



# Kayabu

Eymard Toledo

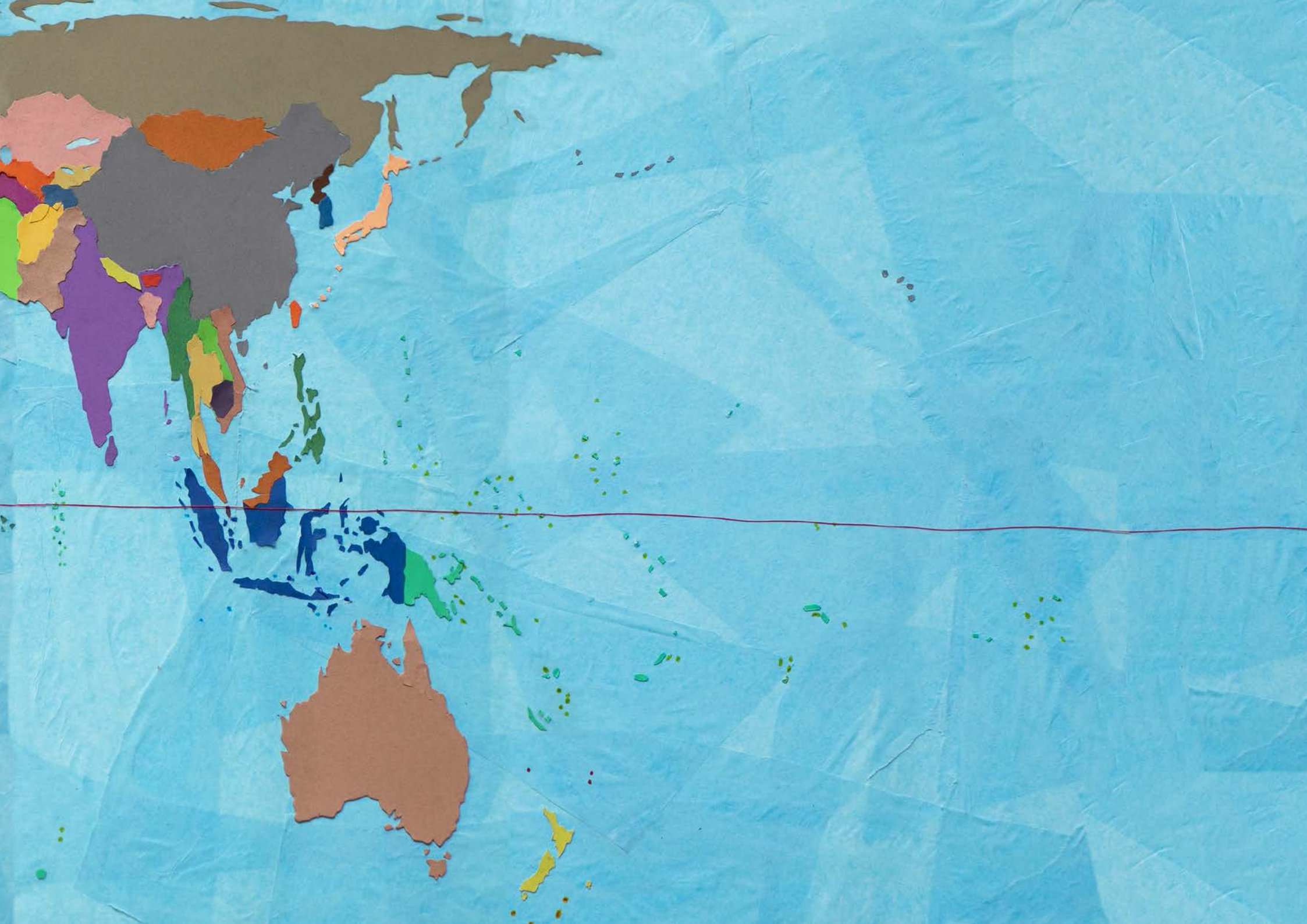
A story from Amazonia
















Amazonia,  
where everyone hides,  
animals hide from other animals, animals hide  
from humans, humans hide from animals  
and sometimes even from other people.

Diary entry

Costa da Conceição, 13. 9. 2022



**Eymard Toledo**

# Kayabu

**A Story from Amazonia**

Translated from Portuguese into German  
by Michael Kegler



**BAOBAB BOOKS**





Naná lives in a village on the banks of the Amazon. To be more precise, on one of the many side arms. This arm is called Urubu because its water is as dark as the feathers of the Urubu vulture.

On Saturdays it is always very quiet in the village. People rest in their hammocks and recover from the exhausting week and the heat. On one such quiet Saturday, Naná was sitting on the riverbank and humming:

»There really aren't many few fish this year!«







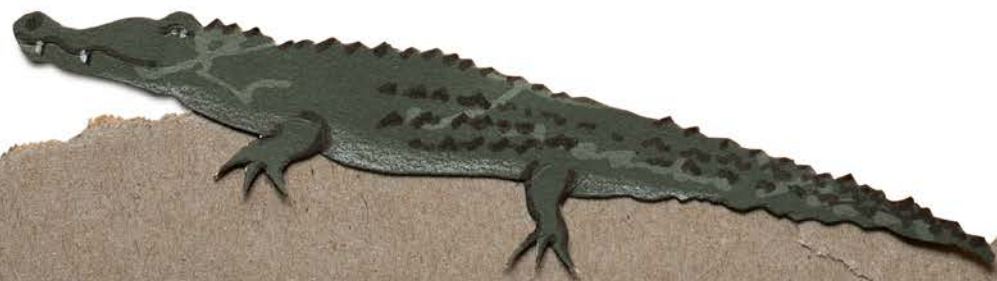
Just as Naná was about to pack up her fishing gear again, she saw a lot of logs floating down the river. »Strange, it's been happening a lot recently. Who's cutting down so many trees? And who needs so much wood?« she asked herself.

Then she spotted a canoe among the tree trunks. There were so many people in it that the water was almost spilling over the side.

A curled-up sloth could be seen in the bow. In the stern, a boy was skilfully steering the boat with a paddle.

Naná was impressed. »How does he manage that? Not even our motorboats can make such tight turns. But the boy can even get through between the logs with his long canoe.«

Naná watched the canoe until it had disappeared into the meanders of the Urubu. Then she made her way home.









A few days later, this same boy turned up in Naná's class.  
Although he looked much older, the teacher introduced him as a new pupil:  
»This is Kayabu.« There was an empty seat next to Naná, and he was told to sit there.  
A sloth clung around Kayabu's neck. However, the teacher didn't accept:  
»Sloths are not allowed in class!«  
Naná spoke up: »Why not? We've already had lots of animals here.  
An ocelot, a whole family of armadillos and even a king snake.«  
But the teacher wouldn't hear of it: »No means no!«









The next day, Kayabu brought to school a huge fish he had caught. He wanted to swap it for a classmate's glasses, but he refused. On the way home, Naná and Kayabu passed the village shop. Kayabu decided to go in with his fish. Naná watched as he placed it on the counter, took a packet of biscuits from the shelf and placed it next to it, while the shopkeeper quickly took the fish to the back. Kayabu came out of the shop with the biscuits. Naná was amazed and asked: »Did you pay for the biscuits with the fish?« »I gave her the fish and she was quite pleased«, said Kayabu.









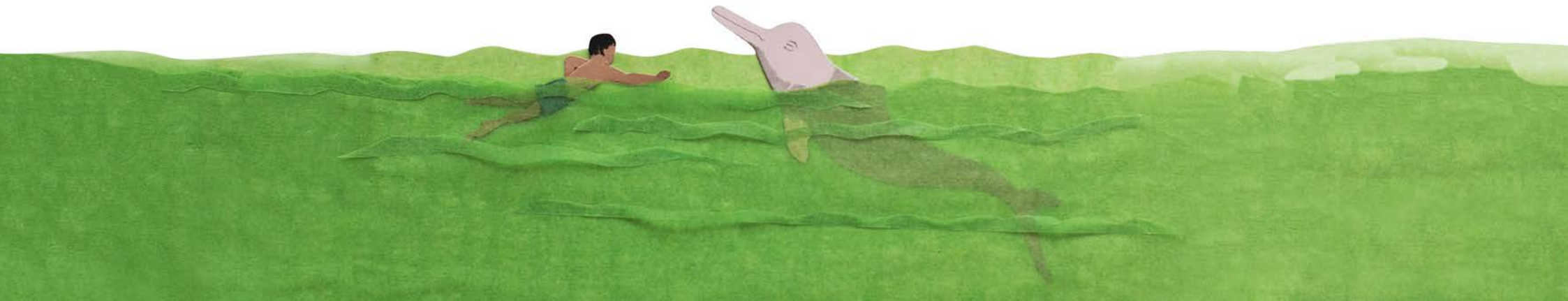
When the monsoon season began, the water in the village rose higher and higher and the air became hotter and hotter.

One afternoon, when school was out, the children decided to cool off in the river. With their splashing they frightened the fish, even the piranhas and river dolphins took off.

The village children managed to keep their heads just above water and Naná also clung to a boat to avoid sinking.

But Kayabu and his siblings swam like fish in the water.

One of them even jumped directly from a roof into the river.









Shortly thereafter, Kayabu invited Naná to his home. Like all the houses along the river, his house was completely submerged in water during the rainy season.

Naná moored the motorboat to a tree and they climbed through a window into the living room.

Kayabu's mother was bathing the children. Kayabu's sister was busy painting her toenails.

There were two rooms in the house: the living room and a bedroom.

The kitchen and the toilet were outside. To reach them, you had to balance on planks.









The grandfather took a nap in the hammock with two grandchildren while the sloth dangled from the rope. At the lower end, one of the children kept the hammock swinging.

Kayabu pointed to the sloth and said: "We saved it from the flames.

»His name is Taquá.«

»Aren't you afraid of its claws?«

»It won't hurt anyone.«

Naná plucked up all her courage and lifted the animal into her arms.

She was amazed at how warm and soft it felt.

Then she asked Kayabu: »Where is your bed?«

»I sleep outside in the canoe. At night, I like to look up at the starry sky.«

»And when it rains?«

»Then I pull the canoe under a tree.«

And then Kayabu told Naná the whole story ...







»Long before the fires started, many people moved from the rainforest to the villages by the river. I once asked my mother what was better there than here at home. She said there were motors for everything. Even the canoes had them and people no longer had to paddle for themselves. But I know the sound of loud motors, they use them to cut down our trees. Then one morning the acrid smell of smoke hit our noses. The wind was hot and the birds and monkey became very restless. The old people in the village always used to tell us to pack up and run away as soon as we smelled smoke. Even before we could see any fire. So we left immediately. When we looked back, we saw our village and the trees disappearing in a thick cloud of smoke. The animals were coughing like us.«







»Did you return to your village after the fire?« Naná wanted to know.

»No, we travelled further through the forest. On and on, the whole dry season«, Kayabu said.

»Wasn't that dangerous?«

»Yes, there were lots of snakes and we heard strange noises at night.

We were very scared because we didn't know the way and it's difficult to get through the dense rainforest on foot. When we finally reached the river, we all carved a canoe out of a tree trunk. Now we could paddle, that was easier. We paddled for several full moons until we arrived here. It hadn't been easy to find our grandfather. We were very tired and hungry.«







Kayabu had been living in the village for some time when he asked Naná one day:

»Where do people find money?«

»You can't find money. You have to earn money«, replied Naná.

»You earn money?«

»Yes, for example by peeling manioc. With the money you earn, you can buy a hammock, for instance.«

Naná showed Kayabu's family how to fill and press the cassava porridge into the tipiti basket\*.

Kayabu and his family helped straight away. They carelessly pocketed the money they received in return without counting it.

»You always have to count the money. Even in the shop. Then you know whether you've received the correct change«, said Naná.

Kayabu had never bought anything with money in his life.

\* The root of the cassava plant is an important staple food. However, it must be cooked to make it edible. In Amazonia, the grated tuber is pressed through the tipiti, an approximately 2 metre long basket made of palm fibres. This separates the edible cassava pulp from the poisonous juice and allows it to be processed into flour.









When they went fishing together, Naná used a fishing rod and a net.

Kayabu and his siblings, however, fished with bow and arrow.

Naná watched them: »Your sister is a good fisherwoman. Her basket is already full. How does she manage that?« asked Naná.

»She sings and the fish come to her.«

»I've never heard anything like it. You know what, Kayabu? You can sell the fish at the harbour«, suggested Naná.

»But we want to eat them.«

»Nobody can eat that many fish.«

»Then we'll give some to our neighbours. They're hungry too.«







There were many things in the rainforest that Kayabu wanted to show to Naná. For example, which lianas can be used to obtain drinking water and what to do if you get lost.

»Have you ever got lost in the forest?« he asked Naná.

»Before we met, I had never been in the forest.«

»But the forest is just behind your house!«

While they were talking, Kayabu's younger brother was swinging upside down on the liana of a huge kapok tree\*.

»Strange, I've never noticed the tree before, even though it's so close«, said Naná.

\* Mighty deciduous tree; the fluffy fibres of the pods are used as cushion filling, for example.







When the river overflows its banks during the monsoon season, the village children have to travel to school by boat.

One day, the headmaster asked Kayabu if he wanted to steer the school boat. He thought that a boy like Kayabu, who was good at steering, paddling and swimming, would be just right for this task. Kayabu replied: »Well, as long as we're here in the village, I'll drive the boat.,

Naná silently wondered about Kayabu's answer. But from then on, Kayabu moored the boat in front of Naná's house every morning at six o'clock on the dot.

He didn't have a watch, but he was never late. When Naná asked him how he knew what time it was, Kayabu replied:

»As soon as you hear the japim and the japó\*, you can get ready, because I'll be on my way to you in the school boat.«

\* Weaver bird and crow-fronted bird, two birds from the sparrow family.









This went on for several full moons. Then one morning Naná waited for the school boat – and waited and waited. The Japim and the Japó had long since stopped singing, but Kayabu was still not there.

You could just about wade through the water. So Naná took off her shoes and set off on foot. The other children in the village also kept an eye out for Kayabu.

When they arrived at his house, the door was open. No one was there, the hammock was gone and the sloth Taquá was nowhere to be seen.

As the children looked across the river, they saw a canoe gliding away.

Naná wanted to wave, but right at that moment a huge cargo ship passed by and blocked the view.

She didn't think twice and climbed up the nearest tree. The other

The other children followed Naná and together they shouted as loud as they could:

»Kayabu! Kayabu! Kayabuuuu!«

But the canoe was already too far away and the cargo ship was making a lot of noise.

When it had finally passed, the canoe was just a dot on the horizon.

on the horizon. The children climbed down from the tree and made their way to school.





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But Naná staid seated for a moment and thought.  
»Kayabu always talked about his village, about his friends and  
about life in the rainforest. I wanted to ask him so many more questions,  
but now he's gone. One day I want to be able to paddle as well as Kayabu.  
And I want to know the stars in the sky so that I don't get lost when I look for him.  
Amazonia is big, but one day we will meet again.«





## Epilogue

In many parts of the world, there are people who have lived in close contact with the forest since time immemorial. But because their habitat is increasingly being destroyed, many indigenous communities are under threat. Primeval forests are being cleared to extract timber, grow animal feed or extract mineral resources from the earth. The Amazon rainforest is one of the most endangered areas.

When I was a child, my father showed me pictures of his travels in the Amazon region and told me about what he had seen there.

He told me about the people, the plants and animals – and also about the many colourful butterflies that lived there. Recently, however, I read that the butterflies had lost their colours where there used to be rainforest. They are apparently adapting to the grey of the scorched earth and the concrete buildings. Perhaps the place my father told me about has already sunk into a reservoir that is supposed to generate electricity for the whole of Brazil.

Last year, I travelled to Amazonia myself and visited a small village on the banks of the river. I learnt a lot there – and also learnt new words. Many words in my native Portuguese come from the languages of the indigenous people. About 500 years ago, when people from Europe colonised their land, more than a thousand different ethnic groups lived in the Amazon rainforest.

Unfortunately, many of these communities have not survived, and many languages have disappeared with them. Today there are about 200 ethnic groups, and they are becoming fewer and fewer as the rainforest continues to be destroyed. Some indigenous people no longer speak the language of their ancestors because their community has broken up as a result of resettlement or flight. Or because they are told that they are worth nothing as indigenous people and hide their origins.

On my trip, I was a guest in the village of Costa da Condição with Dona Maria, Seu Taquito and 87-year-old Dona Diquinha. They all belong to the family of my friend Nara, whom I met in Berlin. She has lived there for a long time, but grew up in the Brazilian rainforest – at the mouth of the Urubu River. Her family showed me the forest, the Amazon, its many tributaries, the people's way of life, how they work, where the children go to school, how they celebrate festivals ...

What always impresses me in Brazil is the hospitality. Everywhere I went on my trip, I was greeted with gifts. I believe this generosity comes from the indigenous people.

In many communities and villages, it is customary to endow strangers generously, even if the people themselves have very little.

I was also given this story of Kayabu and Naná, which I want to pass on with this book. It is one of many stories from the Amazon rainforest. A story of the people who have lived there for thousands of years.

Eymard Toledo, October 2023

PS: Something in this book does not quite correspond to reality:

The Amazon is actually the colour of latte. In my illustrations, however, I decided to colour the water green colour because otherwise it would look as if the canoes were travelling on dry sand. Apart from that, however, I have depicted the reality on the banks of the Amazon as I saw it.



For my brother João



Baobab is the name of the monkey bread tree in whose shade people tell each other stories. Baobab is also the name of the book programme in which picture books, children's stories and novels for young people from all over the world are published in German translation.

It is published by Baobab Books, the specialist centre for the promotion of cultural diversity in children's and young adult literature.

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Kayabu

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Naná lives in a remote village on the banks of the Amazon.  
When one day an unknown family docks with their canoe,  
Naná and Kayabu become friends.  
The rain forest is the actual home of Kayabu's family.  
He begins to tell his story ...

