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# Aquatic routes of knowledge



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"Bibliotecario". <https://www.bibliotecario.org/>

## Aquatic routes of knowledge

Among the many ways that written or spoken words move through the length and breadth of Latin America, one of the most striking was on board boats. Boats of all kinds, sailing all kinds of waters.

Some indigenous societies had no other options to move their knowledge than to do it at the helm. The Qawásqar and the Yámana, the so-called "canoe peoples" who inhabited the southernmost islands and channels of the continent, around the Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego, spent most of their lives aboard their boats, made of hollowed-out logs or tied barks. For them, reality unfolded on a boat, to the rhythm set by an oar. Two elements – for the Qawásqar, *kájef* and *jemóxar*; for the Yámana, *anan* and *áppi*– that helped spread their traditions, stories and memories to the hundreds of islets and fjords that dot that part of the world.

The same happened with the Evueví or Payaguá, the so-called "pirates" of the upper Paraná and Paraguay rivers, in the central and boreal Chaco. For them the *arganaak* canoes moved by the pointed *laraja* oars were practically their home. As they were for some other groups in the Amazon and Orinoco basins: those whose streams and tributaries make up a true road network, dense and extensive.

With the arrival of Europeans, the "canoe peoples" disappeared, exterminated by disease, weapons, and contempt. But knowledge –including some belonging to those extinct sailing societies– continued to be sheltered among the few or many meters of

length that were between prows and sterns. Piraguas and boats continued to carry and bring news by sea and by river. Until today. In Latin America there are many storytellers and narrators who still cross the waters and carry tales and events from here to there.

Books –the written word– also moved with the ships. From Europe, first, bypassing the many censures, barriers and prohibitions. And, little by little, from the large colonial cities, where the printing presses were located (except the Jesuit ones, lost in the highlands or in the jungle) alongside the booksellers and the publishing houses, to the rest of the continent... Since then, they have not stopped their navigation, and in its wake there are several nomadic, mobile libraries.

At the end of the last century, a "bibliobotes" project was briefly developed in the Marañón and Santiago rivers (Peru), as a collaboration between the National Library of Peru and the Aguaruna and Huambisa Indigenous Council.

In Venezuela, in 1987, the Amazonas State Public Library (BPA) used a 5 m long boat to respond to the needs of certain communities in which a stable library could not be established. The "bibliolancha" thus navigated the Orinoco River and the Sipapo, Cuao, Atabajo and Casiquiare tributaries, carrying both books and cultural activities.

In 1992, and in collaboration with the Polar Foundation, the BPA launched the "bibliobongo", a larger vessel than the previous one with which it was intended to provide library services to communities of the Uwottuja (piaroa), Wakuenai (baniva,

curripaco) and Jivi or Sikuani (guahibo) peoples. The 17-meter-long boat was built in the indigenous style, with molded *palo mure* bark, structured with *sasafrá* wood and painted with anticorrosive; it had a zinc roof covered with palm, with which the bibliographic materials were protected from the copious rains of the region. It traveled the Orinoco and Negro rivers, and the Sipapo, Cuao, Atabajo, Casiquiare and Maniapiare tributaries. And like its predecessor, in addition to readings, it offered its users activities such as puppets, cinema, circus shows, traditional and cooperative games, etc.

Five years later, the BPA launched the "bibliofalca", a boat even larger than the bongo, with enough space to have a bedroom, bathrooms and a cellar, in addition to the library services themselves. Starting from Puerto Venado and San Fernando de Atabapo, it covered the Orinoco-Ventuari, Orinoco-Guaviare and Orinoco-Río Negro routes.

None of those three projects are currently active. But they served as an example for many others that developed later in different places, some of which are still underway.

The Solentiname archipelago, some thirty islands and islets located at the southeastern end of the Great Lake of Nicaragua (or Cocibolca), is visited by the "bibliobote" loaded with books every two weeks, since 2012.

A similar "bibliobote" service is offered by Antonio Beltrán Mosquera, who, in a wooden boat full of backpacks and boxes, distributes books in the most remote black

and indigenous communities of the Carmen del Darién municipality, in the department of Chocó, on the Colombian Pacific coast.

Much further south, the Quemchí "bibliolancha" runs along the northeastern coasts of the island of Chiloé since May 1995. The "bibliolancha" is part of the 151 "Edwing Langdon" Public Library in the town of Quemchí, led by Teolinda Higuera; with it, the aim is to take reading to the Chauques Islands, places that are very difficult to access. For a long time, the service distributed the books sailing with ships provided by the Chilean Health Service and the Chilean Navy. In 2015, it was incorporated into the Chilean Bibliomobile Network, and since 2016 it can work with its own boat.

Finally, in Argentina, where the Paraná River flows into the thousand arms of a delta near the city of Buenos Aires, another "bibliolancha" sails. It is based in the Popular Library "Santa Genoveva" at the Felicaria stream, in the second section of islands of the Buenos Aires municipality of San Fernando. Since the beginning of 1999, the boat – 8 m long, and loaded with two thousand copies– complements the work of the library. Currently 14 schools depend on it.

The engines have replaced the strong arms of the Payaguá rowers, and the synthetic materials, the beech bark of the Fuegian sailors. But the water routes, as in the past, continue to cross all borders. The Shipibo shamans –authentic living and mobile libraries of their people– know this well, year after year going up the current of the Ucayali, in Peru, in search of the magical ayahuasca.



