



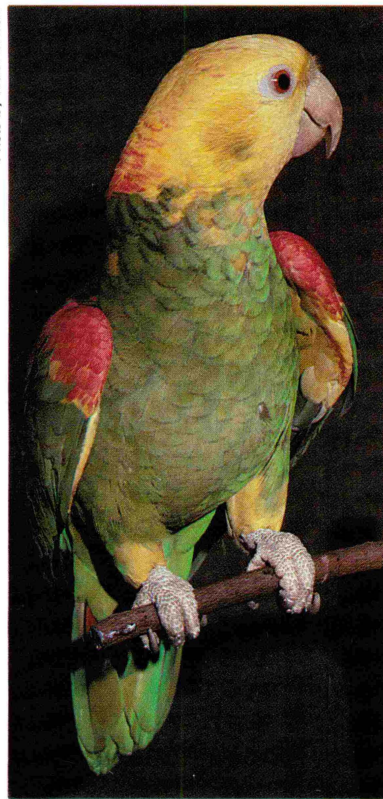
Cayapa house with protective railing. Rio Camarones, Esmeralda



Note the brilliant yellow wingpatches on the Scarlet Macaw. Read the story of how the bird received this color.

The green and the yellow feathers on this Amazon parrot are important in the mythology of the Cayapa people.

Photo by Walt Hanson



Cayapa plantain tree with ripening stalk.

Canoe with Cayapa guides, Rio Cayapa, Esmeralda Province, Ecuador



The Scarlet Macaw and the Amazon Parrot

Folk Tales From the Cayapa Indians of Ecuador

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The spring and summer of 1967 were tumultuous. There were riots in Newark and Detroit, the Arab-Israeli War, and a summit meeting at Glassboro State College in New Jersey between President Lyndon Johnson and Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin. I heard nothing of these events in the rainforest of Esmeraldas Province, northwestern Ecuador (see map).

Cayapa Indians

Esmeraldas Province was the primary homeland of the Cayapa Indians who then numbered about 3,000 people. With an average rainfall of +400" per year, this rainforest was among the wettest areas in the world. I was there during the dry season, but it rained for an hour or two most afternoons and heavily throughout the nights. My clothes rarely dried out completely, and fungi and molds spoiled much of the food and attacked the metal parts and lenses of the cameras.

The rainforest is a lush but fragile environment. The soil is shallow, and once the forest canopy and ground vegetation are cleared, it takes many years for the environment to renew itself, if it ever does. The Cayapa were farmers who relied on plantain as their staple crop supplemented with maize, beans, bananas, sugar cane, oranges, pineapples, coconuts, and wild plants. They raised chickens for eggs and meat, hunted, and fished. Rubber and cacao were produced for trade.

Despite the difficult living conditions, however, the area was one of the most beautiful environments in which I have lived. Ecuador had more species of hummingbirds than any other South American country at the time, and the rainforest was also home

to other species of magnificent birds, including macaws and Amazon parrots.

I was a graduate student in anthropology at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale and had traveled to the Cayapa area with a professor to do research on Cayapa demographics, kinship, and economics. My specific job was to travel the rivers conducting a house-to-house census collecting comparative kinship data, accompanying the Cayapa on trading expeditions, and recording economic activities around the houses where I stayed. Two guides and sometime interpreters accompanied me: Ruen Anapa, eldest son of the Chief, Gabriel Anapa; and Ruen's cousin, Segundo Jose.

During our travels, we discussed many subjects, especially the various populations of birds. Communication was difficult, at times, because Ruen and Segundo spoke no English and I spoke no *Chápalache* [the Cayapa word for their language and for themselves]; we communicated in Spanish, our second language. While in Ecuador, I recorded folk tales including these two about the Scarlet Macaw (*Ara macao*) and the Amazon parrot, probably *Amazona ochrocephala*. They are transcribed as recorded with a few explanatory remarks in [].

The Scarlet Macaw

Long ago, before the coming of the Ecuadorians [Spanish], *Morenos* [descendants of African slaves brought to the area by the Spanish], and all the others who have come since, there was an important shaman named Chápira. He was widely known for his many cures, especially his ability to heal burns. He also had medicine to

make men strong in order to keep their wives happy [aphrodisiacs]. Chápira, himself, had several wives and kept many other women happy by sneaking onto their sleeping mats at night. When the husbands found out about this, they went to another shaman and paid him to make bad magic against Chápira. This he did.

One day Chápira was walking in the forest with his dog, collecting plants and other materials to make medicine. It was the dry season, and the forest floor was covered with a dense mat of old leaves and dead plants. Chápira did not see the *equis* [ekez; fer-de-lance (*Bothrops atrox*), a large, South American pit viper] hidden among the debris, and he stepped on it. The snake reared its head and bit Chápira on the leg, sinking its fangs deep into his flesh. Chápira cried out in pain and fell down. The snake withdrew its fangs and said, "This is to teach you to keep to your own wives and away from those of other men."

Chápira had no snake medicine with him, and he cried out in his pain and agony, seeking help. Up in a tall *chonta* tree perched a pair of large green parrots, a male and female.

They heard Chápira, flew down to him, and asked, "Why are you crying?"

Chápira replied, "Because *equis* bit me, and I have no snake medicine. My leg is so swollen that I cannot walk, and I'm burning with fever and dying."

The parrots asked, "What is it you need? We can get it."

Chápira told the parrots what he needed, and off they flew. Soon they were back with some plants. Back and forth they flew, bringing more plants and then clay so that Chápira could make medicine for his leg. But he had

no medicine bowl, so the parrots chewed all the plants and then mixed in the clay with their feet. Chápira put the medicine on the snakebite, covered it with a palm leaf, and waited.

For several days he waited. He was weak and slept much. When he awoke, he was very hungry and thirsty so the parrots brought him nuts and fruits to eat. They drank water and spit it into his mouth to ease his thirst. Finally, on the fourth day, Chápira was well enough to begin the walk home.

He said to the parrots, "You saved me from certain death. How can I repay you?"

The parrots replied, "Even though we are green, we cannot hide well enough in the forest from the men who would kill us and trap us for our feathers. We are always afraid."

Chápira said to them, "I am a shaman. Come to my house tonight, just before sunset, and I will help you."

That night, just before sunset, the two green parrots appeared on the railing of Chápira's house. Chápira put them on his arm and carried them to the west side of his house where he placed them on the railing. Then he took his most powerful charm, a large, clear, faceted crystal, and held it up toward the setting sun. He told the parrots to turn around in a circle, and as they did, Chápira spoke a magic chant and reflected the red of the setting sun down onto the parrots' bodies. Immediately their feathers changed from green to red. Then he reflected the deepening blue of the night sky (Fig. 9) onto the tips of their tails. This done, the parrots started to leave, but Chápira said, "Wait until morning. I am not finished."

Even though it was the dry season, it rained all night. The next morning, Chápira awoke, wakened the parrots, put them on his arm, and carried them to the east side of his house. He placed them on the railing. As the sun rose, a magnificent rainbow appeared in the eastern sky. Once again, Chápira took his crystal charm and held it toward the sun and the rainbow. He reflected the rainbow onto the shoulders of the parrots, first onto their right shoulder, then onto their left. He chanted his magic, and the parrots' shoulders became the colors of the rainbow.

Now Chápira said to the parrots, "You are different from all other birds in the forest. Because you are so different, you are easy to see and recognize. And because you saved my life, I shall instruct all the Cayapa never to hunt or harm you."

"Thank you," replied the parrots. "Now you must leave other men's wives alone, for we may not always be



near to help you." Then the parrots flew away.

And that is how the Scarlet Macaw came to be, and why the Cayapa never hunt it or trap it for feathers. Chápira left the other men's wives alone, as the macaws had told him. Instead, he spent more time with his wives, and they were very happy, indeed.

The Amazon Parrot

Long, long ago there were only *Chápalache*, no Spanish, no *Morenos*, no *gringos*, and no other Indians. There were only *Chápalache*, and the forest was much as it is today, only denser.

All the animals were here: jaguar, monkeys, wild pigs, *wanta* (capybara), *watin* (a large rodent that resembles a nutria), and the others. The rivers were filled with fish, *camarones* (crawfish), and turtles. There were many birds, snakes, and lizards, but no chickens and cows because this was before the Ecuadorians and *Morenos* arrived [chickens and cows were introduced to the area by the Spanish]. The forest was rich in fruits, nuts, and medicinal plants. There were only *Chápalache*, the forests, and the rivers.

We followed the teachings of our grandfathers and uncles lived in the forest as the gods and spirits would have us live. We did not farm then but ate from the bounty of the forest.

And then, something went wrong, and the gods and spirits became angry. Maybe someone broke the incest rule, or maybe someone committed murder [the most serious crime among a people who were, and are, almost totally non-violent]. We do not know what happened; no one does. Soon there was less and less to eat; animals did not come to our arrows and darts [blowgun], fish swam away from our nets and traps, and even fruits and nuts grew beyond our reach.

We turned to other foods, foods we never ate before. We caught lizards [iguana] because they are slow, and monkeys because they are curious, and we ate them. Then, one day, a man caught a green parrot with yellow on and around its head. He used a stick covered with gum from the *chikila* [rubber] tree and baited it with seeds. The parrot came to eat the seeds, and got caught in the gum.

The man was about to wring the parrot's neck when the parrot spoke to him. "If you kill me, you will have but one meal; but if you let me live and help you, you will eat forever."

"How do I know you are telling the truth?" asked the man. "How do I know that if I let you live, you will not just fly away and leave me hungry?"

"Because you are holding me," replied the parrot, "and when I tell you what to do, you will see that if you do it, I will be unable to fly away."

"Then tell me," the man said, "but hurry because I am very hungry."

"I can stop your hunger soon," said the parrot, "but you must be patient if you are to eat forever."

So the man agreed, and the parrot instructed him thus: "Pluck the four best green feathers from my tail, then pluck the four best green and mixed colors feathers from each wing, and finally pluck four yellow feathers from my head [or neck]." The man did as he was told.

"Now," said the parrot, "take me to a clearing in the forest."

The man took him, and when they arrived, the parrot told him, "Put one

green feather in the soil at each of the four directions toward the center of the clearing. Put one mixed colors feather in the soil on either side of each green feather, and on the tip of each green feather, place one of the small, yellow feathers." The man did as he was told.

Then the parrot said, "Now sit at the edge of the clearing, and pray to the gods and spirits to make the feathers grow. And after you have prayed, you may eat some nuts and fruit, but you must give me some as well." Saying this, the parrot took a small bag of nuts and fruit from under his wing and gave it to the man.

"I will pray," said the man, "but if I give you food, there will not be enough for me."

The parrot replied, "I have promised that you will eat forever, and I have given you my feathers so that I cannot fly. Is it not worth giving me some of the food that I gave to you? And if my promise is not kept, you will still have me to eat."

The man thought about this and agreed, for he knew that birds and other animals do not lie except for

monkeys and snakes that are not trustworthy. So he gave the parrot some of the nuts and fruit, and the man began to pray. When he was done, he ate some food, and he soon fell into a trance. When he awoke, the parrot was still there, but some feathers had grown into tall maize plants with leaves the color of the parrot's tail feathers. Most of the plants had ears the golden color of the parrot's head feathers, but some had ears of mixed colors, the colors of the parrot's wing feathers. Still other feathers had grown into plantain trees with golden bunches of ripe plantain hanging from them.

The parrot said, "Pick the ears of maize, boil them, and eat them, but save one of every four kernels from each ear; dry these, and store them in a safe place to plant next year. Then pick the plantain, bake it, and mash it. Cut down the trees, but leave a large stump for each so that a new tree can grow. Thus you will eat forever." The man agreed to do as he was told.

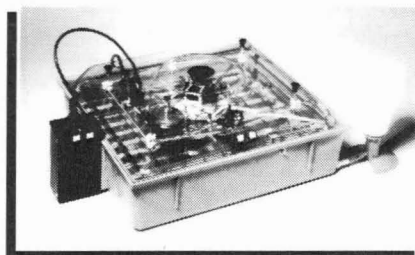
Then the parrot said, "Now go to each plant and retrieve my feathers." The man did so, and the parrot told

him, "Place them back in my tail, wings, and on my head." Again, the man did as he was told. Then he held out his hand and gave the parrot the remaining fruit and nuts from the bag. He thanked the parrot and promised that he would share this gift with all the *Chápalache*.

Then the man released the parrot, and it flew to its nest near the top of a tall *guayacan* tree. The man gave thanks to the gods and spirits of the forest, and to the parrot, took the maize and plantain, and distributed it to all the *Chápalache*.

This is how we first obtained maize and plantain, and this is why we do not hunt the green parrots with the bright yellow heads.

An interesting sidebar to the second tale is it suggests that the Cayapa first planted maize as their staple crop. However, plantain, introduced from Africa, has replaced maize as the staple probably because, in the rainforest, its cultivation, over the long term, is less destructive to the soil than is the cultivation of maize. 🐦



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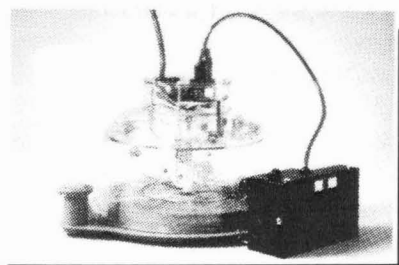


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