

From the *Rehue* to the *Kuxa'an Suum*

Symbolism of the “Staircase to Heaven” in the pre-Hispanic World

... They built a staircase with which he [Wlaha] and the People of the Stars who survived, went up to heaven and became stars.
(Myth of the Makiritare tribe of Venezuela)



Left: Machi playing the *Kultrún* or ceremonial drum. Behind her it can be seen the inclination of the staggered *Rehue* (Photograph by Martin Thomas. Undated/Photographic Archive of the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino). Center and Right: Front and side of a *Rehue* in the permanent exhibition of the Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino (Fotographs by de Rafael Videla Eissmann, 2017).

The Araucanians

One of the fundamental magical-religious symbols of the Lituche-Araucanian cultural substrate of Chile is the *Rehue* or stepped totem carved in wood.

The *Rehue* is a representation of the *Axis Mundi*, the Invisible Column of the World. The Cosmic-Polar Tree. In its upper part, it has an anthropomorphic face –evoking the ANTHROPOS or Cosmic Man from the Western tradition. Is it the Fucha-Huentru-Nguenechén, literally, the “Old-Man-God” of the Araucanians?–.

Sometimes the anthropomorphic figure of the *Rehues* has the *Callana* or “plate” that protected the head of the Lituches from the Sun. The Lituches were the survivors of the Flood or *Tripalafken*.

The ‘steps’ of the *Rehue* –usually seven– allow the real and symbolic ascent where the ancient *Machis* and initiates sought to contact the *Wenu Mapu*, that is, to the “Land of Heaven” where the ancestors dwell –the Antupainko, the “Children of the Sun”–.

Significantly, in the *Nguillatún* ceremony –also called *Pillantún*–, or rogative to the Supreme God –the *Chao Nguenechén*–, the *Rehue* is located in the center of the sacred space or *Nguillatuhue*. Thus, guided by the *Machi* or the *Nguillatufe*, the participants in developing this magical ritual dance in an anticlockwise direction around the *Rehue* to the sounds of the *Kultrún* –the sacred drum–, until its culmination with the *mantrams*: *Aum! Aum! Aum!*

The sacred syllable *OM*.

This rite, like the space where it takes place and the symbol of the *Rehue* are a magical-religious evocation of the means that united –unites– the earth –the *Chili Mapu*– to the plane of the Pillanes gods and the inhabitants of the stars –the

Wenu Mapu–.

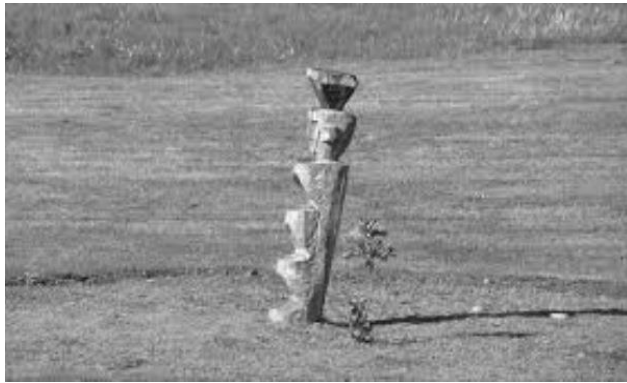
There is, along with these fundamental symbolic elements outlined here, an intangible element: The inclination presented by the *Rehues*. They have an obtuse angle of approximately 105 to 110° –being the vertex the anthropomorphic front–. But what is the reason for this particular feature? What motivates this distinctive inclination? What was its origin and function?

This inclination would be an evocation of the old terrestrial axis, that is, a symbol of the polar axis prior to its change as a consequence for the *Great Catastrophe* or *Tripalafken*. For this purpose, a Mapuche informant –the Mapuches are the heirs of the Araucanian tradition– has stated that *the Mapuche lives since the beginning of the world; we are antediluvians. Chao Ngenechen created us and gave us the land we live in*¹.

The key to understanding is the epithet of “antediluvians”.

Their descendants preserved through their symbols and myths the components of a remote worldview.

The *Rehue* is then, both a symbol of the *Axis Mundi* and a figuration of the “Staircase to Heaven”, to the *Wenu Mapu*².



Left: A Rehue in the Museo de Historia Nacional de Chile (Photograph by Rafael Videla Eissmann, 2018). Right: The inclination of the Rehue (Photograph without information).



Left: A Rehue, symbolic figuration of the Tree-Man, the Axis Mundi (Photograph without information). Right: A Machi and her Kultrún, next to the Rehue (Archive of the Museo de Historia Natural de Santiago).

¹ Foerster, R. *Introducción a la religiosidad mapuche*. Page 77.

² See *Das uralte Wissen der Mapuche. Fliegender Berg und Himmelsleiter* (“The Ancient Knowledge of the Mapuche. The Flying Mountain and the Ladder to Heaven”) where it is addressed the keys of the *Rehue* and the *Kultrún* of the Araucanians as symbols of the remote contact with the *extraterrestrial gods*.

The Catíos-Chocoes

Meanwhile, a myth of the Catíos-Chocoes of Antioquia in Colombia, which by the way has passed through numerous filters, also refers to this “Staircase to Heaven”: The *god* Caragabí had a marvelous staircase, very different from those manufactured by the Indians, which *came from earth to heaven so that the Catíos could come up to talk with him whenever they wanted. This strange staircase was like a very thin glass and had the flanks defended by railings and rails made of a very burnished metal, in order to avoid the vertigo to those who went up or down and it rested on the ground on two strange and beautiful flowers*³.

When the first Indians sinned Caragabi took the staircase from them *so they would not go back to heaven*. As punishment, he also passed his creative hand through the eyes of the Indians, as if rubbing them and took away that prodigious visual power that they initially possessed⁴.

He then spilled coconut water on their heads to age.

The “sin” that caused men such severe punishment was fornication. Some Indians added certain circumstances about the fall of the first men clarifying that *a sinful woman when trying to climb the stairs of heaven to speak with Caragabí, next to her son, fruit of sin, which when touching with her hands one of the two mysterious flowers on which the staircase rested, caused at that moment the collapse of the great staircase: Those who were already climbing the top of it, managed to enter the sky; everyone else fell to the ground*.



The *Piedra de las Escaleras* or “Stone of the Staircase” in the sacred hill of Tusa –which has a pyramidal form–, in the Municipio de Venecia, Departamento de Antioquia, in Colombia. The pre-Hispanic name of the area was Cenufaná. Certainly, the *Piedra de las Escaleras* is a symbol of a past reality –*Cargo Cult!*– (Photograph by Manuel Saldarriaga, 2019).

³ Villa Posse, E. (Compiler). *Mitos y leyendas de Colombia*. Pages 66-67.

⁴ The chapter 2 of the third part of the *Popol Vuh* also refers to the loss of this superior *vision* that, among other properties, allowed them to know the roundness of Earth.

Was the *staircase* just a metaphor? Or was it a specific object? The *Gyelrap*, a genealogical text of the ancient Tibetan rulers accounts twenty-seven kings, seven of whom descended from the firmament to Earth on a *staircase*.

The same idea was recorded by Karl Maria Wiligut in the *Fifth Human Era* of the *Description of the Evolution of Humanity According to the Secret Tradition of Our Asa-Uana Clan of Uiligotis* (1935) which is based on a remote and ancestral Germanic source.

Furthermore, the Catíos also say that the primitive Indians from the Earth heard very well the songs and music coming from heaven because at that time it was not as distant as it is now⁵.

But men were delighted by such delicious wonders and agreed to build a *staircase* that would reach the sky. However, Caragabí opposed this action but the Indians persisted in their attempt and when they reached very high with their *staircase*, Caragabí outraged by their disobedience *knocked them down from above and took the pavilions of the sky much further, so that men would not try to build another staircase*⁶.

Another mythical record of the Catíos speaks of Herupotoarra, a descendant of the lineage of the Domicoes and who was the architect sought by Caragabí himself to build the *staircase* to heaven for the exclusive use of men.

The name of Herupotoarra means “Born of the Leg” because he emerged from the calf of his mother, who died at the time of his birth. When Herupotoarra came of age he found out who had been responsible for the cause of his mother’s death. It was assured to him then that the responsible was the Moon and for that reason Herupotoarra placed two sticks in the form of stairs and decided to avenge his mother. And to the extent that Herupotoarra said: *Uariade, uariade* (“Go up”, “go up”) and the staircase extended vertically until it reached the presence of the Moon, which he rebuked and without giving it time to replicate he discharged in its face such a tremendous strike that it can still be seen in the Moon the marks of it.

A *Trienené* or woodpecker that was flying nearby landed next to the staircase, shutting it down and making it fall.

Herupotoarra, attached to the staircase said while he was falling: *Mojopodo, mojobodo* (“Without weight”, “without weight”). And so, he went to gently fall to another planet under Earth called Armucurá. There Herupotoarra learned that the inhabitants of this planet were immortal; they fed on steam that gave off cooked *Chontaduros* and were free of natural needs.

Later, Herupotoarra built again the staircase and climbed into this world⁷.

⁵ The same notion is found in the myths of Tierra del Fuego: A Selk’nam cosmogonic account refers to a primordial era without visible celestial bodies and reaching back to the time of the creation of man and where stands out the reference to a “low sky” and “another firmament” (Keller, C. *Dios en Tierra del Fuego*. Pages 9-14).

⁶ Where were the “pavilions” in the sky? It is not difficult to intuit that they were the signs or emblems where Caragabí was and that it rose unattainable.

⁷ A similar idea is found in a myth of the Warau of Guyana that speaks about Kononattoo –literally, “Our Creator”–. Kononattoo wanted men to live in heaven, but they were forced to stay on Earth –where they had descended through a hole in the sky discovered by a hunter– because a fat woman got stuck there, making it impossible them from returning. This, along with the subsequent disobedience of the Warau, already living on Earth, saddened Kononattoo and deterred him from his intention to make a new entrance hole or access to heaven. Since then the Warau live on Earth.

Likewise, and in relation to the inhabitants of Armucurá witnessed by Herupotoarra, the

Is it only about myths and fantasies of the pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the current territory of Colombia? Where and how did the idea of beings living in heaven come about? How can it be explained the conception of a “staircase to heaven” in primitive societies without technological development that would allow them to conceive the existence of *extraterrestrial beings* and of other inhabited worlds?

The same notion of the “staircase to heaven” is observed in the *Codex Vindobonensis* with the image of the god Ehecoatl-Quetzalcóatl descending down a ‘ladder’ from a celestial platform. This is the *path suspended in the sky* called *Kuxa’an Suum*, the “*Living Rope*” of the Mesoamerican tradition.

Is the celestial platform from which Ehecoatl-Quetzalcóatl descends a cosmic vehicle? Is this idea not similar to the “pavilions” of Caragabí?

It is always about the *gods* and their portentous vehicles.

The People of the Stars

A pre-Columbian myth of the Makiritare of Venezuela is even more specific because it refers to a struggle between men and the *People of the Stars* and their return to the sky:

The People of the Stars listened to the Jaguar and killed and ate a woman.

Kuamachi wanted to punish them, but they were too many and too powerful. Kuamachi went then where Wlaha, his chief, and invited them to help in the collection of Dewaka fruit. They became suspicious but Kuamachi offered them some fruit and as they liked the taste they decided to help in the collection.

Then Kuamachi and his grandfather Mahanama took them to the trees. The People of the Stars climbed the trees and began to eat the fruit, since they were no longer afraid of only these two people. Kuamachi dropped a fruit and in that place came water that spread and caused a great flood that covered everything except the trees.

Kuamachi then thought “canoe” and a canoe appeared. He and Mahanama got on the canoe. Mahanama threw the baskets he was weaving into the water that turned into anacondas, crocodiles, alligators and other deadly animals. Then Kuamachi set fire to a termite nest filling the forest with smoke. He and his grandfather picked up the bows and arrows they had hidden in a cave.

When they returned and the smoke had dissipated, the People of the Stars implored mercy. Both threw arrows at them.

The People of the Stars fell into the waters and were attacked by dangerous animals. Then, before throwing arrows at Wlaha, the leader of the People of the Stars, Kuamachi and his grandfather were left without arrows. He had transformed into seven people and had collected seven arrows.

*The People of the Stars who were injured went back up to the trees. Wlaha shot the arrows to the sky and with the help of Ahishama, which became the turpial, and Kütto, which became a frog, **built a staircase with which he and the Star People who survived, went up to the sky and became stars.***

Ahishama became Mars; Wlaha became the Pleiades, Mönettä, the scorpion, became the Ursa Major, and Ihette, ‘One Leg’, became the Orion Belt. Kuamachi also decided to ascend. He had Kahshe, the piranha, with whom he cut the vine behind him so that the demon Ioroko could not come up with his basket of poison.

texts *Vyahyaprajnaptyanga*, *Anuttaraupapatikadashanga* and the *Twelve Upangas* of Jainism –from India– describe in detail the existence of beings on other planets.

Kuamachi brought Akuaniye, the Plant of Peace with him, the one he offered to Wlaha, and then they stopped fighting.

Then Kuamachi became the Evening Star [Venus]. Before this, the sky was empty and black⁸.

“They built a staircase with which he [Wlaha] and the *People of the Stars* who survived, went up to heaven and became stars”!

Along with the essential reference to *extraterrestrials* in this extraordinary pre-Hispanic mythical record there is an echo of the *Deluge* or “Great Flood” and the ascension of the *People of the Stars* to the sky. As elucidated by anthropologist Adela Fernández, according to the Mesoamerican myth after the Flood *the gods, to repair such a catastrophe, in the year 1 Tochtli, after the Flood, they created four men [Atemoc, Itzacoatl, Itzmaliya and Tenoch]. Penetrating below the ground they made four holes, until they reached the upper surface; Tezcatlipoca became the Tezcacuahitl tree [Mirror Tree], Quetzalcóatl the Quetzalhuexoch tree [Beautiful Willow], and men, trees and gods raised the heavens⁹, holding them firm with the stars in the way they are now. In recompense of that action, the Tonacatecuhtli [the “Lord of Our Flesh”, the First Divinity] made his sons the lords of heavens and stars, and the heavenly path that Quetzalcóatl and Tezcatlipoca traveled is marked by the Milky Way¹⁰.*



The representation of Ehecóatl-Quetzalcóatl in the *Codex Vindobonensis*. The god-man can be seen descending a ladder from a celestial platform. It is the *path suspended in the sky called Kuxa'an Suum*, “Living Rope” of the Mesoamerican tradition.

Since then, since that distant past where history has merged with the *Golden Mists* of myth –the *Great Flood*– it is expected the return of the god-men, of those beings that live in the stars.

⁸ De Civrieux, M. *Watunna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle*. Pages 109-116.

⁹ ... *And men, trees and gods raised the heavens*. This is expressed in the figure of the *Rehue* of the Lituiche-Araucanian tradition of Chile (*Author's Note*).

¹⁰ Fernández, A. *Dioses prehispánicos de México*. Page 23.



*Evocations of the extraterrestrial gods. Left: A pre-Hispanic whistle with the representation of a hybrid being ‘driving’ a kind of vehicle from the Remojadas Culture of Veracruz, in Mexico (M. H. de Young Museum of Fine Arts en San Francisco, California). Center: A winged god carved in gold discovered in the Diquís Region in Costa Rica (The Cleveland Museum of Art). Right: Dancers of the *Choike Purrún* or Sacred Dance of the Ostrich of the Araucanians. These are *bird-men* (Photograph by Claude M. Janvier, 1930).*

The Future in the Past

The anthropomorphic sacred post of the Araucanians, the ancestral accounts about Caragabí and Herupotoarra of the Catíos-Chocoes; the myth of the *People of the Stars* of the Makiritare and the *Kuxa’an Suum* or the “Living Rope” of the Mesoamerican tradition, present a clear notion of the “staircase” as a means of union or link between two planes: The terrestrial and the heavenly.

Between the world of men and the world of the *gods*.

But how can it be explained the recurrence of this “staircase” in the pre-Hispanic world –practically throughout the Americas–? Would it obey a function of the primitive psyche? If so, with what meaning and purpose? Could its presence be explained due to the fertile pre-Hispanic imagination as the evolutionary historiography exhibitors would argue? Or rather, is it possible to observe in this symbol an anticipation of a future technology –a “memory of the future”–?

Today we understand that these magical-religious figurations of the “staircase” are in fact evocations of an unknown technology of the time before History and whose function –the union between planes– was perpetuated by means of rituality and the memory of the *extraterrestrial gods*.

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