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Folktales stoke cultural fires

Storytellers gather at San Luis

By Sharon Kant-Rauch DEMOCRAT STAFF WRITER

Every night around the fire, the young Juan Carlos Galeano listened to stories about forest spirits, underwater worlds, dolphins falling in love with humans, and anacondas protecting animals and fish.

During the day, at breaks or while fishing, the stories would continue. Galeano, now an FSU Spanish professor, would listen intently as the people of the Amazon in his native Colombia wove their tales.

On Saturday, he'll share some of these stories — and others he collected over 10 years in seven Amazonian countries — at the "Storytelling Around a Council Fire" session at Mission San Luis. During the evening, local storyteller Kate Taluga will also tell Cherokee tales, the Tallahassee Astronomical Society will provide "Star Stories," and Native American Robin Tillery will play the woodland flute.

"We're losing the oral tradition because people aren't telling stories any more," said Karin Stanford, the mission program supervisor. "We're relying on other media such as TV and computers."

She thought bringing storytellers together for an evening would be one way to provide a "living history."

Galeano, whose book "Folktales of the Amazon" was recently published, agreed that folktales are repositories of a culture's values, daily practices and religious beliefs.

"The stories are how families in a particular place remember, not through the history we know from books," he said.

During one of his yearly visits to the Amazon, Galeano experienced just how an event in real life could morph into a folktale.

He had gone to a part of the Peruvian forest where there are giant trees, but little underbrush, a place where spirits supposedly take wounded animals. On his way there, his canoe hit a log and he almost drowned. Then after visiting the area, he got really sick, vomiting uncontrollably.

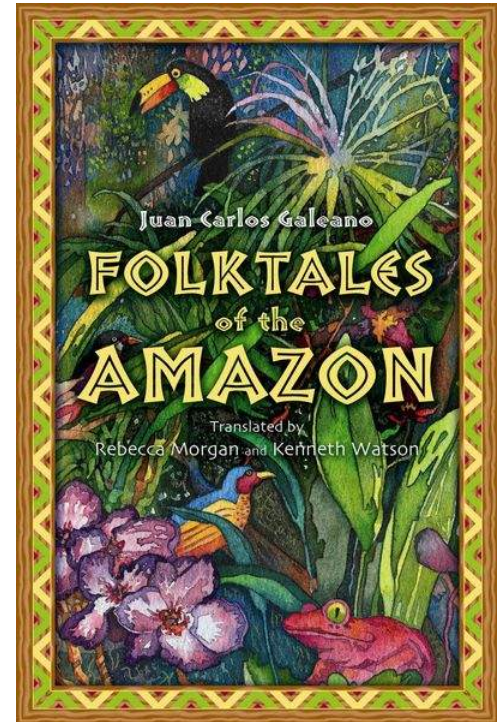
When he got back to the city, he found out that he wasn't supposed to have gone to that area without the mediation of a shaman.

Later, when a friend went back to that same city, the friend heard a tale about a foreigner who had gone to giant tree area, upsetting the spirits. The foreigner had a camera and used bug spray — and he hadn't offered tobacco, the sacred food of the spirits.

Galeano said that for the people of the Amazon there was no divide between culture and nature, the way there often is in western societies.

"We want nature to produce so we can accumulate capital," he said. "We don't have a mythological way of looking at it."

As a boy, he often got scared in bed at night, wondering if the spirits were going to come kidnap him. But that didn't stop him, night after night, from sitting around the fire and begging to hear one more story.



Additional Facts

What: "Storytelling Around the Council Fire"

When: 4:30 to 6:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Mission San Luis, 2020 Mission Road

Cost: Free; beverages will be provided, and visitors are welcome to bring a picnic dinner

Contact: Call 487-3711 or visit www.missionsanluis.org

<http://www.tallahassee.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2009902030306>