

Chapter 9 In Brief

Peoples of the Amazon and European colonization (16th-18th centuries)



Indígenas Kanamari durante trabalho na roça da aldeia Massapé (Foto: Bruno Kelly/Amazônia Real)



THE AMAZON WE WANT
Science Panel for the Amazon

Peoples of the Amazon and European colonization (16th-18th centuries)

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Key Messages

- 1) Many features of the Amazon, such as its name and some recurring myths, were forged from the 16th to 18th centuries. During this period the Amazon was characterized as wealthy (e.g., in metals, medicines, and materials), peripheral, distant, dangerous, sometimes empty (as a result of depopulation), and a captivating space for transmitting knowledge. These characteristics still persist.
- 2) Colonial notions such as those based on the duality between “civilization” and “savagery” have strongly influenced political and social relations within the politico-administrative centers of kingdoms and republics, and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. These dichotomies often appear in the region’s current development policies and proposals.
- 3) The development of “borders,” “limits,” and “frontiers” has also been recurring; between the European kingdoms and the inheriting States of the Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, English, or French colonies; between the mountains and the plains; or among Indigenous peoples. These borders ignore past and present dynamics of intense exchange, such as those between the Amazon and the coasts and high Andes.
- 4) The relationship between Indigenous peoples and European conquerors and colonizers was often violent. Interethnic relations were altered, while slavery and colonial institutions such as *encomienda* were imposed to control both space and Indigenous peoples. Relations between natives and conquerors were tense, and expansion of military and religious control was often met by Indigenous resistance. Many Amazonian peoples subjected to mission villages underwent

processes of ethnogenesis that gave rise to new identities, containing both traditional and missionary elements, and increasing the differentiation between peoples considered “civilized” and others considered as “barbarians”.

- 5) Technologies, such as iron tools, created both new relations and tensions between Indigenous peoples, and between the latter and colonizers.
- 6) Several present-day cities in the Amazon are located on areas occupied by Indigenous peoples, while others were built in new places.

Recommendations

- 1) Historical racism, deterministic ideas of “civilization” or “barbarism,” and violent and exploitative human relations have led to power imbalances in the region. These imbalances, especially related to the long legacy of colonialism, drive the appropriation of the Amazon’s nature and people; breaking with these historical legacies is the only path to transforming the region and its peoples. Policies for the present socio-ecological system require permanent critical observance to avoid perpetuating ancient myths and stereotypes.
- 2) States, institutions, and peoples related to the Amazon must avoid the continuous building of “borders” between States’ policies, between spaces and/or activities considered more or less “civilized” (for example between urban centers and more dispersed settlements in the forests and savannahs), between agriculture (considered a civilized activity) and other activities (such as hunting) carried out by Indigenous peoples and local communities, and between the Amazon and the Andes.

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- 3) Andean and Amazonian Indigenous peoples had permanently tense relations with colonial kingdoms. Overcoming these tensions, that in many cases last until today, requires building respectful relations that address the needs of local populations, avoiding the imposition of agendas from external actors that could, as in the past, generate conflicts, dispossessions, losses, exterminations, and other negative consequences.
- 4) It is necessary to ensure that present-day information and knowledge of the territory is used by and for the well-being of Amazonian populations, to avoid new violent or unsuitable appropriations by internal and external actors.
- 5) More exhaustive research on the colonial history of the Amazon, especially during the 16th century, is needed.

Abstract This chapter covers the history of the Amazon between the 16th and 18th centuries, including myths that originated at that time and persist into the present, influencing political and social relations. It also highlights the main actors involved in this process and their narratives. Finally, it shows how the extraction of natural resources has been accompanied by the subjugation and exploitation of the workforce and the development of multiple forms of domination and extermination, especially of Indigenous peoples, since the era of European conquest.

Introduction This chapter shows the ideological, economic, social, and cultural trends generated during the time of conquest and colonization, many of which have lasted to the present day. It addresses the expeditions that navigated the great Amazon River and its basin, the ruptures and reconfigurations of relations between the Andes and the Amazon, and the search for mythical places and knowledge. Also, the demographic and cultural impacts on indigenous populations, the establishment of cities, settlements and institutions of colonial rule, religious missions, and indigenous resistance and rebellions. And last but not least, the demarcation of the boundaries between the Brazilian Amazon and the so-called Andean Amazon.

The arrival of Spanish and Portuguese conquerors and the origin of the name of the Amazon The Amazon owes its name to Gaspar de Carvajal who called the region “Amazonas” in accounts from 1541 and 1542. In America, the first chronicles of conquest correspond to a narrative genre that “is part history, part fiction, and part description of geography and nature. [...] In this narrative, the chronicler is a witness or participant in the events he describes”¹. Reading the chronicles of the 16th century requires understanding the subjectivity of the conquistadors. Their narratives suggest the interests and cultural expectations they brought over from the Europe, including the search for the valuable spices of the Far East in the Country of Cinnamon; Indigenous myths about El Dorado, El Paitite, El Enim, or El Gran Mojo; and stories that interpret what they saw based on Greek mythology.

Millennial and contemporary relations between the Andes and the Amazon The Andes and the Amazon have been linked over time in different ways. There is increasing evidence that their supposed division, due to geographic, climatic, landscape, and cultural issues, has been a myth². Long before the Spanish conquest, Indigenous peoples who inhabited the so-called “piedmont,” or foothills, were fundamental in this connection. They were mediators between the mountains and the forest plain, gathering and organizing products such as pepper, coca, potatoes, and corn. These “hinge” peoples connected the knowledge, myths, and products of these vast territories.

With the conquest and subsequent processes of depopulation and Indigenous resistance, part of that connectivity was lost. An imaginary border was built between “civilization” and “savagery” or “barbarism.” For example, administrative borders reaching up to the so-called Eastern borders were established for townships and provinces, although in practice these imaginary borders were highly permeable. During the era of conquest, products such as coca, essential in mining operations, flowed widely from east to west^{3,4}.



Figure 9.1 Boundary agreements between Spain and Portugal. Source: Roux 2001³.

More explorations of the Amazon The first explorations of the Amazon by Europeans, most of them with the support of Indigenous peoples, were motivated by greed and curiosity. The first centuries of conquest and colonization witnessed raids by explorers dressed as soldiers, missionaries, scientists, or “entrepreneurial” adventurers such as the *bandeirantes*. Their motivations included the control and

possession of territory; appropriation of gold, animals or plants; contact with local populations, the establishment of settlements, and slavery. Over time, missionary and scientific explorations motivated by cartography, geography, natural history, and ethnography increased, sponsored or endorsed by commercial interests. All of these motivations re-

main today; for example, in mineral and oil prospecting, bioprospecting for useful plants, or research on ecology, biology, hydrography, climate change, and ethnography.

Conflicts between the Kingdoms of Spain and Portugal In the 16th century, occupation of the Amazon received broad support from the Portuguese crown, while the Spaniards governed as though the tropical frontier was worthless⁵ and did not consolidate a permanent presence. Between 1580 and 1640, the Portuguese exploited the dynastic union of the two Iberian crowns to push their conquests far to the west⁶. These advances became part of a military, religious, and administrative project for the vast interior of the basin that laid “the foundations for the integration and effective colonization of the immense Amazonian territory”⁷. This resulted in the spread of the Portuguese and Spanish languages in the territories that would be gradually occupied by agents from both kingdoms.

The lack of a recognized boundary favored the persistence of Portuguese advances towards Spanish territory, including by advancing the agricultural frontier through the capture of Indigenous peoples for labor. Stronger delimitation efforts conducted in the 18th century are largely responsible for the current configuration of the Amazon, and were established by “outlining and creating an imperial frontier that did not exist until then, and by giving shape to what is known as the Andean Amazon, or upper Amazon, and the Brazilian Amazon”⁸.

Depopulation: The impact of conquest and colonization on Indigenous populations Two major periods mark demographic analyses of colonization; firstly, the arrival of the conquistadors whose references are qualitative and not very precise, and secondly the colonial period, where data is mainly based on more detailed mission records but is strictly restricted to the missions’ physical area.

Analysis of historical sources from the colonial period largely corroborates the narrative of demographic collapse. These sources indicate the main factors to be diseases brought by Europeans against

which Indigenous peoples had no defense, concentration of the population in mission centers that facilitated the spread of diseases, and the capture of Indigenous peoples who were then subjected to poor living and working conditions in urban centers.

The establishment of European populations in the Amazon Since the 16th century, Europeans have entered the Amazon to exploit its natural, mineral, and human resources; to establish urban centers and occupy its territory; and to evangelize its inhabitants in the name of the unity of the Christian faith⁹.

Urban settlement (in towns, villages, forts, and missions) was part of the strategy of colonial occupation and territorial control in the Americas¹⁰. In the Amazon, the intricate natural landscape, development of diseases, Indigenous resistance, and lack of mineral wealth hindered the establishment of urban centers. Incursions into the Amazon had a strong impact on native societies, as they caused the disappearance of many groups, as well as regional and ethnic disarticulations. The peoples who most suffered from the European presence were those that inhabited the main access routes to the Amazon.

Jesuits, Franciscans and other religious orders The first missionary wave in the Amazon took place around 1630. Dominicans, Augustinians, Capuchins, Carmelites, Franciscans, and Jesuits advanced towards the Amazon basin either from the Andes or from the Atlantic coast; however, it was the latter three that had the greatest presence in the region¹¹.

The missionaries’ aim was the Christianization and Europeanization of Amazonian Indigenous groups, who were considered culturally and technologically inferior. Their lack of a stable and permanent residence, their ignorance of the Christian faith, and their alleged poor discipline, order, and behavioral norms, both personal and collective, were attributed as signs of “barbarism,” which justified missionary intervention^{12,13}.

The organization of mission villages in the Amazon led to the territorial and demographic fragmenta-

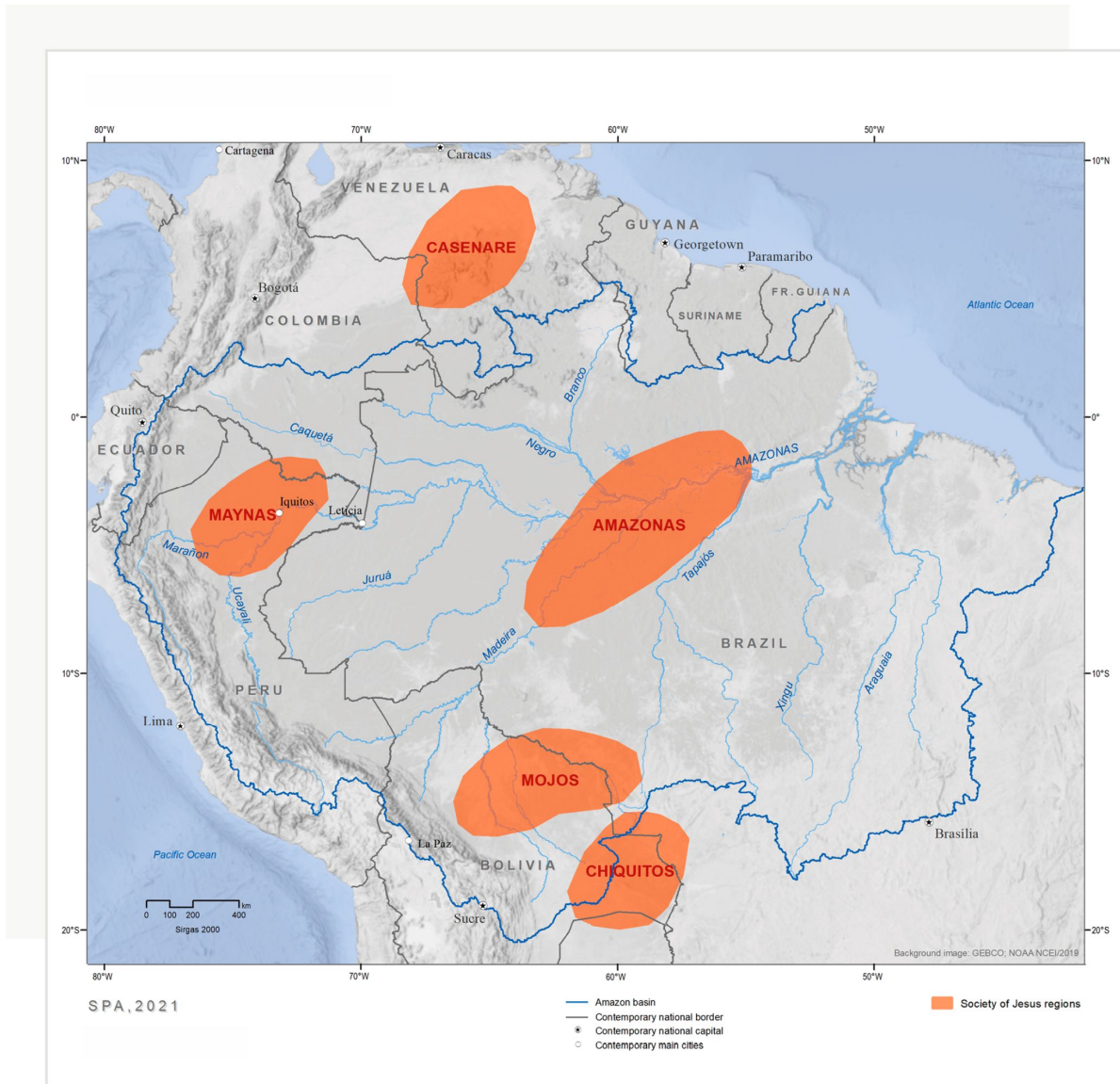


Figure 9.2 Jesuits in the Amazon. Source: Based on Livi Bacci 2010⁴.

tion of Indigenous groups, who left their traditional lands to live under a new social, economic, and political order, shaping new identities within mission centers. Parallel to this clear process of deculturation, a course of ethnogenesis also took place. It was undertaken both by the missionaries, who imposed institutions, knowledge, and habits upon Indigenous peoples; and by Indigenous peoples themselves, who adopted and appropriated them to suit their interests, giving rise to the so-called “mission

culture” or “missionary memory”^{14,15}. The missionary experience of these Indigenous peoples led colonial agents, and later republicans, to consider the former closer to “civilization” because they lived within the state’s political framework, while groups that remained autonomous continued to be perceived as hostile, barbaric, and savage.

Secularization of the missions In the latter half of the 18th century, the Hispanic and Lusitanian monarchies implemented a reformist policy aimed at

strengthening their respective states through modernization of the economy, society, and the administrative apparatus of both the Iberian peninsula and the Americas. Secularization of the missions sought the integration of Indigenous peoples into a broader socioeconomic system, considering their submission to the rule of law, including on taxation, participation in the labor market and regional trade, and their contact and mixing within colonial society.

Both monarchies understood that daily exposure to colonial life was the optimal path to acculturation. This was especially emphasized on the Lusitanian side whose aim was none other than the “Portuguese-ization” of the Amazon. The Portuguese language was imposed as the main language among the Indigenous population, and was considered fundamental to civilization^{16,17}.

Indigenous resistance to conquest and colonization Different forms of colonial domination were matched by diverse forms of resistance by Indigenous peoples, changing according to the stages of conquest and colonization. In the early stages or first contact period, Indigenous peoples discouraged colonization by burning their own villages and leaving numerous European expeditions without food, as well as openly harassing and attacking Europeans. Shortly thereafter, during a second period, they resisted attempts to establish a “frontier of civilization” and the construction of cities in the Amazon by attacking and destroying settlements, including *encomiendas*, towns, and mission villages. In the second half of the 18th century, a third period involved attempts to delineate the kingdoms of Portugal and Spain, particularly in the first case, and represented the most forceful effort to establish colonial rule in the Amazon.

Although Indigenous peoples suffered the ravages of conquest and colonization, many managed to survive. Forms of colonial domination persist to this day and Indigenous peoples have had to create overt or covert forms of resistance. This history should draw attention to the need that States and national societies have to re-establish relations with Indige-

nous peoples on bases that overcome colonial inheritance and value their contributions for the conservation and sustainable development of the Amazon.

Conclusions European conquest and colonization of the Amazon transformed the territory, especially affecting its ancestral peoples. The presence of the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, but also, albeit more marginally, of France, Holland, and England, reconfigured the region in political, administrative, jurisdictional, economic, legal, linguistic, social, and cultural terms. From the beginning, the Amazonian territory was viewed by Europeans as a space with inexhaustible riches ready to be extracted. Relations between Europeans and Indigenous peoples were founded on the “civilization-barbarism” dichotomy, as well as the presence (or absence) of certain forms of culture, both urban and rural. The European presence in the Amazon introduced a series of colonial ideas and practices with that persist to this day.

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