MYTHOLOGIS

# THE TUPI-GUARANI MYTHOLOGY BOOK

*Namandu, the Twin Heroes, and the Land Without Evil*

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Imprint: Mythologis.

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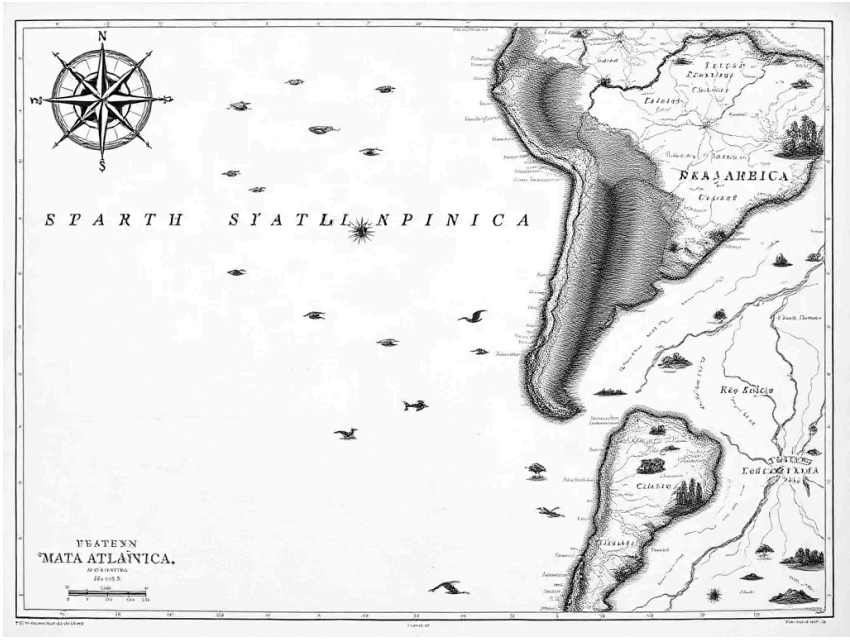
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SPARTH SYATLINPINICA
MATA ATLANTICA.

*For the Guarani communities still walking toward Yvy mara ey.*

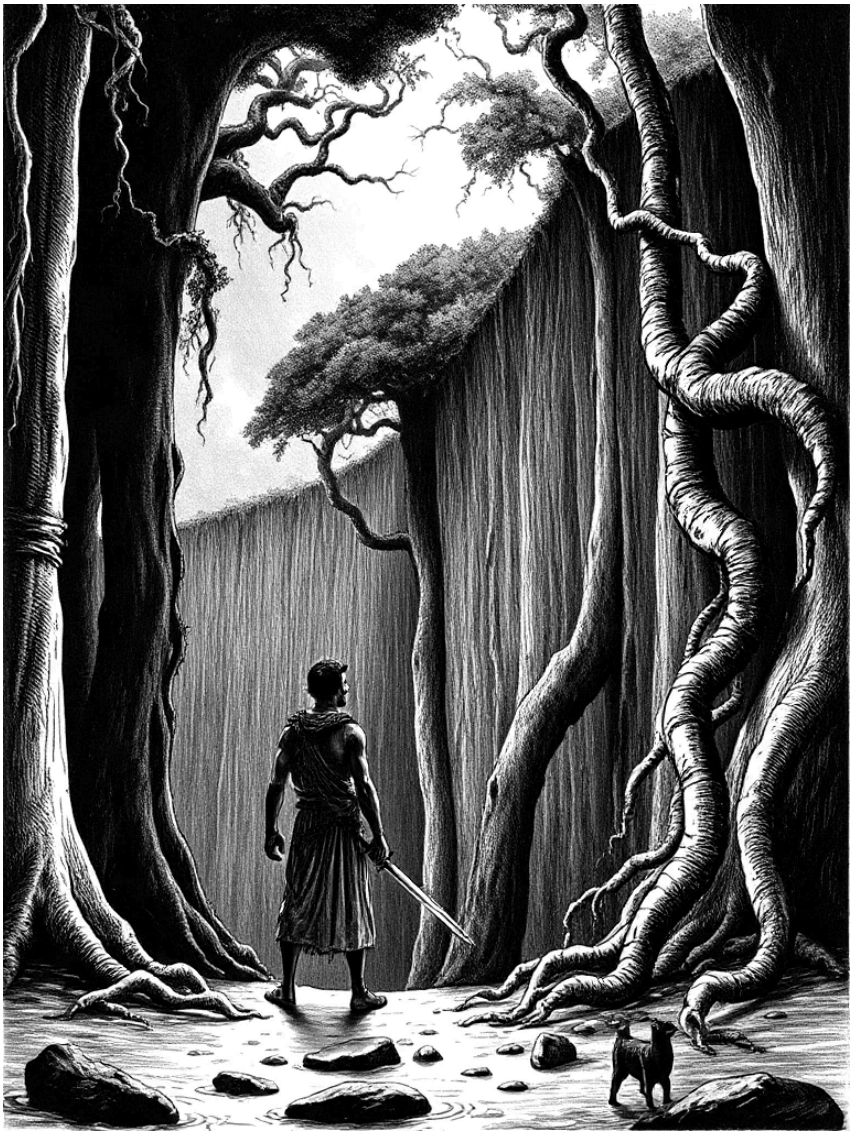
# INTRODUCTION

I am standing in the archives of the Museu do Índio in Rio de Janeiro, holding a typescript of León Cadogan's 1959 Ayvu Rapyta, the sacred words of the Mbyá-Guarani, and the first line stops me cold: "Ñamandu, the first father, out of the original darkness, unfolded himself." Before light, before earth, before gods or jaguars or thunder, there was language. The Guarani placed the word at the foundation of everything, and I realize I am holding not mythology in the past tense but theology in the continuous present. The archive smells of old paper and humidity. Through the window I can hear traffic on Rua das Palmeiras, but in my hands is a cosmology that has survived conquest, disease, forced settlement, and five centuries of people insisting it should not exist. I came to Brazil to write about myths. I stayed to write about survival. This book is about the Tupi-Guarani peoples, a vast linguistic and cultural family that stretches from the Amazon basin to the Atlantic coast, from the Paraná River valley to the highlands of central Brazil. The name covers dozens of distinct communities: the Tupinambá who met the first Portuguese ships in 1500, the Guaraní who built mission towns with Jesuits in the seventeenth century, the Kamaiurá and Tapirapé of the Xingu basin, the Mbyá who still walk forest trails between Paraguay and southern Brazil searching for the Land Without Evil. These are not isolated tribes frozen in anthropological amber. They are neighbors, traders, enemies, relatives. They speak languages mutually intelligible enough that a Tupinambá speaker from coastal Bahia in 1550 could have conversed, with effort, with a Guarani speaker from the Paraná interior. That linguistic unity matters. It carried a shared body of stories, a common pantheon, a set of cosmological principles that bend but do not break across a geography the size of Western Europe. The sources

for this mythology are fragmented, uneven, and sometimes compromised. The earliest records come from Jesuit missionaries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: José de Anchieta writing from São Paulo in the 1560s, Fernão Cardim compiling vocabularies and customs, Antonio Ruiz de Montoya producing his monumental dictionary and spiritual lexicon of the Guarani language in 1639. These men were not neutral observers. They came to convert, and they filtered what they heard through the grid of Christian theology. When a Tupinambá elder spoke of Tupã, god of thunder, the Jesuits heard an echo of Yahweh and bent the translation accordingly. But the Jesuits also had good ears. They learned languages, lived in villages, and wrote down stories that would otherwise have vanished when smallpox and slavery emptied the coastal settlements. I read them with caution and gratitude in equal measure. The nineteenth century brought a second wave of documentation: Brazilian scholars like Couto de Magalhães and Barbosa Rodrigues, working in the aftermath of independence, eager to claim an indigenous foundation for national identity. Their collections are uneven, romantic in places, but they caught myths that had drifted inland, carried by communities retreating from the coast. Then came the twentieth-century anthropologists, the ones who changed everything. Curt Nimuendaju, a German ethnographer who took a Guarani name and spent decades living among communities in Brazil and Paraguay, left field notes of staggering detail. León Cadogan worked with Mbyá-Guarani religious leaders in Paraguay and recorded the Ayvu Rapyta, the foundational hymns of creation, in a bilingual edition that remains the single most important primary source for Guarani theology. Egon Schaden documented ritual life among the Nhandeva. Pierre Clastres, in the 1960s, lived with the Aché and Guarani communities and wrote about their refusal of centralized power as a cosmological stance, not a lack of civilization. These scholars did not always agree. They worked in different regions, with different communities, at different historical moments. Where their accounts diverge, I say so. Where they converge, we can trust the shape of the story. One thing complicates the picture immediately: Tupi and Guarani mythologies overlap but are not identical. The coastal Tupi peoples, Tupinambá, Tupiniquim, Tamoio, bore the brunt of colonization. By 1700, their languages and ritual systems had largely collapsed under the weight of missions, slavery, and demographic catastrophe. What we know of their myths comes almost entirely from those early Jesuit accounts and scattered fragments preserved in

place names, folk songs, and the oral traditions of mixed communities. The inland Guarani, by contrast, maintained greater autonomy. Geographic distance, mission collapse in the eighteenth century, and deliberate strategies of mobility allowed many Guarani groups to preserve ritual knowledge into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. When Cadogan recorded the Ayvu Rapyta in the 1950s, he was transcribing living theology, not archaeological remnants. This means our sources for Guarani cosmology are richer, more detailed, and closer to indigenous voices. The two traditions share a pantheon: Tupã the thunder god, Jacy the moon, Kuarahy the sun, the hero twins who reshape the world. But the theological emphasis shifts. Guarani thought circles obsessively around one concept that appears less centrally in Tupi sources: Yvy mara ey, the Land Without Evil. Yvy mara ey is the axis this book turns on. The phrase translates literally as "the land without evil" or "the land where there is no death." It is both a cosmological destination and a historical practice. In Guarani theology, the creator god Ñamandu made the first earth perfect, a paradise where death and suffering did not exist. Humanity's failings and the actions of lesser gods brought corruption, and the perfect earth was destroyed or hidden. But it still exists, somewhere beyond the eastern horizon, across the great waters, in a place accessible to those who live justly and perform the proper rituals. Throughout recorded history, Guarani communities have undertaken migrations, not displacement, not aimless wandering, but deliberate religious journeys seeking Yvy mara ey. In 1539, a group of several thousand Guarani walked from the Paraná valley to the Peruvian Andes, led by shamans promising the Land Without Evil lay in the west. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, groups walked east toward the Atlantic, believing paradise lay across the ocean. In the twentieth century, Mbyá communities continued to move through Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina, following dreams and prophecies. These are not cargo cults or apocalyptic desperation. They are expressions of a cosmology that refuses to separate the mythic past from the walkable present. I find this electrifying. Most mythologies locate their sacred geography in the unreachable past or the afterlife. The Greeks put the Golden Age behind them, the Christians put Eden in the rearview mirror and heaven after death. The Guarani insist paradise is a place you can walk to if you sing the right songs and live the right way. This is not metaphor. When a Mbyá elder says his grandfather's generation set out for the Land Without Evil and walked three hundred miles

before stopping, he means his grandfather walked three hundred miles. The theology has legs. The structure of this book follows the structure of the sources. We begin with cosmogony: the emergence of the gods, the creation of the earth, the origin of death. Then the hero cycles: the twins Kuarahy and Jacy, their battles with jaguars and monstrous spirits, the civilizing acts that made the world safe for human beings. After that, the myths of transformation, origin stories for animals, plants, and natural features, each tied to a moral lesson or a ritual practice. Finally, the question of persistence. How do these stories live today? Not as museum artifacts but as active theology, guiding migrations, shaping community decisions, resisting assimilation. I cite my sources in the prose itself. When I say "according to Cadogan" or "as Cardim recorded in 1584," I mean you can go check. I will not ask you to trust a story because it feels authentic. I want you to trust it because someone wrote it down when the memory was fresh. This is not a comprehensive survey of every Tupi-Guarani group or every regional variation. It cannot be. The linguistic family includes more than forty distinct languages and covers millions of square kilometers. What I offer is the shared core: the gods and heroes whose names appear in sources from the sixteenth century to the twenty-first, from the Amazon to the Río de la Plata. The myths that survived because communities insisted they mattered. I write this book the way I write everything: assuming you are intelligent, curious, and unwilling to settle for a children's version of someone else's sacred stories. I do not simplify where the sources are complex. I do not invent dialogue or imagine inner lives of gods. I do not treat these myths as relics. The Guarani are still here. Many still speak Guarani as a first language. Some still perform the dances and sing the hymns their ancestors sang when Ñamandu unfolded himself from the original darkness. That continuity changes how we read. These are not dead myths. They are myths that refused to die. You are about to meet gods who spoke the world into existence, twins who turned enemies into constellations, shamans who walked through fire, and a people who believed so completely in an earthly paradise that they crossed mountains and rivers to find it. The first chapter opens in the darkness before creation, where Ñamandu stands alone with nothing but his own divine word. Close this introduction. The story is waiting.



CHAPTER 1

# THE FOREST AND THE WORD

The Atlantic forest begins at the beach. No gradual transition, no polite scrubland: one step you are on sand the colour of ivory, the next you are under a canopy so dense that noon feels like dusk. The air changes. Salt gives way to rot and green growth, and the humidity wraps around your skin like wet silk. Lianas thick as a man's thigh loop between trunks of pau-brasil and jequitibá, trees that were already ancient when the Portuguese caravels appeared on the horizon in 1500. The forest floor is a tangle of ferns and moss, and the sound is layered: the high chatter of capuchin monkeys, the lower rustle of something large moving through the understory, the constant white noise of insects that never stops, day or night. This forest once ran three thousand kilometres along the Brazilian coast, from Pernambuco south to Rio Grande do Sul, then inland along the river valleys of the Paraná and the Paraguay. Early Portuguese sailors called it the Mata Atlântica and refused to enter without Tupi guides. The guides knew the trails, the fruit trees, the places where jaguars denned and where the anacondas sunned themselves on exposed roots. They knew which palms yielded heart-of-palm and which fish traps worked best in which season. They spoke languages so similar that a Tupinambá from Bahia could understand a Guaraní speaker from the Paraguayan lowlands, though two thousand kilometres separated them. The forest shaped the mythology. Rivers were not abstract symbols but specific waterways with specific spir-

its, and the thunder that split the sky in the wet season was not metaphor but the voice of Tupã, whose name the Jesuits would later borrow for the Christian god. The Tupi-Guaraní peoples built their cosmology the way they built their longhouses: out of materials at hand, responsive to the landscape, durable enough to survive storms. The myths were told in smoke-filled maloca at night, passed from elder to child, adjusted in each telling but held to a core that remained stable across centuries. The forest is smaller now. Ninety-three percent of the original Mata Atlântica is gone, cleared for sugarcane and cattle and cities. What remains is fragmented, isolated pockets of green surrounded by farms and highways. But the mythology endures. Guaraní communities in Paraguay, Argentina, and southern Brazil still tell the story of Ñamandú, the first father who unfolded himself from darkness. They still speak of the twin heroes Kuaray and Jacy, the sun and the moon, who brought order to a chaotic world. They still sing the sacred hymns recorded by León Cadogan in the 1950s, hymns that begin with the same line every time: before the earth, before the sky, there was the word. ---- The Tupi-Guaraní peoples are not a single nation but a linguistic family, speakers of closely related languages who occupied a territory stretching from the mouth of the Amazon to the Río de la Plata when the Portuguese arrived in 1500. Coastal groups included the Tupinambá of Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, the Tupiniquim of São Paulo, and the Tamoio of the Fluminense coast. Inland, beyond the coastal mountains, the Guaraní subgroups dominated the river systems of the Paraguay and the Paraná: the Mbyá in the southern forests, the Ñandeva on the Paraguayan plains, the Kaiowá near the headwaters of the Paraguay River. Linguistic studies place the divergence of Tupi and Guaraní branches around two thousand years ago, but mutual intelligibility persisted well into the colonial period. A Tupinambá speaker could understand perhaps sixty percent of a Guaraní conversation without prior exposure, more if both parties slowed their speech and avoided regional idioms. This linguistic coherence produced mythological coherence. The core cosmology is shared across the family: a creator deity who brings forth the world through language, a set of culture heroes who establish the order of nature, a catastrophic flood that reshapes the earth, and a concept of an afterlife paradise accessible through ritual purity and correct speech. Regional variations exist. The Tupinambá of the coast emphasized warfare and ritual cannibalism in their religious practice, while the inland Guaraní developed a more contemplative theology centred

on the opy, the prayer house, and the pursuit of aguyje, a state of spiritual lightness that allowed the living to reach the Land Without Evil. But the narrative skeleton remained consistent. When the Jesuit José de Anchieta compiled his notes on Tupinambá religion in the 1560s, and when the Jesuit Antonio Ruiz de Montoya recorded Guaraní prayers in the 1630s, they were documenting two branches of the same mythological tradition, separated by geography but united by cosmology. The historical encounter began on 22 April 1500, when Pedro Álvares Cabral's fleet made landfall near present-day Porto Seguro in southern Bahia. The first Mass was celebrated on the beach, and the Tupiniquim who watched from the forest edge were described in Pero Vaz de Caminha's letter to King Manuel I as "naked and without shame." The Portuguese were interested in brazilwood, the red-hearted pau-brasil that gave the colony its name, and they needed indigenous labour to cut and haul it to the coast. Trade relationships formed quickly. The Tupinambá exchanged labour for iron tools and cloth, and they shared their language with sufficient generosity that by the 1530s Portuguese traders were speaking a simplified Tupi that would eventually evolve into the Língua Geral, the common tongue of colonial Brazil. The Jesuits arrived in 1549, six priests led by Manuel da Nóbrega, tasked with converting the indigenous population to Christianity. José de Anchieta joined the mission in 1553, at the age of nineteen, and spent the next forty years moving between coastal aldeias, mission villages where converted Tupi were settled. His letters and reports, written in Latin and Portuguese and preserved in the Jesuit archives in Rome, provide the earliest detailed accounts of Tupi religion. Anchieta noted the absence of temples and idols, the centrality of song and dance in ritual life, and the role of the pajé, the shaman who mediated between the human and spirit worlds. He also noted the difficulty of translation. The Tupi had no word for "god" in the Christian sense, no single creator who stood outside creation. The term the Jesuits adopted, Tupã, originally referred to a thunder deity, one spirit among many, elevated to monotheistic status by linguistic convenience. Fernão Cardim, another Jesuit, arrived in Brazil in 1583 and spent eighteen years documenting the natural history and indigenous cultures of the colony. His Do Clima e Terra do Brasil, written between 1583 and 1601, describes Tupinambá cosmology in greater detail than Anchieta's letters. Cardim records the belief in a great flood that destroyed the first world, the survival of a small group of people who climbed a tall tree or took refuge on

a mountain, and the subsequent recreation of the earth by the culture hero known variously as Monan, Sumé, or Tamendoare. These accounts are problematic. Cardim was writing for a European audience, and his descriptions are filtered through Christian typology. He compares the flood to Noah, the culture hero to Christ, and the Land Without Evil to the biblical paradise. But the core narratives are recognisably Tupi-Guaraní, confirmed by later sources collected outside the Jesuit context. The most important early source is Antonio Ruiz de Montoya's Conquista espiritual, published in 1639. Montoya spent twenty-six years in the Guaraní missions of the Río de la Plata, primarily in what is now Paraguay and northeastern Argentina. His book is both missionary memoir and ethnographic record. He describes the Guaraní practice of nightly prayer in the opy, the communal house where men gathered to sing hymns and receive instruction from the religious leaders. He records fragments of these hymns, translated into Spanish but preserving the Guaraní structure of parallel phrasing and repetition. The hymns speak of the father of the word, the unfolder of himself, the one who stands alone in the original darkness. Montoya recognised that he was documenting a theology, not a loose collection of folk tales. He called it diabolical, but he recorded it with care. The colonial period destroyed much. Diseases introduced by Europeans killed an estimated ninety percent of the coastal Tupi population by 1600. Slave raids drove survivors inland or into the missions, where traditional religious practice was suppressed. The Guaraní missions of the Río de la Plata, famously depicted in the 1986 film *The Mission*, were more successful at preserving indigenous culture than the coastal aldeias, but even there the old religion went underground. By the eighteenth century, it was widely assumed by colonial administrators and missionaries that Tupi-Guaraní mythology was extinct, replaced by a Christianised hybrid that bore little resemblance to pre-contact belief. They were wrong. The mythology survived in the inland Guaraní communities that avoided or escaped the missions, and it survived in oral form, passed from one generation to the next without written record. The first modern ethnographic documentation came in 1914, when the German anthropologist Curt Nimuendaju published Die Sagen von der Erschaffung und Vernichtung der Welt, an account of creation myths collected from the Guaraní-speaking Apapocuva of southern Mato Grosso. Nimuendaju had lived with the Apapocuva for two years, learned their language, and participated in their rituals. His monograph describes a fully articulated cosmol-

ogy: the self-creation of Ñanderu, the first father; the emergence of the first earth from primordial waters; the creation of the sun and moon by the twin heroes; and the journey to the Land Without Evil, a paradise located to the east, beyond the ocean, accessible to those who achieved spiritual perfection through dance and prayer. --- The prayer house stands at the centre of the village, a rectangular structure of palm thatch and hardwood posts, open on the sides to let the breeze pass through. Inside, the floor is packed earth, swept clean every morning, and the air smells of woodsmoke and tobacco. At night, the men gather here. They sit in a circle, cross-legged, and the yvyraija, the holder of the prayer staff, begins the hymn. His voice is high and nasal, and the melody has no Western equivalent: not quite chant, not quite song, a tone that rises and falls in quarter-steps that make the European ear ache with the effort to follow. The other men join, one by one, until the entire circle is singing in unison. The women remain outside, standing just beyond the circle of firelight, adding their voices in a higher register. The hymn lasts for hours. It tells the story of Ñamandú, the first father, who unfolded himself from the original darkness. Before the earth, before the sky, before the first dawn, there was nothing but Ñamandú, standing alone. He created his own body by an act of will. He created his heart. He created the word, and the word became sacred speech, and sacred speech became the foundation of everything that followed. The singers do not explain the hymn. They do not pause to gloss difficult passages or point out symbolic meanings. The hymn is not performed for an audience; it is enacted as a form of prayer, a way of participating in the original act of creation by repeating the sacred words in the correct order. The yvyraija sets down his staff. The circle breaks. Men drift to the edges of the opy to smoke and talk quietly while the fire burns down to coals. Outside, the forest is loud with night sounds: frogs in the nearby stream, the territorial call of a screech owl, the rustle of a paca moving through the undergrowth. The village is small, eleven houses arranged in a loose oval around the opy, home to perhaps eighty people. It is 1947, and the village is in eastern Paraguay, near the Brazilian border, one of dozens of Mbyá-Guaraní communities scattered across the interior. The world beyond the forest is recovering from a war the villagers know about only through rumour. Here, the rhythm of life has not changed in memory: manioc is planted in June, harvested in January; the men hunt peccary and tapir; the women weave baskets and cook over open fires; and every night, in the opy, the hymns are

sung. An outsider is here. His name is León Cadogan, a Paraguayan of Basque descent, born in Asunción in 1899, trained as a surveyor but drawn by curiosity and something close to obsession into the study of Guaraní language and religion. He has been visiting this village for two years, learning the language, earning trust, and tonight the yvyraija has invited him into the opy to hear the full recitation of the Ayvu Rapyta, the foundation of the word. Cadogan sits on the periphery, notebook in his lap, writing by the light of a kerosene lamp. He does not understand everything. The hymns use an archaic register of Mbyá, a ritual language distinct from everyday speech, and even fluent speakers need years of instruction to parse its meanings. But he writes down what he hears, phonetically, and later, with the help of the yvyraija, he will translate. The resulting text, published in 1959 as Ayvu Rapyta: Textos míticos de los Mbyá-Guaraní del Guairá, is the most complete record of Guaraní sacred literature ever produced. It is not a myth collection but a liturgical text, the hymns sung in the opy arranged in the order they are performed. Cadogan's Spanish translation runs parallel to the Mbyá original, and his footnotes are dense with philological detail, tracking the meanings of words that have no precise equivalents in European languages. The text begins with Ñamandú's self-creation and proceeds through the formation of the earth, the birth of the first humans, the adventures of the twin heroes, and the promise of the Land Without Evil. It ends with prayers for guidance and protection, petitions addressed to Ñamandú and his divine helpers, the karai, the angelic beings who mediate between the creator and humanity. --- Cadogan's work was not the first attempt to document Guaraní mythology, but it was the first to treat the material as theology rather than folklore. Nimuendaju's 1914 monograph was a summary, a scholar's reconstruction of the cosmological system based on interviews and observation. Cadogan presented the hymns as the Guaraní themselves performed them, in their own words, without editorial paraphrase. The difference is significant. Nimuendaju wrote about the Guaraní; Cadogan let the Guaraní speak. The other major twentieth-century source is Pierre Clastres' Le Grand Parler, published in 1974 and translated into English as The Great Saying. Clastres was a French anthropologist who worked with the Aché-Guayakí of eastern Paraguay in the 1960s and later with the Guaraní communities of the Paraná River basin. His approach was more theoretical than Cadogan's, influenced by Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist school, but his fieldwork was rigorous. He recorded

hours of oral narrative, transcribed the Guaraní texts, and provided line-by-line translations with extensive commentary. His central argument is that Guaraní religion is fundamentally political: the pursuit of the Land Without Evil is not escapism but resistance, a refusal to accept the authority of the state or the church, a determination to maintain autonomy in the face of colonial and post-colonial pressure. The colonial sources remain essential. Anchieta, Cardim, and Montoya wrote as missionaries, not ethnographers, but their accounts are the only surviving descriptions of Tupinambá and early Guaraní religious practice recorded before sustained European contact. Modern scholars treat these texts with caution. The Jesuits imposed Christian interpretations on indigenous material, and they were selective in what they recorded, emphasising elements that could be turned to missionary advantage. But the narratives they preserved are consistent with the later Guaraní sources collected by Nimuendaju, Cadogan, and Clastres, confirming that the core cosmology survived four centuries of colonisation, disease, and suppression. One point of continuity is the centrality of language. All the sources, from Anchieta in the 1560s to Clastres in the 1970s, emphasise that Tupi-Guaraní creation begins with the word. Ñamandú does not fashion the world from clay or breathe life into inert matter; he speaks, and the act of speaking brings the world into being. The Ayvu Rapyta makes this explicit in the opening hymn: "Ñamandú, the true father of the word, before the earth, before the first dawn, unfolded himself. The divine word became the foundation of his being." This is theology in the strictest sense, an articulation of first principles. The word precedes creation; creation is a linguistic act; and human participation in creation, through prayer and ritual speech, recapitulates the original act of naming. The concept has parallels in other cosmologies. The opening of the Gospel of John declares, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The Egyptian *Memphite Theology*, inscribed on the Shabaka Stone around 700 BCE, describes the god Ptah creating the world through speech: "It is he who gave life to all the gods by this heart and by this tongue." The Vedic tradition locates the origin of the cosmos in Vāc, the goddess of speech, whose utterance brings order out of chaos. The Tupi-Guaraní conception is not borrowed from these traditions; the linguistic and geographic isolation makes direct influence impossible. But it arrives at a similar conclusion: that language is not a tool used by conscious beings but the medium through which consciousness and being emerge to-

gether. The survival of this theology is remarkable. The Tupinambá of the coast were evangelised, enslaved, or killed by the mid-seventeenth century. Their descendants, the caboclo populations of northeastern Brazil, retained elements of indigenous cosmology, but the coherent mythological system recorded by Anchieta disappeared. The inland Guaraní, by contrast, maintained their religious traditions through a combination of geographic isolation and active resistance. The Mbyá retreated into the forests of Paraná and Misiones during the colonial period, avoiding contact with settlers and missionaries. The Ñandeva and Kaiowá adopted strategies of selective engagement, attending mission schools while continuing to perform the nightly hymns in secret. When anthropologists arrived in the twentieth century, they found not cultural fragments but living religious communities with fully articulated cosmologies. The messianic movements of the nineteenth century demonstrate the vitality of Guaraní religion during the period when outside observers assumed it was dying. Between 1820 and 1870, a series of prophetic leaders emerged in the Guaraní communities of Paraguay and southern Brazil, preaching the imminent arrival of the Land Without Evil and urging their followers to undertake long migrations to the east, toward the Atlantic coast. These movements were millenarian but not Christian. The prophets, called karai or yvyraija, drew their authority from the traditional religious framework, claiming direct communication with Ñamandú and the celestial beings. Some migrations involved thousands of people, entire villages abandoning their fields and setting out on foot toward the coast. Most ended in disaster: starvation, disease, violent encounters with settlers. But the movements continued into the early twentieth century, documented by Nimuendaju, who witnessed one such migration in 1912 and described the participants' unshakable conviction that they would reach the Land Without Evil if they danced long enough, prayed hard enough, and followed the correct path. Contemporary Guaraní communities number between fifty thousand and eighty thousand people, depending on how membership is defined. The Mbyá are concentrated in southern Brazil, Paraguay, and northeastern Argentina. The Ñandeva and Kaiowá are primarily in Mato Grosso do Sul and eastern Paraguay. All three groups maintain active religious lives centred on the opy and the nightly recitation of the sacred hymns. The Kaiowá have been particularly successful at integrating traditional religion with contemporary political activism, using the concept of tekoha, the traditional territory, as the basis for land

claims against Brazilian agribusiness interests. The religious framework remains intact: the earth is sacred because Ñamandú created it, and the Guaraní have a duty to maintain it through correct ritual practice. This is not cultural nostalgia. It is a living theology, adapted to present circumstances, drawing on myths recorded in the Ayvu Rapyta and earlier sources but applied to contemporary struggles over land, identity, and autonomy. ---- The forest is different at dawn. The night sounds fade as the light changes, the high whine of mosquitoes replaced by the chatter of parakeets and the deeper call of toucans. The mist that settles in the valleys overnight lifts slowly, revealing the layered canopy: the emergent trees a hundred feet high, the mid-canopy palms and lianas, the shrub layer where the spider monkeys forage. The river, a narrow tributary of the Paraná, runs clear over smooth stones, cold enough to make you gasp when you wade in to fill a water jug. A woman kneels by the riverbank, washing manioc roots in a woven basket. Her daughter, six or seven years old, crouches beside her, imitating the motion. The roots are peeled and grated, the pulp squeezed in a palm-fibre press to extract the poisonous juice, then spread on a clay griddle to dry into flour. The process takes hours. The woman hums while she works, not one of the sacred hymns but a simpler tune, the kind sung to children. The melody is pentatonic, the rhythm irregular, and it blends with the sound of the river until it is hard to tell where the music ends and the water begins. Upstream, two men are setting fish traps in the shallows. The traps are conical baskets woven from split bamboo, weighted with stones, open at the narrow end so that fish can swim in but not out. The men work quickly, speaking in Mbyá, the words crisp and clipped, full of glottal stops that give the language its distinctive texture. One of the men is the yvyraija who led the hymns last night. In daylight, he looks younger than his voice suggested, perhaps thirty-five, with the wiry build of someone who spends his days walking trails and clearing fields. He wears shorts and a faded football shirt, nothing that marks him as a religious specialist except the authority in his gestures when he adjusts the placement of a trap or points out a good spot for the next one. The mythology says the first humans learned to fish from Kuaray, the sun. Kuaray descended to the earth after the great flood, when the waters were still receding, and he taught the survivors how to weave traps, how to read the currents, how to call the fish by name. The names mattered. Each species of fish had its own spirit, and the fisherman had to address the spirit correctly or the fish would not come.

This is not metaphor. The yvyraija, if asked, would say that he still speaks to the fish, quietly, under his breath, and that the fish listen. Not always. The spirits are capricious, and there are days when the traps come up empty. But often enough to confirm the relationship, the balance of respect and need that keeps the world in order. The village wakes slowly. Smoke rises from cooking fires. Children spill out of the houses, running barefoot through the clearing, chasing a stray dog. An old man sits on a log outside the opy, sharpening a machete with a whetstone, the rhythmic scrape of metal on stone a counterpoint to the birdsong. This is an ordinary morning. The mythology is not invoked at every moment, not explained or performed except in the proper context. But it is present, a framework that shapes how people move through the world, how they understand the relationship between the forest and the village, the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible. The word is not an abstract concept. It is the thing that holds the world together, and it is renewed every night in the opy, in the voices of the singers, in the repetition of the sacred names. The Atlantic forest is smaller now than it was when the Portuguese arrived. The maps show the fragments, isolated patches of green surrounded by farmland and roads. But the mythology does not shrink. It persists in the communities that remember the hymns, that gather in the opy, that teach their children the names of the fish and the spirits of the trees. The forest and the word are inseparable. The forest gave birth to the mythology, and the mythology, in turn, gives meaning to the forest. As long as one survives, the other endures. The mist has lifted entirely. The sun breaks through the canopy in shafts of light that turn the river to liquid silver. The woman finishes washing the manioc and stands, balancing the basket on her hip, her daughter trailing behind her as they walk back to the village. The yvyraija and his companion gather their traps and move upstream, disappearing into the green shadows where the forest closes in and the river narrows to a thread. The world continues, as it has for two thousand years, held together by stories older than any church, any colonial boundary, any map drawn by people who thought they could name what they did not understand.

CHAPTER 2

# NAMANDU UNFOLDS HIMSELF

In the beginning there is no light, no earth, no sound. Only the original darkness, yvy tenonde, stretching without limit. No sky presses down, no wind moves, no water flows. The darkness is not empty. It is full, dense, saturated with potential, but nothing has yet unfolded. Then Ñamandu Ru Ete, the true first father, unfolds himself from within that darkness like a palm opening. The image the Mbyá-Guaraní use is precise: the word is mbojera, to unfold, to open out from a compressed state. A seed splits. A fist relaxes. A god becomes. He does not arrive from elsewhere. He was always there, coiled inside the darkness, and now he stands. His first act is not to create matter but language. He conceives within his own divinity the foundation of human speech, ayvu rapyta, before there is anyone to speak it or anything to name. The word ayvu means speech, language, the act of speaking. Rapyta means foundation, root, source. Together they name the substance that precedes all other substances, the linguistic ground from which the world will grow. Ñamandu withdraws the primordial mist into himself. He withdraws the darkness. The withdrawal is not destruction but concentration: he draws the formless into his heart, and there it becomes form. His heart beats in the silence. Each beat is a word. Each word is a name. The names do not describe what already exists; they bring into being what has never been. The first dwelling place appears, the opy guasu, the great prayer house, though there is not yet earth for it to stand on or

sky for it to stand beneath. It is a platform, a space marked off from the undifferentiated darkness, a place where being can gather and take shape. Ñamandu stands at its centre. He holds in his heart the sacred words, and he speaks them one by one, and as he speaks the world begins. --- The fullest account of this cosmogony appears in León Cadogan's Ayvu Rapyta: Textos míticos de los Mbyá-Guaraní del Guairá, published in 1959 and drawn from hymns recorded in the late 1940s in a Mbyá community in eastern Paraguay. The text opens with the line: "Ñamandu, the first father, before unfolding himself from the original darkness, conceived within his own divinity the foundation of human speech." The word order matters. The conception of language precedes the act of unfolding. Ñamandu exists first as pure potential, undifferentiated from the darkness that surrounds him, and his first creative act is internal: the generation of ayvu rapyta within his own being. Only after this internal generation does he unfold, revealing himself as a distinct entity separate from the formless ground. The term yvy tenonde, often translated as "the original darkness" or "the first earth," carries both spatial and temporal connotations. Yvy means earth, ground, land. Tenonde means first, original, primordial. Together they describe a state before differentiation, a condition in which earth and darkness and potentiality are not yet separated into distinct categories. Cadogan's Spanish translation uses tinieblas originarias, the original shadows, emphasising the absence of light. Modern Guaraní speakers describe yvy tenonde as a state of concealment, a world folded in on itself, waiting to be opened. Ñamandu's self-creation involves a series of withdrawals and concentrations. The Ayvu Rapyta describes how "the divine mist, the darkness, he withdrew into the seat of his divinity, into his sacred heart." The heart, ñe'ẽng, is both a physical organ and a metaphysical centre, the place where thought and speech originate. The mist and darkness are not expelled but internalised, compressed into the heart, where they undergo transformation. What enters as undifferentiated formlessness emerges as differentiated speech. The heart becomes a filter, a crucible, the site where chaos is transmuted into order through the act of naming. This cosmogony has no parallel in the creation myths recorded by the coastal Jesuits in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. José de Anchieta's letters from the 1560s describe Tupinambá beliefs in a creator figure called Monan who brought forth the world through an act of will, but the linguistic dimension is absent. Antonio Ruiz de Montoya's Conquista espiritual, published in 1639, comes