

So That We, The Ye'kuana, May Inhabit Our Land

In Venezuela, the Ye'kuana nation has organized itself against a legal invasion. In 1978, the government of Venezuela, bypassing the Ye'kuana peoples, declared Duida-Murahuaca a National Park and Orinoco-Casiquare a "Biospheric Reserve." Until recently, however, other than declaring both areas under Special Administration, its implementation never occurred. According to the Ye'kuana, government bureaucrats have systematically ignored their historical presence and territorial rights make decisions on their behalf.

by José Félix Turón

Transcribed by Simeón Jiménez Turón

I have come to Caracas for the first time in my life because our land is being threatened. Where I live, along the source of the Cunucunuma River, I have heard rumors of invasions of lands close to us and of future plans to invade other lands in the area. Therefore, I, having always lived along the source of the Cunucunuma River, have come Caracas to write about the historical bases of our territorial rights. I will speak about the real owner of the land and about the origins of the land. This is how Wanadi gave us a piece of the Amazonian territory.

The Origins of Our Land

S/he who made the earth is called Wanasedume.

There was no earth

In the beginning

Wanadi (or Wanasedume) created the earth so that we, the Ye'kuanans, may inhabit it, care for it, feed off it, manage its resources, and so that we may die there. Wanadi said, "Take care of the land. It belongs to you; do not destroy it." That is how the land became ours.

The owner of the material necessary to make the earth was Mane'uda. With his material Wanasedume created the earth. He made it inhabitable.

That is how the earth was created.

In the Beginning

Wanasedume realized that people on earth had nothing to eat. S/he brought the yucca from the heavens, being the only one who knew where in the heavens it was. S/he first planted it in Roraima, so that everyone there could have food to eat. Wanasedume then realized that the Ye'kuanans, in their place of origin (Kamasoiña, north of the Cutinamo River), had no food. Where s/he first brought the yucca, Maarawakajaina, it did not grow. S/he then took it to the Cunucunuma River where it grew for 24 hours until it reached the skies. Therefore, we, the Ye'kuanans, consider as our land the territory that begins at the Cutinamo River, as well as the Cunucunuma, the Ventari, and the Manapaire River.

Wanadi gave the yucca to Kamasenadu. She was the owner of all food. Therefore, it is only the women, as the mothers or guardians of agriculture, who cultivate the earth.

Wanadi planted the yucca in the yard of a house that belonged to a man by the name of Tudumashaka. Many fruits were born from the trunk of that yucca tree. The fruits

were like rocks. The tree grew so big that no more yucca could be planted; people only ate the yucca that fell from the tree. Seeds and rain also fell. No longer able to grow upward, the tree grew sideways. Then the rock-hard fruits fell dangerously.

Tudunadu, son of Tudumashaka, died picking up fruit to eat. Some told Kamasenadu that people were dying, urging her to find a solution soon. Kamasenadu agreed, granting permission to cut down the tree. The chief of the felling was Yakawiyena. He visited neighboring villages and asked Waimene, a chief with workers, to help him. They worked one day and night but the trunk did not fall, one of its branches being hooked to the sky.

Kamasenadu was present at the felling to collect branches. Kamasenadu sent Wayuni (the moose) and Majadaku (the tiger) all the way to Mudumunuña to bring water back to the place of the felling. There, a number of other chiefs were now also waiting.

Seeing that the trunk was not falling, Kamasenadu sent Wadajaniyu to discover what was happening with the trunk above. Wadajaniyu returned, saying that he had no teeth and could not cut the branch hooked to the sky. Then,

Kamasenadu sent Kadio (the squirrel), who was like people, advising her to stand on top of the trunk so that she could come down the same way she went up while the branches fell off. Kadio was able to grab a fruit and save it in her mouth before chopping the branch with her teeth. The tree fell and the squirrel came down with it. Ever since then, the trunk of the tree is called Madawkajujo.

Kadio fell to her death at the foot of the tree in Tudumashaka's yard. The fall was so violent, her eyes welled up. This is why the squirrel's eyes are welled up. Kamasenadu quickly revived the squirrel by blowing on her.

When the tree fell, Wayuni and Majadaku were not present and therefore did not get fruit from the tree. The main branch fell toward chief Padamo. Majadaku, angry, threatened to eat people if he could not eat yucca. Wayuni, not having heard Majadaku very well, said that they would eat the leaves. Majadaku then said that he too would settle for leaves.

Kadio, after her revival, sat on the trunk with the fruit hidden inside her cheeks. She mocked Majadaku for not getting any yucca. Soon their insults turned to fighting. They placed bets on who could kill whom. The winner would take the fruit as a prize. Majadaku jumped from trunk to trunk. Kadio lay Majadaku a trap. She placed a loose rock on his path. Majadaku stepped on it and fell. All of those involved in cutting down the tree became animals: Majadaku (the tiger), Wayuni (the moose), Kadio (the squirrel), Wadajaniyu (the "tuqueque"), Nukoyame (the woodpecker), and Dakönö (the "tara larga").

The food which Wanadi gave to us was meant for the Ye'kuanans. All those who nowadays eat cassava took notice of where the branches of the tree of life fell, taking stems and sprouts from the branches. Some did not know how to properly cultivate yucca. The land surrounding the Autana River and the hills along its headwaters, and the land surrounding the Cutinamo, Padamo, Cunucunuma, and Ventuari rivers are apt for the cultivation of yucca. The lower regions (for example, the savannas of the Ayacucho Port, of the Esmeralda, or even the lands north of the Orinoco River) are not.

This is the story of the beginnings of the domestication of yucca and other foods native to the Orinoco and the Amazon region—foods that all of us, peoples of the Amazon, eat today.

Second Demarcation: Present-Day Boundaries of the Ye'kuana Communities

We, the Ye'kuanans, have lost a great deal of the land which Kujuyani left us as his sacred legacy. We must defend this sacred legacy in the same way other religious groups demand respect for their churches or places of worship. On our land, we, the Ye'kuanans, should not permit others to indiscriminately and disrespectfully frequent our sacred sites—as is the case in Madawaka, Duida, Autana, parts of Piaora, and in the Pemón region of Roraima.

During the months of March, April, and May, 1993, we the Ye'kuana communities of Culebra, Akanaña, Esmeralda, Tookishanamaña,

Watamo, Mödeshijaiña, and Huachamakare, met and agreed to establish our communities' boundaries and to demand state recognition of those boundaries.

Based on our people's collected memory—embodied or condensed in the historical wisdom of José Félix Turón—six communities were able to demarcate their lands according to the teachings of the story of origins. Thus, our occupation of the lands we now reclaim dates back many centuries. Our occupational rights precede the Europeans' arrival and the founding of the Venezuelan State. Some national constitutions of Latin America have acknowledged these rights, including Brazil (1988), Colombia (1991), and Paraguay (1992).

No declaration is more transcendental or powerful than our peaceful, productive, and conservationist occupation of the land that Wanadi and Kuyujani left in our custody.

In this age of "preservation" and "sustainable management," it is imperative that the Venezuelan government respect our rights. Granting us legal rights to the lands we have occupied for centuries would not only be just and right, but also a guarantee for their "sustainable management."

We fear there could come a time when we will not be allowed to live off the land. We do not want that moment to arrive, since our lands are food, shelter, our life, and religion. To deny us our land would be to amputate our soul and our supreme reason for living. ☺

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