Detached from civilization, Amazonian tribes relate to nature in ways difficult for us to understand. It is not a nature to preserve nor one to extract resources from; rather, it is literally an ecological way of life: a nature with which one lives, and in which the projectless building appears as a way of humanizing an environment without the need to exploit it.
The Puerto Alegre community is the last native group in the upper part of the Yaquerana River, on the border between Brazil and Peru. The Matsés people came into constant contact with the outside world in 1969 and life in the communal houses was maintained until 1999. Since then, the role of community life and the defense of ancestral land entered into a complex reform of new relationships, leadership, and aspirations. The communal house shubu tsiquecaïd plays an important role as a built instance of the community (FIG. 1).

As we enter the Matsés territory, an extraordinary landscape with ancient forests of vibrant nature is revealed. In times before contact, the maloca was the center of their universe, the only place they could really stay, given the hostility with neighboring tribes and external visitors, such as rubber collectors, loggers, hunters, and even the Peruvian army. The presence of the Matsés people has helped preserve their territory from extractive threats like the ones mentioned. In this way, the maloca contains significant relationships and materials that acknowledge it as part of an interpreted and humanized nature.
When I arrived in Puerto Alegre, I met Abel Biná, a man who, like few others, incorporates the recent history of his people. His house was a large and gloomy room, with a high palm roof blackened by smoke. The walls and floor were made of pona, a hollow palm tree trunk that, when opened in slats, is used as a board without the need of a sawmill. The result was a space crossed by thousands of slits of light. Rays falling from the ceiling through the chimney’s smoke. Three hammocks were hanging and Abel rested in one of them (FIG. 2).

In 1999, the great communal house of Buenas Lomas Antigua fell and Biná decided to found a new community called Puerto Alegre in the remote Yaquerana. The elders died and with them gone, community life was extinguished.

Later, Abel Biná told me: "Without the shubú tsubakaid I cannot mean anything, that is why we have built it, to represent ourselves as a Matsés. The construction of this house gave me much joy because with it I will be again." (FIG. 3) The connection between living and being never appeared to me in a clearer expression: being, like the daily realization of all these significant links.
The *shubú* *tsubakaïd* is an oral building. During construction 'the wise' gives instructions, directs and teaches us how to do things. The *maloca* is also a system of parameters: once its width and length are determined, there are no more decisions, the rest are construction crafts and typological consequences (FIG. 4).

*Chuiquid*¹, the matsés word for boss, means someone who frequently advises, tells stories and is consulted. Rómulo Neca (known in Spanish as 'the wise') was our works master: he would guide the construction. Rómulo acquired this trade by helping his father.

Much of the work consisted of collecting the precise materials from the environment. A job that requires identifying the proper species and the correct quality of the material. Two types of palm leaves, cambium tree bark, and vines to tie different parts had to be brought from places hours away (FIG. 5, 6). I can only imagine what this task would have been without metal tools.

Through orality, the *maloca* performs the role of nature in the human context as well as the human belonging to the natural environment. The forest is the substrate of this dwelling, which appropriates everything that has been experienced, touched and transformed, known and named.
The word for shelter and house, *shubú*, comes from a kind of palm that is used for shelters and roofs (Fig. 7, 8). It can be harvested by hand without cutting the trees or using metal tools, so it is possible that this leaf has been used as the initial construction material. *Shubú* then extends to other shelters in nature. It is used for the wasp nest as *madiñen shubú* and as *cheman shubú* for the yellow-backed cacique bird nest.

The word for access that holds *shecuë* also means burrow, and the word *ushté*, ‘the place to sleep,’ is the same as the word for nest. The word for hammock is also taken from the type of palm that provides the fibers from which it is made. The edge of the roof at the end of the maloca is called ‘scorpion chest’ due to its woven pattern.

In the Matsés language, many meanings come from nature to the human abode and then, like the paucar bird’s nest, they return to nature. This is how the human environment emanates from nature, signifying and interpreting it.

The maloca has a timeless darkness, even during the day it seems permanently buried in the night (Fig. 9). Like a burrow. The rising day penetrates with a blinding force.
When entering, it is not possible to distinguish people. After a while, the interior begins to appear. In the dim light, the palm leaves acquire a certain brightness, even blackened by smoke, their texture appears as a metallic reflection of the entrances. The maloca is also the place of fire. In its clear center, community meetings are held. The side aisles serve to hang the hammocks while the ovens of family kitchens are placed in separate spaces. The trunks at the back serve as a seating area to receive visitors, who cannot enter beyond the triangular space in the background.

At the end of this work, the community gathered to celebrate. We had a typical Matsés meal, with cooked banana, fish, and chapo, a non-alcoholic banana drink. There was an instance of dialogue in which all the men present expressed their opinion on the importance of work, current times, the condition of traditional culture, and, notably, the conservation of lands and ecosystems.

This image is in a way a commentary on change and adaptation. Someone brought a computer and people gathered to watch a movie (FIG. 10). The community meets in the darkness and the shubú tiquecaid becomes a cinema. So, to be in the house-village shubú tsubakaid is to adopt the particular place of the Matsés within nature, in the midst of the extended family and surrounded by what is transcendent in life. I think this is what Abel Biná wanted to tell me. ARQ

Notas / Notes

1 Formed by chui (to tell some information, advise, consult, ask something) and the frequentative suffix nominalizer -quid. See Fleck, David; Uaquí, Fernando Jiménez, Daniel. Diccionario Matsés-Castellano. Iquitos: Editorial Tierra Nueva, 2012.