



Aquí Alaga

Rising black waters in the Peruvian Amazon



The river is creeping in. At dawn, the spirit of Yanayacu awakens you with the hollow sound of canoes knocking against the houses. Yanayacu means 'black waters' in Quechua, a common name for Amazonian rivers rich in organic matter. In the community of San Juan de Yanayacu, the ground becomes a myth for four months of the year. Children swim between rooms, their bodies activating an unshakeable balance as they jump from roof to roof. They play at fishing for pandillo, the breadfruit that sometimes floats between the flooded streets. The reward is a delicious fruit, large enough to share with everyone.





Gravity feels different, and the body is free to follow its own laws. With almost nowhere to walk, there is no choice but to hang from the wooden skeletons of the houses and swing monkeylike from one beam to another. This is how children grow up with strong ankles and arms. After adapting to daily life in balance during the flood months, they move with even greater dexterity on dry land.



We need to buy sugar to make chapo, a sweet drink made from ripe plantain. The challenge is to get to the shop dry, walking only on canoes, floating logs, or ladders. Halfway there is a very long gap to the next canoe, which is impossible to jump across. Hanging from the wooden planks of the elevated ground floor, it is only possible to move forward using your arms.

The boards have been wet for a long time and are rotting. You'd better be careful which ones you trust to put your weight on. If you look closely, the wood looks like a sponge, swelling as it accumulates water.

Not only does it provide us with a home, but all kinds of life dwell in its damp pores. Like beetles, ants, larvae, and fungi. That's why it smells musty and sour, a smell you eventually get used to.



Almost at the shop, I fell into the water. Desperate, I climbed onto a loose wooden plank. My friends picked me up in a canoe. We are at the beginning of the flood season, which is when most snakes come out. They are very difficult to spot as they move stealthily with the current. And, when you least expect it, you have them at your feet.





This is how we spend the whole day, playing in the water or escaping it, as long as the school remains closed during the flooding season. This is the only building that is not elevated, and lately the rains have been heavier and lasted longer. The most extreme I've experienced so far was back in 2012.



We ran out of books, and you could almost dive in the classrooms. Teachers couldn't and didn't want to commute during that time either. They have nothing to eat or anywhere to stay, and access by river gets riskier.

This was very good news for the children, as it meant fewer classes and more playtime, until I reached the age of eleven, then twelve, and still could not read or write. My parents never learnt and could not teach me themselves during the flood seasons. I felt ashamed, and some of my siblings even left school altogether.

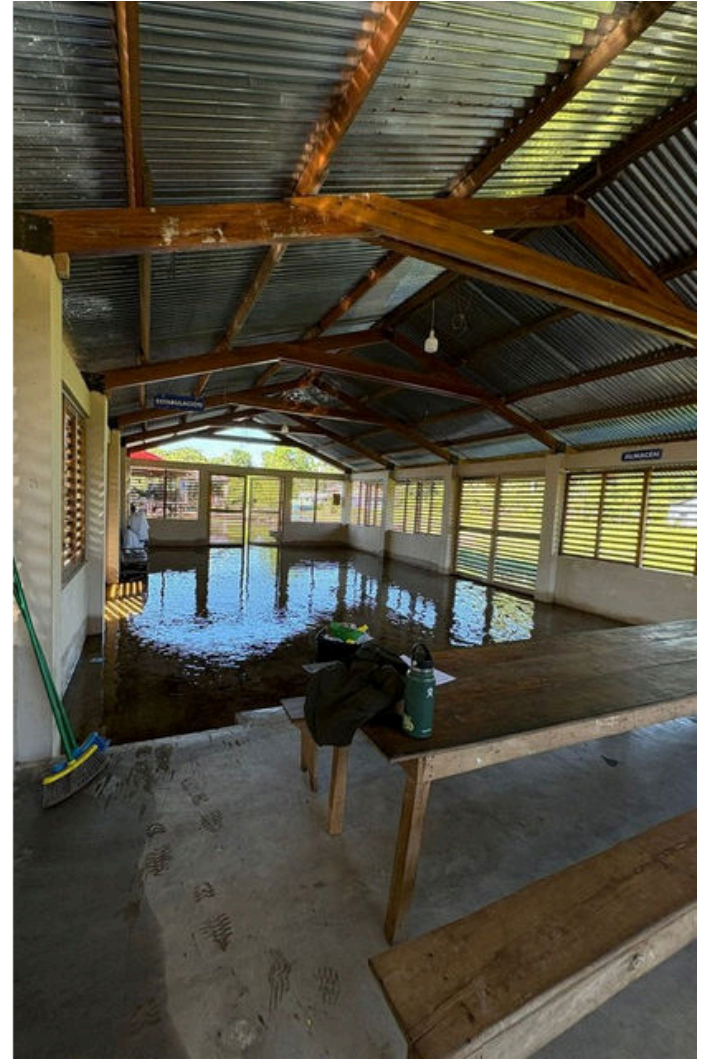
Despite this, we were lucky. Our house was quite high up and only got flooded by thirty centimeters. Some people had to climb onto their roofs and had nowhere else to go.



I have to enjoy this delicious chapo my mum has made. She prepared it with the last bananas we had left. From now on, we'll have to make due with eating only fish because the harvest is rotten and rice is becoming very expensive. All communities are asking for more rice, flour, and sugar because of the rotten harvest, so prices are rising.



I don't care much myself, but I am concerned about my younger siblings who have to keep growing, and with only one cocha (Amazonian lake), we risk running out of fish as well.





I remember that I used to be able to catch Carachama fish with my bare hands. We would go out at night with torches, set up an ambush, and catch them just like that. Over time, the fish in the stream have disappeared, so now we play at fishing pandillo. The only thing that increases is the sightings of some large animals, such as jaguars and sloths, as they seek refuge from the water.



The community is trapped in time; it has created its own world, and during the flood, it becomes a floating island. Despite being in the rainforest, surrounded by exuberant life wherever you go, access to food becomes very difficult with the floods, and children cannot follow the curriculum.

Amidst laughter and games, the children do not realize that the floating island leaves them increasingly isolated and vulnerable. Meanwhile, they will continue to climb, swing, and swim between the houses, learning to go with the flow of whatever the Yanayacu brings.

A story collected by Slavia Salinas
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