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Self-Perception of Identity Unity Amid Diversity in A Murui/Uitoto Myth

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Abstract

The main objective of this article is to present the relationship among identity, language and genetics from a premise that considers the point of view of the participating group. The Murui/Uitoto indigenous people (in the Colombian Amazon) have had a self-perception of identity diversity, despite different linguistic groups and dialectal variations. In our western view, we need DNA testing to explain genetic bonding among indigenous populations, but they already have a self-perception of that unity amid diversity: this reality is reflected in a myth. The article will first present the myth and the background to understand the linguistic convergence areas; then, the context of the research with the Murui people in Caquetá (Colombia). The conclusions will explain the reasons for using this kind of presentation and will summarize how the aspects underpin identity self-perception.

Keywords: *Amazonian Tribe, Genetics, Linguistic Convergence Areas, Indigenous Identity, Uitoto / Murui Myth.*

Introduction

On December 20, 2022, some members of the University of the Amazon team visited chief Emilio Fiagama in his *maloca*[4] at El Manantial, on the outskirts of the urban area of Florencia (Caquetá). That day, he told us in detail the birth of the first humans, according to the tradition of the Murui people, commonly known as Uitoto. He did not begin the narrative directly; instead, we began by making a map with the rivers and the most significant locations. Therefore, when he shared the story, we already had a geographical reference of the locations of the various tribes inhabiting the Amazon. We will first present the narrative to highlight some relevant aspects throughout the article.

At the beginning, a hole was opened in the earth. It was like labor pain, like contractions. The first people emerged from there, the third humanity. There were two humanities before the third: When there was nothing created in the world, the first humanity was just voices, the ɨurukɨ jayagɨ; the second one was hybrids between humans and animals, the jagagɨ.

Humans are the hofore namakɨ, which means “people who live at home”, that is, humans, the third generation. The place is called Oyirifo or Komuyafo, which means “birth hole”.

This happened between 6:00 PM and 6:00 AM. We started going out in pairs with tails and navels, that is, with the umbilical cord. And there are two other characters in charge of cutting

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off the tails and navels: Mabɨ, the salamanqueja [gecko, a type of lizard], who carried a machete, kuefai; the other is Kuegoma, the wasp. Next to that hole there was a murky lake, Jorai U'ɨgoji, where all the cut-off navels and tails were thrown.

The navels and tails that were thrown into the lake became Agaronuyo boa. So, since we had just been born, there was nothing, nothing at all — no territory, no clothing, no food, not even language. One morning, the boa overflowed [floated]. There were nine groups watching, and each group expressed or asked. They exclaimed: "What is that?" because it was something strange for them. Then, they exclaimed in astonishment, and that is how the languages came out. One exclaimed: "Nɨpode"; another one said: "Mɨnɨka"; another one: "Mɨka" and the last one: "Bue". Those were the first words spoken, and they mean: "What is that?" There, the languages [dialectal variants] of the Uitoto ethnicity are born. We do not have a word to say "Uitoto". We say: "Nana daje kamunɨdɨkaɨ". We are all the same people, those who emerged from the Oyirifo or Komuyafo hole. The Muinane and the Bora also accompanied us there; they also emerged from the Oyirifo hole. There are other holes from which the other groups of the Amazon emerge. Everyone had white skin at that time; it changed color over time. You, white people, the "human eaters", "Nomaɨdi rɨaɨ komunɨdɨ" [he laughs], stayed that way.

Well, until that moment, none of us spoke because we did not know that we knew how to speak. It is like when you get scared and scream horribly. That is the first thing that comes to mind. In the same way, they saw that, and that is how the native language of the Uitoto people was born. And that is where nine variants emerged from the Uitoto people's way of speaking; today only four of those variants remain. Each group was named according to how they spoke. Those are the four dialectal variations today, stemming from the creation of humankind.

Then the feast came. Since there was nothing to eat, they were hungry, and the only creature they found was the boa, so it was for the feast. They took it out and began to tear it apart and roast it. Since they did not have either plates, forks or knives, they used some botanical samples to serve the food. For instance, now when they have meat or fish, they take either a leaf, a plate or a stick. The name of the clans arose from what they brought to eat. For example, she [pointing to one of the attendees] brought a milpez leaf to receive her portion, so they called her komainɨ; she brought a canangucha leaf, kuneni; another one brought a maraca leaf, mɨteni; and the teacher brought a caimo leaf, like my clan, jipikueni.

But there was one group missing, a group that looked for all kinds of leaves, and then they found a leaf like a snake: lanceolate, striped, elongated and painted, the jayoma clan. So, they are the snake clan. And that group, when they arrived, they only found the head of the boa. At that moment, they did not think about its value but about the hunger.

As you know, the boa's head has no meat. They threw it away and said: "We do not want that. We are hungry. Why are you giving us only bones?" They did not know that the power of the boa was there; they despised it because at that moment they did not think with their heads but with their bellies.

Then, they said: "We, the Jayobe clan, were in the underworld, that is, under the ground [just like the other groups]. We heard that in this area there is a lake with many fish. We are going to look for it". That lake is called Muidomene, which means *distant lake*. They all went to look for that lake for the Jayobe clan. They followed a route already established by other mythological characters: two beings that belong to the second humanity. They only had the information; they came with what they had heard and nothing else.

They arrived here [Caquetá region] during the time we call "royi" or *extreme cold* [Brazil frost season]. It lasts three days, with intense cold during day and night. Then, the sky and the earth got together and said: "We have reached the end of the world" because for us the world is flat and can be compared to the kneecap, like an arepa. They said that if we continue, we will fall [don Emilio points to his knee to explain]. So, a part of that clan stayed here, and another one settled here. Then, they heard that Royima, an important character who fertilizes all plants, called for the first dance, which he named Yuae Royizimui. He performed the first dance and named all living beings "nana urukɨ", so that they could receive that abundance.

A part of that clan said they were returning from where they came to reach the Muidomene lake, and some others said: "No, we stay here". The first dance was the one of the fruits; the dance has three stages to become Yuaɨ Buinaima. In the first dance (Yuaɨ Royizimui), no food is given, no ambil is given, nothing is given. Since the chief does not have anything, he tells them to bring seeds, fruits and hunting because he is just about to start. In the second dance (Yuaɨ Zagerani), food is given. In the third dance (Yuaɨ Buinaima), a lot of food is given because there is already production. The highest level is Nabedɨ Buinaima, and that happens when the chief has apprentices.

(Chief Emilio Fiagama, December 20, 2022; verification of words and details, June 18, 2023, and December 23, 2023)

The previous narrative introduces the central themes of this article: the reflection on self-identity from a common origin that includes other peoples, and how those humans, while speaking the same language, exhibit differentiated linguistic forms in dialectal variations. The narrative also outlines internal clan organization and briefly presents the diaspora movements, as well as the dance traditions, which are of great importance to this community.

The main objective of this article is to present the relationship between genetics and linguistics in a cultural group by recognizing that it is not univocal but depends on factors such as movement through territories and links with other human groups. The text will be organized in three sections:

In "Linguistic Context" we will delve into the region inhabited by the Murui people and the linguistic context of the Uitoto language. In "Territoriality and Movement" we will learn about movement through territories and links with other human groups in the Amazon region from ancient times to the present. We will follow the concept of *linguistic convergence areas* (Heggarty, 2020) for the case of the Murui people; that is, how this convergence does not depend solely on genetic factors but on historical situations experienced during the contact with other peoples (Barbieri et al., 2022). In "Context of the Research" we will show how a study, initially focused on scientific knowledge about genetics, relies not only on laboratory results, but also on social relationships reflected in family diagrams and interviews, to understand the relationships between peoples, the correlation between diseases and genes, and the possible correlation among genetic changes, geographic dispersion and linguistic changes. Finally, in "Conclusions", we will explain how the ideas of Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Smith, 2016) guided us to first consider the point of view of the indigenous population. We emphasize that indigenous identities do not depend on external recognition. They have had a clear self-identity since ancient times, so the myth reflects this thinking. It is not an isolated self-identity; on the contrary, it considers the relationships with other human groups that surround them in a vast territory. It also notes the internal dialectal particularities and recognizes that while there is linguistic variety, there is also cultural unity.

1. Linguistic Context

Chief Emilio Fiagama welcomed us to his *maloca* in December 2021, when the "Alianza" research team began its work in the region. This team is coordinated by Mabel Bohórquez, from the University of Tolima, in alliance with the University of the Amazon, under the guidance of Girley Collazos. The research project includes a component of genetic analysis of ancestry and diseases, in continuity with projects previously conducted by the University of Tolima with Colombian indigenous peoples such as the Wayúu and the Embera (Criollo-Rayo et al., 2018; Criollo et al., 2021). In the 2021 call, the research would also have a component in the cultural area, focusing on the Murui and the Korebajü peoples, with the participation of researchers such as Julián Mejía (in the field of linguistics), supported by Julieth Zapata, and Flor Ángela Buitrago in the field of anthropology), supported by the students Ana Plaza and Albeiro Sabogal. The University of the Amazon team started to work since January 2021; however, progress was slow due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We had to wait until December 2021 to carry out on-site approaches.

The Murui people, to which don Emilio belongs, have been historically known as "uitotos", "huitotos", or "wuitotos", due to the influence of the text *Voyages dans l'Amérique du Sud*, by Jules Crevaux (1883), who explored the Caquetá River in the company of Carijona guides, who referred to their southern neighbors as "uitotos" (Echeverri 2020, 20). As "huitotos", they appear in the *British Bluebook* written in 1912, in which Roger Casement denounces the activities of the Casa Arana. They are also referred to as "Uitoto" by other authors who made important contributions to the ethnography of this region in the early 20th century, such as *Zwei Jahre unter den Indianern. Reisen in Nordwest – Brasilien* by Theodor Koch-Grümberg (1909), and *Religion und Mythologie der Uitoto* by Konrad T. Preuss (1921 and 1923). This denomination persisted into the 21st century, as seen in texts like *Las palabras del origen. Breve compendio de la mitología de los uitotos* (Urbina Rangel, 2010).

In recent years, members of the community have chosen to identify themselves as *Murui*, although it is still common to hear the former term. Chief Emilio, for example, refers to himself as belonging to the Uitoto ethnic group. In this article, we will follow Alvaro Echeverri's suggestion: to refer to those people as Murui while maintaining the use of Witoto for the name of the linguistic family, one of many in the Amazon region (see Table 1).

Linguistic family	**Language**
Witoto	*Murui (formerly known as Uitoto)* *Ocaina* *Nonuya*
Bora	*Bora* *Miraña* *Féeneminaa (formerly known as Muinane)*
Western Tucano	*Koreguaje* *Siona* *Maihuna or Orejon* *Tama* *Secoya* *Macaguaje*
Tupí-Guarani	*Cocama*

Arawak	*Refigure*
Caribe	*Carijona*
Unclassified	*Andoke*
Unclassified	*Cofán*
Unclassified	*Tikuna*

Table 1. Languages of the Southern Amazon, Grouped Into Linguistic Families.

Source: Own elaboration, based on *Lenguas indígenas de Colombia, una visión descriptiva* (González de Pérez, 2000, pp. 169-315), data from Echeverri (2020, pp. 36-37), and information about languages of the Western Tucano family.

The Murui or Uitoto language belongs to the Witoto linguistic family. This group lives in the northern Amazon region, between the basins of the Cahuinarí and Igará-Paraná rivers, and to the north with the Caquetá river. The Murui have a system of patrilineal filiation and prescriptive symmetrical alliance and are organized in exogamous clans.

Regarding the Murui language, four dialectal variants are recognized: n̈ipode, m̈inika, m̈ika, and bue, as mentioned in don Emilio's narrative, and reiterated by linguistic research (Petersen de Piñeros & Patiño Roselli, 2000). In Emilio's narrative, a speaker of the n̈ipode variant, the variations are part of the way they perceive themselves. The exclamation "What is this?" gives rise to the names of these variants, and they are given a place within the worldview. In the explanation on the map (see Image 1), don Emilio first specified the locations of the Igará-Paraná and Cahuinarí rivers and La Chorrera, El Encanto and Araracuara towns. These places were the starting point to organize the content of the map and thus locate where the speakers of these languages were.

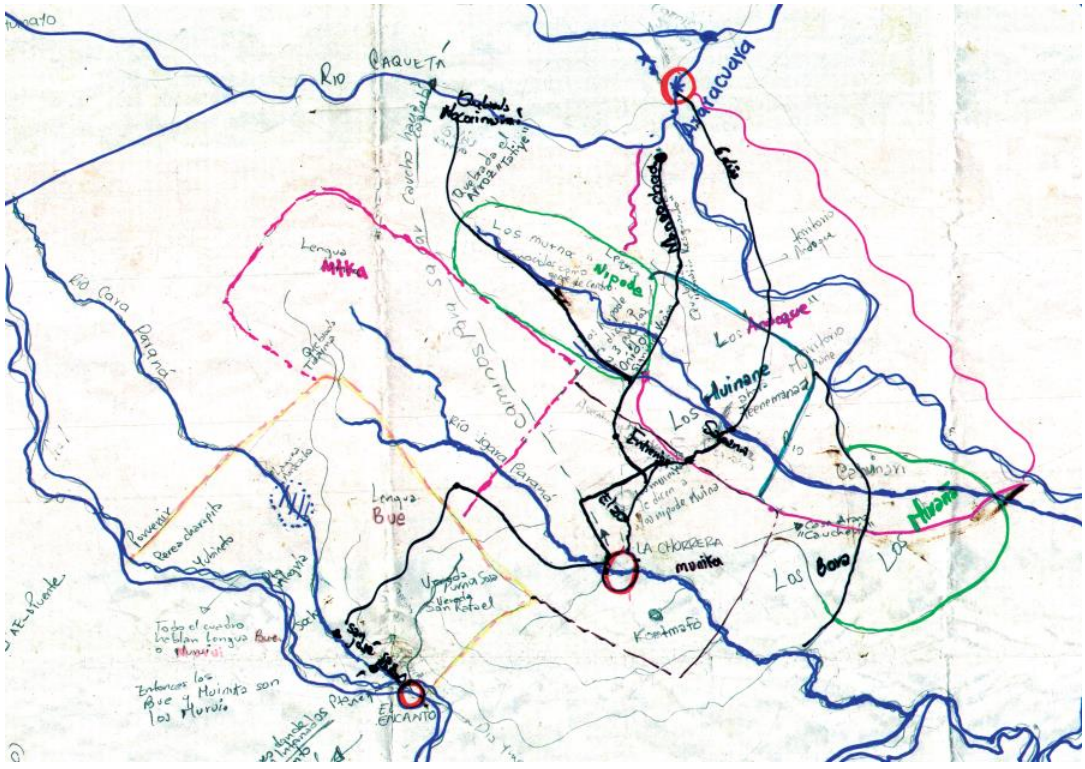

Image 1. Map of the Southern Amazon according to the instructions provided by Chief Emilio.

Source: Elaboration guided by don Emilio during the meeting of December 20, 2022. Highlighted section refers to the four dialectal variants, as well as the location of the Bora and Muinane (currently Féeneminaa).

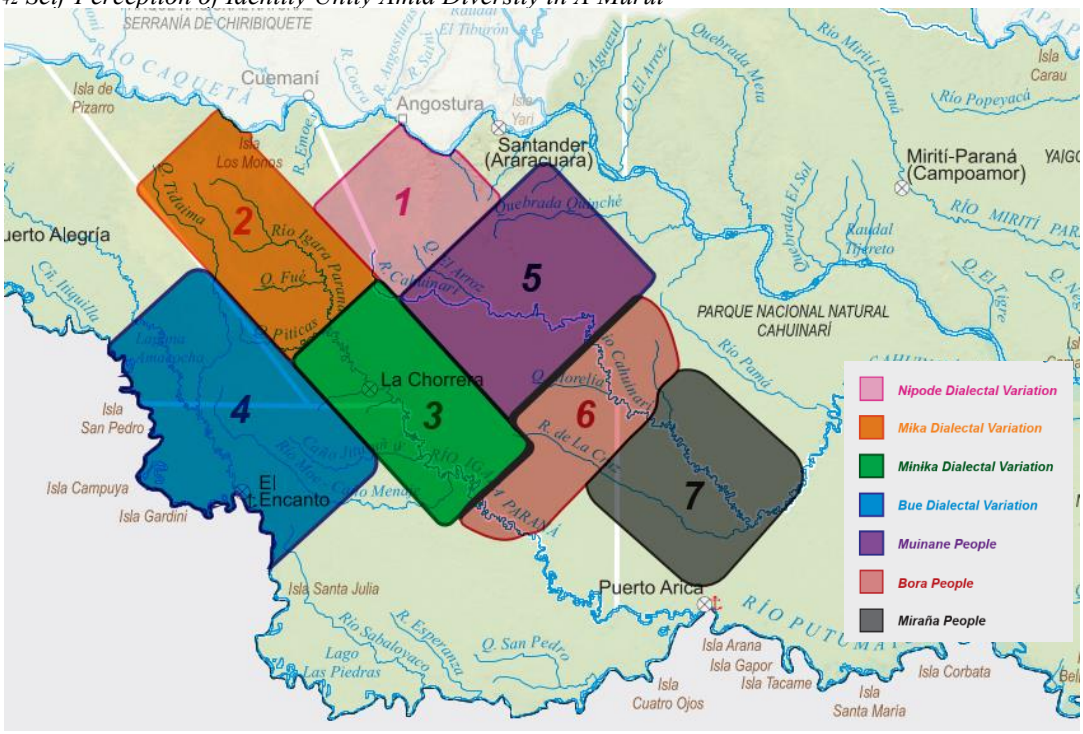

Image 2. Map Of the Southern Amazon Based on the Previous Map.

Source: Details of the four areas that don Emilio indicates as typical of the speakers of the four dialectal variants of the Murui language (Map, collaboration of Bridi Sabat).

For don Emilio it is very important to emphasize that each group of speakers of the dialectal variants has a very particular demarcated "zone" and, in addition, he indicates the way in which they refer to each other. Here we cannot show don Emilio's videos or audios, but we do want to show what we could translate as "drawing with our feet" (Pink, 2011). In this case, don Emilio draws on the map the places that his feet went through and vividly relates his experiences.

In don Emilio's case, we were not directly on the scene videotaping while seeing the exact map (it falls short of being an "inscriptive practice", Pink, p. 142), which would have been the ideal case. However, it was important to him that we understood the general location of the places along his route to have an idea of the distances and the rivers that crossed it. We brought the map of the Amazon region and made arrangements for him to tell us the story of his life.

Echeverri presents a very detailed map (Image 3) of this region, where various towns appear in the central area of the Southern Amazon. On this map, the place marked with numeral 1 stands out.

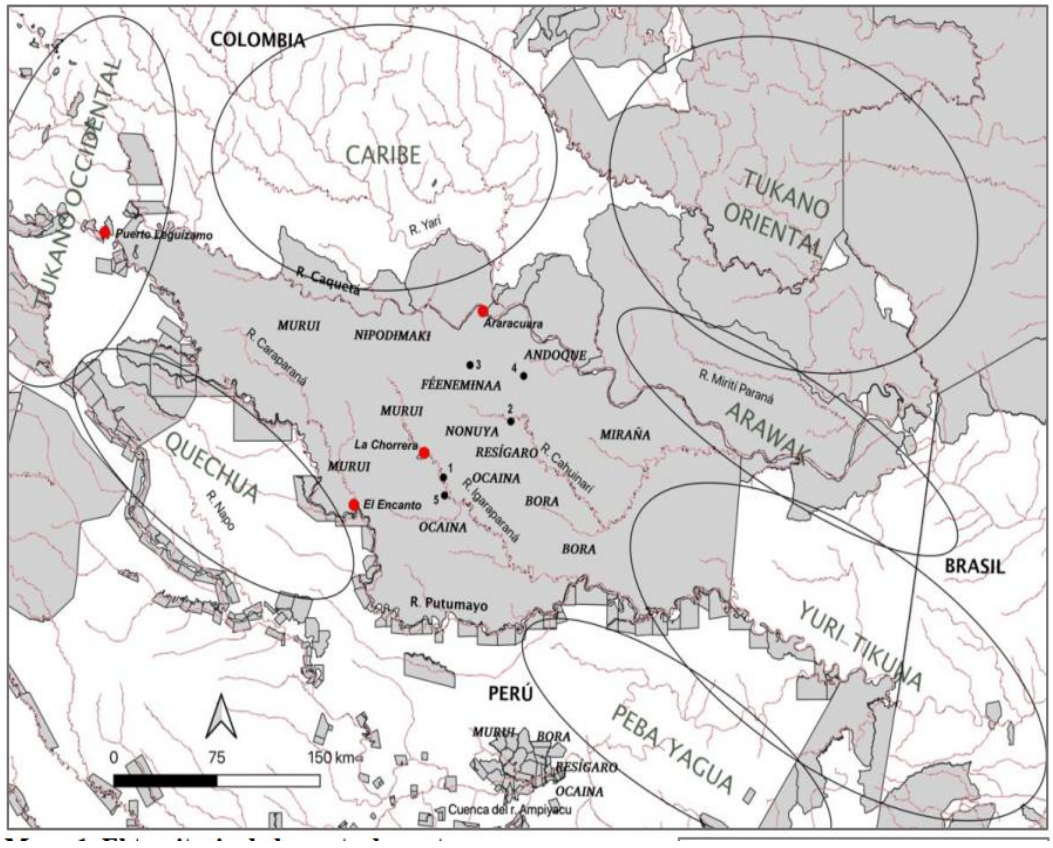

Image 3. Map of the Southern Amazon.

Description: In gray, legally recognized indigenous territories (Predio Putumayo reservation: area between the Caquetá and Putumayo rivers).

1: Kaziyafo “hole of awakening” / Komɨmafo “hole of humanity” (birth of Murui);

2: Nametɨje “savanna” (birth of féenemɨnaa néjegaimɨjo);

3: Chɨrɨbɨkaaja “where the boa sparked” (féenemɨnaa Killéyɨmɨjo birth);

4: Mnfosikn “hill of tears” (birth of andoque);

5: Adofikɨ “Igaraparaná mountain range”.

Source: Elaborated from the geographic dataset of Mayorga et al., 2012, open access, without restriction. In: Echeverri 2020, p. 20.

The map is particularly useful for two reasons: first, it includes the locations and names of relevant places in the worldview. In this article we only focus on the first place on the map, Kaziyafo, which for don Emilio is Oyirifo or Komuyafo: the birthplace of the people. Secondly, it presents us numerous peoples coexisting in a geographical area where not only linguistic loanwords occur, but also marriages among members of different peoples. The Murui people have had a history of links with the peoples of the Southern Amazon, but the experiences gathered since the years of the rubber plantations have given them greater visibility, although

the Bora, the Ocaina and other peoples also suffered the attacks of this cruel historical period (Pineda Camacho, 2000). The demand for rubber as a raw material for the manufacturing of tires, at the end of the 19th century, attracted Colombian settlers who soon did business with the Arana brothers, Peruvians who later associated with the British government under the name of the Peruvian Amazon Company in 1907. The town of La Chorrera is very close to the point called Komuyafo by don Emilio, the place of origin of the Murui people. There, precisely, the Arana House founded its bastion, a place almost inaccessible to government forces, where the will of the rubber tappers on duty was law. The abuses reached the ears of the British government, which decided to send Roger Cassement to evaluate the situation. I do not need to relate here what Vargas Llosa describes masterfully in *El sueño del celta* (2010). In the myth, don Emilio expresses it: "You, white people, the 'human eaters', 'Nomaɨdi rɨaɨ komunɨdɨ'".

The birth hole (Oyirifo or Komuyafo) appears in the myth as a way of interpreting the world. The Murui people are not isolated from other peoples; rather, they are part of the "People of the Center". They share territories to such an extent that they are the birthplace of several peoples according to the myth: Murui, Bora and Muinane (today called Féenemɨnaa). They do not necessarily share a linguistic identity; on the contrary, they identify themselves as separate linguistic families. The Murui here form an identity in opposition to the Bora and Muinane because although they share a common origin in the Oyirifo, they have different languages. Now, as the narrative continues it becomes evident that it is not a static, solidified identity. They recognize that there is linguistic diversity, by understanding the particular linguistic variants of their language (nɨpode, mɨnɨka, mɨka and bue). Clearly there is a self-perception of identity unity amid diversity in the Murui/Uitoto myth of origin.

2. Territoriality and Movement

Chief Emilio is a witness of the periods of exodus that the Murui people have suffered. Its current place of settlement is El Manantial Reservation, located on the outskirts of the municipal capital of Florencia. He told us much of his life story on December 27, 2022. Since his birth in 1961 on the banks of the Monochoa stream, in Nipaché –a place that had been more under the domain of the Andoque than the Murui's–, Emilio went through the immediate changes of the generation that emerged from the domination of the rubber factories. His student career stands out since the boarding school in La Chorrera, where he began his studies in 1968, when the Church still maintained control of the education for indigenous peoples, as had been the case since colonial times. He vividly remembers that, in the two years he was there, he began to learn Spanish with teachers who did not know the languages of the children who arrived there, who were from the "Uitoto, Andoque and also Bora" peoples, as he states. His Spanish, Writing, Arithmetic and Religion classes were all taught by the same nun who maintained strict discipline with whips or sticks for the hands, and they still weigh on his memory: as he tells it, he stands up and remembers what it was like to recite the lesson facing the board and to receive blows at the slightest mistake, while he covers himself with his arms.

Amid these initial difficulties, he excelled as a student and thus, on the advice of the same religious people, Mother Laura nuns and Capuchin parish priests, he continued at the Fray Javier de Barcelona boarding school, which was near the Araracuara penitentiary at that time. In 1973, at the age of twelve, he finished elementary school. He became an assistant teacher for the nuns of the same school. In 1975, with the support of the Church, he was sent to continue his studies at the José María Hernández School, a boarding school in Puerto Leguízamo, two days upriver through the Caquetá and a day's walk from La Tagua. Emilio obtained his high school diploma

in six years. He remembers that in the same period there were great political and social changes in Cauca. The Regional Indigenous Council of Cauca (CRIC) arose from the National Association of Peasant Users (ANUC). Those peasant and then indigenous organizations were the seed of great changes that also influenced places as far away as the Murui villages of the Amazon. In 1981, after graduating from high school, he was a teacher in Koemaní, a riverside town in Caquetá near Araracuara, at the Fortunato Really school (now called Yinaka Buinaima). By that year, there were some proposals of ethno-education, which Emilio included in his teaching plan, but they were not well accepted. Then he became part of the political movements that emerged in his region, being part of the first delegates of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) and participating in the Regional Indigenous Council of the Middle Amazon (CRIMA). He moved to Bogotá to pursue a bachelor's degree in Spanish while remaining active in this political life. With great efforts he managed to obtain his degree but initially decided to continue with political activism, especially to share ideas related to ethno-education and in support of Francisco Rojas Birry, who would later be one of the indigenous members who participated in the constitutional reform of 1990. He traveled abroad during his political activities representing the indigenous peoples: he was no longer speaking on behalf of the Murui – although it was often his main speech. He spoke to denounce the abuse suffered in the Amazonian territory to make all the indigenous peoples visible.

In 1997, he fully returned to his territory as head of the Fortunato Really school, but the territorial conflicts that FARC had in that area led Emilio to exile. For his and his family's safety, they had to move to the Florencia area, by the Caquetá and Orteguaza rivers. They did not arrive directly to the place where they live today. At the beginning, they were in an area that was a huge estate owned by a family named Lara. They went through a long process to buy the property and finally they were assigned the area where they live today. This is only the general journey because the details about his family and his decision to change a life of academia or politics for the mambe and the ambil was motivated mainly by the desire to maintain and strengthen his culture, as he told us on December 23, 2023. Many grandparents taught him and supported him.

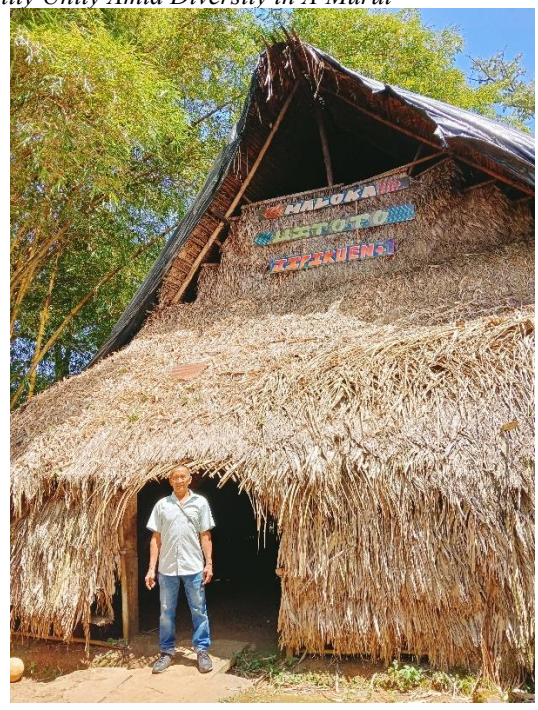

Image 4. Emilio Fiagama In His Maloca Uitoto Jipikueni (Caimo Leaf, His Clan), At El Manantial.

Source: Flor Buitrago, personal archive. August 24, 2024.

He recalls with nostalgia that so many years dedicated to the fight for the rights of his people were not always recognized, but this experience has also given him a deeper perspective on the value of traditional knowledge. Today he recognizes that a life of politics or study that is not guided by ancient knowledge ends up doomed to failure. Leaders who separate themselves from the roots and knowledge shared in the *mambeadero* will end up giving priority to personal interests over collective ones. Today he regrets not having shared much more with his father when he was young: "He called me, asking me to go, sit and chew coca leaves with him... No, not me. I did not think that was for me. That is why I also understand today's young people, who are almost not interested in this. I was like that, too."

The life of don Emilio gives us an example of life in movement, which has been a constant for the Murui people. His experiences are framed mainly in the context of education for indigenous peoples; however, transit through the territories is a recurring event in the peoples that inhabit the Amazon since ancient times: around 20,000 BC (Mora, 2011). Some evidence that we have are the petroglyphs and stone paintings, especially in Chiribiquete: "The presence of cultural features in Chiribiquete possibly begins 22,000 years ago. Although we did not find exfoliated painted rocks at that time, we did find hearths in which ocher nodules and charred edible seeds were recovered" (Castaño-Uribe, 2019, 74). They have been present in several places since the Holocene (10,000 BC). Evidence of domesticated plants and animals (Beresford-Jones and Machicado Murillo, 2020, 29) is found from 7,000 BC. Some researchers even propose a millennium earlier: "cultivated plants appear in the Amazon much earlier than we thought. Some gourds and tubers were already manipulated 8,000 years ago" (Mora, 2011, 53). Between 6,000 and 4,000 BC, the exchanges between the Amazonian plain areas and the surrounding highlands

became more intense. Around 5,000 BC, the Caral culture emerged in the coastal zone with extensive use of marine and agricultural resources (Solis, 2006). Around 3,000 BC the large Andean settlements begin, which later gave rise to cultures such as Chavín (1200 BC - 200 BC), Tiahuanaco (250 BC - 1100 AD), Wari (550 AD - 1200 AD) and the Tahuantinsuyu (1200 - 1532), which fell during the Spanish conquest. Between 1000 BC and 500 AD there is an "Amazonian hiatus", that is, a decline in the presence of records (Lombardo, Rodrigues, and Veit, 2018). It is considered very likely that the climate changes, floods or epidemics could have forced the population to travel long distances. However, around 500 AD there was a new repopulation with semi-autonomous villages, and around 900 AD there was a more intensive use of the land in Amazonian areas from Bolivia, Ecuador, Guyana and Colombia, in large territories. The main evidence of human presence in the Amazon region is the presence of anthrosols (Grossman et al., 2010) and the same distribution of vegetation in the jungle, which is not natural but a human construct due to the form of natural seed dispersal and the findings of plants in non-native areas and in externally controlled concentrations (Roosevelt, 2013).

Don Emilio's experiences are a clear example of the continuity of transit through the Amazon territory. Griet Scheldeman (2011) highlights that words say less than what the action of carrying them out expresses, so talking about "how he walks" (slow, fast) says nothing about the experience of walking. With don Emilio it is true: words say less than the experience of his life path. We may know the days of journey between one point and another (as his son-in-law knows), but the life experience is not shared. The fatigue, the change of diet, the vicissitudes that were endured. At one point, the gesture of being at school: he stands up, remembers the teacher with the stick high. His gesture of pain and fear revives that memory.

Here I follow the concept of *History* in Tim Ingold's terms: History is not static but rather a "becoming" of something. History is that crossing of paths that form a tapestry (Ingold, 2011, 6-9). Indeed, don Emilio is a sample of that great history of the Murui people, which is not fixed and does not get stuck in the times of violence experienced in the rubber era, but is a constant transformation, a turning, a moving in time. But this is not a random movement. It is linked to the concept of *dwelling*: it is embarking on a movement throughout life. The one who produces-perceives is a traveler, and the mode of production itself illuminates the path or route to follow. To dwell is not to be in a place but in the path (Ingold, 9-13).

This quote helps us understand even better: "The path, and not the place, is the primary condition of being, or rather of becoming. For this reason, I have begun to wonder whether the concept of dwelling is, after all, apt to describe how humans and non-humans make their ways in the world" (Ingold, 2011, 12). This condition of being in a transit of routes rather than in a fixed place is more associated with the concept of inhabiting. In our case, inhabiting an immense Amazon, where the routes of numerous human groups converge. This sheds light on the understanding of *linguistic convergence zones* (Heggarty, 2020) in the case of the Murui people; that is, how this convergence does not depend solely on genetic factors but on historical situations experienced during contact with other peoples (Barbieri et al., 2022).

Heggarty offers an accurate reflection on our scarce elements when it comes to classifying these languages in the Amazon area. The concepts of linguistic family, inherited mainly from the European experience with Latin, give us a view that is not comparable to the Amazonian situation. The link between genetics and linguistics will be based on Heggarty's proposal, not so much on *families* but on an *area of convergence*:

Families are just one of the two main levels –which moreover can crosscut one another– on

which languages can be analysed into larger entities. Besides language families, the second level is that of "linguistic convergence areas." These are far less well known outside linguistics, and are often confused with families, when in fact for prehistory they mean very different things. (2020, 36)

The areas of linguistic convergence are an approach that goes beyond the notion of linguistic family, where a proto-language expands in a "convergent" way, as the author calls it. He criticizes the idea that between a proto-language located in a small area and contact with other peoples, new languages (in the future, sister languages) are created, especially from the convergence between those already present and the proto-language. The example is presented by the author through Latin and Romance languages. Spanish and French, for instance, do not arise in a process of convergence ("fusion") between two languages, but from important substitutions by the new dominant language (Latin) on the local languages of the Iberians and Franks, for example. There is more struggle in the divergence of a new language and the local language.

In the following map, in the Amazonian area, the zones of intense language interaction ('linguistic convergence areas') within South America are Caquetá, Putumayo and Vaupés. (Image 5)

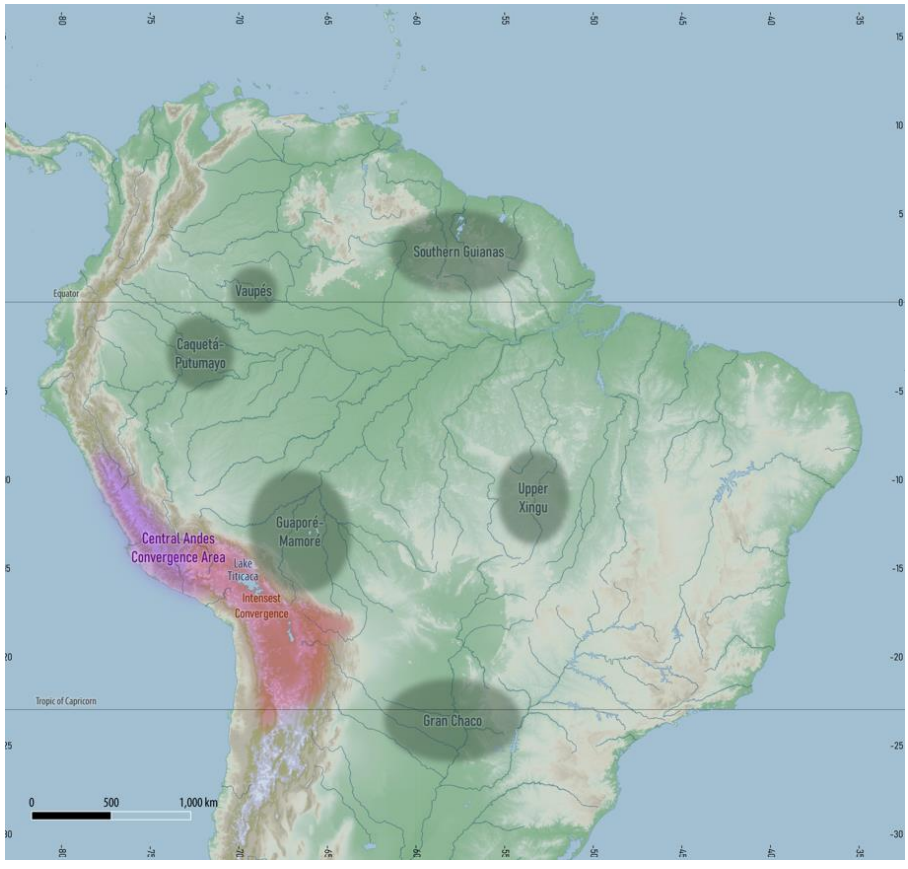

Image 5. Linguistic Convergence Areas

Source: Heggarty, P., & Epps, P. (2024).

The proposal of areas of linguistic convergence has an advantage. The idea is not to simply overlook the issue of linguistic families and ignore their identification problems, but to observe that languages are alive and receive mutual influences and from other languages, currently Spanish. This is a topic of current relevance not only in terms of Language Rights (Ley 1381 de 2010) but also from the point of view of linguistic studies, as Azucena Palacios refers:

Studies on contact-induced language change published in recent decades have been essential for drafting a theoretical framework for contact linguistics adapted to the current data of complex linguistic ecologies. In the case of studies on Spanish, the tendency to approach contact phenomena based on idiosyncratic data collections without methodological rigor has been overcome [...] **language contact situations are complex, dynamic, and the result of a multitude of social and linguistic factors** whose influence is difficult to separate, as Thomason (2001) pointed out at the time, which makes the study of these linguistic ecologies more complicated (Palacios 2021, 47. Translation and emphasis are mine).

This quote invites us to go over the topics of this section: don Emilio's life path in the context of constant diasporas of a territory inhabited for thousands of years, where contact with several groups has also been frequent. Contact not only in terms of commercial exchanges but also linguistic contact. Only in Colombia recently:

Department	**Ethnic Group**	**Population**
Amazonas	Tikuna	7,102
	Uitoto	5,352
	Tanimuka	1,247
Caquetá	Coreguaje	2,063
	Inga	1,808
	Nasa	1,204
	Uitoto	1,073
Guainía	Kurripaco	7,118
	Puinave	5,554
	Piapoco	1,080
Guaviare	Tucano	2,092
	Nukak	1,074
	Guayabero	642
Putumayo	Inga	13,916
	Kamentsa	4,773
	Embera	1,162
	Nasa	1,002
Vaupés	Kubeo	6,222
	Tucano	4,904
	Desano	2,297
	Barasana	1,961
	Wanano	1,253

Table 2. Ethnic Groups of the Colombian Amazon, 2001.

Source: Meissel Roca, Bonilla, and Sánchez Jabba, 2013, 38.

In the map of the initial section, we see that it is a region populated by a diversity of peoples with their own languages that come into permanent contact. In don Emilio's narrative this reality is not foreign to the myths: not only does the origin of the linguistic variants of the Murui language appear there: "We are all the same people, those who came out of the Oyirifo or Komuyafo hole; the Muinane and the Bora also accompanied us. They also emerged from the Oyirifo hole". The history of many peoples and what they have shared converge in the myth. There are traces of linguistic borrowings in the language, which are evident in actions such as the Carijona Dance, celebrated by the Murui: "It is a dance that comes from the agreements of the wars between ancient Carijona indigenous lineages and ancient Murui-Muinai (Uitotos) lineages who spoke Nɨpode" (Tobón, 2020, 10). The place mentioned by the myth, Oyirifo or Komuyafo hole, is a reference point that anchors memories, values and knowledge. Similarly to what Julie Cruikshank (2010, 399) did in her study of glacial narratives, here we see the story in an Amazonian territory, a highly significant place even if it has never been visited, a culturally important land that serves as an archive of memory.

Context of the Research

Now, it is necessary to clarify the reason for this approach. Several authors motivate us in this decision, from Linda Smith in "Decolonizing Methodologies" (2016) to Stine Agnete Sand in "How should the non-Indigenous speak? A discussion of decolonizing academia, positioning, and freedom of speech" (2023). We have chosen a less academic and positivist approach: less orthodox and with less rigid schemes (method, results, discussion and conclusion); in exchange, more relevance has been given to the Murui indigenous voice, and we have been more aware of their world perspective. This position is aligned with recent studies such as "Living with Nature, Cherishing Language. Indigenous Knowledges in the Americas Through History" by Justyna Olko and Cynthia Radding (2024). For that reason, we begin with the origin story to understand the context of its inhabitants and spaces. Then, the narrative of don Emilio leads us to understand that his life is a correlate of a long story of movement in a vast territory that has been inhabited for millennia.

The fieldwork with don Emilio arose in the context of a research focused on genetic sampling work, whose results will be part of future publications. Here we focus on what is behind the sampling: the conversations with the people, the boat trips (some unsuccessful), the difficulties to carry out the sampling that, in a couple of cases, led to the unfeasibility of the sample for scientific study and the production of family diagrams to select the samples that would be genetically sequenced because it was important to analyze those of lesser consanguinity. When preparing the family diagrams, we found that most of them are part of the same family! They share common ancestors in generational line. We also noticed that there are families made up of different ethnic groups. For example, don Emilio is Murui and his wife, María Celina, is from the Desano people of Vaupés. This case is not isolated: families from other reservations in the region are made up of couples of different ethnic origins.

As researchers we have our biases and during the fieldwork we unlearned a lot to understand other points of view as part of a participatory methodology. The scientific study also gave us the possibility to go into details such as the diseases that several members of each family had because the genetic study has been conducted in native populations of different ethnic groups by using molecular markers of ancestry and those related to protection and/or risk of developing cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes and metabolic nutrition problems, and by using new-generation sequencing tools for molecular genetic analysis that allow for the expansion of

current molecular diagnostic panels to contribute to the creation of new public health policies.

When collecting samples, we had the opportunity to talk extensively with the members of the communities, who told us about their lives and painful stories of exile and sadness. We were able to visit them with don Emilio on several occasions, in the suburbs of Florencia.

We opted for this form of decolonization of methodologies because we adapt to the forms of knowledge conveyance from the perspective of the Murui people as a way of empowerment. In Haboud's terms:

From the perspective of empowerment, it is necessary for researchers to interact with the research subjects instead of trying to remain isolated from them. The aim is to do research not of and by the so-called informants, but with social subjects. The term "with" implies the use of interactive methods that highlight the crucial role that the research subjects play in the research process. Consistent with what has been said, the followers of this model try to keep in mind that the knowledge brought by the researchers must be shared with the researched (subjects) in an effort to give them more control over what is researched. (Haboud, 2021, 32)

In his *maloca*, we learned the story that starts this article after several visits where we learned about the life of don Emilio, we participated in the process of preparation of cassava and thus we had a traditional lunch with them. We were ready to learn the story after seeing the map of the places and getting into his words through the mambe and the ambil.

Conclusions

The identity presented in the myth goes beyond the ideas of *ethnic groups and their borders* (Barth, 1976). Although it is suggested that there is a certain correlation with the Bora and Muinane people due to what would be the complementarity with respect to some of their characteristic cultural traits (cf. 11), the fact is that they do not make up a uniform group despite their common origin. Nor could we affirm that the Murui consider themselves an *imagined community* in Anderson's terms (1993) because, at least in the myth, they do not stand as a political community, a nation of anonymous patriots. Rather, the differences are also emphasized from the very moment of origin, by stating that dialectal variants are not only a linguistic feature but part of their cultural heritage.

Contrary to Western concerns, with texts such as "Language: mirror of identity" (Zambrano Castro, 2008), for the Murui, despite the clear linguistic diversity, there is an identity that is also in relation to other linguistic groups, the Bora and the Muinane, who are not even from the same linguistic family. Interlinguistic cultural cooperation has allowed, among other phenomena, the lexical loan or transfer of words between different languages; however, in the case of the Amazonian population we could not affirm facts as lexical borrowings but borrowings of "the Word", here taking the word in the sense explained by Benavides (2006). The Word here is a cultural practice: word of warning, word of advice, word of woman, word of tobacco, etc. The conveyance of knowledge takes place through dialogue, mambe and ambil. These borrowings are also expressed in the myth when it mentions the dances in which they participate and later when we comment on how some of these were because of cultural exchange.

Still, studies that show whether there are ties among the Murui, Bora and Muinane peoples are lacking. Perhaps they have them, just as they would have them with the other Amazonian population because population dispersion has occurred for millennia. It is a contact zone with a wide population variety, as seen in Table 2. The genetic links among the inhabitants of the

Amazon are very likely, as well as the map of areas of linguistic convergence shows us the Caquetá and Putumayo region as a hotspot. The areas of linguistic convergence help us understand that large territories are home to populations that have historically been mobile due to environmental or climatic factors and, in more recent times, to socioeconomic factors. The political situation has confined these groups in reservations, and although they may have a considerable extension, they are fixed places where exchanges now depend on social encounters in other areas.

Finally, although there is no unifying term to express "we are Murui/uitoto", but rather "we are all people" [of the same origin], the representation of identity appeals to the principle of unitary integration or reduction of differences. However, it is not exactly in Giménez's terms: "In fact, the affirmation of any identity unity, individual or collective, rests on the integration of differences under a unifying principle that subsumes them, but at the same time neutralizes them, dissimulates them and induces to "forget them" (Giménez 1992, 90) because the Murui do not want to hide or forget their differentiating aspects. Indigenous identities do not depend on genetic recognition by scientific studies or governmental certificates; they have had a clear self-identity since ancient times, so that the myth reflects this reasoning. It is not an isolated self-identity; on the contrary, it considers the relations with other human groups that surround them in a large territory. It also observes the internal dialectal particularities and recognizes that although there is linguistic variety there is also cultural unity. While the myth refers to a time of origin, it is valid for the Murui people's interest in their self-identity, the relationship with groups in the region and the survival of their language and cultural importance among the younger population.

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