

Articles

Care, healing, and enchantments from the perspective of elderly riverside residents of the Amapá Amazon

O cuidar, o curar e as encantarias na perspectiva de idosos ribeirinhos da Amazônia Amapaense

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Abstract

The article discusses cultural knowledge from the perspective of the elderly in the Amazon region of Amapá. Its aim is to analyze the knowledge of the elderly from the perspective of care, healing and enchantment in the Amazon region of Amapá. The methodological paths are the result of field research with a qualitative approach, in association with cartography, oral history and descriptive research. The collaborators were thirteen elderly people from different territories in the Amazon region of Amapá. The interviews were conducted over several visits, and their knowledge was systematized and analyzed using elements of content analysis. The data was generated as part of a wider study carried out at Amapá State University, in partnership with other institutions. The results showed that knowledge and cultural practices of care, healing and enchantment contribute to the well-being and quality of life of these elderly people in Amapá. In addition, the research also highlighted the importance of thinking about public policies and actions aimed at caring for the elderly in the riverside communities of the Amazon.

Keywords: knowledge of care; knowledge of healing; knowledge of enchantment; elderly riverine people.

Resumo

O artigo tematiza saberes culturais a partir da enunciação de idosos amazônico-amapaenses. Tem como objetivo analisar os saberes dos idosos, na perspectiva do cuidar, do curar e das encantarias, na Amazônia Amapaense. Os percursos metodológicos resultam de uma pesquisa de campo de abordagem qualitativa, em associação com a cartografia, a história oral e a pesquisa de caráter descritivo. Os colaboradores foram treze idosos de diferentes territórios amazônico-amapaenses. Foram realizadas entrevistas ao longo de várias visitas, cujos saberes foram sistematizados e analisados a partir de elementos da análise de conteúdo. Os dados foram gerados por ocasião de uma pesquisa mais ampla, desenvolvida no âmbito da Universidade do Estado do Amapá, em parceria com demais instituições. Constatou-se, nos resultados, que os saberes e as práticas culturais do cuidar, do curar e as encantarias contribuem para o bem-estar e a qualidade de vida desses idosos amapaenses. Além disso, a pesquisa também destacou a importância de se pensar em políticas públicas e ações voltadas para o cuidado dos idosos nas comunidades ribeirinhas da Amazônia.

Palavras-chave: saberes do cuidar; saberes do curar; saberes das encantarias, idosos ribeirinhos.

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Study conducted in the socio-cultural context of the Amapá Amazon, through an inter-institutional research, based at the State University of Amapá (UEAP), Macapá, AP, Brasil.



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INTRODUCTION

This article, focusing on the knowledge of elderly people whose narratives are rooted in the riverside communities of the Amazonian region of Amapá, aims to analyze the elders' knowledge from the perspective of care, healing, and their relations with "encantarias" (spiritual entities) in the Amazon of Amapá. It is part of a broader institutional research conducted within the context of the State University of Amapá, through the Study, Research, and Practice Group in Education in the Amazon of Amapá – GEPEA. The methodology employed was a qualitative field research approach, combined with cartography, oral history, and descriptive research. The subjects were thirteen elderly individuals from different territories of the Amazonian region in Amapá.

Firstly, we consider the alert from the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) that population aging is happening faster in less developed countries. By 2050, 80% of elderly people worldwide will live in these countries, which means fewer immediate solutions for infrastructure, healthcare services, and other tools to handle this significant social transition (Organização Pan-Americana de Saúde, 2017). It is important to note that Brazil will undergo this demographic transformation in just 20 years.

In Brazil, a person is considered elderly from the age of 60. Statistically, about 9% of the Brazilian population today is composed of people over 60 years old. It is estimated that by 2025, this number will grow significantly, reaching about 32 million elderly people. According to Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (2018), by 2040, there will be more elderly people than young people in the population, with 21.9% of the population being elderly and 15.4% being young. Currently, there are 43.2 children aged 14 or under for every 100 people aged 60 or older. By 2060, the percentage of people over 65 will rise from the current 9.2% to 25.5%. In other words, one in four Brazilians will be elderly.

Additionally, it is important to highlight that most elderly people live in rural areas. These data show that Brazil's demographic profile is transitioning, no longer being a "country of young people" and becoming a nation with an increasingly aging population.

In the Elderly Statute (Brasil, 2003), in its Article 8, Chapter I, about the right to life, the state has the obligation to provide "[...] elderly people with protection for life and health, through the implementation of public social policies that allow healthy aging in conditions of dignity" [...]. Therefore, the knowledge and cultural practices of elderly people must be legitimized by federal, state, and municipal institutions as part of the recognition of public policies outlined in documents for the elderly.

In the case of the Amazon region, riverside communities are heterogeneous social groups whose way of life and sociocultural practices are closely connected to nature and the ecosystems of the region. This symbiotic relationship with nature creates a strong sense of belonging, based not only on the idea of ownership but also on a shared identity of affection and respect for the environment they live in. These communities are recognized for their territorialities, which represent concrete places of life and also spaces of resistance and struggle to preserve their traditions and ensure sustainable aging in these communities.

The Amapá Amazon represents one of the least known forms of rural spaces in Brazil. In this region, life is shaped by the rhythm of the waters and the paths they follow. The vast forests surrounding rivers, lakes, streams, and flooded forests are home to indigenous, quilombola, and riverside communities, which are the main traditional population groups of the Brazilian Amazon. Among these groups, riverside people are the most numerous and depend on nature's resources for their subsistence, while maintaining an ancestral relationship with their surrounding environment.

Recognizing the memory of elderly people and valuing their diverse Amazonian cultures means appreciating and respecting the knowledge and cultural practices that are part of their life experiences. In this process of recognition, education plays a fundamental role, as it must be open to the outcomes of interactions between individuals, their living environment, and their culture.

We believe that education must be sensitive and inclusive, considering the different perspectives and knowledge of the elderly. This involves promoting spaces for intergenerational dialogue, where younger generations can learn from the wisdom and experience of the older ones, and vice versa. Furthermore, it is important that educational institutions value and incorporate

Amazonian knowledge and cultural practices, ensuring that this wisdom is preserved and passed on.

The discussion about the knowledge of riverside elderly people enriches our society as a whole, promoting cultural diversity and strengthening connections between generations. It is a continuous process of mutual learning, in which education plays an essential role in promoting inclusion and respect for diversity.

The observations in this article act as a call to public authorities to implement public policies that meet the needs of the elderly in Brazil, especially those living in Amazonian territories. Additionally, the results of this study provide a basis for developing specific actions and programs for riverside areas, considering the unique characteristics and demands of the elderly.

METHODOLOGICAL PATHS

This article results from field research conducted in different sociocultural contexts of the Amapá Amazon. For this reason, it relied on a methodological and epistemological approach. It involved a qualitative field study, using cartography, history, and descriptive research methods (Minayo, 2014), anchored in cartography and oral history, with data description as its central feature.

The cartography of knowledge (Oliveira; Mota Neto, 2004) involves understanding and interpreting the lives of individuals as well as specific groups in relation to particular themes. It allows mapping and exploring the knowledge and experiences of the subjects involved in the research, aiming for a deeper understanding of the studied phenomena. This understanding is also linked to the concept of symbolic cartography by Santos (2006), which helps identify the structures of representations in various fields of knowledge about social reality. This approach seeks to map and understand the different forms of knowledge and representations related to social reality.

We combine cartography with oral history because it has significant epistemological potential by enabling the production of critical knowledge. This is especially true considering that oral tradition is not merely a new source for historiography but a form of knowledge production (Mignolo, 2002). This means that knowledge is built not only through theory but also through practical experience and the interactions among the various actors involved. This makes it more relevant and applicable, as it allows access to and recording of individual and collective experiences of people who have lived through certain events, bringing to light evidence of the facts experienced in society.

The narrator, in this context, is equated with the social scientist, philosopher, or social critic, thus eliminating the colonial epistemic distinction between subjects who know and objects of knowledge. For this reason, we choose to refer to them as co-producers of the research, in an anthropological condition of equality with other subjects who have institutional ties, such as teachers and researchers.

During the research that led to this article, field activities were conducted over three months, involving five communities: Rio Preto, Rio das Cinzas, São José do Rio Maracá, Foz do Macacoari, and Quilombo do Tapereira. These communities were selected for representing different socio-cultural contexts of the Amazon region in Amapá.

From these communities, we had the effective participation of thirteen elderly individuals, eight male and five female, aged between 70 and 97 years. The selection criteria for participants included elderly individuals aged 60 or older, of both genders, nominated by the community itself during visits, which allowed the inclusion of elders recognized by their own communities. Another criterion was that participants needed to have preserved cognitive abilities to ensure they could clearly and consistently share their knowledge and experiences, reflected in the forms of cultural practices and knowledge related to caregiving, healing, and enchantments, during the conversations held. Considering the routines of the communities and the most suitable times for conversations, field activities were conducted on Saturday mornings.

The elderly participants who agreed to take part in the research signed the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF) as well as the Consent Form for the use of image and voice. Data were collected through in-depth interviews divided into two stages, which included questions about their life trajectory in the region, their routines, and their knowledge and Amazonian wisdom.

The interviews took place at the elderly participants' homes and lasted approximately three hours. All guidelines from the Ministry of Health (MH) regarding hygiene and social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic were followed.

All interview stages were transcribed and validated in subsequent meetings in 2023, allowing participants to include, exclude, or modify the transcribed data if they deemed it necessary (Meihy; Holanda, 2007). To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the participants were identified using pseudonyms, specifically flower names they themselves chose.

It is noteworthy that the research began only after approval by the Research Ethics Committee involving Human Beings, under opinion no. 4.450.614/2023.

The data were systematized based on thematic content analysis, as proposed by Minayo (2014). This process included a pre-analysis phase, characterized by a floating and thorough reading of the collected material; material exploration, involving thematic categorization to understand the text and organize significant words and expressions; and finally, interpretation of the material and discussion of the categories using the theoretical framework.

Knowledge of the elderly and Amazonian culture

Culture plays a fundamental role in the Amazon, reflecting the relationships and ways of life of its society. The region's rich culture encompasses various dimensions, such as education, religion, and medicine. This knowledge is passed down through generations and manifests in memory, especially among the elderly, who hold a valuable and priceless wealth of experiences accumulated over their lives.

Elderly individuals are guardians of traditional knowledge and daily practices essential for understanding Amazonian culture. Their memories and experiences are a precious source of wisdom, representing the continuity of traditions and the preservation of the region's cultural heritage (Oliveira; Mota Neto, 2004). By recognizing and valuing the knowledge of the elderly, we can promote the appreciation of local culture and the transmission of knowledge to future generations. Furthermore, including the elderly in discussions and decisions about cultural policies allows for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach, one that respects and strengthens the cultural identity of the Amazon.

It is a fact that the Brazilian Amazon and Amapá have a long human history, evidenced by archaeological remains such as rock art, megalithic sites, and excavations of burial pits. These traces date back at least 1,000 years before the arrival of Europeans in the region, demonstrating the ancestral presence of native peoples on the northern coast of Amapá and the eastern part of French Guiana (Saldanha; Cabral, 2014).

However, the arrival of Europeans triggered a process of human and epistemological genocide in the region. European ethnocentric thinking was imposed, resulting in the elimination of many distinct ways of thinking and the forgetting of the traditional knowledge of various indigenous peoples. This violent and systematic process of erasing diverse expressions of ways of life is referred to as coloniality, more specifically the coloniality of power, which continues to influence Latin American thought even after the end of the colonial period (Quijano, 2005). These societies located in the Amazon maintained very close relationships with the forests, rivers, crops, herbs, and their uses, among other elements, which enabled the construction of a unique cultural system – Amazonian culture, whose most traditional expression is found in the rural riverside environment (Loureiro, 2001). Here, culture is understood not simply as inherited wisdom or passive experience, but as a vast number of active social representations expressed in intersubjective relationships (Fonseca; Nakaïama, 2010).

This culture presents itself as a colorful mosaic of myths, rituals, beliefs, values, knowledge, and representations of the caboclo universe, which reflect the Amazonian way of being and living and must be recognized and valued (Fonseca, 2003), including the knowledge of the elderly. The knowledge of the "elders"¹ is situated within the perspective of denied and silenced knowledge (Santos, 2009) as a result of the Eurocentric modernity project. In this framework,

¹ The author forges the concept of "elder" to engage in the debate about cultural knowledge rendered invisible by the paradigm of evidence. However, in this article, this concept is used synonymously to refer to the term "elderly", as a category that upholds cultural knowledge and practices in the Amazon region of Amapá.

predominantly cultural, political, and economic manifestations specific to this continent are established as the human world par excellence, while the world of “others” is framed as a realm of barbarism, inhumanity, and lack of civilization. These material elements lie at the core of what Dussel (1994) calls the myth of modernity, bringing implications of denial and silencing of the knowledge and alterity of “other” non-European and, more recently, non-“North American” peoples.

Our agreement with Enrique Dussel directs us toward overcoming this modern developmentalist paradigm, in which coloniality persists in its many expressions. For this reason, we seek to systematize data that can contribute to the (re)foundation of an “other” societal paradigm—pluriversal, allowing space for the distinct and the plural in horizontality.

Knowledge of care, healing, and spiritual beliefs of elderly riverside residents in the Amazon region of Amapá

In the Amazon, knowing, understanding, living, and doing were predominantly indigenous processes. These processes were incorporated through adaptation, assimilation, competition, and diffusion with new institutions, techniques, and motivations “transplanted” by colonizers and settlers, as well as new values brought by immigrants from the Northeast and other regions of Brazil.

In the Amazon region, traditional communities hold vast knowledge about the use of medicinal plants. However, these practices have been directly influenced by modern Western medicine and by the lack of interest from younger generations in these traditions, threatening the disappearance of oral transgenerational transmission (Amorozo, 2002).

The popular knowledge of riverside residents in the Amazon region reveals complex and deep understanding about the use of natural resources for health. These healing practices are widely used by the elderly and women, who are considered the caregivers of the family.

Healers, prayer leaders, and midwives play fundamental roles in performing these treatments. They use teas, infusions, and poultices made from medicinal plants, always accompanied by prayers and traditional rituals. These individuals have an intimate knowledge of the healing properties of plants and know how to use them effectively to treat various illnesses and health conditions.

A notable characteristic of riverside communities is the presence of herb gardens around their homes. These medicinal plants are cultivated in accessible ways and are readily available to be harvested when needed. The riverside residents believe that their natural remedies are never harmful, as long as they are administered in the correct dose. This knowledge has been passed down through generations, ensuring its efficacy and safety. In this context, it becomes evident how the elderly play a fundamental role as guardians and transmitters of this ancestral knowledge, accumulating experiences and wisdom throughout their lives.

To deeply understand the reality of riverside communities, it is necessary not only to recognize the myths and their meanings but also to incorporate them into all actions and listen carefully to the stories and wisdom of the elderly. This prevents stereotyped or reductionist interpretations, allowing for a more holistic and respectful understanding of the culture and values of these communities.

Moreover, it is essential to implement good practices in social and health public policies in these riverside communities. This includes strengthening access to quality healthcare services, promoting prevention and health education programs, and establishing partnerships between professionals of Western and traditional medicine.

By combining the traditional knowledge of riverside residents with good practices in social and health public policies, it is possible to improve the quality of life in riverside communities, including for the elderly. This integrated and respectful approach values ancestral wisdom, strengthens the autonomy of the communities, and promotes the health and well-being of all community members.

However, it is important to highlight that this is a continuous journey that requires the active and participatory involvement of riverside communities, healthcare professionals, and responsible authorities. Through dialogue, attentive listening, and collaboration, we can build a fairer and healthier reality for everyone.

In the Amazon region of Amapá, the importance of medicinal plant species stands out in the context of elderly riverside residents. These plants play a fundamental role in their living conditions, as they hold vast knowledge about the plants and the processes used to treat illnesses.

The integration of scientific and traditional knowledge is essential for consolidating practices for conserving medicinal plants. By combining these two types of knowledge, a broader understanding of the medicinal properties of plants and traditional usage methods can be achieved. This enables the preservation of these plants and the promotion of their sustainable use. Furthermore, valuing and respecting traditional knowledge not only contributes to biodiversity conservation but also strengthens the cultural identity of riverside communities. By recognizing and appreciating traditional knowledge and practices, it is possible to promote the autonomy and empowerment of these communities, as well as encourage the continuity of this vital knowledge for the health and well-being of elderly riverside residents.

Below are the cultural knowledge and practices developed by elderly riverside residents for the treatment of illnesses in daily life at the mouth of the Amazon River using herbs from traditional medicine:

The 12 symptoms, presented in [Chart 1](#), reveal the diversity of herbs used to treat these symptoms identified in the Amazon region of Amapá, as well as announce that the knowledge and cultural practices originate from numerous productions of teas, syrup and fruit juice.

Chart 1. Remedies produced from plants of the Amazon rainforest.

Symptoms	Herb	Knowledge and Cultural Practices
Headache	Cashew tree	Tea from the bark.
Diabetes	Chicory	Tea from chicory leaves with tansy, basil and rue.
Sinusitis	Papaya flower	Tea from the papaya flower.
Stomach pain	Basil	Tea and bath with basil leaves and tansy leaves
Fever	Boldo	Boldo tea
Sore throat	Rosemary	Tea from rosemary leaves with “cibalena” leaves
Gastritis	Andiroba	Syrup made from andiroba oil with honey
Flu	Noni	Juice from the fruit
Urinary Infection	Mango tree	Tea from mango leaves, such as vassourinha, jambu and sugarcane
Kidney stone	Bamboo tree	Tea from bamboo roots and passion fruit tree roots.
Pneumonia	Watermelon	Tea from the roasted seed.
High blood pressure	Oriza	Tea from oriza leaves and soursop leaves. Root bath.

Source: Field Research (2023).

Other cultural knowledge and practices existing in the Amazon region of Amapá come from animals, they have a fundamental role in the cure of physical diseases, which are associated with natural and non-physical causes, such as spiritual or cosmological. Natural diseases are treated both by Western medicine, with doctors and nurses, and through phytotherapeutic prescriptions, which frequently include animal parts. [Chart 2](#) follows, with the knowledge and cultural practices produced by elderly riverside dwellers for the treatment of everyday diseases at the mouth of the Amazon River.

When it comes to cultural practices, animal fats are used in different ways for various therapeutic purposes. They can be used in teas and infusions, both hot and cold, and can be consumed pure or mixed with bee honey or industrialized products, such as Sebo de Holanda, Minâncora ointment, and white kerosene. Additionally, the fats are also applied topically through rubs.

Chart 2. Remedies produced from animals of the Amazon.

Symptom	Animal	Cultural Knowledge and Practices of Elderly Riverside Dwellers
Muscle strain and “breakage” (bone structure injuries).	Sucuriju snake	Apply Sucuriju fat.
Rheumatism and Stroke.	Alligator	Alligator fat
Cerebrovascular accidents (stroke, infant convulsions, epilepsy), rheumatism, respiratory diseases (tuberculosis, flu, and asthma), circulatory issues (hemorrhoids), and inflammatory processes.	Ray fish	Ray fish fat
Asthma and Bronchitis.	Pirarara fish	Pirarara fish fat
Earache.	Traíra fish	Traíra fish fat

Source: Field Research (2023).

Some specific parts of animals, due to their rarity or difficulty of acquisition, are preserved for long periods. Animal fat is extracted from specific locations, such as the dorsal area in terrestrial animals and the liver in the case of fish.

This diversity of uses and preparations demonstrates how ancestral wisdom recognizes the therapeutic potential present in animals. Each utilized part has unique properties that are valued in different contexts of health and well-being.

It is important to emphasize that the use of products derived from animals should be conducted with awareness and respect for ethical and sustainability principles. We must seek responsible and sustainable alternatives, ensuring the preservation of species and the balance of the ecosystem.

Thus, it is impossible to standardize the knowledge and cultural practices of elderly riverside dwellers when producing remedies for certain symptoms of individuals in the Amazon region of Amapá. Depending on the type of illness, knowledge is hybrid, meaning that for the same remedy production, both phytotherapy knowledge (cultural practices involving the use of herbs) and zootherapy knowledge (cultural practices involving animals) are applied.

It is also noteworthy that most of these illnesses, according to the voices of the elders, are related to “*encantarias*” (a term referring to spiritual enchantments or mystical phenomena in local beliefs). The diseases of “*encante*” (spiritual afflictions caused by enchantments) caused by “*encantados*” (enchanted or mystical beings) are treated specifically by shamans through shamanic rituals. Shamans possess profound knowledge and spiritual connection, enabling them to communicate with the spirits and energies responsible for these illnesses. Through their rituals, they aim to balance and harmonize these energies, promoting healing and well-being for the affected individuals.

On the other hand, there are illnesses that can be cured through specific prayers, known as “*rezas*” (traditional healing prayers). These prayers are performed by *benzedeiros* (folk healers) or *rezadores* (prayer specialists), who are also keepers of traditional knowledge regarding the use of natural resources, including animals and plants. They understand the importance of the forces of nature and use this ancestral wisdom to promote healing and health.

We observe that different cultures and traditions have their own approaches to addressing illnesses and seeking cures. The diversity of therapeutic practices reflects the richness of knowledge accumulated over time, passed down from generation to generation.

The *rezadores* play an important role in treating specific illnesses, such as “*vento caído*” (fallen wind), “*mal olhado*” (evil eye), “*quebranto*” (a kind of spiritual weakness), and “*espanto*” (fright). These conditions are considered illnesses of spiritual or energetic origin, and the *rezadores* have the necessary knowledge to address them. The “*vento caído*” is described as an event in which a small child falls, becomes frightened, and feels sad, resulting in symptoms such as diarrhea and vomiting.

The “*mal olhado*” occurs when a hungry person comes near a child and, for some reason, causes discomfort or malaise in the child. To treat this condition, it is necessary to call a *rezador*, who will perform prayers to neutralize the “*mal olhado*” and restore the balance and health of the affected child. The “*quebranto*” is a morbid state resulting from the “*mal olhado*” cast by certain people onto others. This can lead to symptoms such as prostration, dejection, and weakness.

The “*espanto*” is described as a scare or emotional shock that negatively affects a person. In such cases, the *rezador* can perform specific prayers to calm and harmonize the individual, helping them recover from the state of “*espanto*”. These healing practices based on prayers are an integral part of the cultural and spiritual traditions of many communities. They reflect the belief in the influence of energies, spirits, and emotions on health and well-being.

In all these cases, *rezadores* have specific prayers to bring healing and restore the health of the individual. It is important to respect and value the knowledge and cultural practices of the elders, recognizing their significance in the pursuit of both physical and spiritual healing and balance.

The term “*encantado*” (enchanted) is frequently mentioned in oral and written narratives, particularly in *pajelança* (a form of traditional rural or caboclo shamanism) and in the religious practices of Afro-Brazilian worship. In *pajelança* rural or cabocla, a form of traditional Brazilian medicine, the term “*encantado*” is used to refer to spiritual beings or entities that possess special knowledge and powers. These beings are considered guardians of nature and holders of ancestral wisdom. Shamans, or healers, believe they can connect with these beings through rituals and prayers, seeking their guidance and assistance in treating illnesses and solving problems.

In Afro-Brazilian religious manifestations, such as Candomblé and Umbanda, the term “*encantado*” refers to the spirits of ancestors and spiritual entities that are worshipped and revered. These *encantados* are seen as intermediaries between the spiritual and physical worlds and are invoked during religious rituals to bring protection, guidance, and healing.

Thus, it is important to highlight that the use of the term “*encantado*” can vary depending on the region and specific cultural tradition. Nevertheless, in all these contexts, the term conveys the idea of spiritual beings endowed with special powers and knowledge, who are respected and honored in religious and medicinal practices.

The current belief in “*encantados*” results from a blend of knowledge and practices from Indigenous and African cultures in contact with European traditions (Catholicism). According to Maués (1997), the term was redefined from European fairy tales about enchanted princes and princesses that arrived in Brazil and the Amazon.

In *encantaria* (the belief system surrounding enchanted beings), the entities come from various origins, and their fundamental characteristic is that they did not die but became “*encantados*”, meaning they mysteriously disappeared (drawn by other enchanted beings or becoming invisible) without leaving traces of their human bodies; therefore, they are not considered spirits.

The domain of the *encantados* consists of subterranean or underwater cities, which is why elements of nature (earth, flora, and especially water) are closely linked to representations of their dwelling places or “*encantes*” (considered sacred sites or locations). These are places of deep mystery and strong energy, often perceived by sensitives, especially in more isolated areas where this energy is more concentrated.

Many *encantados* appear to humans in the form of animals associated with aquatic environments (seas, rivers, streams, bays, lakes, etc.), such as snakes, alligators, fish, dolphins, and others (including mermaids/iaras and the *Mãe-d’água*, or Water Mother). These are known as “*creatures from the depths of the water*”, which are difficult to distinguish from real animals and are considered dangerous, as they can cause the “*mal-olhado*” or illness through a “*flechada de bicho*” (spellbound by a creature)—manifested as bodily pain. In such cases, only a *pajé* (shaman) has the ability to treat and heal the afflicted person.

It is also important to consider that the knowledge of elderly riverside dwellers in the Amazon region of Amapá, shaped by cultural practices of care, healing, and enchantments, originates from the ancestral knowledge of Indigenous peoples. For the Indigenous communities of Amapá, the *Karuãna*, or *Bichos* (Creatures), are beings who live in the Other World, where they are people just like us, and only the *pajés* (shamans) can see and communicate with them. They

come from the sea, rivers, lakes, forests, and even the sky and are spirits of birds, snakes, fish, trees, and stars. These beings ask the shaman to hold a grand festival for them, with dancing and the use of caxixi (a type of rattle). However, the Karuãna can also cause illnesses and even death, which is why the shaman must perform the Turé (a festival of gratitude to the invisible beings of the Other World, called Karuãna, for the healing they have provided through the shamanic practices of the shaman).

One of the elderly riverside women from the Rio Preto community narrated a situation when she went to take care of her field a few kilometers away from her house on the mainland, deeper into the forest:

One day, I was in my field, and something invisible made me run away from there, the noise was scary. My daughter-in-law said she had seen jaguar tracks around my field. I went there to clear the area, just me, and I said, "I'll check out this field because I want to see if it was jaguar tracks." Look, I'm very brave, so I went. When I got there, a loud noise, and it got louder and louder. My ass was so tight it couldn't even fit a cupu (cupuaçu). I crouched down and stood up, but it was impossible to see... every animal leaves tracks, but this one didn't. Across the whole region, there were similar reports, but no one found out what it was (Elderly Woman from the Rio Preto Community, 2023).

The presence of entities considered guardians of animals and the forest, known as "owners," "lords/ladies," "fathers/mothers," or "guardians," is a remarkable phenomenon in various parts of the world. These entities represent an animistic and vitalist view of nature, in which humans are seen as part of an interconnected whole alongside natural elements.

This vision of reciprocity and interdependence between humans and more-than-human entities has played an important role in protecting nature and resisting deforestation and social inequality caused by modern agriculture. The animistic worldview values harmony and balance with the natural environment, recognizing the importance of preserving and respecting natural resources. In a way, it also contributes to preserving the knowledge and cultural practices of elderly individuals and the Amazonian diversities.

However, socioeconomic modernization and the introduction of new institutions and dogmatic religious cults, such as Christianity and Neo-Pentecostalism, have led to the discrediting and aversion toward the forest's spiritual entities among local inhabitants. These changes in worldview and traditional ways of life have impacted the indigenous systems of beliefs and practices related to regulating access to and use of natural resources.

This interference in local beliefs and practices compromises nature conservation, as dogmatic religious institutions and cults often fail to recognize the importance of interconnectedness and reciprocity with the natural environment. This can lead to the unchecked exploitation of natural resources without considering environmental and social impacts.

Based on the findings regarding the "enchanted beings" and "enchanted places," it was observed that the riverside inhabitants do not make a clear distinction between the different forms of river deities, preferring to refer to them as "*mãe d'água*" (Mother of the Water). These deities are believed to have the power to attract and punish those who do not respect the rivers and forests, aiming to preserve their domain.

People affected by these deities may be taken to the "depths," suffering the consequences of "*flechada de bicho*" or the "*mal olhado*." These terms describe the harmful and negative effects that these deities can cause, such as illnesses, misfortunes, or even being taken to the supernatural world.

These beliefs and stories reflect the deep and complex relationship that riverside communities have with rivers and the deities that inhabit them. It is a form of respect and reverence for nature and the supernatural beings that dwell within it, seeking to maintain balance and harmony between the human world and the spiritual world.

The "*flechada de bicho*" is considered an abnormal disease with non-natural causes. Its symptoms include pain in various parts of the body, except the head and joints. Unlike diseases treated by traditional medicine, the "*flechada de bicho*" requires treatment by a *pajé*, a traditional healer.

The elderly riverside inhabitants refer to these illnesses as “*malefícios*” (harmful effects), which can have two different causes. One is attributed to enchanted beings, known as “*flechada de bicho*,” considered natural by the natives as they come directly from nature. The other cause is attributed to harm caused by humans, involving the manipulation of natural forces to harm someone, known as witchcraft.

This perception of diseases as “*malefícios*” and the need to treat them through a pajé reflects the sociocultural worldview of riverside communities. These communities believe in the existence of a transcendent world beyond ordinary daily experiences and see illnesses as persuasive evidence of this reality. In this sense, the enchanted beings are part of the daily lives of elderly people in the Amazon, engaging in a relationship of mutual respect. Both contribute to the preservation of rivers and forests, as the health of these natural elements directly influences the health and well-being of the elderly.

In riverside communities in Amapá, nature is considered enchanted and alive. Spaces, animals, and other elements are believed to have preferences, desires, emotions, and the ability to become upset, pleased, sick, or even heal people. In this way, the cultural knowledge mediated by caregiving, healing practices, and enchanted beings contributes to the well-being and quality of life of these elderly residents in Amapá.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research mapped the cultural knowledge of elderly riverside residents in the territories of Rio Preto, Rio das Cinzas, São José do Rio Maracá, Foz do Macacoari, and Quilombo do Tapereira, all located within the Macapá region. The goal of the study was to draw attention to the specific care that should be directed toward this segment of the population, as the number of elderly people is expected to increase in the coming years, particularly in the riverside communities of the Amazon.

The mapping also enabled the identification and analysis of caregiving, healing practices, and enchanted beliefs, emphasizing the value of the knowledge of elderly riverside residents and recognizing the importance of traditional knowledge and accumulated life experience. These elders hold vast knowledge of phytotherapy, zootherapy, and the enchanted beings of the Amapá Amazon.

Moreover, the research underscored the importance of considering public policies and actions aimed at caring for elderly individuals in Amazonian riverside communities. With the growing elderly population, it is crucial to ensure access to healthcare, social services, and adequate support to meet the needs of these communities.

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the reality of elderly riverside residents and to the development of effective strategies for care and the promotion of quality of life. The appreciation of traditional knowledge and the recognition of the importance of the elderly are fundamental to building a more inclusive and fair society.

The lives of elderly riverside residents in the Amapá Amazon are unique and complex, shaped by their connection to nature, the challenges of riverside living, and the cultural traditions of the region. Understanding their needs, knowledge, and caregiving practices requires in-depth study and a sensitive approach to their specific realities.

The lack of available information and experiences highlights the importance of expanding academic research in this area and developing more suitable public policies to meet the needs of elderly riverside residents. It is essential to involve local communities, listen to their voices, and value their traditional knowledge to build a more comprehensive and effective understanding.

As more research is conducted and more information is gathered, we will be able to acquire a broader understanding of the care, knowledge, and way of life of elderly riverside residents in the Amapá Amazon. This will allow for the development of more targeted and efficient policies and programs that address the specific needs of these communities and promote the well-being of their elderly population.

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Authors contribution

VSCN: Data collection, Systematization, Analysis. ASD: Data collection, Systematization, Analysis. CSSN: Article structuring, Data analysis based on a cultural approach. RAM: Article revision regarding form, Data analysis based on contributions from material culture.

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