

## **PRODIGIES I. - PAEZ**

The indigenous people of the mountain ranges in *departamento Cauca* have been from time immemorial telling each other stories about extraordinary and powerful people, prophets chosen by gods, personas that carved a deep line into people`s memory and left remarkable stories behind. These legends are about messengers from the other world who come to us only once in forty years.

"Once in sixty years!, they say!," I overhear somebody object.

"Not remotely, what nonsense! A story tall as the tallest tree in Cauca! For one hundred years must the Paez people patiently wait before one of these chieftains, musicians or heroes appear," another voice joins into the argument, "that is exactly how long it takes before the Great Puma raises them up, feeding them on her own milk."

...so they can bring the message of the gods and our ancestors, so they can teach the tribe new, important skills, bring knowledge of useful things, lead their people into victorious battles or initiate long lasting peace. They come from inside the mountains, in times of great misfortunes or natural disasters. Their birth is accompanied by tremors- when the earth is violently shaking as if in labour pains, when it is trembling as if coldness gnawed deep into her bones - then the mountains crack open and reveal gaping chasms from which the messengers, yet another of Ksaw Wala`s newborn children (who until then lived in the Inner Realm and were being fed by the Puma of Myths and Dreams - a noble Being of all nurturing Darkness), come onto our world to bring Light and hope to all their tribesmen.

And one of them, as Paez people believe, was Khwen Tama A, Juan Tama of the Star, or Juan Tama de la Estrella, a glorious chieftain and an illustrious leader of his peoples.

The night was very deep. Only the sleepless, the dreamers and those suffering the pains of unrequited love were still awake gazing into the dormant sky (some of them passing their time counting, others invoking or pleading the stars), when the serene surface of the celestial waters became suddenly disturbed by a sharp beam of light, resembling a flying torch or a smoldering rainbow, which was followed by a deafening whistling sound.

"One of the stars, the lit chiming bells of the night firmament, broke off the Darkness Tree as if it was its leaf," *wala*, the shaman explained, "and was falling down, heading to our world. It went flying through the land illuminating the night, disturbing many a sleeper, pointed at us like a warning finger and crashed into one of the numerous peaks of our mountains. It seemed that the entire World shook at that moment, and the ripped patches of soil and the loose rocks and stones broke off the mountain crests and started sliding down into the valleys. And as they were rolling downwards, violently pushing all the debris in front of them, creating a new, deep furrow, a brand new wrinkle on the face of our mountains, a place was made for a new, young spring, a playful stream, which sprang to the surface from the rocky slope, exactly at the same spot, where the shooting star sank into the soggy flesh of the mountain back, not unlike the God's spear..."

And that is why we call him Juam Tama de la Estrella.

Every village, every small town, has their own stories, ancient anecdotes, about the birth of Juan Tama, or at least their own variation (or a specific combination of the stories other communities narrate) to this legend. Some of them differ more than others, but in the most popular version, you will hear that the fallen *estrella* plunged into a mountain lake, which is today called after Juan Tama de la Estrella, and that

it was such a big splash that the lake burst its banks and flooded the valley below...

"...and a new, youthful and rather shy little brook brought to the people in the valley something vaguely resembling a wicker basket..."

Well, it looked more like a bird's nest with twigs and small branches densely but skillfully plaited together.

"... and even though it looked really strange, people would have most probably just shrugged it off and gone about their business, if they hadn't heard, all of the sudden, something that reminded them of child's crying and sobbing coming directly from the strange cocoon."

Fear came upon the people standing on the bank. Some fled away at once. Others tried to reach an agreement on how they should proceed. But... who wouldn't know the stories about gods' prodigies!?

"What if this is one of them?," one spectator suggested.

"And what if it is not," another argued.

"And even if it isn't one of the prodigies after all," somebody else would observe, "it is a human baby, and so we are obliged to save it."

"Go and bring ropes!," they sent a boy back home.

"Then they used the ropes to fish the drifting nest out of the water and pulled it towards the river bank. And indeed, now they could all clearly hear the human child's crying coming from inside it. But to their utter bewilderment, when they took the bizarre cocoon apart, there wasn't a baby inside after all... instead they found themselves facing an appalling strange creature which didn't even remotely resemble anything any of them had seen before... we could perhaps say that it looked a bit like a giant worm with a muzzle of a beast."

Only eyes, its eyes were human.

"What are we going to do with it?"

"What is it?"

"Kill it!"

"Well, when I don't know what it is I'm going to kill it, brilliant option, isn't it?," somebody was sneering at the suggestion.

"Shall we send it further down the river?," others proposed.

"As revenge?"

"Come on, neighbours, don't be silly!"

"Leave it to fate, let's forget about this monster and go home," advised others.

But women were strictly against. The one who gives life knows its pain and isn't so hasty with death ordeals.

"Kill it..."

"...or get rid of it..."

"...is something we can do anytime!"

So in the end, curiosity won.

"...and thus the people decided to keep the strange Worm and took it to a woman who had just had a baby and told her to milk this strange thing with the child-like voice together with her own newborn baby."

Only three days passed and the woman was found dead.

What happened? People were horrified. Especially when they saw how the worm lying next to the dead woman had changed its shape... suddenly the whole thing looked more like a human head.

"Now we have to keep it."

"But what should we do with it?"

"It never stops crying."

"It must be still hungry."

"We need to find a new wet-nurse," people agreed and started to look for a new woman who would be able to give some of her milk to the mysterious head... and so it happened that for the new quest most people completely forgot about the unfortunate woman.

Only the elders looked closer at the lifeless body and examined it carefully. Such a puzzling case of death is not to be seen every day. Luckily.

"I have never seen anything even remotely similar to this."

"It looks as if something sucked out all the life from her body."

"All the sap of life."

"Perhaps that monster..."

"...that strange worm...!"

"Yes, the milk from her breast was not enough..."

"Greedy creature!"

"It also devoured all her life energy!"

But they didn't want to frighten anybody...

"What if we have got it all wrong?"

"...and so they didn't say anything to others," wala continued. "But in three days' time, the new wet-nurse was also found dead, and then there were no more doubts that it was indeed this peculiar human Head that took from its wet-nurses not only their milk, but also their blood and with it, naturally, all their life. And to make the matter even more alarming, the head was continuously changing its form, resembling more and more a human being."

"We have to get rid of it once and for all!," somebody growled.

"Bitterness and misery is coming upon us!"

"Kill it?"

"Maybe the best solution would be if we sent the Head down the river. And then? Leave it all to destiny."

"But it's not possible!"

"You can see that it is a human being after all!"

"Only partly."

"To sacrifice the Head..."

"The monster, you wanted to say..."

"...or the young mothers of our own tribe, mothers of our children?"

To cut the long story short, after all the bickering and discussing, they decided to keep the Head and to find another woman to milk it. No, they didn't tell her anything... and yes, even she died three days later. And then four more followed... so there were altogether seven dead women... but by then, the metamorphosis of the Head had been already completed, and suddenly it looked just like a regular baby. First the Head grew chest, then arms, legs... and voilà! It was a handsome little boy.

How relieved was the woman whom they had persuaded to milk the Foundling as the eighth in the unfortunate row of wet-nurses, when the child refused to suck from her breast... from that moment, he started to be fed on usual children's food.

And the boy grew and they gave him a name Juan Tama, or Juan Tama de la Estrella to remember his extraordinary arrival.

Later, when he was a fully grown man, Juan became the chief of the tribe, a real hero of the Paez people, who spent all his life protecting the land against the Spaniards. Some historians deny his existence completely, while others admit that somebody of resembling characteristics may have lived in the area of the Paez communities in the seventeenth century. But none of this is really important. These speculations simply don't belong here.

And so it's said that the great chief of the Paez people, who arose from Laguna de Juan Tama, went back there late in life with his wife, so they could both bathe naked in its cooling waters, and that the lake (blue like a glass eye of the mountain peaks, with thousands of frailejones for eyelashes), the very same lake which brought him into Life at the beginning of our story, took them both back into its womb.