

# The Hyacinth Macaw: a South American Indian Folktale

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Folktales about the Scarlet Macaw and Amazon parrot recorded during my 1967 fieldwork among the Cayapa Indians of Esmeraldas Province, northwestern Ecuador (see Map 1) were published in the July/August 1997 issue of the *afa Watchbird*. As I wrote, one of my tasks was to accompany the Cayapa on trading expeditions to record what they sold or exchanged and what they received in return. The two folktales were collected while traveling along the rivers with my Cayapa guides. Some trips were in the general area — not more than a day's journey from the house of the family with whom I lived. Other trips took several days as we went to towns such as Borbon (photo 1.) and Limones on the Río Cayapas, and to the coastal town of San Lorenzo at the mouth of the river. The most distant destination was Tumaco, across the border in Columbia (Map 1).

The Cayapa sold or traded a number of forest-derived and homegrown horticultural products and a few manufactured goods: bananas and plantains, cacao beans (for chocolate), balls of raw rubber, balsa and other logs, tobacco, dugout canoes and paddles, and rum, if the sugar cane harvest had been especially good. In exchange the Cayapa purchased or received in trade, cotton and satin cloth, needles and thread, kerosene, matches, fishhooks, shotgun shells, rubber boots and hats, machetes and other tools, and, infrequently, a Coleman™ lantern.

These trading expeditions were interesting for several reasons. For example, I met members of other Indian tribes such as the Colorado,

another lowland group, and peoples living in the Andean foothills and mountains, most often Otavalan Indians (Map 1) who traveled widely selling their hand woven textiles. Each group had a distinctive style of clothing specific to them (photo 2). I learned much about these other peoples despite the fact that we communicated in Spanish that was not the native language of any of us.

Evenings were enjoyable, especially if the Cayapa were pleased with the success of their trading activities. We gathered around the hearth in a house, or an outdoor firepit, and the Cayapa and other Indians exchanged news, gossip, and stories (including folktales). One folktale concerned the Hyacinth Macaw (*Andorhynchus hyacinthinus*), a bird not native to either Ecuador or Columbia; its habitat is the Amazon Basin of Brazil, an area which most of these people never visited (see Map 2). I assume that the



MAP 1

Map of Ecuador and neighboring countries with locations of the Cayapa area and the towns mentioned in the text.

story was transmitted over time and distance because it is amusing. It might have originated with the Bororo of Brazil, but I am uncertain of this and have not been able to verify it. I relate it here for your enjoyment.

## Hyacinth Macaw

In the beginning, Hyacinth Macaw resembled some other birds, but he was much bigger. He was all blue, so it was often difficult to see him against the sky when he flew above the forest. And his beak was straight so that he could peck at trees to eat the insects—his favorite food—that lived under their bark, and so that he could sip nectar from flowers like his smaller brother, hummingbird.

Hyacinth Macaw lived a carefree life. Because he was so much bigger than most other birds, he had nothing



MAP 2

Map of South America. The darkened area is the general area of Brazil inhabited by the Hyacinth macaw (*Andorhynchus hyacinthinus*).

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to fear from them. And because he lived so high up in the trees, he did not have to fear other animals, except for the snakes that can climb trees to steal macaw chicks. But with his long, pointed beak and great size, Hyacinth Macaw was unafraid of most snakes, and few snakes would risk slithering up a tree to steal his chicks. There were other birds less able to defend themselves and their young.

As I said, Hyacinth Macaw was carefree. He was also a foolish bird who thought he could do anything he wanted. And what he wanted most was to fly up high, so high that he could touch the sun. Hyacinth Macaw loved the sun's warmth that swept the morning mists from the forest and allowed him to fly above the trees. There he would spread his wings and let the air currents, heated by the sun, carry him even higher.

One day, Hyacinth Macaw decided to fly up to touch the sun. He told the other birds and forest animals of his plan. They told him that he was being foolish, as usual.

"The sun is our Father," they said, "And you must treat him with respect. You cannot just fly up and touch him."

An old, wise shaman named Tupiyama overheard Hyacinth Macaw telling of his plans. After the other birds and animals left, Tupiyama called Hyacinth Macaw to him. When he perched on Tupiyama's shoulder, Tupiyama told him, "My friend, you should not do this thing. It is not respectful. Besides, it is not your nature to fly so high. Only Harpy Eagle, Condor, and King Vulture fly this high, and they are much bigger and stronger than you are. Even so, Condor and King Vulture had the feathers on their heads burned off. Stay where you belong just above the forest."

Hyacinth Macaw thanked Tupiyama for his advice and concern but said that he wanted to fly up to the sun to touch it. With that he took off, and soon he was high above the trees.

Up and up flew Hyacinth Macaw, higher and higher, and nearer and nearer to the sun. Never had he been so high before, and it took all his strength to fly that high, even with the warm air currents helping him. Ever

closer he came to the sun. He was very warm and very happy, but he now was also very tired. Indeed, he was so tired that he lost control of his wings and fell toward the sun. Splat! Hyacinth Macaw hit headfirst into the sun. The sun was extremely hot, so Hyacinth Macaw quickly walked off its surface.

But now Hyacinth Macaw found himself falling rapidly away from the sun, tumbling downward through the sky, toward the forest. Over and over he turned as down he plummeted. Finally he was able to regain his control, and he spread his wings. This slowed his fall, and just before he was about to plunge into the tallest trees of the forest, Hyacinth Macaw straightened out his flight and landed safely on a high branch.

For many hours Hyacinth Macaw perched on the branch at the top of the tree, resting. Then, he realized he was hungry, so he flew to a nearby tree to eat some nectar from its flowers. But Hyacinth Macaw was unable to eat; his beak was now bent and curled downward because he had flown so hard into the sun. He tried to peck the bark of another tree to reach the insects beneath it, but his newly curved beak was useless for pecking trees.

Hyacinth Macaw began to cry from hunger and frustration, and soon the other birds and animals gathered around him. When they saw what had happened, they began to laugh. Hyacinth Macaw was angry. "I am hungry and cannot eat, and all you can do is laugh at me!"

The other birds and animals replied, "Yes, because your beak is bent, and you look so strange. And you have yellow splotches on your face" (photo 3).

Hyacinth Macaw flew to the river and looked at his reflection in the water. He saw that he now had yellow spots around his eyes and the sides of his mouth where some of the sun's color had rubbed off onto him when he flew into it. He ducked his head into the water, but the color would not come off. He put his beak into the crook of a tree and pulled, but he could not straighten it. Hyacinth Macaw again began to weep.

Soon, along came Tupiyama. He

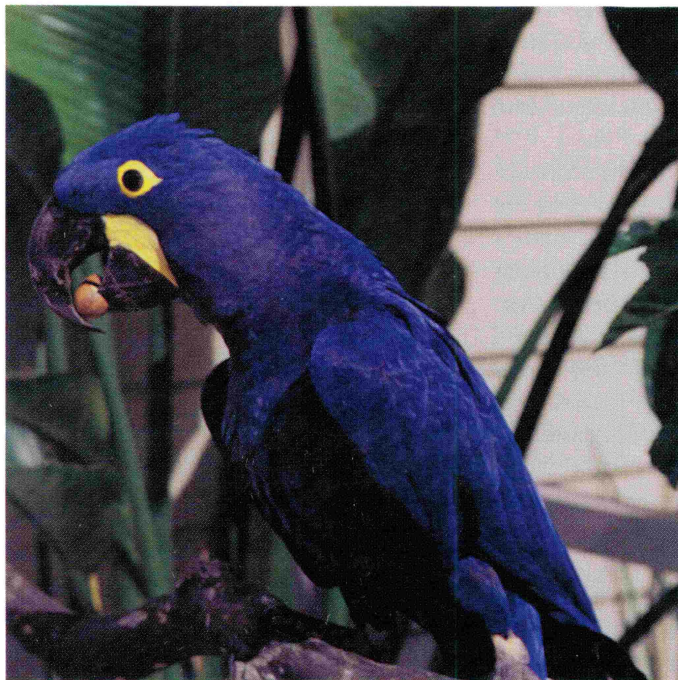


looked at Hyacinth Macaw and laughed. "Now your looks match your foolish behavior," he said. "I warned you not to fly to the sun."

Hyacinth Macaw replied, "Well, you were right, but I did. Now what am I to do?" Tupiyama reached into his pouch and withdrew some nuts. "From now on," he said, "these will be your food. And from now on, people and the other birds and animals of the forest will laugh at you because of the way you look, because of the yellow spots on your face. You may be a big bird and a very strong bird, but the silly look on your face is forever a reminder that you are a foolish bird who did not heed the advice of those wiser than you, and that you flew into the sun."

So that is why Hyacinth Macaw has a curved beak, yellow on his face, and eats what he does. And let this be a lesson to all of you to pay attention to those wiser than us, and not to behave foolishly. Instead, follow the way of life that the gods and forest spirits intended for us because we can only be who we are, and we are happiest when we do what is right and proper, as they have prescribed. 🐦

Photo by Kathleen Gaynor-Smith



*Hyacinth Macaw.*



*The town of Borbon on the Río Cayapas, northwestern Ecuador. June 1967.*

Photo by Jonathan E. Reyman



*Otovalan (Ecuador) man wearing the traditional blue and white outfit and Otovalan woman in her traditional blue, white, and bright pink clothing. June 1967.*

Photo by Jonathan E. Reyman