (Podocnemis expansa and P. Unifilis) and during the whole year, but occasionally, the meat of the terrestrial tortoise morrocoy (Col.) or motelo (Pe.) (Geochelone denticulata) (Hildebrand et al. 1997). The larva of various species of beetle are also consumed mojojoy (Col.) or suri (Pe.), which are gathered from fallen trunks of the milpeso (Col.)

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\(^1\) Note that most local names for Flora and Fauna have Tupian origin in the Colombian Amazon (through Nhengatú, the lingua franca used here up to the 19th century), while they typically derive from Quechua in the Peruvian Amazon.
or *ungurahui* (Pe.) palm (*Oenocarpus bataua*) and *canangucho* (Col.) or *aguaje* (Pe.) palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*).

The species of greatest mythological importance are the jaguar, locally known as *tigre* (*de mariposo*) (*Panthera onca*), the anaconda, locally known as *boa* (*Eunectes murinus*) and the harpy eagle, locally known as *gavilán* (*Harpia harpyja*).

The ecological characteristics of the current territory of part of the People of the Centre, in Northeastern Peru, are generally similar to those of their traditional territory. For the descriptions of this area, see the publications of the IBC (Instituto del Bien Común) in Lima and those of the Field Museum of Chicago.

**References**


