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BRAZIL INSTITUTE SPECIAL REPORT

PART I: "LITERATURE IN THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON"

BY MÁRCIO SOUZA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When one thinks of the Amazon, art is rarely the first thing that comes to mind. But it was the Amazon—and specifically, the bustling, ethnically diverse port city of Manaus—that gave Brazil one of its most famous contemporary poets, Thiago de Mello, and a world-renowned orchestra conductor, Claudio Santoro. Manaus is also the birthplace of Milton Hatoum and Márcio Souza, novelists whose creative work have brought renewed attention to Amazonian cultural production.

While portrayed in the media either as terra incognita or a zone of violent conflict between the forces of economic development and environmental preservation, the Amazon has created vibrant literary worlds that remain largely unknown outside Brazil. To dispel these misconceptions and highlight the richness of Amazonian culture, the Brazil Institute and the Brazilian Embassy in Washington organized a discussion on September 16, 2008, with one the most celebrated Amazonian authors, Márcio Souza. Born and raised in Manaus, he is the author of picaresque, satirical novels like *The Emperor of the Amazon* and *Mad Maria*. Souza was joined by Lúcia Sá, a visiting professor of Literature at the University of Manchester, England and author of *Rain Forest Literatures: Amazonian Texts and Latin American Culture*, and Regina Igel, professor of Portuguese and Brazilian Literature at the University of Maryland.

This two-part special report—published as two separate issues—includes the original writings on Amazonian literature of Márcio Souza and Lúcia Sá. In this issue, "Literature in the Brazilian Amazon," Souza highlights the uniqueness of the history and culture of the Amazon and its contribution to Brazilian art. Sá's issue, "[From the Amazon to São Paulo: Macunaíma and the Native Trickster](#)," can be downloaded from our "publications" section at our website www.wilsoncenter.org/brazil.



Márcio Souza,
Author of *The Emperor of the Amazon* and
Mad Maria at the Woodrow Wilson Center

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN the Amazon did not belong to Brazil. The Portuguese established two colonies in South America. One was the land discovered by Pedro Alvares Cabral in 1500. It was called Brazil and administered by Governor-Generals and Viceroys based in Rio de Janeiro. The other colony, known as Grão-Pará, Greater-Para, was discovered by the Spaniard Vicente Yañes Pinzon, in 1499, soon after Columbus' third trip to America. Its territory, occupied by the Portuguese in 1630, is composed of the vast Amazon basin. Its capital was Belém and it was administered by military and civilian governors, who reported to Lisbon. The inhabitants of the colony of the South called themselves Brazilians; those of the North were the "Portuguese Americans."

The two colonies developed separately until 1823, when the Brazilian Empire, which had declared independence from Portugal the previous year, sought to annex the northern colony.

Of the Portuguese colonies, Grão-Pará was the only one that exported manufactured goods instead of raw materials or agro-industrial commodities. In the late XVIII century, both Grão-Pará and Brazil had a strong merchant class, dedicated to imports and exports. These were gentlemen of great fortunes and considerable autonomy from Lisbon. While Brazil deliberately adopted an economy of big landowners producing sugar, cattle and gold, based on slave labor, Grão-Pará used paid labor and intensified investments in the naval industry and in the secondary processing of agricultural products, especially tobacco and Brazil nuts, with small farms in the hands of many settlers. There were slaves, but only for domestic work. The export and local consumption of rubber fed a rising industry that produced important products, such as shoes and galoshes, waterproof rubber tarps, springs and surgical instruments.

Grão-Pará enjoyed a well-developed urban culture. It had a beautiful capital with wide streets and well-designed buildings of neoclassical architecture—a novelty in Portuguese and Spanish America. Social life in Belém was quite modest—still, tropical nights brightened with music and song from private houses and the street bands in crowded squares. This was also the period of poet Tenreiro Aranha, the first native writer from the Portuguese-speaking Amazon. Tenreiro Aranha also wrote and staged many plays. In fact, theater was one of the passions of the people of Belém, and it was in that city that some of Gabriel Malagrida's daring plays were staged. Malagrida was a Jesuit priest, a naturalist and a Spaniard mystic. He has the hapless honor of being the last heretic to be burned at the stake by the Inquisition.

The northern leadership (of Grão-Pará) aspired to dominate the post-colonial political arena, seeking to constitute a new country, a republic. This was not what happened. Grão-Pará was annexed to Brazil by force, because the path of dialogue and negotiation would have demanded that both sides have a mature project of nationhood and a vision of continental politics, things that neither the Portuguese-Americans nor the Brazilians had. Between 1823 and 1840, what we in fact witnessed was a series of acts of deliberate arrogance by Rio de Janeiro and growing resentment and fury coming from Belém. After losing successive groups of leaders through political and military intervention, Grão-Pará was tragically defeated by the Brazilian Empire. Instead of becoming a new country, Brazil reduced Grão-Pará to an economic periphery. The defeat of Grão-Pará and its destruction, I believe, can be seen in the same light as if the South had won the Civil War in the United States. Seventeen years of civil war

reduced Grão-Pará to ruin and social regression. After the conflict, 40 percent of its inhabitants were dead or missing. Politicians of the Brazilian Empire and the northern leadership could not find common ground, and for that reason no dialogue was possible. Thus, Grão-Pará was gone with the wind.

THE FIRST CHRONICLERS

If Brazil, in the eyes of the world, is seen as a country of emotions and irrationalities, it cannot be forgotten that we inherited from the Portuguese the ability to plan and organize with great attention to detail. The Portuguese always set specific goals. They went step by step in the New World, conquering almost all of South America. You are not going to find a Portuguese searching for the Fountain of Youth, or getting their legs wet to take possession of the Pacific Ocean, like the Spaniards.

By the time Grão-Pará was dissolved into the Amazon and became an economic frontier, the Portuguese colonization had already established a new civilization in the tropics, able to develop a national culture of Portuguese expression in a sub-continent of many languages: French, English, Spanish, Dutch and a hundred of Native American idioms. Of course, Brazil can be proud to have conquered Grão-Pará, but the natives of the modern-day Amazon preserved their cultural and artistic conquests, and their experience with modernity. There is still Amazonian cuisine, literature, architecture, and theater, as well as art and music. It is about this literature that we will talk.

The first Europeans to write about the Amazon were chroniclers like Gaspar de Carvajal, Cristobal de Acuña and João Daniel, all Catholic missionaries. During the early stages of European exploration of the New World, the explorers' personal and in loco narrative accounts of their journeys

were as important to Iberian culture as collection and research in the jungle were to the conquest economy.

Written in a distinctive style, these narratives introduced, for the first time, the Amazon to the Western World, describing enormous, never-before seen rivers and the rainforest that envelopes them. It was a vision of the enchanted, of those who had never dreamed of finding such wonders. The colonial literature of chronicles and narrative accounts became the standard model for writing about the Amazon—and remains, surprisingly alive today. The more contemporary versions of this literary style have adopted the same Salvationist rhetoric and work as an oppressive force over modern Amazonian society. Their observations generally refuse to look at Amazonian realities while unrestrainedly praising nature's exuberance, although this exuberance has taken on a utilitarian character. This is the ideological underpinning of an attempt to force the Amazon to embrace various deceptive acts of solidarity that aspire to preserve the "primitive" in its present state, forever.

In 1819, the poem *Muhuraida*, written thirty years before by Henrique João Wilkens, was published by Imprensa Regia, in Lisbon. *Muhuraida* is the region's first poetic attempt in the Portuguese language and is an extremely important historical document. It is written by a man who had direct contact with Native Americans, inhabitants of the great river. Wilkens was Second Deputy and occupied the post of Military Commander at Vila de Ega in 1787.

While a lyrical poem of glory and conviction, with all the characteristics of internal decay of an epic poem, *Muhuraida* is a mediocre work. Fruit perhaps of a heart ravished by the idleness of the barracks and by the devotion typical of military men with artistic leanings. In any case, the work

Literature in the Brazilian Amazon



From left to right, Regina Igel, Márcio Souza, Lúcia Sá and Paulo Sotero

has this stylistic corruption. In the great Iberian epics, most of all in Camões, the Portuguese mercantile system became part of the Renaissance expansionist philosophy through analogy. The epic poem was about evangelization and dissemination of Christianity, an endeavor that the Spanish and the Portuguese were determined to bring to the newly discovered worlds. This ideological construction was so powerful that the epic poem not only took possession of, but also surpassed Christian poetic reserve. The epic embraced pagan elements of Greek and Roman culture, adapted and preserved by medieval monasteries. Maritime adventure and evangelization, Poseidon and Divine Providence, Argonauts and Admirals, God and gods, science and myth, great personalities and great destinies were interwoven so that the deeds of Iberian discoverers would appear of absolute importance as other great deeds of humanity.

When João Wilkens wrote his poem, the colonial empire had already set its roots in the new world. Literary expression was only respected if

it were a reflection of reality. That is, only if the great deed was found to be true, or materialized due to the forces of power or national culture or, in more extreme cases, by order of the King. Muhuraída is one of these reflections of reality, describing the defeat of the Mura, fierce warriors who never accepted white domination over their lands and succeeded in resisting until the nineteenth century.

“I sing the extraordinarily fortunate success
That bathes cheeks in tears of happiness
After having seen in century past
Only lamentation on discouraged faces.
I sing the success, that celebrates in glory
All that which Divine Providence has done,
In the unforeseen and praiseworthy places,
That confirms the inscrutable destinies.”

Thus João Wilkens begins his genocidal hymn. He wipes the tears off of colonialism’s benevolent countenance and arms himself with a calculated aesthetic. It is the opening of a cantata on Catholicism and cruelty; Wilkens depicts the mechanisms that moved the conquest during the

long years of its invasion and reconnaissance phase. In the end, “after seeing in century past, only lamentation on discouraged faces,” the Portuguese affirmation is to ask for the song of the “extraordinarily fortunate success.” Still, Wilkens manifests the need to assert colonial predestination.

“In the unforeseen and praiseworthy places
that confirm the inscrutable destinies;
the success, which celebrates in glory
all that which Divine Providence has done.”

Amazonian poetry began by preparing for the future with an autocratic realism; a future created to conform to the Portuguese past. This interrelation between colonial theory and practice is as essential to soldier João Wilkens’ poetry as it is to the conquest as a whole. The mutual relationship is not at all surprising, and produces an historical and ideological interpretation of the region. Hence, we see the soldier-poet sing:

“In the dense ignorance of paganism
Without notion of time, worship or permanent ritual,
Seeming to have forgotten divinity
They live deprived and indifferent;
Abusing that selfsame freedom
Granted them by the Almighty
For frivolous motives tinting the earth
Blood-red by unjust human war.”

It is worthwhile to observe the statements contained in each word of the poem, in as many details as there are great moments of mercantile spirit. João Wilkens’ poem is one of the great moments of the consolidation phase of colonialism. We begin to understand the conquest in its totality through his work, as well as through historical sketches, decrees, narrative accounts and colonial laws. Mercantilism is imbued in the poem, beginning with the level of language, which constitutes its essence. Muhuraída is much more than an historical daydream. The Native

Americans had a mythical conception of the world, the Portuguese a violent theology.

ENTER THE SCIENTIST AND EXPLORERS

In a way, colonial discourse in the Amazon began to change after Henrique João Wilkens, when a new breed of scientists and explorers offered their numerous contributions. Still, the discourse did not lose its long-lasting presumed superiority. It is in this time period that Europeans realized they had invented a new world. Within the changing discourse, ideas detached themselves from the sphere of the narrative, moving away from the old theology of the Counter Reformation. Literary and scientific expressions became secular and irreverent. The confused narratives were no longer simply commentaries on the existence of the Amazon. They were a more determined reflection on the collision between culture and nature. In the dark place where this collision had taken place, the confusion slowly began to disappear. The Conquest and the establishment of a permanent colony were about to be completed. What remained were only playful fables, a mythology whose powers of enchantment grew with this new rationality of spectacle and illusion. Myths on the region appeared everywhere, but now they were recognized as myths; it was time for the appraisal and study of science. It was the time for a new poetry.

On September 4, 1769, Bento de Figueiredo Tenreiro Aranha was born in Barcelos, the capital of Rio Negro Captaincy—he was the first native Amazonian writer and poet of Portuguese language. His father, Raimundo de Figueiredo Tenreiro, was a small farmer like many in Rio Negro, harvesting the banks of the river for cotton, coffee and rubber. Early in his life, Tenreiro Aranha became an orphan and went to live with a friend of the family. His godfather, vicar and archpriest Dom Jose Monteiro Noronha, sent the boy

to Belém to study in the Saint Anthony convent, and later to the Mercedários to prepare to go to Coimbra. Fate did not want Tenreiro Aranha to fulfill his ambitions to become a lawyer. He was 19 years old when he became destitute. Educated by priests, he was a bookworm who loved the Greeks and Latin classics. Peaceful but ambitious in character, his destitution forced him to become a civil servant. In Tenreiro Aranha's first job, he directed an Indian village. For the rest of his life, he longed to visit Portugal and the University of Coimbra—a trip that never happened. He knew that, as a native without a graduate degree, he would never achieve the high posts of colonial administration of Grão-Pará. Tenreiro Aranha married his childhood sweetheart, Rosalina Espinoza, and lived a very simple life, writing sad poems and sparkling poetic plays. As a native of the Amazon, he was the first authentic Amazonian artist because he saw his land with the eyes of a non-Portuguese man, yet he also lived in this world as a Portuguese. This duality would be the landmark of his art. Tenreiro Aranha was an artist as a result of martyrdom and a life of frustrations. Without a literary tradition he suffered the curse of all pioneers, and he took refuge in the classical realm of the Greeks and Latin poets.

“*Dos homens me rodeia a iniquidade,
A calúnia me oprime, e ao fim tremendo,
Me assusta uma espantosa eternidade.*”

.....

“From mankind surround me iniquity,
Lies oppressed me, and in the dreadful end,
Haunts me a frightful eternity.”

The poems of Tenreiro Aranha are alive and well, loved by reader's of the Amazon. This is easy to prove with the many editions of his poetry and plays.

When the wounds of the destruction of Grão-Pará started to heal, two great writers were born

in Óbidos, Pará. One in 1853, Inglês de Souza, and the other in 1857, José Veríssimo. The first, Herculano Marcos Inglês de Souza, was born into a rich family and studied law in Recife, Pernambuco. Inglês de Souza, however, never forgot his roots and his family's cocoa plantations. In 1888 he published the masterpiece, *O Missionário*, introducing Brazil to naturalism, with a special flavor of warm weather and sensuality, far from the cold liturgy of the European school.

The other, José Veríssimo, went to school in Manaus and Rio de Janeiro, where he studied engineering. His masterpiece, *Historia da Literatura Brasileira*, was published in 1916. In this work of literary criticism he favored objectivity over shallow nationalism, literary values instead of impressionism. Both authors immersed themselves in a new approach to creative literature. Inglês de Souza had a wonderful ear and his novels and short stories deal with the truthfulness of a writer whose characters had to endure in a place of mystery and human contingency. José Verissimo examined, in his literary criticism, sympathetically but not without skepticism, the role of Brazilian literature in a nation under construction. In his writings we find a pattern of thought and feeling that has literary quality as its motif.

The rubber age that goes from 1890 to 1920 promoted the development of a unique culture. It included outdated Portuguese traditions and a collection of new influences imported as if they were consumer goods. The result was a series of odd juxtapositions. Patriarchy reigned over the family and servants in the era of Madame Bovary; sexual hypocrisy was commonplace at the time of the Hell Fire Club; a judicial body at the service of the landowners existed alongside British unionism; and a lack of refinement that even well-tailored garments couldn't hide. These juxtapositions prevailed while Marcel Proust wrote

on precise etiquette. This patchwork quilt was the culture of the rubber barons, who escaped their contradictions in an attempt to rearrange themselves into a model, rational society.

Both Belém and Manaus had an active cultural life between 1890 and 1914. The two cities invested in the construction of sumptuous opera houses that held annual theater and opera seasons. The Manaus Opera House alone, cost the public treasury four hundred thousand sterling pounds (an exorbitant amount in those days). The Rubber Boom also produced poets Jonas da Silva, Paulino de Brito and Raimundo Monteiro, and non-fiction writers like Domingos Antonio Raiol, who authored the first historical study about the end of Grão-Pará, *Motins Políticos*. *Motins Políticos* is of unquestionable importance to political studies, in the same way the outstanding works of Ferreira Pena, Lauro Sodré and Sant'Ana Nery are to regional research. The economic powers made an attempt to raise educational levels during the Rubber Boom, creating the very first Brazilian university in 1918, the Escola Universitária Livre de Manaus. They also searched for self-expression using the most modern and expensive artform of the time: film. A pioneer in the field, Silvino Santos produced images of the region captured forever in movies such as "No País das Amazonas" and "No Rastro do Eldorado."

CULTURAL DECLINE AND RENAISSANCE

The Amazon alternated between a state of solitary abandon and rare manifestations of national charity. During these difficult years the region suffered a frightening reduction in its population and its liquid assets fell to practically zero. The rural masses regressed to a subsistence economy and an elementary barter system. The devastation was complete. Those who remained in the

Amazon valley after the disaster struggled to survive. Close to two million people suffered throughout the Amazon. Rubber tapers were freed, but did not have the resources to return to the Northeast. In Manaus, the lack of available credit pushed many in the middle class into the level of common laborers, where high unemployment forced many into poverty. The abandoned mansions began to crumble and the streets filled with holes. The collapse of the entire urban services infrastructure was accelerated by the rural to urban exodus. Manaus, once the "Paris of the tropics," was then a sort of ridiculous Port-au-Prince, living in a maddening loneliness.

In "Apóstolo e Santo Moderno," Djalma Batista, a scientist, paints a picture of the situation in Manaus during the thirties:

"The young men had nothing to look forward to and the old men only stared, tearful, at bankruptcy. Amazon was being drowned by the weight of historical determinism. Even the educated men, desperate in their struggle against being devoured by society, isolated themselves, muted. Only a few remained faithful to their intellectual pursuits. (...) An entire intellectual generation went into oblivion."

Tenreiro Aranha tried to retain as much of his homeland as possible. The authors of the Rubber Boom, lured by European culture tried to escape from the Amazon, but the new generation that came out of years of poverty remembered the lessons of the first poet. From this generation the Amazon offers to Brazil two major artists, Thiago de Mello, a poet, and Claudio Santoro, a composer and conductor. Both natives of the state of Amazonas who experienced cultural alienation.

Thiago de Mello and Claudio Santoro are part of a cultural renaissance in the late forties, after World War II. They are known as the 45-genera-

tion, together with poets like Elson Farias, Jorge Tufik and Luiz Bacellar, all members of Clube da Madrugada. Thiago de Mello's masterpiece is *Estatutos do Homem*, which has been translated into many languages. In *Estatutos do Homem*, the contemporary language of poetry tends to be political and stylized, carrying the author back to his land—the green earth of his small village, Barreirinha. At the same time, warming up to concerns for morals in a time of darkness, as in the sixties in Latin America.

*A couraça das palavras
Protege nosso silêncio
E esconde aquilo que somos.
Que importa falarmos tanto?
Apenas repetiremos.*

.....
The bulwark of words
Protect our silence
And hide ourselves.
Why should we talk?
We only utter repetition.

Thiago de Mello and his contemporary, Claudio Santoro, were exiled from the 1960s until the late 1980s. Santoro left a work of powerful music; he is perhaps the most important Brazilian composer in the second half of the 20th century. He was exiled to Moscow and West Germany, where major orchestras recorded many of his symphonies. One of his last works he composed was a cantata based on Thiago's *Estatutos do Homem*, staged by Ballet Stagium, from São Paulo. The world premiere of his only opera, *Alma*, was performed in the Manaus Opera House in 1998—a production for the II Amazonas Opera Festival. When you read Thiago de Mello, or follow Santoro's symphonies, you understand why they could not live in Brazil. A military dictatorship controlled the country, as was the case in most of Latin

America during that period. They were artists with a cause, they believed in a better Brazilian society, free of misery. They also negotiated the uneven and fateful transaction between art and politics, between hope and transformation—between their own survival and the turmoil of changes that were happening in the Amazon.

I could go on all day talking about authors of the Amazon, about poets like Aldísio Filgueiras and Astrid Cabral, novelists like Dalcídio Jurandir, Haroldo Maranhão and Milton Hatoum. Filgueiras dwells with the urban life in a big city; he is the poet of Manaus, with an inflammatory verse full of irony. His masterpiece, *Malaria e Outras Canções Malignas*, shows a gifted poet struggling with modernity.

*“Ah! A poesia aqui
meu filho
é uma doença tropical!”*

.....
“Ah! Poetry here
my son
is a tropical disease!”

Astrid Cabral, together with Violeta Branca Menescal e Mady Benzecry, form a generation of poets that show us part of what it is like to be a woman in the Amazon. They don't write feminine poems or feminists poetic declarations. They have the conscience of women, who carry the painful feminine conviction to surpass with humor the dense fog of small tragedies and little gestures of every day life. Astrid sings:

*“Dentro de mim há cachorros
que uivam em horas de raiva
contra as jaulas da cortesia.”*

.....
“There are hounds inside me
howling in hours of fury
against the cages of courtesy.”

I will finish this brief walk through Amazonian literature crossing the border to the other side of the frontier, out of the boundaries of the western civilization, to meet the Native American culture. There, we will find out wonderful stories, poetry and ancient traditions.

In the early twenty century a few authors found those hidden treasures, such as Ermano Stradelli, Brandão de Amorim, Raul Bopp and Mário de Andrade. Each one delivered some ore of this mysterious gold, but I should mention the name of Tolomen Ken Jiri, known as Luis Lana. He is a Dessana and the first Native American to write a book, published in Brazil, in 500 years. This was 1979. The book, *Antes o Mundo Não Existia*, captures an account of the creation of the universe according to the Dessana, an Arawak people living in upper-río Negro. Written in Dessana and Portuguese, the young author (he was 21 at the time of the writing), describes a very complex chain of events that leads to the creation of the universe, the Earth and mankind. Far from the one God hypothesis of Judeo-Christian cosmogony, Dessana cosmogony could go side by side with the modern Big Bang theory.

Luis Lana was born in São João do Rio Tikiê, in 1961. He went to the school of the salesians missionaries, like every Native American boy of upper-Rio Negro. To write the book, Lana had to deal with the missionaries' censorship; his typewriter was confiscated because Indians were not allowed to have one. In the end, he wrote by night in school notebooks. On the left page he wrote in Dessana, on the right in Portuguese.

Thanks to Luis Lana's daring example, Amazon literature has now a group of authors of different tribes. There are more than 30 different tribes in upper-Rio Negro, speaking different languages,

all of them with their own civil organizations, under the coordination of the Federation of Indians Organizations .

The young generation, who went to school in Manaus, returned with degrees in Law, Sociology, Anthropology, and Medicine. Many have become teachers and writers. Primary school children only study the language of their mothers until they turn 8 years old and then begin Portuguese classes (as mandated by the official Brazilian syllabus). All grammar school textbooks now are printed in native languages, and the new authors have their own publishing house in São Gabriel da Cachoeira in the state of Amazonas. Every book deals with old vanishing traditions, causing tidal waves in contemporary cultural anthropology. It has opened a new horizon in Brazilian literature, unknown to the literary critics of the mainstream media.

For many centuries the people of the Amazon were encouraged to forget, without a struggle, their original nature—at least formally—selling their labor, swallowing whole the social relations imposed by their colonizers. Pressed to the deplorable phenomenon of acculturation, they recognize themselves only during such moments of rapture. They were supposed to be utterly lost and alienated by a shock whose meaning has been withheld. Through art, through literature, the Amazon people trace many interwoven historical experiences of cultural clash and cross-pollination. Of course, the presence of European culture is an irreversible fact, so is the thousands-of-years-old presence of the original Native American cultures. This is why I think it's easy to probe the meaning of Amazon literature: so New World it is, so American, because as a product of a cultural shock it surpassed the differences and helped form a new national identity, the Brazilian identity. ●

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