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The Encante as a World in Motion

When I retell Father Simón's story of the Indian chief whose wife takes up residence at the bottom of a lake to Tô Pereira one hot October morning some seven years after our first encounter, he listens intently.¹ "Well now, I hadn't heard of this chief before," he says as he glues a heel fashioned from a piece of used tire onto a well-worn shoe. "Still and all, the story sounds a lot like others that my Uncle Mané used to tell about the Encante. Yes, the story definitely sounds familiar. Except that I'm almost sure this priest of yours got a few things wrong."

"So, what did he get wrong?" I ask as Tô Pereira starts tapping nails into the heel.

"To begin with, the wife's lover was almost certainly not one of the chief's employees," he replies. "No, the lover had to have been an Encantado, almost certainly that dragon about whom he talks. Now then, I think that by a 'dragon,' that priest must have meant an anaconda. Because there are definitely no dragons at the bottom of the water—aren't now and never were. But there are, for sure, a lot of anacondas, and so, her lover was most probably one of the enchanted kind who was taking on the husband's form in order to sleep with the wife. And the baby, that was almost surely the Encantado's child."

"Well then, the husband was angry because he thought that the wife was cheating on him. And so, she called to the snake to come and take her and the child to the lake bottom. So then, the husband sent his best *sacaca* [a particularly powerful shamanic curer] to bring them back to earth, but getting someone back from the Encante is really very hard."

"Why is it so hard?" I ask.

"Because enchanted people almost never return," he answers matter-of-factly. "I don't think the Encantado really gouged out the baby's eyes; that's just a way of saying that the enchanted person no longer has eyes for this earth. But the storyteller was a priest, and priests don't like these

stories. They say that the Encantados are just superstition, or else creations of the devil. But this isn't true. The Encantados are a thing of nature. God made them, but it is the mother of the water who tells them what to do. And the Encante, it is always with us, but it remains beneath the water, and so, far beyond the reach of me and you."

Stories and Storytellers

Tô Pereira's nonchalant analysis of a native legend contained within a European chronicle written almost five hundred years before underscores the ties between stories of enchanted places told throughout much of the Amazon today and early tales of El Dorado that have come down to us through writers such as Father Simón.² His remarks also invite a comparison of the two cities, which, though both prodigiously rich, deeply mysterious, and maddeningly elusive, are by no means identical. In contrast to El Dorado, which remains the terrestrial home of the golden king (described as an Indian chief in some accounts), the Encante is almost certainly a present-day descendant of that city beneath the water whose existence Father Simón derided.³

The dangerous and alluring subaquatic world that appears in many contemporary Amazonian Indian myths links them to a number of the Encantado tales, which are told by Amazonians of mixed blood, and to the bits and pieces of indigenous stories that show up in the work of colonial writers such as Father Simón.⁴ The emphasis on aquatic seducers who appear sometimes as anacondas or freshwater dolphins, sometimes as human beings, also unites the two groups of narratives. So does the presence in the Encantado tales of personages from contemporary indigenous myths. Thus, the anaconda who is also the first shaman Unurato in Indian stories becomes the enchanted Norato or "Noratinho" (an affectionate diminutive) of *caboclo*, or mixed-blood, storytellers. The dolphin that, in animal form, seduces women in indigenous myths reappears in the Encantado stories as a handsome man in a straw hat who chases pretty girls around the dance floor.⁵

If the Encantado stories display obvious roots in the myths of indigenous Amazonians, they also reveal traces of European mermaid narratives, accounts of enchanted Moorish maidens (the *mouras encantadas*), and old Norse and Celtic legends about shape-changing walruses and seals. African influences are particularly obvious and important in the Encantado tales as well.⁶ Rich in regional variations, the tales may

incorporate additional borrowings from the many other groups—Syrians and Lebanese, Sephardic Jews, and Japanese—that have found their way into the Amazon over the past five centuries.⁷

Although by no means everybody in the Amazon tells these stories, they crop up throughout much of the region.⁸ Linked most closely to the countryside, the Encantado tales appear as well in the big cities, where steady streams of rural migrants come and go.⁹ Particularly in the poorer sections of the sprawling city of Manaus, where many of the female factory workers have husbands who remain in the countryside, from which they periodically return with a fresh supply of fish, manioc, and stories, accounts of the Encantados abound.

The ongoing influx of migrants into areas bordering new roads makes it more difficult than ever to say who is an “insider” and who is an “outsider” in today’s Amazon.¹⁰ Newcomers often learn of the underwater city and its enchanted residents through conversations with new neighbors and through children’s schoolbooks that present the Encantados as *folclore*—a word that, like the much used umbrella term *cultura*, often means quite different things to different people. The Encantados also make their presence known through “folklore” floats in the nationally televised Boi-Bumbá festival, which has become one of the Brazilian Amazon’s biggest tourist attractions.¹¹ They likewise are a recurring theme in the accompanying music that finds its way onto the radio, as well as countless tapes and CDs. “The Encante?” asks one young recent arrival from São Paulo. “Yeah, sure, it’s a magic city beneath the water. You haven’t heard the song?”

Cover illustrations for glossy tourist brochures and municipal telephone directories, the Enchanted Beings provide inspiration for poets, novelists, graphic artists, and composers.¹² They have served as the source of movies such as *The Dolphin* and *Where the River Runs Black*, both shot in the mid-1980s and readily available in many U.S. video stores.¹³ The Encantados even play a part in political campaigns, with at least one candidate, former Amazonas governor Gilberto Mestrinho, pointedly identifying himself with the powerful, if wily, Dolphin in a catchy, made-for-television jingle. (I use capitals to indicate enchanted, as opposed to nonenchanted, beings.)

Generally told second- or thirdhand (“my cousin says . . . ,” “my sister’s neighbor told her . . . ,” “everybody there in Terra Preta knows . . .”), accounts of the Encante may arise as part of ordinary conversation. “Dona Belita, wasn’t she the one whose daughter was carried off

to the Encante?" one person may ask another as both wait outside an itinerant dental clinic. "When was that? How did it happen?" a third person may ask, prompting a story that often proves to be the first of many. Not infrequently, tales of the Encante alternate with other accounts of extraordinary and not-so-extraordinary events that people exchange as they sit wedged into a stuffy bus that lurches through the city, or as they hunt for turtle eggs at midnight on a moonlit beach.

The stories' close association with things and places that play a fundamental role in daily life within the Amazon sets them apart from other, more universally familiar stories of ghosts, forest monsters, or UFOs. Even people quick to dismiss the underwater city as a fiction are apt to have seen the stretched skins of one or another great snake harpooned by fishermen or to have heard the telltale snorts of river dolphins coming up for air in the sultry stillness of the night. Likewise, almost everyone knows at least one person who claims to have seen the lights of a great city shining beneath a stretch of water over which big and little boats routinely pass. "I don't say that I believe in the enchanted city, but almost everybody here in Água Fria has seen lights beneath the river," one older man in a frayed straw hat says between puffs on a hand-rolled cigarette.

The fact that many different sorts of people tell—or at least recognize—these stories ("Yeah, my granddad always used to talk about these enchanted dolphins") ensures a wide diversity of attitude and opinion. A handful of the tales about enchanted cities and enchanted beings are firsthand testimony. "You know, I once talked with an Encantado on the beach there in Campo Grande," an old woman may half-whisper, smoothing back a wisp of silver hair. "Me, yes, I can say that I have been to the river bottom," a young man may confess with a mixture of embarrassment and defiant pride.

Even those storytellers who recount events to which they claim no personal relation may have firm opinions about the stories' truth. While some people treat the underwater city as an obvious reality, many others profess genuine doubts about its existence or describe the stories as "just something I have heard." Still others dismiss the tales as outright fabrications, and some speak of the Encante as something that could or should exist. For instance, Tô Pereira's eighteen-year-old granddaughter Lucinha, a first-year university student in Manaus who speaks casually of ozone layers and habitats, rolls her dark eyes at his stories of enchanted snakes and dolphins. She nonetheless grows serious when I later

ask if the Encante is just make-believe. “No, no,” she says. “I think that there must be something there beneath the water. These scientists who come here with all of their fancy equipment leave empty-handed, and yet, before we know it, they are back once more. So, there has to be something at the river bottom that they really want. But these old stories that my granddad tells, I think that they are saying that the river is home to mysteries that have been ours forever and that no one can ever carry off.”

The Encante and El Dorado

The supreme wealth and the stunning artifice of the Encante cannot help but recall El Dorado. Not only are the streets paved with silver, gold, or diamonds and the roofs made of gold or crystal, but the Encantados eat off plates of precious metal arranged on gleaming trays. The Encante’s aura of mystery, its near-at-hand yet elusive nature, and its enormous transformative potential are likewise reminiscent of the golden city.

A close cousin to the Tupi Indian “Terra sem Mal,” or “Land without Evil”—an ideal place that still inspires periodic peregrinations among some indigenous peoples—the Encante is the epitome of earthly wealth. “It is just like this world, only richer,” Tô Pereira explains as he works at his old black sewing machine. Storytellers often compare the enchanted city to Manaus or Iquitos, Rio de Janeiro or Lima, but on a grander scale. “Each of the Encantados has a house as big as the president’s palace in Brasília that you see on the TV,” adds Tô’s friend Raimundo, who has come to borrow the battered saxophone with which Tô still occasionally performs at country dances.

A young woman who is pounding laundry soap into a mound of shirts at the river’s edge in Zé Açu, a hamlet near Parintins that was a thriving Japanese jute colony in the 1930s, confirms the theme of the Encante’s similarities to—yet wondrous improvements on—earthly cities. “Everything that we have here, they have there,” she asserts. “Streets and houses, saints’ days, dances that go on till sunrise, even policemen to keep everyone in order.” The residents of the Encante eat the same foods as people do on earth, but they eat more, and more often. Although the Encantados, like the storytellers, sleep in hammocks, they trade the usual rough cotton for smooth, cool silk “all embroidered with little flowers in gold thread.” As within Amazonian homes, which nor-

mally shun interior doors in favor of cheaper, cooler curtains, the palatial homes of the Encante employ gold and silver sheets as room dividers. “So then,” continues the young woman, waving a soapy hand to emphasize her words,

there is no difference between the Encante and this world. It’s just that everything is easier. There, there are no insects to destroy crops, no ants to carry off the seed that has just germinated. There, nobody comes to burn down the forest where people hunt in order to make room for his cattle, no one appears with a big boat to haul away the poor man’s little fish. And the houses, look, the houses have all sorts of pretty things. The hammock is of shiny cloth, the curtain [room divider] of fine gold. And so, while it’s very lovely, nobody finds it strange.¹⁴

The embroidered hammocks and the gleaming room dividers confirm that the Encante, like El Dorado, is distinguished as much by its artifice as by its riches. Although forged entirely from naturally occurring substances (no plastic plumbing or steel drains in its silver-shingled houses), the underwater city reveals a high level of craftsmanship. Even its peach palms, guavas, and towering Brazil-nut trees, which bear real fruit, stand in perfect rows, in contrast to the tangled forest that surrounds many storytellers’ homes.

The aura of mystery that pervades the Encante also recalls the golden kingdom. Much like the man from Água Fria who claims to have seen the play of lights beneath the water, people may describe hearing the cries of children, the slap of washboards, or the raucous barking of a dog. “This is what they say,” Tô’s young assistant Gerineldo tells me. “I myself have heard strange noises, but I can’t say what they were.”

Situated beneath a river that often laps at people’s doors when it does not wash away their houses, the enchanted city is nonetheless customarily off-limits to humans. According to Tô Pereira, entrance to the Encante is strictly by invitation. Although shamans regularly make their way to the river bottom, the underwater city and its inhabitants remain close, yet out of reach.

The following speaker, however, a laundress in the outskirts of Porto Velho in Rondônia, is one who does not find the Encante to be inaccessible. Rather, like the pursuers of El Dorado, she blames a series of exterior obstacles (the wind, the darkness of the night) for her failure to apprehend the strange and marvelous couple she and her brother once saw walking on a far-off stretch of sand.

We had gone to hunt turtle eggs that night, me and my brother. I was ten, I think; he was, perhaps, twelve. The night was very dark. I still remember how dark it was. But the stars shone out like tiny campfires and even the water seemed to glow. We kept on hunting [for the eggs]. We had been hunting for at least two hours when we saw a pair in the distance, at the island's point. A young man and a young woman, both very blond; their hair shone like gold in the moonlight. So then, my brother said to me, "Ah, these aren't people from these parts." We ran after them, shouting and shouting, but the wind was strong and they gave no sign of having heard. And, little by little, the night closed in around them until we could no longer see a thing.¹⁵

Finally, the vast and elusive riches of the Encante, like those of El Dorado, initially seem to invite transformation. A single crystal pebble from the river bottom is enough to make a person comfortable for life. "I know a man there in Nhamundá who once found a stone from the Encante in the belly of a fish," reports Tô Pereira's burly cousin Paulo, who has come to town from the interior to collect the two sacks of fertilizer and bottle of cow vaccine that a local politician had promised him in exchange for his vote. "Ah, who doesn't dream of that! Today that fellow has a stucco house with three rooms, a backyard full of chickens, and a fishing boat with a new motor that my cousin says is a real beauty."

Even while the similarities between the Encante and the golden kingdom are multiple and obvious, however, they often prove superficial. Despite regular references to "*the* Encante," there are myriad enchanted places. "There's an Encante in the river close by São José dos Lagos," a person may say, "and another not too far from Japuri-Mirim." As much a state of being as an actual entity, the Encante is as diffuse and changing as El Dorado is emphatically singular and concrete. Supremely mobile, the Encante can disappear in a twinkling before popping up anew in the same or a totally different place. Tô Pereira's friend Raimundo, dressed one morning in a bright plaid shirt given to him by an Italian missionary ("It was free, but it's quite ugly"), describes how he once strung up his hammock on a beautiful white island, only to narrowly escape a midnight drowning when the island began to sink. "It happened this way," he remembers:

I was dead tired; I only wanted to sleep. And so then, I came across that island in the middle of the Amazon. An island of coarse white sand, with many trees and lots of animals to hunt, everything very pretty. I thought it strange that I had never noticed it before, but I was too tired to think twice. I hung my hammock between two mango trees full of fruit and went to sleep. So

then, there around midnight, I was awakened by a great noise. And I saw the island sinking, it was heading toward the river bottom. Heck, how I jumped up! I grabbed my knapsack, I leapt into my boat, and rowed and rowed. And when I looked back, I saw only the tops of those trees to which I had tied my hammock. The hammock remained behind, also an almost brand-new cooking pot. Because that island was enchanted; it wasn't of this earth, you see!¹⁶

Even though El Dorado always turned out to be more than just temporarily elusive, its pursuers continued to hope that they would one day reach its gates. Such hopes are harder to pin on a fundamentally elusive Encante. Not only does the enchanted city keep floating off to new locations, but its very substance keeps dissolving into the thick river mist.

The Encante's profoundly counterfeit nature is particularly clear in stories about enchanted Dolphins of both sexes who seduce human beings with riches that soon turn into something else. One woman with a shiny gold tooth—a present from a miner boyfriend now far away in Suriname (“That’s where there are fortunes to be made, and I hope that he can give me a whole mouth full of gold before his luck runs out there”)—recalls a story she once heard from her grandmother in a small community not far from Santarém. “In the past,” she says,

the Encantados used to come to all the country dances. Today, no, people go to the clubs to hear disco, and so these sorts of things are far less common. But back in the old days, cases like this used to happen all the time.

So then, my grandmother always used to tell about the Dolphin who made a habit of chasing the prettiest girl in a place. You’ve heard this story, haven’t you? Well, this Dolphin was a real scoundrel, he would always appear in the country dances, he would dance all night. Then, he would give lots of presents to the girl and later, when he saw that the others were no longer watching, he would show up in her hammock. It’s just that the next day, the diamond which he had given her would become an ordinary stone. And the pockets full of dollars that he’d left her would turn into seaweed. The golden necklace would turn into a water snake. Now then, the real remembrance with which he would leave her would only show up nine months later!¹⁷

In contrast to accounts of El Dorado, which render an alien nature familiar through the process of fragmentation and containment, stories of the Encante emphasize its fundamental strangeness even while asserting its proximity, when not its outright permeability. Despite their access to prodigious riches and their own immense powers of transformation, the denizens of the river bottom kingdom are not giants, but rather, integral parts of a world in constant motion. More protean than the

Greek god Proteus, who eventually tires of metamorphosis and surrenders to his pursuers, the enchanted beings never seem to weary of their shape-shifting ways.

Coated from head to foot in gold dust, the golden king looks “as resplendent as a gold object worked by the hand of a great artist.”¹⁸ And yet, while his gleaming epidermis sets him apart from other monarchs, it does not challenge any physical law. Likewise, despite El Dorado’s extraordinary treasures, it remains very much a kingdom of this world. To arrive there may be difficult, but it is not—at least in theory—physically impossible. The Encante, in contrast, presents a series of direct challenges to natural laws, though these challenges fail to impress many of the storytellers. (“How do people breathe beneath the surface of the water? Oh, the Encantados give them a device to put in their noses,” one young man says matter-of-factly.) Nonetheless, these same storytellers may insist on the Encante’s fundamental mystery. “But that’s the whole point of these stories,” a heavily perfumed Lucinha explains as she waits for her boyfriend, Davi. “Because the world beneath the river is very different from our world, so that even though they look like us, they can never be the same.”

Unlike El Dorado, which prompts fears that prove illusory, the Encante asserts human limits in the face of an often overpowering nature. Although individual human beings regularly enter into temporary alliances with the Encantados, there is no hope of totally knowing nature, let alone producing a Batesian “glorious new race under the Equator.” Raimundo’s tale of the Encantado who assumes the form of a child’s mother to rob the woman of her baby and Tô’s story of the Dolphin who assumes the form of a man’s best friend in order to seduce his wife emphasize the enduring alienness of a natural world that regularly insinuates itself into the lives of individual humans.

Whereas accounts of El Dorado stress the riches that lie just out of reach, the real point of Encante tales is the only partially penetrable nature at the heart of everyday existence. Thus, while Lucinha initially does no more than laugh when I ask what her grandfather means when he says the Encante is “another world, another planet,” she abruptly returns to my question later. “I think he means that we live among things that we cannot understand no matter how hard we try to do so,” she says. “Because the Encante is right here, beneath the surface of the river, but in some ways, we know no more about it than we do about the moon or Mars.”

At first glance, the Encante, like El Dorado, reveals an immense transformative potential. However, it is almost always the Encantados who do the transforming, they who carry off individual men, women, and children to the river bottom, where the abductees quickly proceed to grow gills that will impede their return to land. Although the man in the following story succeeds in reaching the underwater city, he finds that he cannot return to earth once he has seen his fill. The storyteller, one of Tô Pereira's neighbors, tells the tale to her grandson, who listens, wide-eyed. The "Sea Horse" to which the woman refers is no miniature marine animal, but a large white stallion that thunders off with his elated rider into the river's depths.

So then, that man wanted to see the enchanted city—so beautiful, so mysterious, so rich, ah, so very rich! He did everything he could to get there, but without success. Until he finally succeeded in mounting one of these Sea Horses. And off they went to the Encante. There, the man was astonished. Because the houses of the river bottom are of real silver. And the roofs are made of lightning stones [aerolite, stony meteorite], and those shaman's crystals that they call *urutacu*. So then, every day, he would mount the Sea Horse and they would go for a ride. And things went on like this, every day another ride. Until one day, the man suddenly felt homesick for his wife and mother and his newborn son. So, he said, "Let's go, Sea Horse! It's time for me to return." But the horse had disappeared. He called and called to it, but it was nowhere to be found. So then, the man had no choice but to remain there in that city—so rich, so lovely, but so far away, my heart, my pretty little bird, so very far away from here.¹⁹

The transformations that the Enchanted Beings effect may enrich particular humans. A tone-deaf man whom they whisk off to the river bottom may return a consummate musician. The shy and awkward teenager at whom pretty girls laugh may come back an accomplished healer over whom the same girls quarrel. Nonetheless, it is clearly the Encantados who select the human objects of these metamorphoses, not the human beings themselves. Those men and women who attempt to effect their own sorts of transformations almost always fail. Although people may succeed temporarily in spiriting off a pocketful of crystals from the river bottom, these usually turn into stones or worthless glass before the adventurer can exchange them for something of lasting value. Should the fisherman accustomed to bringing home whole boatloads of giant, bony-tongued *pirarucu* from a particular lake or river suddenly incur its enchanted owners' displeasure, he is almost sure to find himself with an empty boat.

Blurred Boundaries

Consummate impersonators, the Encantados are definitely not human. Nonetheless, particular Enchanted Beings often seem far more like people than does El Dorado's golden king. The fact that the Europeans' interest in the king seldom went deeper than his gleaming skin underscores his identity as a mere embodiment of gold. In contrast, at least some of the Enchanted Beings are individuals who display a range of emotions, including envy, greed, remorse, and compassion. While some Encantados are remote and largely faceless, others possess distinctive personalities and even proper names. "That Dona Julita!" exclaims one older woman seated behind a plastic tub of shrimp in the marketplace. "She always shows up on the beach near the Mocambo, she says things to the young men that encourage them to sweet-talk the young women, ah, she's a real matchmaker!"

Sometimes, the normally untrustworthy Encantados appear as role models, thereby converting the Encante into a foil for human societies and underscoring a recurring theme of justice and injustice in these stories. "Down there in that city of theirs, no one ever goes hungry," one thin young woman says as she presses a piece of bread into the hand of a whining child. "The Encantados always help each other. They don't fight, they don't steal, they are more human, more Christian than we here on earth."

Unlike those of their number who regularly cart off the objects of their desire to the river bottom, a handful of Enchanted Beings actually seek to abandon their enchanted status in favor of becoming human. Usually, these renegades turn out to be the offspring of one enchanted and one human parent.

"But why would the Encantados give up a life of luxury at the river bottom? Why would they want to lose their immortality?" I ask Raimundo, who has stopped by to give Tô Pereira a slab of silver fish. Raimundo considers my question as he carefully wraps the fish in a banana leaf and lays it in the shade.

"You've got me there," he says with a laugh. "Life is so much easier at the river bottom than it is here on earth. No one has to work, everybody eats well, and every night there are big parties with dancing until dawn. Me, I wouldn't leave that life to sit out on the river in the cold of night, surrounded by mosquitoes, waiting for a fish to bite!"

Tô joins in the laughter, but then looks solemn. "The Encantados are very rich," he says, "but they are prisoners of nature. Their servants

bring them fruit on silver trays from dawn to dusk, but they have no control over their own lives. We humans, now, even the poorest person has more liberty than they do, down there in that city all of gold. Because we are owners of our own lives, free to choose at every moment between good and evil, while the Encantados have no choice but to do as nature wills."

The handful of Encantados who make the decision to abandon their life of luxury beneath the river cannot perform this act of reverse alchemy single-handedly. In order to effect their own disenchantment, they must seek out a human ally willing to follow instructions. These instructions may require feats such as firing a shot into the forehead of a monstrous snake that suddenly looms up from the water, or breaking an egg or squeezing a lemon over this same monster's ugly head. Should the human partner waver, the Encantado will be forced to disappear beneath the waves. ("They say that his enchantment will be tripled!" exclaims Gerineldo, who had been listening quietly.)

The single most familiar story of disenchantment throughout much of the Amazon is almost certainly that of the great snake known as Cobra Norato.²⁰ Storytellers often begin with an account of the conflict between Norato and his twin sister, who has a nasty habit of capsizing boats and gulping down their passengers. After one particularly fierce fight in which the sister blinds Norato in one eye, he decides that he has had enough of the enchanted life. He seeks out a soldier whom he asks to help him in his quest for disenchantment. "And so when the third wave broke, Noratinho [in this case, an ironic diminutive] arrived in the body of that monstrous snake," explains Gerineldo's pretty young cousin Rosane, whose husband is off working in Manaus as a taxi driver while she tends to their newborn son.

The soldier was very frightened, he broke out in a cold sweat, he wanted above all to run away. But he screwed up his courage [literally, "he made a heart of his intestines"] and *pahhh!*—he shot that monstrous snake right in the middle of the forehead. With that, the snake's shell split wide open and that man, who was Noratinho, came walking out. Afterward, he gave the soldier an enormous diamond. And he went off to live in the interior near Alenquer. He still lives there with his wife and a whole raft of grandkids. He's old now, but he still shows up at all the country dances. My aunt heard him play the fiddle once and she says that she never heard anything like it. The dance to which he had been invited never ended before dawn.²¹

Although Rosane begins and ends with Norato, the intrepid soldier is an essential figure in the tale. His role is yet more pivotal in other

versions of the story, which exhibit an El Dorado-like emphasis upon material riches. Not only does the soldier dominate the action in these cases, but he succeeds in permanently transforming to his own advantage the normally elusive—and illusive—treasures of the river bottom. The following storyteller, a man nicknamed Charuto (Cigar, a reference to his stocky build and dark complexion), often works with Gerineldo's father, a modest *regatão*, or river merchant.²² Initially reluctant to tell the story ("I've forgotten half of what I knew—get Gerineldo's dad to tell you"), he quickly becomes engrossed in its telling, pausing in the midst of unloading bulging sacks of yellow flour to act out the events that he describes.

Heck now, I'm telling you, this fellow became stinking rich! Because he took the stone from the river bottom which Norato had given him and he sold it for a fortune. What a lot of money it was worth! [Here, he waves his hands enthusiastically.] So then, he went on to buy a whole herd of oxen, land, an apartment in Santarém and another in São Paulo, all furnished, with a uniformed doorman. He even bought himself a little airplane to go on joy rides. [More hand waving.] Now, they say that the shell is what is most valuable of all. Because it can cure any illness—cancer, hepatitis, evil eye, you see? They say that a shell like this is very dangerous. But, I swear to you that if I found myself nearby, I'd grab it. [Here, Gerineldo rolls his eyes, causing Charuto to repeat the assertion.] You can make fun if you want, boy, but it wouldn't scare me. And even if I were scared, I would grab it anyway.²³

In yet other versions of the Norato story, the former Encantado becomes one of that special class of shamanic healers called *sacacas*. Unlike the less powerful healers called *pajés* and *curandeiros*, these *sacacas*—like the “sorcerer” in Father Simón’s story of the little dragon—can travel at will to the river bottom.²⁴ Their ability to do so undercuts the elusiveness of the Encante and challenges the absolute power of the Encantados, whom they may urge (or even order) to cure a sick man or to return a kidnapped child. “Look,” says Raimundo, “I knew one of the most powerful *sacacas*, his name was Raimundo Buritama—Raimundo just like me, see? Now then, this man would go to the river bottom like you or I would go to Palmares or the Francesa [both neighborhoods of Parintins]. He’d light his cigarette and jump into the water. Minutes later, he would resurface, his clothes still dry, puffing on that cigarette!”

Because a healer on the order of Raimundo Buritama is so clearly extraordinary, his ability to penetrate the borders of the underwater city is

scant proof of its accessibility. However, other stories in which ordinary people manage to barge, bluff, or wheedle their way into the Encante present a more direct challenge to the idea of the underwater city as off-limits to human beings. In contrast to the fisherman who merely stumbles across a pebble from the Encante that he trades for a three-room house with a backyard full of chickens, the man in the following story, who unexpectedly finds himself at the river bottom, succeeds in raiding the Encante. Precisely because the happy ending is an exception to the rule in which such disrespectful actions are severely punished, his account underscores not only the permeability of the boundaries between the earth and the Encante, but also a similarity between stories of El Dorado and the Encante.

Well, when this fellow opened his eyes, he was in the Encante. He didn't know how he'd arrived there, he just saw that everything was different and very rich, you see? So, he quickly filled his pockets with those little stones. Then, he ran as hard as he could, he ran and ran and ran until he couldn't any longer. He closed his eyes and when he looked around him, he was again on the beach. And look, his pockets were full of sand, of pebbles, but there was one, just one of these pebbles that turned out to be an enormous pearl. And this pearl alone was enough to buy a boat that is the equal of a luxury hotel. Its name is *Enchanted City* and it makes the trip from Manaus to Belém every second Friday of the month. If you book passage on it, the crew will tell you the same story. That I guarantee!²⁵

In theory a source of danger to be avoided, the Encante in practice may be so attractive that people throw caution to the wind. ("They were so beautiful that I forgot to be afraid," confesses one man who describes his encounter on a shadowy beach with a trio of Encantados dressed in clothes the color of sea foam.) Moreover, the same Encante that exerts an ominous power in many stories may become the butt of jokes in others. Gerineldo loves to recount the tale of the man dragged off to the river bottom by a group of Dolphin policemen furious that he has wounded their chief with his harpoon.²⁶ Usually, this tale ends with a description of how the man returns to earth laden with gifts after he succeeds in healing the injured chief. Gerineldo, however, laughs delightedly at his own conclusion, in which the turtle-guide who extends his paw in a farewell handshake ends up in the soup pot. "You really think you're funny, don't you, Gerineldo?" scolds Lucinha, trying hard to frown while Tô Pereira shakes his head.

Ongoing Interchanges

The tenuous nature of the division between El Dorado and the Encante becomes obvious if one compares the Encantado stories with a number of contemporary Amazonian Indian accounts of shape-changers. The greater fluidity of boundaries in the native narratives indicates the Encantado tales' intermediary status between European and native Amazonian accounts. The presence of this third strand of stories also makes clear that even when the Encante provides a vivid contrast to El Dorado, the relationship between giant and shape-shifter is no simple, binary opposition. The boundaries between the Encantado stories and native narratives, and between these stories and accounts of El Dorado, are blurred enough to leave no doubt about the continuing interplay between various groups within and outside the Amazon.

Unlike giants, such as the golden king, who are content to strain the imagination, the Enchanted Beings actively transgress physical laws. Thus, while the native legend Father Simón incorporated into his own chronicle only hinted at an ongoing commerce between the world of human beings and another world beneath the water, these ties are far more explicit in Encantado stories in which Dolphins and Anacondas make love to men and women.

In the countless stories about amorous male Dolphins and insatiable females ("She was one hot dame!" one man who claims to have been pursued by a blond and blue-eyed Dolphin exclaims to a group of friends and neighbors), however, the Encantados inevitably take on human form before embarking on their escapades. In that way, they stand apart from indigenous Aquatic Seducers, who often retain their animal form during intercourse.²⁷ Frequently casual or even humorous descriptions of lovemaking between humans and Encantados undercut the seriousness of the fundamental unity that is the point of native myths. Different from the Encantado stories in their generally more self-consciously solemn tone, indigenous myths often reveal a somewhat different vision of the human relationship to the nonhuman world.²⁸ A contemporary Shipibo myth from the Peruvian Amazon, a piece of which appears here, offers an excellent example. The nephews of a woman hide on the riverbank and watch a dolphin emerge from the water, approach their sleeping aunt, and have intercourse with her.²⁹

When he was very, very close, the woman began to sleep—*hëén* [a Shipibo word for the heavy breathing indicating that someone has fallen asleep]. When the dolphin reached her, he entered her. The two nephews then began

to approach the copulating couple. The dolphin carried an *iscohina* [a ceremonial costume that involves a cotton poncho from which dangles a bunch of four bird feathers] around his dorsal fin. He wore it thus on his back as he entered the woman's mosquito netting. When he was leaving it afterward, one of the two nephews began to shoot arrows at him with his bow. The dolphin fell to the ground impaled. He struggled to raise himself on his ventral fins and crawled with great difficulty toward the lake. The other nephew then shot him with an arrow when he was very near to the port. Then he gave the dolphin a blow with his *macana* [presumably, a club]. The wounded dolphin managed nonetheless to crawl into the water and escape.

Mixed-blood storytellers often describe the Enchanted Beings as *mães*—an ambiguous term in that these “mothers” of the woods and waters can be either masculine or feminine in form.³⁰ However, despite the term’s implication of sexual duality, gender distinctions in the Encantado stories are very clear. My question as to whether a male Dolphin could be attracted to an adult man elicits gales of laughter. “The males are very macho” (*Os machos são bem machos*), Tô Pereira assures me as Lucinha coughs discreetly and Gerineldo snickers. The fixed quality of gender distinctions in the Encantado stories contrasts with the greater ambiguity of contemporary Indian myths, in which the Fish Woman may be at once the daughter of the Anaconda and one of the Anaconda’s many alter egos, which include the World Tree and the Cosmic Dragon. The presence of a serpent within her own vagina is just the most obvious proof of Fish Woman’s dual sexual identity.³¹

And yet, if the boundaries within the Encantado stories are generally more fixed than they are in native myths, there is at least one significant exception. Whites or gringos are almost always strongly negative personages in contemporary Indian narratives. In them, figures such as Cobra Norato exist in opposition to the whites.³² In the Encantado tales, the Enchanted Beings themselves may actually be whites.³³ The ensuing ambivalence that storytellers display toward these personages underscores the blurring of ethnic boundaries in much of present-day Amazonian culture.

In one Arapaço retelling of the Cobra Norato story from the Vaupés River basin, in the northwest Amazon, a shape-changing snake who lives in a house beneath the water seduces a woman whom he sees bathing in the river. The suspicious husband then posts a companion woodpecker in a nearby tree. When the snake arrives, the husband shoots the snake with a poison dart, fishes it out of the river, and cuts off its penis. Next, like the chief in Padre Simón’s story, he cooks the penis, which he then slips into the wife’s food.

Though the wife vomits upon learning what she has just eaten, she nonetheless gives birth to Unurato. While she goes on to take up residence within the river in the form of a huge *pirarara* (a bright red catfish), her son grows into an enormous snake who regularly attends parties on earth in human form. One day, he asks a white man to meet him at midnight on a beach and to hurl an egg at his head. The man, however, becomes afraid when he sees Unurato in the form of an enormous snake. Instead of following Unurato's directions, he shoots him. The snake skin falls into the water, and Unurato, suddenly bereft of his supernatural powers, has no choice but to remain in human form upon the beach.

Forced to labor for the whites who have been the cause of his misfortune, Unurato heads off for Brasília, where he gets a job as an ill-paid construction worker. After saving up enough money, he returns to Amazonia in the form of an enormous, brightly illuminated submarine crammed full of goods. The machines he has purchased allow the “snake-beings” called *wai-masa* to build an enormous city beneath the river, whose purpose is to bring renewed prosperity to the Arapaço.³⁴

This version of the Unurato story shares many features with *caboclo* accounts of Cobra Norato. Indeed, the majority of Encantado stories of the great snake are far closer to indigenous myths than they are to certain contemporary retellings of the Norato tale, such as one available in a glossy comic book.³⁵ The initial seduction of a human woman by a snake, the snake-child’s penchant for attending parties in human form, and Unurato’s instructions to a human regarding his fearsome appearance are key elements in both. While the sojourn in Brasília is almost certainly a recent Arapaço addition, the time-honored theme of a great Anaconda boat appears in many of the Encantado tales.³⁶ The single most important difference between the two concerns the gringo character, who appears in most Encantado tales as “a soldier” of indeterminate race, and as a faithful ally. This same figure betrays Unurato in the Arapaço story. Then too, although Unurato turns out to be the original ancestor of the Arapaço, the Enchanted Beings remain suspect and often treacherous figures in the Encantado tales.

The term *gringo* refers not just to white skin, but above all, to power over others. (A *casa de branco*, or “white’s house,” can just as well belong to a rich man with darker skin.) Some storytellers expressly compare the Dolphin to the old-style rubber barons who cruelly exploited rubber tappers, or to new-style production bosses who work their employees to the bone. “Look,” says one young woman who has lived all

her life in one rubber colony on the Juruá River. “The Dolphin is just like the owner of the rubber camp in my grandfather’s time. If one of his workers didn’t bring in enough rubber, he would have his hired thugs beat up the whole family. Today, the Dolphin is more like the factory owner, who doesn’t want to hear that a worker has a headache, who won’t let a mother leave her shift five minutes early to pick up a sick child.”

At the same time, however, that the Dolphin—unlike Unurato—is not to be trusted, he possesses tremendous healing powers. Not only are his cures powerful and certain, but, unlike expensive “drugstore medicines,” they are, as Tô Pereira says, “a thing of nature, and so, freely given.” In addition, the Enchanted Beings oversee an abundance of natural riches. While they may share these with human beings, they inevitably take their treasures with them when they pull up stakes. “The Encantados can be scoundrels, but they can also be good friends to us,” observes Gerineldo’s mother as she mashes a banana for the baby whose tiny toes he gently tweaks.

The Enchanted Beings also make life considerably more interesting. Frightening in their caprice, they nonetheless inject a note of the unexpected into an often grueling routine. “My mother knew a woman there in the interior who claimed to go to the river bottom every evening to dance with the Encantados,” Lucinha says.

By day, she was a laundress, she washed and ironed from dawn to dusk, but each night she would go to the Encante and dance away the night. My mother told her that she must be dreaming, that no one could go like that to the river bottom. But the woman talked in such detail of what she saw and did in that underwater city that one would almost think it was all true. And my mother says that once she saw that woman at dawn emerging from the river, fully clothed, completely dry, with a big bouquet of white, very fragrant flowers. And so, people still argue about what really happened. That’s why my granddad says that the Encante is the mystery of this earth.

At the same time that the Encantados are often cruel and deceitful, they evoke a fascination that few storytellers find themselves able to resist. The fact that the former governor of Amazonas was able to turn to his own advantage his critics’ negative identification of him with the lustful and deceitful Dolphin is a prime illustration. A barrage of ads that portrayed him as a strong leader capable of marvels offer vivid proof of this enduring ambiguity.³⁷ In this sense, the Encantado stories, with their grudging celebration of the gringo, offer a reverse image of early chronicles of El Dorado in which the native *dragoncillo* exercises

a perverse allure. In short, while there is no confusing the giant with the shape-shifter, the two are part of specific narratives that regularly intersect, and mirror each other, in many ways even as they rework similar elements for different ends.

Entangled Worlds

Tô Pereira's reinterpretation of my account of Father Simón's written version of an oral legend calls attention to the multiple overlappings between accounts of El Dorado and the Encante. The fact that Tô later goes on to repeat my version of Father Simón's account to Lucinha suggests that the native legend will continue to go through new permutations in the future. ("My granddad told me all about that chief who gave the snake to his wife for dinner!" she says to me a few days later with a twinkle in her eye.)

The contemporary quality of the Encantado stories, like that of native myths in which the snake-man Unurato goes on to become yet another faceless migrant to Brasília, resides partially in storytellers' insistence on the continuing presence of the Enchanted Beings in their own lives. It also owes to the storytellers' awareness of that larger world that presses in upon themselves and the Encantados. "Of course you won't find any sign of the Encante in the city!" exclaims Gerineldo's brother Pedro Paulo when I ask if he has heard reports of enchanted beings in Manaus. "Do you think that the Cobra Norato is going to rent an apartment and install a telephone? No, no, the Encantados aren't going to live in dirty rivers into which people throw old Coke bottles and all sorts of other garbage. They won't put up with a place all full of factory fumes where your eyes itch and burn any time of night or day. No, they like peace and quiet, they like to bathe in clear rivers and to stroll through the woods at dawn. You can still find a few here in the Aréia Grossa [a sandy stretch that was once the lonely outskirts of a rapidly expanding Parintins], but they're getting to be fewer and fewer as more houses crop up where once there was nothing except trees and sand."

For most people in today's Amazon, "El Dorado" is not some shining treasure trove, but rather, that tiny rural community in the Brazilian state of Pará where police gunned down a group of landless peasants in April 1996.³⁸ Talk of the tensions between El Dorado and the Encante therefore would have little meaning for them.

At the same time, however, that the storytellers would frown at terms

such as *giant* and *shape-shifter*, they are quick to note that their own conception of the Amazon and Amazonian nature is very different from that of most outsiders. Some are equally quick to see the Encantado stories as an expression of this difference. “Where you live, there are no Encantados,” says Gerineldo as we sit on a grassy knoll above the river, waiting for Charuto and his father to anchor the small wooden boat crammed with plantains and bulging burlap sacks. “But then again, there are hardly any anacondas. You don’t even have *pirarucu* fish. So, everything is very different, it is not like here at all.” The interest that such tales continue to excite in the people who hear and tell them (“Do you think these things are true?” storytellers often ask each other) is in part a tribute to the intriguing events that they describe. However, curiosity about the Encantados also attests to differing levels of awareness that these accounts express a vision of nature presently under assault from without.

Those Amazonians who reject the Encantado stories as mere superstition are usually well aware that the Encante represents another vision of the world. Their negative assessments of these stories often reflect their own desire to appear as rational and modern in outsiders’ eyes.³⁹ “In the old days, people were very ignorant,” one of Tô Pereira’s regular customers declares as he wraps her resoled sandals in newspaper. “We here in Amazonia lived at the end of the world. Today, no, we are more up-to-date, we know all about the greenhouse effect, biodiversity, and sustainable development. So, nobody talks anymore about the Encante, or the Encantados. Except, perhaps, my next-door neighbor, who likes to talk about how he once went to the Encante. But this is just a story; no one can breathe at the bottom of the river. We all know this very well.”

Some people do not reject the Encante so much as relegate it to a past fundamentally different from the present. In the stories I recorded, the differences in the actual narratives were often far less striking than were divergences in the commentaries surrounding them.⁴⁰ “The Encante comes from the beginning of the world,” explains one man who is waiting for Tô Pereira to repair the heel on his small daughter’s sandal. “It is the chaos on which Christ was able to impose order and only this little remnant remained there beneath the water as a reminder of the past.” “I don’t know if there is an Encante,” muses a lottery-ticket vendor who has stopped to drop off Tô’s weekly ticket. “But I am sure that there used to be one in those times before what they called ‘progress’ came knocking at our door.”

In many cases, the Encante becomes part of an era preceding large-scale deforestation and urbanization, a recent and yet mythic time when, supposedly, no one ever had the slightest trouble finding enough to eat.⁴¹ “There was still an Encante when my father arrived here in Tefé. But today it no longer exists, because it has disappeared with all the movement,” says one young man in the once-sleepy city now overrun by petroleum workers bound for a platform in the forest.

“These things of the Encante are from a distant past when the birds still used to speak with people,” Gerineldo asserts, mopping the sweat off his face as he prepares to close the shop for lunch. “Because long ago, in the past, the birds knew our language and we could speak their language too.”⁴²

“So when did the birds stop talking to people?” I ask him.

“Oh, at least twenty, maybe even thirty years ago,” he says. “In that time before people started burning down the forest and the Encantados had to leave.”

While some storytellers see the Encante as a Disappearing World on the order of Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes tropiques*, others attempt to understand it in terms of the new language of environmentalism that reaches even the most remote villages through TV or radio programs, as well as via children’s schoolbooks. (Today, even tiny rural communities often have a single television that runs on a generator that provides energy to the central square for a few hours every day.)⁴³ Often, the Encantados emerge in the new guise of environmental guardians and a sort of supernatural rain forest police who regulate resource consumption.⁴⁴ “The Encantados are the owners of everything in nature and they don’t let anybody mess with it,” explains one young woman who has slung her hammock beside mine on a crowded boat bound for the gold camps of the Madeira River. “They protect the forest, they don’t let people pollute the river or fish too much. And if somebody doesn’t respect nature, they give him a really hard time so that he learns not to do these things again.”⁴⁵

Other storytellers, including a number of Lucinha’s fellow university students, often make the same point in a more abstract way. “I don’t believe that there are anacondas that turn into boats,” says her boyfriend, Davi, an agronomy major whose high, straight nose has earned him the nickname “Índio.” “And I don’t think that dolphins go around getting women pregnant. But I do believe that people here have their own way of saying that humans have to respect nature, that if we continue to destroy the environment, everyone is going to suffer, that we Amazonians

will go hungry in a land of great abundance. And so, you could say that I almost believe in the Encante, because I am convinced that what these stories say about caring for this world of ours is true.”

In contrast to Tô Pereira, who shrugs diplomatically when I ask him what he thinks of Davi’s comment, Tô’s friend Raimundo bristles at Davi’s rejection of a more literal interpretation of the Encantado tales. “Your father, Davi, was born in the interior,” he says to the young man. “He fished and hunted in the woods and so, he knew a thing or two about the Encantados. You were born there too, and you’d still be there, fishing and hunting deer and tapirs, if your mother hadn’t moved you to the city after he got sick. Well then, what you know of the Encantados, you have learned from others. You aren’t your father, who once saw one face-to-face.”

Although Raimundo takes issue with Davi and rolls his eyes at non-colloquial terms such as *the environment*, he reserves his scorn for the outsiders who scoff at the Encantados as superstition while they mine the waters for fish in enormous trawlers. Davi joins Raimundo in expressing anger at their contemptuous attitude. “Perhaps I don’t believe in the same way that you and my father believe in the Cobra Norato,” he says to the older man. “But I never say that the Encante is a lie. It makes me angry to turn on the TV and to see only Indians and parrots on the programs about Amazonia. It makes me even angrier to hear outsiders say that we don’t know how to take care of nature when it is they who come here to steal our fish and cut down our trees.” The recurrent protest in these stories against humans’ injustices to one another, and against humans’ mistreatment of nature, also unites Raimundo and Davi.

“Master, I will show you where it lies,” one native said to the owner of a gold mine almost three hundred years ago when the owner asked the man to show him the location of El Dorado. “You will see it from afar, but you won’t be able to reach there because it has been enchanted by the ancestors.”⁴⁶ Only one of countless forms of popular expression in a vast and varied Amazon, the Encantado stories prompt multiple reactions. Nonetheless, the interchange between Davi and Raimundo underscores a larger vision of nature with deep roots in a centuries-old narrative tradition upon which both “insiders” and “outsiders” continue to draw.

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