



The *Barbacha*: Origin of the Inkal Awá¹

Inkal Awá People -Colombia, Ecuador

We the Awás are children of the mountain. Our parents are two *barbachas*, one white and one black, which were in a tree located at the head and on the bank of the Chatanalpí river. We are from the union of those two *barbachas*, hence the name Inkal Awá, which is a translation from ‘people from the mountain or jungle’,² and our mission is to take care of nature.

The Awá are one and the same reality: what happens to the mountain happens to the Awá; we cannot live one without the other. We are mountain or jungle people; we are Inkal Awá. This is, fundamentally, our reason for being, our origin and identity, our wisdom and our autonomy in the mountains, in the biodiversity of the territory.

From our worldview, the stories of the origin and the spirits tell that all beings and components of nature are related to man and their own choices in the different spheres of the Awá world, such as the spiritual owners of animals, trees and other beings of the mountain. All of these beings are protected by signs, sounds, noises, warnings, rules and punishments. The stories reveal the agreements in force and exist to maintain balance with our territory and with the spiritual beings who live there, in a relationship of *respect*.

¹ The *barbacha* is an epiphytic plant that grows and lives in trees, and hangs from their branches in the shape of hair or beards. The name comes from the Spanish *barba*, which is ‘beard’.

² For the Awá, the same term can be translated as ‘mountain’ or ‘jungle’. They are just naming their habitat, which is a mountain jungle.



The spirits that live in the mountains, and especially the owners of some hunting animals, such as pigs or large birds; the owners of some plants or fruits such as guava or ripe banana, or the owners of sacred sites such as large pools or falls, also enforce their own Law.

(...)

At the beginning, the world was only inhabited by trees. Thickness was found wherever you go in the jungle.

One day, from a tree or *ti* in particular, a black *barbacha* or *titkaya Tipuh* began to sprout. That *barbacha* grew and grew, lengthening in such a way that it would soon reach the ground. When that black *barbacha* reached the ground, it took the human figure; he became the first man who would populate those jungles and who was called *Atim Awá*.

That man learned to live in the mountain, to eat its fruits, to fish and hunt animals. This first Awá was characterized by being very tall, with dark skin and a large nose, but his main gift was to be able to speak to all trees.

At that time, trees could chat among themselves and with the *Atim Awá*. From these conversations between the first man and the plants, all the secrets and wisdom that the 'mountain' keeps were transmitted. Every day a tree taught something different in order to survive.

The years passed and passed, and this primeval man began to grow old and with a deep sadness of being alone and not being able to share with others similar to him. One day, from that first tree where years ago the *Atim Awá* had sprouted, a *barbacha* began to break out, this time a white *barbacha* or *pucha Tipuh*. In the same way, the *barbacha* grew longer and longer until it reached the ground. Upon touching the ground, that *barbacha* took the form of a woman, the first *Ashampa*. □

Words from Awá people recorded by Bayron Arcos Meza (2013) and Paula Mora Pedreros (2012).

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Comments

The text offered above has not undergone any kind of adaptation by people foreigner to the Inkal Awá ethnic group. This means that we have maintained the cultural respect to which we originally committed in The Earth Stories Collection. In fact, the first four paragraphs belong to Mora Pedreros (2012, pp. 20 and 40), while the second part of the story is collected from Arcos Meza (2013, pp. 50-51). Both authors affirm having collected their texts from people belonging to the Awá ethnic group.

The word *Inkal* has been translated into Spanish as 'mountain', hence the Inkal Awá are known as the 'Mountain People'. However, for the Awá, the word *Inkal* does not refer exactly to the mountain, but to the jungle and its trees. In fact, as Arcos Meza (2013, p. 56) points out, 'when an Awá child is asked to take a pencil and paper to draw *Inkal*, immediately reproduces a jungle and, in the middle of it, stands out a large tree'. Thus, we could better translate the expression Inkal Awá as 'People of Trees' or 'Tree People'.

Inkal Awá People are in risk of physical and cultural extinction, according to the Constitutional Court of Colombia. In fact, in the Colombian armed conflict, the Awá had to make massive displacements to flee from the armed fighting, and in 2009 they were twice massacred, being killed 29 Awá, including eight minors (Reina, 2011). However, the murders of indigenous Awá leaders have continued since then, accounting for 29 murders between 2016 and 2019. They were trying to defend the rights and territories of the Awá People against land and population control from different groups fighting in Colombia, as well as against large mining and agro-industrial companies that want to invade their territories (UNIPA, 2019).

Sources

- Arcos Meza, B. R. (2013). Mito y educación en la cultura del pueblo Inkal Awá (Myth and education in the culture of the Inkal Awá People). *Historia de la Educación Colombiana*, 16(16), 47-62.



Mora Pedreros, P. A. (2012). *Palabra y letra del pueblo awá* (Word and letter of the Awá People). (Master's degree dissertation). Universidad de Nariño. San Juan de Pasto, Colombia.

Reina, J. (2011 Sept. 19). «Nosotros somos Inkal Awá, hijos de la montaña, y sin el territorio no somos nada» (We are Inkal Awá, children of the mountain, and without our territory we are nothing). UNHCR Spain. Available on <https://www.acnur.org/noticias/noticia/2011/9/5b0c19eb12/nosotros-somos-inkal-awa-hijos-de-la-montana-y-sin-el-territorio-no-somos-nada.html>

UNIPA (2019 June 11). Asesinatos y amenazas a líderes y comuneros profundiza crisis humanitaria del pueblo indígena Awá (Assassinations and threats to leaders and community members deepens humanitarian crisis of the Awá indigenous people). Asociación Minga. Available on <https://asociacionminga.co/index.php/2019/06/11/asesinatos-y-amenazas-a-lideres-y-comuneros-profundiza-crisis-humanitaria-del-pueblo-indigena-awa/>

Associated text of the Earth Charter

Preamble: Earth, our home.- Humanity is part of a vast evolving universe.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.

Preamble: The challenges ahead.- The choice is ours: form a global partnership to care for Earth and one another or risk the destruction of ourselves and the diversity of life.



Preamble: Universal responsibility.- To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Principle 1a: Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings.

Principle 13f: Strengthen local communities, enabling them to care for their environments, and assign environmental responsibilities to the levels of government where they can be carried out most effectively.

