

**Mythic Foundation to fabled history:  
representation in Venezuelan fiction [1]**

by Gregory Zambrano  
University of Los Andes  
Mérida-Venezuela  
e-mail: gzambran@yahoo.com

**Intuition of a river**

**T**he references of space, geography and nature of what today Venezuela is are found in the context to *Carta de relación del tercer viaje* of Cristopher Columbus, 1498, written to the catholic kings. In this, one is conscious of the impact on the sentiments that the scenery aroused in him in the golf and the Parian peninsula where for the first time he described in the dominant language what he thought was a sea of sweet water, ignoring completely that he had found the river Orinoco, one of the longest river in which later came to be known as America. With a westernized narrative, written in a language that was not native to him, the chronicler started a fable, a myth, a legend and also history.

This story also signified in terms of the discursive constitution, the creation of the New World. In Columbus's mentality it could be noted that he was witnessing a situation totally in contrast to what he had learned. He knew that a river of this magnitude resulting in the confusion of being the sea was not in Asia according to the geographical description of Ptolomeo. So, " according to his mentality of a man of the Middle ages he thought that this must be one of the four rivers of Paradise" where no one could reach except by divine intervention, and what he had known was that paradise was in Asia. But it did not cater to the notion of the vast territory in the south in Asia. This neither

concorde with the notion of an immense territory, in the south, according to what his sailors were informed by some natives. Even more so, it corresponds to the idea that at this level there was a similar river in the Asian continent, of which they knew. That is why, intuitively he writes that surely he is witnessing a new land of the other world [2].

But much earlier than the time when the Spaniards sailed through the “unknown lands” there existed in the great territorial zones a marvelous cultural development. For example, the Mexica and Mesoamerican cultures towards the north and the south were the seat of the Incan Empire. Also known was its advanced system of making use of the land, architectural monuments and an important social development.

In this way at the peripheries the Orinoco culture was developed. In the following discussion I intend to establish the relations between two foundational texts. One, the mythic that defines the origins of the culture sustained in the pre-existence of the westernized discursive referentially. The other, circumspect to the same space and identical cultural references, finds an imagery that inserts a sense of the historic whose focus is also molded by the necessity of verisimilitude. Both are the relative foundations, which are articulated, with their differences in the verifiable sense of a mythical originative story of the Americans.

### **A foundational myth**

The myth of Amalivaca passes through the impact of the encounter of 1492. This has had diverse manifestations on the orality, in literature and also in the plastic arts. The myth recreates the figure of a traveler, navigator of rivers and seas, “founder of a people”, a “superior being” full of wisdom with the sole mission of teaching, of imparting knowledge to dominate nature in order to protect man. From here one can imagine its importance in the cultural life of the people. And it also explains how the story was imprinted in some of the stones, in the figures of petroglyphs, even still without unraveling, and in the whole orality, that is to

say, in collective memory of the majority of the natives of Guayana[3]. Of course, it deals with the redefining of the deeply rooted Americanism whose value was universalized and in the writings, of different European travelers, which has been taken again and put in the cultural dialogues with other stories to increase its universal value.

### **Fabled history**

As the fables are rooted with the foundational myths of Latin America in its whole geography, the writings established a story, which by its power of conviction produced a historical and juridical truth which tried to dislodge the fictional truth. This is from the oral narrative whose transmission and permanence was helped by its condition of verosimilarity. Since the 18th century, the narrative on the journeys of Amalivaca; a being endowed by supernatural powers had a great impact on some of the travelers and chroniclers, like Filippo Salvatore Gilij (1721-1789)[4]. Gilij referring to the myth of this founder hero imposes the dogma of the origin of man against the anthropogonical narrative of the Tamanacos. In respect, wrote that: In the Amalivaca the Tamanacos speak of a man who was with them in Maita. They say that he wore clothes, was a white man and of other similar things not concurring to the one who created him, but the one who took him first to those places. On the contrary, the formation of the world, of them and also of the Orinoco are acts of divinity [5].

In the same way the wise German Alejandro Humboldt also dedicated some pages to the hero registered in his *Voyages aux régions équinoxiales du Nouveau Continent* (1799) where he indicated: "The Tamanaca people [...] have a local mythology relating to some of the painted stones where Amalivaca, the father of the Tamanacos, that is to say, the creator of the human gender [...] reached this place in a boat at the time of Great floods, which is called the Age of Water. When the great waves of the ocean beat against the interior of the land and against the mountains of La Encaramada, all the men -continues Humboldt- or to say it better all the Tamanacos were drowned with the exception of one man and one woman who saved themselves in the mountains

near the banks of the river Asiveru. Amalivaca who was traveling in one boat captured the figure of the sun and the moon on a painted rock: "Tepumereme" of the Encaramada [6].

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the myth was incorporated in a pioneer book on the legends of Venezuela. It is entitled, "La leyenda del Moriche" and was included by Aristides Rojas in his book *Historical legends of Venezuela* (1890) [7]. Already in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a myth was established related with the first instance to the role of the savior hero. When the Great flooding occurred and the Tamanacos were about to die "suddenly they saw a strange boat riding the great waves driven by a tall and strong man, of radiant deep blue eyes like the light. It was Amalivaca. Father of the people who will be born later and who brought along with him his brother Vocchy and his two daughters" [8]. This fact is related to the end of that period and the start of the next. It determines the mythical relation and the start of a cycle of civilization. Amalivaca expands the fruit of the palm tree Moriche from where a new mankind would be born [9].

Alejo Carpentier who lived in Venezuela between 1945- 1959 also gives an account of the same narrative. In his novel *Los pasos perdidos* (1953), he reasserts the presence of Amalivaca whose magical powers were related to the grandeur of the same geography, impregnated by a magical power of the great River. Later, in a very specific manner, he emphasis this to explain the American version of the Great universal flooding, where under the same role of being "saviors of mankind" they interact with figures like Noe, the man of Sing Deucalion, Out-Napishtim and Amalivaca. This ideological cultural encounter, represented in the exchange of food and utensils, and the transmission of details on their way of living in one long night are the dialogical recourses which give structure to the narrative; "Los advertidos" included in his book *Guerra del tiempo* (1967) [10].

In a conference given in the Central University of Venezuela, Carpentier returned to narrate the story of his encounter with the venezuelan Amazonia and the impact that it caused in him flying over the river Orinoco, looking at the

enormous rock formations called “Tepui” which are considered as the most ancient formations of the world: from Bolivar City to the port of Ayacucho, following the center of the riverbed. So, on passing through the mountainous range of La Encaramada, for example, we pass through the level of the three great stones, the three great rocks looking like the great drums of Amalivaca [11].

The extra literary implications of the narrative of Carpentier has given rise to different interpretations in which there is a strong presence of this ancestral American element but with the perspective of universalizing it. Victor Bravo also proposes: “in “Los advertidos”, through the myth of the great universal flooding one enters deeply into a fact that is a central theme of contemporary anthropology: the confluence of the mythologies. Much beyond the differences of the procedures and ends the Levi Strauss and Mircea Eliade Schools and from the field of psychology, the Jung school, have demonstrated the presence of universal constants in the myths. In “Los advertidos”, this confluence is lived from the interior itself of the mythic vision, provoking- not from the perspective of disbelief but in the interior of faith itself- the disenchantment of the divine” [12]. And even more, with respect to the encounter it deals with the consideration that Mijail Bakhtin denominated “the dialogical encounter” in which the two cultures neither come together nor mix, each conserve in its unity and its open totality, but both enrich themselves mutually [13].

With respect to the plastic art, the Venezuelan painter, dramatist and poet; Cesar Rengifo introduced an allegory of myth in the great mural in the Simon Bolivar Center of Caracas in 1955. For the artist it was “necessary to exhibit the temporal flow between the past and the present, recuperating the symbol of our ancestry like culture. And that is why wrote, that he wanted to leave a testimony engraved of what we were a country which possessed a deeply rooted and historically profound culture of great value. Also he wanted to demonstrate all the spiritual richness that was in our indigenous people before the advent of the Spaniards” [14].

In 1931, Enrique Bernardo Núñez published *Cubagua*, a novel, which during a long time was forgotten by the historiographers and known by a few readers only which in the last years has been remodeled as a novel that problematizes the discursive construction of history. Its narrative focus is centered on the “secret of the land”. The connecting thread of its historicity enters into the mythological origins carried by the hands of an enigmatic woman, Nila Cálice.

In this novel, the mythological foundation of Orinoquia is recreated. Amalivaca and his brother Vocchy, also sailors constitute the pretext that breaks the linearity in time to situate us into a transposition between the verifiable history and the mythological. This is only believed by its power of fantasy which attributes to the myth a strong dose of lyricism and poetry. On this point, there is a shifting of the spaciality of the origin of myth and it is situated in a small island in eastern Venezuela, closely situated to the island of Margarita that is why in this context it also incorporates the Caribbean ambience. The mythological and historical motives of Amalivaca functions as a hypotext, which is moved without showing a real confirmation which transcends its ends, more so historical than anthropological or ideological.

Coming back to the starting point we consider the defining narratives, the two foundational texts: “the Myth of Amalivaca and the *Carta del tercer viaje* of Cristopher Columbus. Both will constitute two narratives of origins, representatives of the two imagery complexes, which appear indispensable in our contemporaneity. So, confronting from the perspective of today, both brightly converge in distinct moments, and from different modes in the beginning of our culture, sharing partially the same scenery, in spite of having been elaborated in distinctly different languages by different subjects and in different conditions” [15].

Letter of Columbus finds a narrative which names for the first time a complex universe, what will be later called Venezuela; “it is the first colonial document that recounts the existence of some indigenous cultures and of a geography which will in time constitute the most eastern part of the country” [16]. But also

it institutes another reality that can be foreseen as a beginning of the dialectics only understood as the 'otherness'. Columbus, "through the written texts, considered himself as a hero of the same and adjoins the representation of being the chosen one of God, as a divine subject; and the one sent by the kings; as a political subject" [17]. On the other hand, the myth of Amalivaca can be considered as a motive of the recurring appearance within the imaginary constitution of some of the literary texts. It has been valued and redone through the passage of time with multiple variants and various functions. Without any doubt, this is one of the marvelous and interesting myths of the many that have been inherited from the cultural indigenous traditions whose richness provides elements that help in a persistent and ingenuous valorization of the ancestral American.

*Translated by Noorin Khan  
Center Of Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and Latin American Studies  
Jawaharlal Nehru University. New Delhi. India.*

### **Cited Works**

Bakhtin, Mijaíl, *Estética de la creación verbal*, translated by Tatiana Bubnova, México, Siglo XXI, 1982.

Borges, Trino, "Amalivaca, una afirmación necesaria en la Venezuela de los 500 años festivos", *Actual* (Mérida), núm 23, 1992, pp. 87-94.

Bravo, Víctor, *Magias y maravillas en el continente literario*, Caracas, La Casa de Bello, 1988.

Carpentier, Alejo, "Un camino de medio siglo", in his book *Razón de ser*, Caracas, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1976.

Carpentier, Alejo, *Guerre du temps*, París, Gallimard, 1967.

Carpentier, Alejo, *Letra y solfa*, Caracas, Síntesis Dosmil, 1975.

Gilij, Filippo Salvatore, *Ensayo de historia americana*, Caracas, Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1965. (Collection Fuentes para la historia colonial de Venezuela, 73).

Humboldt, Alejandro de, *Viaje a las regiones equinocciales del Nuevo Mundo*, Caracas, Monte Ávila, 1985.

López Bohórquez, Alí, *El descubrimiento y la invención de Tierra Firme*, Cumaná, Comisión Presidencial V Centenario de Venezuela, 1998.

López Bohórquez, Alí, *Margarita y Cubagua en el Paraíso de Colón*, Gobernación del Estado Nueva Esparta–Rectorado de la Universidad de Los Andes, 1997.

Martí, José, “Maestros ambulantes”, in *Obras selectas*, Volumen I, La Habana Centro de Estudios Martianos-Editora Política, 1978, pp. 376-380.

Martí, José, “Nuestra América”, in *Obras selectas*, Volumen II, La Habana Centro de Estudios Martianos-Editora Política, 1978, pp. 519-527.

Rengifo, César, *Seña* (Mérida), núm. 1, 1983.

Rodríguez C., Alberto, “Sujeto y narración en la Carta del tercer Viaje (1498)”, in Alí López Bohórquez, *El descubrimiento y la invención de Tierra Firme*, Cumaná, Comisión Presidencial V Centenario de Venezuela, 1998. pp. 37-45

Rodríguez C., Alberto, *Sueños imaginarios*, Mérida, Ediciones Mucuglifo, 2001.  
Rojas, Arístides, *Leyendas históricas de Venezuela*, Caracas, Oficina Central de Información, 1984.

Tedesco, Ítalo (Selecc.), “Mito tamanaco. Amalivaca”. In: *Literatura indígena de Venezuela*. Caracas, Kapelusz, 1971

Uslar Pietri, Arturo, *La creación del Nuevo Mundo*, Caracas, Centro de Estudios Latinoamericanos Rómulo Gallegos, 1990.

Zambrano, Gregory, “Alejo Carpentier: los diálogos y la advertencia”, in *Los verbos plurales*, Mérida, Ediciones Solar, 1993, pp. 101-123.

Zambrano, Gregory, “Amalivaca, un mito que nos funda” in *Actual* (Mérida), núm. 30, 1995, pp. 167-180.

#### **Notes:**

[1] Submitted for the International Seminar “Myth, Magic, History: Contemporary Fiction in Latin America and India”, India International Center, New Delhi, India, 23-25, February 2006.

[2] Cfr. Arturo Uslar Pietri, *La creación del Nuevo Mundo*, Caracas, Romulo Gallegos Center of Latin American Studies, 1990, p. 11.

- [3] Cfr. Trino Borges, “Amalivaca, una afirmación necesaria en la Venezuela de los 500 años festivos”, *Actual* (Mérida), núm 23, 1992, p. 90.
- [4] Filippo Salvatore Gilij, *Saggio di Storia Americana* (Roma, 1780).
- [5] Filippo Salvatore Gilij, *Ensayo de historia americana*, Caracas, Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1965 (Col. Fuentes para la Historia Colonial de Venezuela, 73).
- [6] Alejandro de Humboldt, *Viaje a las regiones equinociales del Nuevo Mundo*, Caracas, Monte Ávila Editores, 1985, Volumen 4, pp. 403-404.
- [7] Arístides Rojas, *Leyendas históricas de Venezuela*, Caracas, Oficina Central de Información, 1984. See also: “Los jeroglíficos venezolanos”, in *Estudios indígenas*, Caracas, 1944.
- [8] “Mito tamanaco. Amalivaca”. In: *Literatura indígena de Venezuela*. Caracas, Kapelusz, 1971 (Selection, preliminar study and notes by Italo Tedesco).
- [9] In addition to the previously cited text also see: José Martí, “Maestros ambulantes”, in *Obras selectas*, Volumen I, La Habana Centro de Estudios Martianos-Editora Política, 1978, p. 80, and “Nuestra América”, *Obras selectas*, Volumen II, La Habana Centro de Estudios Martianos-Editora Política, 1978, p. 527.
- [10] This book was originally published in French: *Guerre du temps*, París, Gallimard, 1967. On this story see also Gregory Zambrano, “Alejo Carpentier: los diálogos y la advertencia”, in *Los verbos plurales*, Mérida, Ediciones Solar, 1993, pp. 101-123. And “Amalivaca, un mito que nos funda” in *Actual* (Mérida), núm. 30, 1995, pp. 167-180.
- [11] Alejo Carpentier, “Un camino de medio siglo”, in *Razón de ser*, Caracas, Universidad Central de Venezuela, 1976, p. 42. See also “Visión de América”, and specially “El Salto Ángel en el reino de las aguas” (26.11.1947), in *Letra y solfa*, Caracas, Síntesis Dosmil, 1975, p. 328.
- [12] Víctor Bravo, *Magias y maravillas en el continente literario*, Caracas, La Casa de Bello, 1988, p. 173.
- [13] Cfr. Mijail Bakhtin, *Estética de la creación verbal*, translated by Tatiana Bubnova, México, Siglo XXI, 1982, p. 352.
- [14] César Rengifo, in *Seña* (Mérida), núm. 1, 1983.
- [15] Alberto Rodríguez C. *Sueños imaginarios*, Mérida, Ediciones Mucuglifo, 2001, p. 12.
- [16] Alí López Bohórquez, *Margarita y Cubagua en el Paraíso de Colón*, Gobernación del Estado Nueva Esparta–Rectorado de la Universidad de Los Andes, 1997, p. 34.
- [17] Alberto Rodríguez C. “Sujeto y narración en la Carta del Tercer Viaje (1498)”, in Alí López Bohórquez, *El descubrimiento y la invención de Tierra Firme*, Cumaná, Comisión Presidencial V Centenario de Venezuela, 1998. pp. 37-45.