

## Displaced by the *desbarranco*. Riverbank erosion in Kukama-Kukamiria communities (Peruvian Amazon)

Desplazados por el *desbarranco*. Erosión de las riberas en comunidades kukama-kukamiria (Amazonía peruana)

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the Kukama-Kukamiria in the Peruvian Amazon adapt to their changing riverine environment and how this relationship is reflected in their cosmology, spiritual perception, and respect for the territory. It analyzes oral testimonies about riverbank collapses, their repercussions on agriculture and settlements, the causes attributed to them, and the measures taken to provoke or prevent them. The qualitative research is based on three interviews conducted by the authors in 2020 in the communities of Nueva Fortuna and Leoncio Prado, and one in Nauta in 2024, as well as on twelve research notebooks produced in 2002-2003 by Kukama-Kukamiria students of bilingual education. These sources represent a unique emic perspective on historical events and how they are remembered and retold within the communities. The study concludes that constant environmental transformation may explain the unstable nature of bodies and

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the agency of rivers in Amazonian Indigenous ontologies.

### KEYWORDS

Occupied territories, soil erosion, rivers, collective memory, oral history, Indigenous peoples, Peru.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo examina cómo los kukama-kukamira de la Amazonía peruana se adaptan a su cambiante entorno fluvial y cómo esta relación se refleja en su cosmología, percepción espiritual y respeto por el territorio. Analizamos testimonios orales sobre los derrumbes de riberas, sus repercusiones en la agricultura y los asentamientos, las causas atribuidas y las medidas adoptadas para provocarlos o prevenirlos. La investigación cualitativa se basa en cuatro entrevistas realizadas por los autores en 2020 en las comunidades Nueva Fortuna y Leoncio Prado, y una en Nauta en 2024, además de consultas a doce cuadernos de campo elaborados en 2002-2003 por estudiantes kukama-kukamiria de educación bilingüe. Esas fuentes representan una visión émica única sobre los acontecimientos históricos y cómo esos se recuerdan y se cuentan dentro de las comunidades. El estudio concluye que la constante transformación ambiental puede explicar la inestabilidad del cuerpo y la agencia de ríos en las ontologías indígenas amazónicas.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

Territorio ocupado, erosión del suelo, río, memoria colectiva, historia oral, amerindio, Perú

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The Kukama-Kukamiria are an Indigenous people in the rainforest lowlands of Peru, Southeastern Colombia, and along the Solimões River in Brazil. They are generally classified as belonging to the Tupí-Guaraní linguistic family, although this is debated among linguists (Cabral 1995, Vallejos Yopán 2010, O'Hagan 2011, Michael 2014). Kukamiria refers to a group that split from the Kukama in the early seventeenth century but maintained strong links with them (Stocks, 1978, p. 78; Jouanen, 2005, p.

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1 The sources used here also form the basis for Arno Holl's current PhD project. Yet, the analysis presented here will not be featured in detail in the PhD thesis.

374). While the Kukama lived on the lower Ucayali River at the time of the first colonial contacts, the Kukamiria had moved west to the lower Huallaga. Some scholars consider the Kukamiria more of a Kukama colony than a separate group (Espinosa, 1955, p. 589; Reeve, 1994, p. 110; Petesch, 2003, p. 101). In Peru, both are commonly referred to as Kukama-Kukamiria.

Since precolonial times, the Kukama-Kukamiria have inhabited the banks of the major rivers of the region, the Ucayali, the Marañón, and the Huallaga, with their close relatives, the Omagua, living along the Amazonas/Solimões. This set them apart from most other groups of the area and put them in a crucial position as they controlled the main ways of transportation and communication (Reeve, 1994, p. 116; Rivas-Ruiz, 2004, p. 17, 2022b, p. 91). Living close to the water, they are renowned fishermen and boatmen, and bodies of water occupy a central role in their spirituality. For the Kukama-Kukamiria, the river is the heart of life (*«el corazón de la vida,»* Campanera Reig, 2026, p. 13).

Kukama history cannot be told without speaking about rivers. Their subsistence relies on the river cycles and the animals that live in the water. Their mobility is guaranteed by the river routes. The rivers even guard their memories, be it in the form of drowned relatives who live on under water and communicate with their kin through dreams, be it in form of apparitions of steamships from the rubber boom or spirits taking on the shape of rubber bosses, along with the sound of bells of the colonial Jesuit missions (Berjón Martínez and Cadenas Cardo, 2009, 2014, pp. 227, 233, 235; Ramírez Colombier, 2021, pp. 221, 226, 233). «It is in the river that the Kukama inscribe their histories and reactivate their memories» (Ramírez Colombier, 2015, p. 65).

The Kukama-Kukamiria's close relationship with the river led to a groundbreaking court case in Peru: On March 15, 2024, the Superior Court of Justice in Nauta ruled in favor of the Kukama women's organization Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana, who had demanded that the Marañón River be recognized as a holder of rights in face of destruction and pollution, mainly through oil companies (Huaynakana Kamatahuara Kana, 2021; Corte Superior de Justicia Loreto, 2024; Tello, 2024; Fernández Calvo, 2024; Domínguez, 2024; De Santiago Peña Lobato, 2025; Campanera Reig, 2026).

There is good reason why other groups preferred to live along the smaller rivers or deeper in the forest: Not only are the riverbanks heavily affected by different types of bloodsucking insects, but they are also subjected to continuous and often drastic changes through the yearly cycles of the river system. Landscape changes provoked by the rivers' fluctuation

have a profound effect on human settlements and agriculture. As the Kukama-Kukamiria have lived in this habitat for centuries and have developed distinct strategies for dealing with the often unpredictable environment, they present an ideal case study for the impact of these natural phenomena. Our analysis is centered around the so-called *desbarranco* or *desbarrancamiento*, a term in regional Spanish meaning a landslide caused by erosion through the motions of a river. We want to investigate how these landslides affect Kukama-Kukamiria communities and how they are dealt with and explained in Kukama-Kukamiria cosmology.

## Materials and Methods

For this purpose, we analyze interviews with inhabitants of Kukama-Kukamiria settlements and also research notebooks (*cuadernos de campo*) produced by *Kukama-Kukamiria* students based on fieldwork in riverine communities. The interviews were conducted by the authors during research trips in the community of Nueva Fortuna and Leoncio Prado in 2020, and in Nauta, 2024. The *cuadernos de campo* were produced in 2002-2003 by Kukama-Kukamiria students of Formabiap<sup>2</sup> (*Programa de Formación de Maestros Bilingües de la Amazonía Peruana*), an institution dedicated to the training of culturally sensitive bilingual teachers for Indigenous communities in the Peruvian Amazon. Every year during their five-year training, they are sent to communities of their own group to do fieldwork on specific topics, mostly through interviews with contemporary witnesses and/or village elders. The handwritten *cuadernos* are archived in the library of Formabiap, in Zúngarococha near Iquitos, and are not usually accessible for the public. They mostly contain transcriptions of interviews, sometimes paraphrasing, and in several cases personal reflections and general data on the community. This concept places them at the border between written sources and oral history. Thus, they offer a distinctive insight into the emic perspective on historical events and the ways these are remembered and narrated within the communities. Most *cuadernos* do not feature numbered pages. In these cases, we give the respective chapter's title for reference when quoting. For this article, twelve *cuadernos* were selected for their explicit data on the effects of river erosion.

Although this study was not submitted for evaluation by an institutional Ethics Committee, the fundamental ethic principles have been employed rigorously for the work with people. All procedures were conducted respecting the ethical norms agreed upon in the Declaration of Helsinki. All participants were informed about and agreed to the goals of the

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2 <https://formabiap.org/>

investigation, the use of their testimonies, and their rights to desist at any moment without consequences. In order to guard their privacy, their personal data was treated with utter confidentiality, and the interviews were anonymized during the process of analysis and redaction. The gathered information was used exclusively for academic and publication purposes, respecting the participants' dignity, autonomy, and well-being at all moments.

## The Environment

The territory historically and currently inhabited by people identifying as Kukama-Kukamiria lies in the Western Amazonian floodplains, especially the geographical depression called Ucamara, a compound of the names of the two major rivers at its limits, the Ucayali and the Marañón. Since 1982, most of this area belongs to the Reserva Natural Pacaya-Samiria (Puertas et al., 2000, p. 161), or RNPS (Reserva Nacional Pacaya-Samiria), Peru's second biggest nature reserve. This caused a series of conflicts with the local population (Bodmer et al., 2009, p. 109; Campanera Reig, 2017, p. 282; Rivas-Ruiz, 2021, p. 18). The floodplain is marked by two major seasons, a dry season (*uni t̄ipa*), roughly from June to November, and a rainy season (*uni ar̄iwa*) from December to May. During the rainy season, the rivers' water levels rise to the point of flooding vast areas of the Ucamara depression, connecting different bodies of water, covering plantations and villages, and making the forests navigable. Early colonial sources state that the Kukama-Kukamiria used shortcuts through the flooded forest for war excursions by canoe, often over large distances (Figueroa, 1904, p. 99; Jouanen, 2005, p. 379).

Agriculture, on the other hand, is restricted to the dry season, when areas covered in fertile river sediments are exposed by the receding water levels (Espinosa, 1935, pp. 101-102; Barclay Rey de Castro, 2010, p. 60). For this purpose, crop varieties are used that grow and ripen quickly so they can be harvested before the waters rise again (Steward et al., 2022, p. 238). Common crops include manioc (cassava), plantains, maize, sweet potatoes, groundnuts, squash, pineapples, rice, beans, and tomatoes, among others (Stocks, 1978, p. 83; Ahuanari do Santos, 2003, La Agricultura). Surplus of manioc is often buried in the floodplain before the floods, so it can be consumed once the waters recede and food would otherwise be scarce until the next harvest (Del Águila Silva, 2006, p. 75).

Variations in flood intensity have an enormous impact on Kukama-Kukamiria agriculture. While unusually high and long-lasting floodings like in the early 1970s used to be a rare exception, through climate change, they have become more and more frequent and unpredictable,

threatening the established agriculture (Barclay Rey de Castro, 2010, p. 54; Steward et al., 2022, p. 233; Rivas-Ruiz et al., 2024, p. 18). The dry seasons are also becoming more extreme, endangering the procreation of fish as well as people's access to water (Rivas-Ruiz et al., 2024, pp. 15-16).

Now, it is not only unusually high or low water levels that cause problems for Kukama-Kukamiria settlements. The whole river landscape is prone to constant transformation, as the rivers drag away sediments from one place and deposit them elsewhere. Thus, islands grow or disappear, river curves intensify or get cut off and are transformed into lakes (*cochas*), and whole portions of land may break off into the river (Barclay Rey de Castro, 2010, p. 51). Such landslides are known as *barranco*, *desbarranco*, or *desbarrancamiento* in local Spanish. The Kukama term for this phenomenon is *iwama* (Vallejos Yopán and Amías Murayari, 2015, p. 82; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, p. 109). For riverbank dwellers like the Kukama-Kukamiria who depend on the fertile lands close to the water, this can have dramatic consequences (List and Coomes, 2019, p. 21). The Kukama living space consists of houses, plantations, corrals, ports, rafts, and canoes, fishing grounds, resting areas, and sometimes also fish farms and satellite houses for guarding those spaces (Piccini Acuña, 2023, pp. 61, 72, 73). Frequently, plantations are lost to *desbarrancos*, and houses or even entire villages need to relocate elsewhere to avoid being dragged away by the river. In consequence, Kukama furniture is typically light and easy to move (Piccini Acuña, 2023, p. 68). Two types of riverbank soil are differentiated, «light soil» (also called *iwama* in Kukama) and «hard soil», *tuyuka tatan* (Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, p. 109). The former type is invoked for easy childbirth, linking the child to the soil that slides into the river without much resistance (Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, p. 242).

In academic literature, much attention has been given to the Kukama-Kukamiria's cosmovision and their relationship with the spiritual beings of the water. These include the Great Boa, *purahua*, which is strongly connected to powerful shamans, called *bancos* in local Spanish, who may transform into anacondas after their death (Regan, 1999, p. 479; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022b, p. 93; Krokoszyńska, 2023, p. 103). At times, these snakes appear in the form of sirens (Luna 1986, p. 82). Other spiritual beings present in Kukama accounts include the pink river dolphin; people living in enchanted cities under water, called the *karuara*<sup>3</sup>, in Kukama, or *yacuruna*, in Kichwa (Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 200), who sometimes abduct people

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3 The name can be traced to the sixteenth-century Tupinambá and is used among many groups of the Tupí-Guarani language family in Brazil. Although rarely associated with water, there is always a strong connection between *karuara* and shamans (De Barros Laraia, 2009).

to live with them in the river (Berjón Martínez and Cadenas Cardo, 2014, p. 26; Ramírez Colombier, 2021, p. 226; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, pp. 90-91); the black water jaguar; the mother (*madre*) of the water turtles; the mother of the stingrays, and others (Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, p. 94). Curiously, the spiritual world at the bottom of the river is described as a decidedly urban environment (Ramírez Colombier, 2021, p. 228). Considering archaeological proof of major urban centers in precolonial Amazonia, Santos-Granero and Fabiano suggest that these images may well predate the construction of colonial and national cities (Santos-Granero and Fabiano, 2023, p. 18).

The spiritual beings inhabiting those cities are said to control the animal species of the river, making them accessible to fishermen or withdrawing them, according to people's behavior (Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 207; Chirif, 2020, p. 122; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022b, p. 96; Rivas-Ruiz et al., 2024, p. 16). This encourages people to make sustainable use of natural resources, not only of water animals, but also of forest game and medicinal plants, who also possess *madres* (Espinosa, 1935, p. 142; Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 207; Rivas-Ruiz, 2021, p. 33). The spiritual beings inhabiting different bodies of water are the source of power of Kukama-Kukamiria shamans, who form personal relationships with them (Barclay Rey de Castro, 2010, p. 45; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022b, pp. 95, 108). To be granted access to the plants, animals, or spaces guarded by those *madres*, one needs to address them appropriately, which often includes singing (Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 198; Cerqueira, 2023, p. 56). Through these relationships and the respectful approach they demand, the territory is continually reproduced as a social space (Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 209; Piccini Acuña, 2023, p. 113).

Anthropological literature on Amazonian spirituality and cosmologies describes most, if not all, beings as «chronically unstable,» to use the words of Aparecida Vilaça (Vilaça, 2005). Humans, animals, and spirits shift bodies, transform into one another, and thus modify and negotiate their relationships with each other (Campanera Reig, 2018). For the Kukama case, this perception of an ever-changing reality where things are not always what they seem to be may well be rooted in the everyday experience of the rivers' changes that affect everything around.

Authors have also worked on how the Kukama explain phenomena of the river through the actions of spiritual beings, especially the *purahua* (Berjón Martínez and Cadenas Cardo, 2014; Campanera Reig, 2018; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, 2022b; Rivas-Ruiz et al., 2024; Campanera Reig, 2026, p. 12). Yet, the massive impact that the continuous threat of riverbank erosion has on this society is largely absent from most publications. One major exception is a paper by Steward et al. (2022), focusing on the consequences of climate change for riverbank communities in the Brazilian Amazon.

The interviews used in our study as well as the *cuadernos* by Formabiap students paint a different picture: Hardly any Kukama-Kukamiria settlement is still found in its original location, due to the rivers' activities and course changes. On some occasions, *desbarrancos* caused villages to split up, or people abandoned the affected area once and for all. Therefore, we consider it of great importance to investigate the Kukama-Kukamiria's perspective on these events, as well as the specific problems they cause in dealing with the demands of the national society.

### Stories of Desbarranco

Kukama-Kukamiria oral history is rich in stories of communities being affected by the phenomenon known as *desbarranco*. The river water's movements eat away at the riverbank and eventually cause a portion of it to collapse. This can decrease a community's territory, destroy plantations, and, in extreme cases, force the inhabitants to take down their houses and move elsewhere. The following quotes give an impression of how common this problem is:

[A]ll of a sudden, the barranco finished the community's territory and they left looking for another place to live<sup>4</sup> (Mendoza Ahuanari, 2003, p. 36).

[T]his Obrero where we are right now is the fourth one [,] because of the barranco. (Flores Crispín, 2003, Acontecimiento Desbarrancamiento de la Comunidad).

1989: An immense barranco dragged away half of the community plus the fields, plantations, and great parts of the territory, because of the damage done by this natural disaster the inhabitants moved further back into their territory (Solón Yasacama, 2002, Línea de Tiempo Vertical).

Interviewee 1: Leoncio Prado used to be way upriver. That land doesn't exist anymore. The barranco finished it. [...] Now it is more than a kilometer downriver. Leoncio Prado is now farther down. And we gave them a part of our territory, from there onwards we gave it to them, as they didn't have any land anymore. They said, «We have no land,» because the barranco took it away. It destroyed their territory (Interview by Roxani Rivas-Ruiz in Nueva Fortuna, 2020).

These examples are from the Kukama-Kukamiria communities Nuevo San Juan, Obrero I Zona, Payorote, and Leoncio Prado, respectively. Such stories are common in most settlements of this group. Therefore, whenever people are on the look for a new location to settle, they seek ground

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4 All translations in this paper are the author's own.

that promises safety from such landslides, as then-67-year-old Nestor Huaya Torres from Bagazán told Formabiap student Modesto García Sangama:

Well, we chose this, this place because it was close to the water [and] it was on firm land which seemed not to, until now we have not been affected by the barrancos, we only suffer from the winter, but not from the BARRANCO (García Sangama, 2003, Testimonio Néstor Huaya Torres).

The winter he refers to is the rainy season with its high water levels, which continue to affect the community. The quote before from Nueva Fortuna mentions another problem: While in many cases, a settlement may move within its own territory, sometimes this is not possible because of the extent of the destruction. Then, negotiations with other communities are necessary, who hopefully will grant the refugees part of their own land. In other cases, such as the first quote from Nuevo San Juan, the villagers have to move out of their zone looking for either uninhabited lands or moving in with kin or friends in other communities. Simply settling in a territory without acquiring land rights can result in costly fines and high prices for receiving the land title (Angulo-Giraldo, 2026, p. 164).

Relocating a whole village puts a lot of strain on people, as they have to do everything on their own. Wilder Ríos Flores, at the time president of the community of Santa Clara, explains that it took them four months to move the village after it had been affected by the *desbarranco* in the 1990s:

It was a lot of work to take down the houses' roofs, rebuild them in the new location, then there was the loss of plantations such as plantain, manioc[,] maize, because there was a time when the riverbank broke down too quickly, in less than two weeks 300 meters of ground were dragged away in that place where the water hit especially hard (Ríos Flores, 2003, Entrevista Wilder Ríos Flores).

Here we see how much land can be lost in a short period of time. Ríos Flores goes on to describe that the total loss of territory on this occasion was 50 hectares of land. In moments like this, it is important for the villagers to support each other:

[W]e as organizers have always worked together, and continue to do so. The house next to ours is always the first one we take down and transport (Ríos Flores, 2003, Entrevista Wilder Ríos Flores).

In addition, moving elsewhere interrupts people's very personal relationships with their healing plants (Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 204) and calls for negotiations with the Shapingo, *madre* of the forest, for the permission to make use of the new territory and avoid conflict with this

powerful being (Piccini Acuña, 2023, p. 118). Spiritual beings may take revenge on humans if these try to overpower or exclude them (Angulo-Giraldo, 2026, p. 167).

Taking down the houses and rebuilding them in the new location is not just a matter of avoiding to have to prepare all the materials from scratch: it is believed that the logs are inhabited by spirits of the trees from which they were made, and that a house is actually a living being that forms a close relationship with its inhabitants (Piccini Acuña, 2023, pp. 104-105, 126). Building or rebuilding a traditional Kukama *uka* (house) is an important step when migrating and familiarizing a new environment: «From the house as a base, relations are formed with the city, with the markets and the Peruvian State, but also with the neighbors, the animals, plants and spirits, that is, with the different types of non-humans» (Angulo-Giraldo, 2026, p. 164-165).

The destruction of plantations adds food insecurity to the hardship of relocating the houses. As the plantation period is reduced to about four to five months of low water levels during the dry season, it is very hard to compensate for a loss of crops. Ideally, there are always food reserves in form of buried manioc, but on several occasions, people stopped storing food when high floods had been absent for an extended period. If then a major flood occurs, the resulting problems are huge. In Nuevo Arica, such a case led to overhunting of land animals who were seeking refuge in the few areas untouched by the waters. According to Manuel del Águila, this caused the loss of up to 90 percent of the wildlife in the area between 1993 and 1994 (Del Águila Silva, 2006, p. 78). In Victoria, on the Punahua canal of the Ucayali River, community president Óscar Ramírez told Formabiap student Janeth Murayari about the consequences of the destruction of their fields:

Those who had money ate nothing but rice from the store[,] and those who had none ate nothing but fish, there was enough fish but what was missing was plantain to eat it with, so people would eat it with some pandicho [pandisho, *Artocarpus altilis*], even green they plucked them to eat, they couldn't get it from anywhere else. People were desperate, they couldn't even buy *fariña* [toasted manioc flour] anywhere[,] it was unbelievable, but slowly we got over this situation (Murayari Ihuaquai, 2003, Entrevista Óscar Ramírez).

He goes on to describe how «the children were constantly ill, they were suffering from malnutrition.» And not only foodstuffs are lost in such situations. Going back to the example from Santa Clara, Ríos Flores also describes the destruction of lakes where the community used to fish, of precious woods which had guaranteed financial income, and of medicinal

plants that were still much in use (Ríos Flores, 2003, Entrevista Wilder Ríos Flores).

The stress these difficulties put on the population can cause conflict within a community. When only part of the territory is destroyed it means that some villagers lose everything, while others are less affected. In the case of Obrero, on the Puinahua, a *desbarranco* in 1988 caused the village to split apart:

The situation was alarming to the leaders of Obrero I Zona because there was a certain disunion between them and the villagers which they couldn't work out anymore because the leaders were not united, they were divided, didn't communicate and were in disagreement, each trying to save their personal possessions. Eventually, the leaders stepped back from their positions and handed the leadership over to the Shupingahua [a family surname], they appointed new leaders for the community to try and change its destiny[,] in this case for Obrero I Zona and equally for Obrero II Zona. In the area called Milagro they wanted to do the same but ended up forming part of Obrero I Zona, with time they began building houses but did not create institutions of their own, which is why by now it has turned into estates and plantations of the people of Obrero I Zona and Obrero II Zona (Ahuuari Flores, 2002, pp. 74-75).

Ahuuari Flores alludes that these conflicts had already been glowing under the surface before the *desbarranco*, mentioning the use of «witchcraft for land» (Ahuuari Flores, 2002, p. 56) in the mid-1960s. It seems, therefore, that the calamity caused by the *desbarranco* brought already smoldering conflicts to the surface. What can be seen from the above quote is how the village authorities were overwhelmed by the situation and unable to find a compromise that might have worked for everybody. In consequence, Obrero was split into two separate areas, Obrero I Zona and Obrero II Zona.

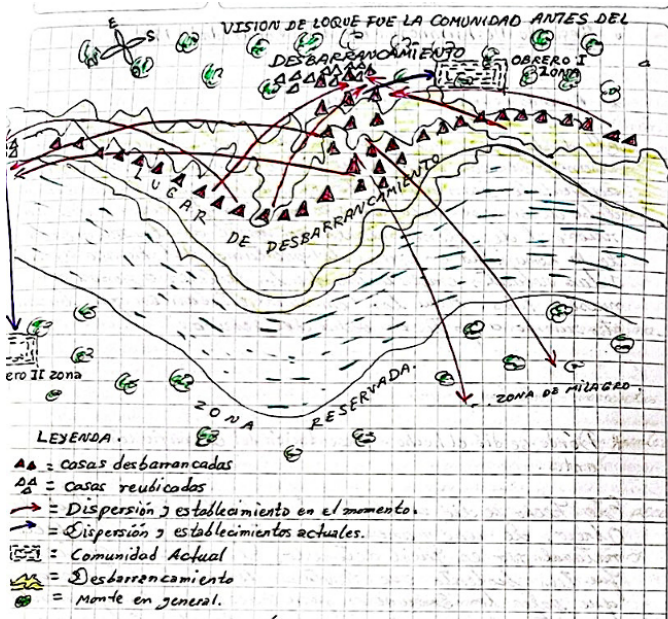


FIGURE 1. Illustration of the *desbarranco* in Obrero in 1988

Note. Drawing by Joiter Ahuanari Flores in Ahuanari Flores (2002, p. 72).

The drawing in Figure 1 shows the original locations of the houses in Obrero (red triangles), the portions of land that were lost to the *desbarranco* (yellow), the places where people sought refuge at the time (red arrows) and the different locations where the two new villages were eventually built (rectangles, blue arrow). The addition "zona reservada" at the bottom shows that the new settlements of Obrero II Zona and Milagro lie inside the Reserva Nacional Pacaya-Samiria.

*Desbarrancos* not only pose a continuous threat to houses, fields and natural resources, but are especially dangerous in combination with mining activities, which are common in the area. Two examples for this again affected the Puinahua, once in the 1940s and again in 1981. According to Ahuanari Flores, the first occurred in 1945 and was caused by a combination of factors. Heavy rains met with an earthquake and a *desbarranco*, possibly caused by the earthquake. In addition, the ground had been weakened by drilling for oil and sulfur (Ahuanari Flores, 2002, p. 67). Fermín Mendoza Mozombite states that the event occurred in 1947 but agrees on the source of the problem and the description of the catastrophe (Plaza del Águila, 2002, Testimonio del Señor Fermín Mendoza Mozombite). Janeth Murayari Ihuaquiqui mentions that the affected mines were located on the Río Satipo, an indirect affluent of the Upper Ucayali far to the south

(Murayari Ihuaquai, 2003, Línea de Tiempo). The landslide caused severe contamination of the river that was felt in all the communities in the area, as the river was covered in dead bodies of fish and other animals. Animals bred by the villagers also died after consuming contaminated fish, while the human population was cut off from their habitual source of water:

The water got really thick[,] you couldn't drink it, we went to bring water in canoes, in boats from the nearest lakes for us to drink, because this went on for eight days[,] then it got clearer [...] but you still couldn't eat the fish because they were poisoned you could say (Plaza del Águila, 2002, Testimonio del Señor Fermín Mendoza Mozombite).

Also, the contaminated water caused skin disease in the inhabitants (Ahuanari Flores, 2002, p. 70). According to the Kukama population, the effect was not only the death of many animal species but also of the spiritual beings of the water. So, in addition to people having to go long ways for drinkable water and change their diets in order to avoid sickness, their relationship with the river's spirits and *madres* was permanently scarred: «The spiritual beings of the water are no longer friends of the people of the earth[,] they are enemies» (Ahuanari Flores, 2002, p. 70). The occurrence in 1981 was similar, although the account leaves open what exactly the source of the contamination was. Flores' interviewee mentions a *desbarranco* as a possibility:

According to what we were told[,] there was a *desbarrancamiento* upriver around the [P]achitea that caused all this, because suddenly the water looked like an iron bar and we couldn't drink water for 17-20 days[,] it worried us and all the population (Flores Crispín, 2003, Acontecimiento *Desbarrancamiento* de la Comunidad).

The water rose so high that the village had to be taken down and rebuilt on higher ground, where later it was affected by yet another *desbarranco*. As in 1945, fish died in great quantities, and the villagers' plantain fields were destroyed. Also, in order to have water to drink, people had to recur once more to lakes that were still disconnected from the Puinahua:

We had to drink water from the lakes, young man, walking 3, 4 hours or more to bring water that we could drink[,] we couldn't do it any other way (Flores Crispín, 2003, Acontecimiento *Desbarrancamiento* de la Comunidad).

In such situations, people would also ask the district authorities for help. This was not always successful. An inhabitant of Solterito speaks about his community asking for support after a *desbarranco*:

The leaders repeatedly asked the state institutions for support but were never attended, so the leaders and the villagers helped each other, be it in building the houses which often had to be relocated, or in community works (Salas del Águila, 2003, Derrumbamiento de tierra).

In San Martín del Marañón, memories are slightly more positive, but not much:

I remember that in those times they helped us with the very least with some expenses to buy what we most urgently needed, they gave us support when our leaders made petitions (Arimuya Yaicate, 2003, Acontecimiento: Desbarrancamiento).

Three years later, the community was affected again, and not for the last time. Like in Obrero, the *desbarrancos* caused land disputes and a reduction in population. An interviewee in Solterito also complains about the plantations now being far away from people's houses (Salas del Águila, 2003, Derrumbamiento de tierra). A publication by the Defensoría del Pueblo sums it up:

The current situation of the Indigenous peoples and communities in the Amazon is one of virtual abandonment; they do not receive protection nor state assistance, which shows in the inability of the public institutions to attend to the enormous needs of this extremely vulnerable population (Yáñez, 1998, p. 84).

Kukama-Kukamiria history is a story of continuous change on many different levels. Santos-Granero's words on the Yanasha may well be applied to the Kukama-Kukamiria as well: «The Yanasha not only accept that things change, they preserve the memory of change» (Santos-Granero, 2007, p. 65). While several authors have worked on questions of belonging, cultural change, and possible assimilation among the Kukama-Kukamiria, here we focus on change imposed by the environment. As the following chapter will show, this environment is perceived as alive and bestowed with agency, and human behavior plays an important role in the interpretation of such disasters.

### **Causes of *desbarranco***

While from a scientific point of view, the *desbarranco* is a natural phenomenon caused by the erosion of the ground through the river's movement, for the Kukama-Kukamiria the situation is more complex than that. The river is considered a living being, impersonated by the *purahua* (Ramírez Colombier, 2015, p. 65). Lakes also have their *madres*, who guard the fish living there (Herndon, 1854, pp. 168-169; Fernández, 2016, p. 4). Different *madres* may differ in character, and it is necessary to establish a

relationship with them in order to fish in their waters without being harmed (Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 207; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022b, pp. 96, 111). Such *madres* are said to sometimes have the body of enormous anacondas, lying at the bottom of the river or lake (Rivas-Ruiz, 2022b, p. 94). If she abandons her body of water, it will lose its biodiversity and eventually dry up (Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 202). These snake-mothers of the water are said to be responsible for most changes the landscape undergoes with time, be it the rise and fall of the water, the apparition of lakes, canals, or beaches, or the destruction of portions of land (Berjón Martínez and Cadenas Cardo, 2014, p. 234; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, p. 63, 2022b, pp. 94-96, 99; Piccini Acuña, 2023, p. 96). In this, the *purahua* faces opposition from the *karuara*, who try to protect the land from destruction (Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, p. 86). Some authors, on the other hand, report that the *karuara* can also be the cause of *desbarranco*. This is interpreted as a piece of land, sometimes including houses, coming under their dominion (Angulo-Giraldo, 2022, p. 14; Piccini Acuña, 2023, p. 104). Thus, the *desbarranco* is not seen as a destruction but rather as a shift, a transition to another state. This again mirrors Amazonian cosmology, which is rich in repeated transformation of bodies, while the interior is preserved (De Castro, 1998, p. 472; Vilaça, 2005; Taylor, 2007, p. 159; Grotti and Brightman, 2012, pp. 168-169; Fernandes Moreira and Ramírez Colombier, 2019, p. 166).

Asked about the reason for the frequent *desbarrancos*, inhabitants of Nueva Fortuna gave the following answers:

Interviewee 1: The barranco, the water itself[,] takes away the soil. The weight of the water breaks away the soil. Because of this there are vortices, it digs at the ground, that's why it breaks apart. The weight of the water itself breaks it, the impact, the current, this breaks away the soil.

Interviewee 2: Well, our ancestors had a different ideology, no?

Roxani: Yes, yes, yes.

Interviewee 2: They believed in beings living inside the water. Because in the old days, when the barranco would take away Fortuna, you would see people wandering around at night, but they were invisible. At night you could see them, many people saw them. I also saw them all the time.

Roxani: What did they look like?

Interviewee 2: People, people, they looked like people, physically, no? Made of flesh, but they weren't human beings, they were spirits. So, they walked around. It was then that the riverbank started to break off. And our ancestors thought that those beings, which they called the *yacuruna*, it was them working, as they said, through the

water. And that is why the landslide began. So, those beings of the water started to work, and the water began to eat away the soil. So, it started to break off, and they took away our village. And that is how we moved to this place here where we are now (Interview by Roxani Rivas-Ruiz in Nueva Fortuna, 2020).

What is interesting about this dialogue is that at the beginning, the first interviewee gives a fairly scientific description of the *desbarranco*. After that, he is reminded by a second person that their ancestors interpreted things differently. The account that follows sounds distanced at first, describing what «they» believed in «in the old days.» Soon, though, this is enriched by personal experiences including seeing those very beings that the ancestors believed in, dissolving the personal distance from those beliefs expressed in the beginning. Here, the *yacuruna/karuara* are given as the cause of the landslide, which confirms the observations made by Angulo-Giraldo and Piccini Acuña. An increase in apparition of spiritual beings is often seen as a sign for dramatic events (Berjón Martínez and Cadenas Cardo, 2009, p. 427; Angulo-Giraldo, 2026, pp. 256-257).

As mentioned before, it is possible to come to terms with *karuaras* and *madres* by establishing a personal relationship with them. This is best done by addressing them in respectful ways and offering gifts such as tobacco or liquor. As Campanera Reig (2018, p. 195) writes: «To offer tobacco is an efficient action given that this establishes a relation of generous sociability between beings of different nature who therefore have a disposition for hostility.» That being, it comes as no surprise that people try to influence the activities of the river beings to their advantage. Returning to the story of Obrero, Ahuanari Flores writes:

For the inhabitants, the *desbarrancamiento* was the worst moment in their lives even though they tried to protect the territory in curious ways by curing them with duck eggs, which, according to beliefs, holds back the *desbarrancamiento* or the erosion of the soil. This operation has been successful to this day (Ahuanari Flores, 2002, p. 74).

Here, the author expresses two apparently contradictory perspectives. The first sentence is formulated as a slightly condescending description of local superstitions («curious ways», «according to beliefs»), while the second sentence informs us that those measures have actually proven successful over fifteen years. The «curing» mentioned by Ahuanari is a common term in local Spanish (*curar, curación*) referring to spiritual practices of protection, also realized for protecting plants from parasites or thieves. Earlier in his *cuaderno*, Ahuanari describes this:

The plantations have secrets of protection and of the destruction of a specific piece of land. When people, for example, want to protect their plantations or fields from the *barranco*, they plant a cooked duck egg, and when they want to cause undermining, scorching, *desbarrancamientos* [,] they use the meat of the stingray or the claw of the giant armadillo (*Carachupa mama*), tracing the borders of a territory to take away its protection, for this operation they practice diets, *icaros*, prohibitions and regulations (Ahuanari Flores, 2002, p. 18).

So, as often in shamanic contexts, healing/protecting and harming are closely related. Not only are there “cures” to protect a garden or territory from breaking into the river, *desbarrancos* can also be purposely provoked by ritual action. The list of things to practice and observe during these actions given by Ahuanari proves the connection to Western Amazonian shamanism. Dieting here means following a series of food restrictions usually involving the avoidance of salt, pig meat, and chili peppers, but also of sexual activities and contact with menstruating women (Espinosa, 1935, p. 146; Tessmann, 1999, p. 42; Campanera Reig, 2018, p. 198). These restrictions are said to make the body lighter and to cause compassion in spiritual beings (Santos-Granero, 2007, p. 63). *Ícaros*, or *ikaros*, are songs employed in Western Amazonian shamanism to harness the powers of plants or objects and to call spirits of the river. The word probably comes from the Kukama verb *ikara*, “to sing,” but the use of *icaros* has spread far beyond Kukama-Kukamiria society (Espinosa, 1935, p. 149; Brabec de Mori, 2011, pp. 34, 257; Chirif, 2017, p. 267; Rivas-Ruiz, 2022b, p. 101).

Magical actions such as stripping a piece of land of protection against the *desbarranco* are part of the arsenal of aggression among the Kukama. In her *cuaderno* on the history of Mundial, Jéssica Yuimachi Tamani describes how in the 1930s, a group of Indigenous workers, consisting of Kukama, Kichwa, and Chayahuita people, tried to combat a *mestizo*<sup>5</sup> family called Arévalo Guerrero who had taken possession of an especially fertile piece of land, not allowing anybody else to enter it (Yuimachi Tamani, 2002, p. 31). Stinginess with natural resources is a major offense in Kukama society (Ricopa Yaicate and Panduro, 2013, p. 8; Campanera Reig, 2017, p. 286), so although that family was in the socially higher position of

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5 *Mestizo* in Peru usually means a person of mixed heritage, mostly European and Amerindian, but in the Peruvian Amazon is rather a social rank. *Mestizo* people occupy the space in-between the powerful «white» lords, company owners and businessmen of European origin and the supposedly isolated, kinship-oriented indigenous people (Wade, 2008, pp. 179, 186; Krokoszyska, 2023, p. 108). *Mestizos* typically engage in trading and are considered more urban than the traditional indigenous population (Stocks, 1978, p. 279; Gow, 1996, p. 104).

*patrones* (bosses) and *mestizos*, people revolted against their land claims. When the *mestizo* family employed a shaman from Iquitos to harm the rebelling workers, their leader, a Chayahuita shaman himself, responded accordingly:

[T]his gentleman Wilfredo Shupingahua (shaman) started retaliating with his power, but that power turned against the children of the Arévalo family, this man not only did that, he also caused the destruction of their plantations and, above all, he caused the animals they bred to die of a disease he sent upon them (animal pest).

So, he retaliated as well, but everything he did was against the people who lived in their working huts, so[,] not feeling convinced[,] he started to destroy the land (causing des[b]arrancamiento but in the place where the estate was).

The estate owner was injured when a tree fell on his house, the roof was taken away by wind and everything was pure destruction[,] also affecting the founders' plantations a little (Yuimachi Tamani, 2002, pp. 58-59).

Although the destruction obviously affects both parties, the oral history of Mundial ascribes the events and their consequences to the overwhelming power of the leader of the later village founders, the shaman Wilfredo Shupingahua. But this kind of spiritual violence is not restricted to dealing with outsiders. A bilingual teacher tells the story of a conflict between two neighboring Kukama communities on the banks of the Marañón, Santa Clara and the abovementioned Leoncio Prado:

Interviewee: They [Santa Clara] moved about five kilometers upriver, no? And what had happened? Do you know what had happened? On the other side, there's Leoncio Prado. No? On the, on the headland, no? There it was. And what happened? They are eternal rice farmers, on the beach. So, that beach, the beach is innocent, it doesn't know where it goes, right? The river flows, and the beach grew. And so, it grew into the territory that belonged to the other community. So, late at night, they went and ripped out the rice. On the beach, no? And the other community was left without rice. So what happened? They don't want anymore... well, the beach should be for nobody. What did they do? The old man tells me that they killed a, a yangunturu they call it, how do you guys call it, ah, armadillo! You know that one, don't you?

Arno: Uhum, yes.

Interviewee: Exactly, an armadillo. A giant armadillo. There's the normal one and there's the big one... they cut its, it only has two claws. They cut them off, bury them, do the diet, no? They diet for a while and then dig them back up. And with that they go and make lines on

the beach. And the bank starts to fall... No? And so, nobody got to keep the beach. It broke off on both sides, no? And this thing with the digging up, here they did exactly the same. Making lines in the beach with the, with the claw of the [...]. And the other community, they too were affected by the *desbarranco*, I think more, more than five times already (Interview by Arno Holl in Nauta, July 16, 2024).

He then went on to tell how something similar happened between Parinari and Atenas, also on the Marañón River.

Interviewee: Parinari is a community whose territory is gone, no? The same thing happened, about the rice-growing beach. No? They were, they split, the community, it used to be one community. They split into two, now it's Atenas, and the other one is Parinari. So the same thing happened, no? [...] They went downriver, and the *barranco* took them away. And now it continues to do so. But the other community no, it doesn't happen anymore. What have they done? They have protected themselves.

Arno: In Atenas?

Interviewee: In Atenas. It hasn't happened in over thirty years, they live on the riverbank. And it hasn't, what have they done? They say that they took the *huayo* [*Kageneckia spp.*], the *ayahuma* [*Couroupita guianensis*]. No? On a new moon, they went and put that. Until the limits of their territory. And the *ayahuma* [...]. And it stopped. The land doesn't break off anymore (Interview by Arno Holl in Nauta, July 16, 2024).

These examples show that not only is the phenomenon of *desbarranco* an existential threat to settlements in the Amazonian floodplain, it is also associated with human and non-human agency. While some *desbarrancos* are attributed to the activities of the *purahua* or the *karuara*, others are connected to rivalries with other communities. *Curaciones* may be used to try and cause the *desbarranco* of certain parts of the rivals' territory, others are employed to protect one's own from such endeavors. Rivas-Ruiz also mentions the use of the fruit of the *Ayahuma* tree for protection (Rivas-Ruiz, 2022a, p. 134). This positions humans as actors on a different level within their natural environment, giving them the power to harness spiritual forces to change the landscape around them. Such agency may be seen as analog to the powers of the national and foreign societies who use large machines, concrete and explosives to try and tame rivers, dig tunnels through mountains, and dictate what is allowed to grow where.

One example for this are the plans for the Proyecto Hidrovía Amazónica, a joint project of the Peruvian government and the Chinese company Sinohydro (Lu, 2019, p. 11). The plan was to drag the beds of the major

rivers of the Peruvian Amazon to make them shippable during both the rainy and the dry seasons. Due to a lack of investigation of the environmental consequences, but especially because of over 400 protest notes handed in by Indigenous organizations, the project was put on ice in 2020 (Rivas-Ruiz, 2022b, p. 111; Pérez Bartra, 2023). Among the main reasons for the massive protests was the destruction of the spiritual world inside the rivers. A document sent by the representants of several communities asks among other questions:

How will the Hidrovía affect the spirits and madres, the beloved beings living in the river? For example the Yakurunas, the sirens, the beings living in the river in general. In the river lives the boa, the mothers of fish; the curahua [sic], which is the great boa (ACODECOS-PAT, 2015, p. 4).

While the Kukama shamans work with the beings of the river, the foreign machines work against them. Mythical stories about the enchanted river world and people's personal relations with this environment are employed in attempts to regain ownership of the traditional Kukama-Kukamiria territory and maintain its integrity and diversity (Angulo-Giraldo, 2022, pp. 21-22).

### Administrational Challenges

Nowadays, relocating a village is a much more complicated task than in the past. Not only do people rely more and more on industrially produced building materials, the villages have been recognized by the state authorities since the mid-twentieth century and were connected to the rural school system (Gow, 1991, p. 230; Barclay Rey de Castro, 2010, p. 54; Ames, 2017, p. 359). Once a settlement possessed a state school (*escuela fiscal*), its localization was registered. Soon, a school became a necessary condition for a settlement's recognition by the authorities (Gow, 1991, p. 230). Moving the village now meant a lengthy process trying to receive the permission of the Ministry of Education to relocate the school building (Barclay Rey de Castro, 2010, pp. 53-54). Thus, the threat of *desbarrancos* has also become one of bureaucracy, and Ahuanari Flores mentions how in one case of *desbarranco* in Obrero I Zona, the authorities were desperate to save some of the materials of the newly created school (Ahuanari Flores, 2002, p. 74).

Of course, registration is not limited to school buildings. In the 1990s, many Kukama-Kukamiria settlements in Peru applied for recognition as *comunidades nativas*, Indigenous communities. This meant a major step for a population who had negated being Kukama-Kukamiria or Indigenous for a long time and caused plenty of conflict within the communities

(Gow, 2003). Yet, with an ever-growing presence of national and international companies invading the communities' territories to exploit their natural resources, it was necessary to take measures to officially define each community's territory and provide a minimum of protection.

At the same time, the idea of demarcation parts from a static idea of territory. As we have seen throughout this paper, the Kukama territory is anything but static. Whole portions of a community may break away within a short period of time, or may grow in an unforeseen direction, causing conflict with neighboring communities. As Barclay observed: «In general, it is a problem that the course of the rivers and creeks changes, which may cause part of a community to be flooded, or move the border into its center» (Barclay Rey de Castro, 2010, p. 72)<sup>6</sup>. Also, the more territories are clearly defined and officially occupied, the harder it becomes to find new land after losing one's own to the river's forces. Sometimes others are willing to share their land, as in the example of Nueva Fortuna and Leoncio Prado mentioned in the beginning, but this increases the populational pressure on natural resources. Also, the Peruvian legislation considers a territory merely as a surface used to guarantee a population's subsistence. This differs strongly from Indigenous conceptions of and relationships with their environment, described as «relational territory» (Angulo-Giraldo, 2022, p. 20; Surrallés, 2022, pp. 96-97). Acknowledging these problems on a political level and finding ways to deal with them are challenges that still need to be met.

## Conclusions

In this paper, we have sought to shed light on a topic largely ignored in anthropological publications on the Amazonian lowlands, the erosion of the riverbanks. These are traditionally inhabited by the Kukama-Kukamiria, and increasingly by other groups who have adopted their lifestyle. The landslides resulting from the erosion, known as *desbarranco* or *desbarrancamiento*, can cause the partial or complete destruction of a settlement and its plantations. Results are food insecurity, dependence on markets, loss of territory, water contamination, and the need to relocate houses or entire villages. A community's population may decline due to people moving away. Questions of territory, borders, and registration with the state authorities are affected by these events.

As the Kukama-Kukamiria are not only physically, but also spiritually strongly connected to the bodies of water in their territory, the movements

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6 «En general, resulta problemático el hecho de que el cauce de los ríos y quebradas se modifica, lo que pone parte del terreno de una comunidad en el agua, o el lindero en medio de ella.»

and transformations of the river landscape are interpreted as the activities of its spiritual inhabitants. Beings such as the Great Boa, *purahua*, or the people living under water, the *karuara* or *yacuruna*, are attributed with great power that can be destructive but also may be harnessed by shamans. Thus, powerful shamans are said to be able to either cause or prevent *desbarrancos* in areas they themselves determine. Reports of the use of this stem from both conflicts with outsiders and between Kukama-Kukamiria communities. The ever-changing environment may also be one of the reasons for the famously unstable view on bodies and belonging in Indigenous Amazonian ontologies as analyzed in Amerindian perspectivism. Finally, the Kukama view of the river as a living being, endowed with agency, personhood, and therefore rights, has influenced juridical decisions about the Proyecto Hidrovía Amazónica and the question of oil exploitation in the area. Similar cases have happened in Canada, Colombia, and New Zealand, and give hopes for Indigenous perspectives to be taken more seriously in the future.

### **Contribución de autoría**

Arno Holl cumplió con las fases de conceptualización, curación de datos, análisis de datos, adquisición de fondos, investigación, metodología, administración de proyecto, redacción del borrador original, y redacción, revisión y edición del texto final.

Roxani Rivas-Ruiz cumplió con las fases de curación de datos, investigación, validación y redacción del borrador original.

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