Indigenous women and traditional watercraft in Native South America: paddling through gender prejudices

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Abstract

This article examines the roles of Indigenous women in navigation, watercraft, and aquatic lifeways across South America, challenging the masculine bias that has long shaped maritime archaeology and historical narratives. Drawing from a wide range of documentary, archaeological, and ethnographic sources, we adopt a feminist and decolonial framework to recover women's agency, technical knowledge, and symbolic presence in aquatic contexts. A reflexive methodology grounded in three principles (Aim, Attention, and Assessment) guided the identification, interpretation, and evaluation of evidence of women's participation in navigation. The dataset, encompassing diverse Indigenous

groups and time periods, was systematized and mapped to reveal the spatial and temporal distribution of women's engagements with canoes and other traditional watercraft. The results demonstrate that women were central to aquatic life as paddlers, divers, steerswomen, and caretakers of canoes among peoples such as the Guató of the Pantanal, the Yagan and Kawesqar of Tierra del Fuego, and the Mapuche of southern Chile and Argentina, where canoes also appear in funerary contexts. In addition, iconographic and ethnographic materials from the Moche, Uros, Warrau, Emberá, and Tukano further attest to the enduring association between women and watercraft. Reinterpreting these records through a feminist and decolonial lens reveals that women's presence on the water was not an exception but integral to the social, economic, and cosmological fabric of their communities. Recognizing Indigenous women as navigators broadens the definition of maritime archaeology and contributes to the decolonization of its theoretical foundations, emphasizing navigation as a collective and gender-inclusive human practice.

1. Introduction

The phrase "man and the sea" has been used so extensively that it has become ingrained in our collective consciousness. From literary works like Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) to academic definitions, such as Muckelroy's (1978) description of maritime archaeology as "the scientific study of the material remains of *man* and *his* activities on the *sea*" [emphasis added], this notion has been pervasive. Consequently, it has been difficult to envision alternatives like 'woman and the sea' or, more relevant to our discussion, 'women and watercraft'. Fortunately, new generations of girls are growing up with new role models such as *Moana*, a Disney movie where the main character becomes an excellent sailor in the traditional watercraft used in the islands of Polynesia challenging long standing stereotypes. In maritime archaeology, recently, some scholars have begun to discuss the role of women in maritime and aquatic settings in the past (Amarante, 2021, Holtzman, 2024, Streiffert Eikeland, 2023, among others). But still, a lot more needs to be done. Especially in South America. And awareness is key, so let us begin.

The archaeology of aquatic environments has traditionally been associated with men (Amarante, 2021) or as Ransley (2005) puts it "boats are for boys". Navigation is related to a male realm, and within a western context this is related to a long standing European tradition where women were prohibited on board by some navigation regulations of the 1500s (Medina, 1908). In recent years, research on early watercraft and indigenous navigation in South America has taken off (Aguilera, 2023; Alberda and Ramos, 2024; Bonomo and Ramos, 2023; Delaere et al., 2025; Holtzman 2024; Nieva Sanz, 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Saccone, 2022a, 2022b; Saccone et al., 2024; among others). However, in our study, we have observed the notable scarcity of women in the descriptions in

documents from the early post-European contact period (Saccone, 2022). This scarcity is linked both to the perception of navigation as a male sphere and to the fact that the chroniclers of these accounts were, with very few exceptions, predominantly male.

To uncover the roles women played in these contexts, it is crucial to apply a "purple lens" (Villarmarzo et al., 2021)—a perspective that allows us to see beyond the male-dominated narratives and reveal the contributions of women (Escoriza-Mateu et al., 2015; Montón Subías, 2014; Sanchéz-Romero, 2022) and problematize the causes of these biases (Hernando, 2015). In this paper we present the results of this search for women paddling, rowing, poling, fighting, living and dying, and owning their watercraft in native South America. We had to challenge our own biases to uncover the traces left by women on watercraft and understand the significant role navigation played in the lives of women in certain indigenous societies.

Maritime archaeology, as defined by Adams (2002:368) in the *Encyclopedia of Historical Archaeology*, is the study of material remains related to human activities in seas, interconnected waterways, and adjacent areas. Adams (2001, 2002) emphasizes that its relevance lies in its holistic scope: it integrates cultural and environmental aspects, metaphysical and material dimensions, as well as symbolic and functional perspectives. This breadth makes maritime archaeology particularly apt for exploring not only technologies of waterborne transport, but also the social and economic practices tied to trade, exchange, maritime industries, navigation, domestic maintenance activities, and the occupation of coastal and riverine landscapes.

Yet, like archaeology more broadly, maritime archaeology has often reproduced gendered assumptions. As Conkey and Gero (1991) noted in their foundational critique, archaeological narratives have long privileged men’s activities while marginalizing or silencing those of women. Wylie (1997) further systematized these critiques by distinguishing between two complementary approaches to feminist archaeology: one analytical, focused on how women’s roles in the past are interpreted, represented, or invisibilized (Vermeer, 2009; Chalcatana et al., 2024; Ribeiro and Passos, 2020; among others); the other structural, concerned with inequities within the discipline itself, such as unequal access to funding, institutional support, and professional advancement (Belleli et al., 1993; Santana Quispe, 2019; Prieto, 2025; Saccone et al., 2025; among others).

Although we, as women scholars, are acutely aware of this second dimension, the present paper is framed within the first. Our aim is to highlight women’s roles in maritime and aquatic contexts, spaces that have traditionally been construed as overwhelmingly masculine. This bias is evident both in historical representations of navigation and seafaring, and in archaeological practice, where

women’s participation in aquatic labor, mobility, and knowledge systems has too often been overlooked.

Placing maritime archaeology into dialogue with feminist and gender archaeology therefore opens a productive space for rethinking aquatic environments as gendered landscapes. As Gilchrist (1999) and Sørensen (2000) have argued, gender-aware approaches do not simply add women into existing narratives but critically reshape our understanding of past societies by questioning the categories, assumptions, and silences on which those narratives are built. In this sense, recognizing women’s active participation in waterborne transportation, riverine and coastal settlement, and maritime technologies allows us to view them as central actors in the cultural and technological histories of Native South America.

2. Materials and methods. Sources, scope, and analytical framework

2.1. Conceptual framework

Our approach is rooted in feminist and decolonial archaeologies, which advocate for the visibility of historically silenced subjects and the questioning of androcentric and colonial assumptions in the production of knowledge (Conkey and Spector, 1984; Scott, 1986; Joyce, 2008; Lugones, 2008; Segato, 2014; Espinosa, 2016; Ribeiro, 2017; Alberti, 2022). We understand interpretation as a situated and reflexive practice: our perspectives are shaped by our experiences as Uruguayan archaeologists trained within institutions whose traditions of origin are marked by colonial legacies. One of the authors identifies with Indigenous ancestry, while the others engage from different positionalities within the same local academic field. Recognizing these locations allows us to identify and challenge inherited assumptions about gender, technology, and maritime life, and to build interpretations grounded in regional knowledge traditions.

Given the heterogeneity of the available evidence, we applied a set of criteria to determine inclusion in our corpus. Sources were selected based on their explicit or implicit reference to women’s interaction with watercraft or aquatic environments, their geographic and cultural relevance, and their level of contextual detail.

We acknowledge that most early records were produced by European men and thus reflect their own perceptions and biases.To mitigate these asymmetries, we cross-checked written accounts with archaeological and ethnographic data and incorporated regionally produced sources. This triangulation helps balance interpretive perspectives and minimizes the risk of reproducing colonial stereotypes.

2.2. Research design: Aim, Attention, and Assessment

As female archaeologists committed to uncovering the lives of women in the past, we have developed a methodological approach centered around three steps: Aim, Attention, and Assessment. These guiding concepts allow us to move beyond traditional narratives and biases embedded in both the documentary and archaeological record. Our *Aim* is explicit and intentional—we seek to identify and understand the presence, roles, and agency of Indigenous women in aquatic environments, particularly in relation to watercraft. This requires us to question not only what is present in the sources, but also what is absent, and why. We begin by identifying patterns in archival documents, early colonial narratives, iconography, and archaeological contexts that might allude to women's involvement in navigation and the use of watercraft.

The second step, *Attention,* involves a detailed and critical reading of the data. When women appear in the historical or archaeological record, their presence is often marginal, incidental, or framed through a male perspective. Therefore, we pay close attention to how gendered behaviors are described: who is speaking, what terms are used, what activities are associated with women, and in what contexts. We also examine silences and gaps in the record, interpreting them not as evidence of absence, but as reflections of the social and epistemological frameworks that have shaped historical and archaeological knowledge. Through this attentive reading, we aim to expose the ways in which gender roles have been naturalized and embedded in the interpretation of material culture, particularly in fields like maritime archaeology that have long been seen as male-dominated (Ransey, 2005; Amarante, 2021; among others).

Finally, we move to *Assessment,* where we analyze and evaluate the data in relation to both the broader cultural context and our own interpretive frameworks. This step requires self-reflection and an acknowledgment of the biases we bring to our work as researchers trained within Western academic traditions. By critically assessing the sources through a gender-conscious lens—what we refer to as a *purple lens* (Villarmarzo et al., 2021)—we attempt to reconstruct alternative narratives in which women are recognized as navigators, builders, and users of watercraft. This reassessment allows us to reposition Indigenous women not as peripheral figures, but as active participants in aquatic lifeways, with their own forms of agency, knowledge, and mobility. Through this methodological approach, we seek not only to illuminate overlooked aspects of the past, but also to contribute to a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of Indigenous maritime histories.

2.3. Diversity of data origin

To carry out this research, we compiled and analyzed a diverse corpus of sources ranging from the 16th century to the present, encompassing documents, images, and scholarship related to Indigenous peoples of South America. These include early colonial records, missionary reports, and administrative documents, as well as ethnographic accounts from the late 19th and 20th centuries.

In addition, we drew upon archaeological literature that discusses watercraft in past contexts and bring forward the representations of watercraft and women. We included data from prehistoric burials in *wampos* (dugout canoes) as well as decorative motifs in ceramic vessels.

Lastly, we included recent ethnographic observations and visual documentation that depict Indigenous women and children engaged in waterborne activities such as paddling, poling, or managing watercraft. These data were mostly provided by researchers and photographers from the region.

This multi-temporal and multi-source approach allows us to trace continuities and transformations across time in the representation and presence of Indigenous women in aquatic spaces.

2.4. Data analysis

To organize and systematically analyze this data, we developed a database to record all instances where women and girls are mentioned, represented, or inferred in relation to watercraft or navigation. Each entry includes the following fields: geographic location, Indigenous group, type of source (archival, ethnographic, archaeological, visual), time frame, original text or visual description, activity, reference or citation, and, where applicable, images. This structured format enables us to cross-reference information and identify patterns in the documentation of women's involvement in aquatic practices.

Each entry was qualitatively coded according to themes such as type of activity, context (subsistence, ritual, domestic, mobility), and degree of agency implied. Data extraction and interpretation were discussed collectively among the authors to ensure consistency and minimize individual bias. Using the "geographic location" and "Indigenous group" fields, we created a regional map in QGIS to visualize instances where Indigenous women appear as navigators, owners, paddlers or passengers of watercraft. This spatial representation helps to highlight the geographic distribution of data recovered from different sources.

By analyzing entries in the "description" and "activity" fields, we were able to identify specific types of watercraft associated with women, as well as the nature of their participation—whether transporting goods, fishing, ferrying others, or engaging in ceremonial practices. These patterns form the basis for our interpretive analysis, allowing us to reassess dominant narratives and foreground

Indigenous women's aquatic agency across time and space. We are aware of the ethical implications of interpreting Indigenous women’s past and present practices through external academic frameworks. Our goal is to highlight their agency and knowledge systems without appropriating or homogenizing diverse cultural experiences.

3. Results: Women, Watercraft, and Gendered Practices: Historical, Archaeological, and Ethnographic Evidence

This section integrates multiple strands of evidence to examine the relationships between Indigenous women and watercraft in South America. Written and graphic historical documents (3.1) provide early European depictions of women’s active participation in paddling and navigation. Ethnohistorical sources on groups such as the Guató of the Pantanal and the Yagan and Kawesqar of Tierra del Fuego (3.2) show how women’s skills and responsibilities on the water were central to everyday life. Archaeological contexts (3.3) further extend this perspective, revealing that associations between women and watercraft persisted beyond life itself, inscribed in funerary and sacred practices and material remains. Finally, recent ethnographic records (3.4) demonstrate the continuity and transformation of these practices, emphasizing their lasting cultural significance.

Each place or group discussed in this section is identified by a number (1–19), corresponding to its location on the map shown in Figure 1, which helps visualize the geographic distribution of the evidence presented. Together, these lines of inquiry allow us to reassess the gendered dimensions of aquatic traditions, positioning women not at the margins but at the heart of South American fluvial, lacustrine, and maritime lifeways.

Figure 1. Map showing the location of 19 references to women and watercraft in South America, produced by the authors in QGIS.

3.1. Native women in watercraft through written and graphic historical documents

In this first section of the results, early documents produced in the centuries following the arrival of Europeans to South America provide valuable insights into the presence of women and their involvement with watercraft. These historical sources, although fragmentary and often filtered through colonial perspectives, contain scattered yet revealing observations about navigation, riverine mobility, and domestic life linked to aquatic environments. In some cases, specific Indigenous groups are identified, while in others, only regional descriptions allow us to infer who they might have been based on the geographical context mentioned in the document. Together, these accounts offer an initial framework for tracing how women and watercraft appeared in the written record of the early colonial period.

3.1.1. Tupin Ikin of the Atlantic Coast of Brazil (present day Sao Paulo) (1)

The Tupin Ikin formed part of the extensive network of Tupinambá peoples—Tupí-speaking groups who inhabited the Brazilian coast from Ceará to Porto Alegre (Finlayson, 2022). Despite their shared linguistic and cultural heritage, these communities were frequently divided by rivalries and cycles of warfare. The Tupinambá used bows and arrows for hunting, fishing, and combat, both on land and from canoes that allowed them to fight across waterways (Neubauer and Kim, 2021).

Within this broader network, the Tupiniquim occupied territories in what is now São Paulo and Paraná, maintaining a continuous presence for more than two millennia (Noelli et al., 2023). Recent research highlights the active roles of Tupiniquim women—long marginalized by colonial and academic narratives centered on masculine domains—as producers, healers, and potentially as political or warrior figures (Noelli et al., 2023).

Within this context, an account by the German traveler Hans Staden offers a rare glimpse of women's involvement in canoe use and warfare. During his captivity among the Tupinambá in the 1550s, Staden described a battle in which a Tupin Ikin woman took part as a crew member in a war canoe along the coast of present-day São Paulo (Staden, 1900 [1557]:97). Although he provides no further detail, this brief mention challenges prevailing assumptions about gendered divisions of activity and stands as one of the few historical records acknowledging women's involvement in war and navigation among the coastal Tupinambá peoples.

3.1.2. Indigenous groups of the Paraguay River (2)

In his *Comentarios* (1555), Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca offered one of the earliest descriptions of Indigenous life along the Paraguay River during the seasonal floods. He observed that when the rising waters covered the riverbanks, local inhabitants prepared large canoes in advance, loading them with several layers of clay to build a hearth in the center. Entire families—men, women, and children—would then live aboard these canoes for up to four months, cooking on the canoe hearths as they moved with the floodwaters. During this period, they disembarked only on small patches of dry land that remained above water to hunt deer, tapirs, and other animals displaced by the inundation. When the waters began to recede, they returned in the same way, fishing and hunting until the banks reappeared, where their houses stood (Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, 1902:86 [1555]).

This account vividly illustrates an adaptive way of life intimately tied to the seasonal rhythms of the river, where canoe-based mobility, aquatic dwelling, and subsistence were deeply integrated into the social and domestic sphere. Although Cabeza de Vaca does not clearly specify which Indigenous groups practiced this form of canoe living during the floods, it may have referred to the Guató, who will be discussed later in this paper.

3.1.3. Matares from Chaco region (3)

In *Pedro Hernández* memoires ([1545]:204), the Mataraes are described as providing eight canoes and about eighty individuals—men, women, and children—to accompany and supply the expedition. This brief mention, though framed from a colonial perspective, is significant: it indicates that waterborne mobility among the Mataraes was a collective endeavor that involved entire families, not just male warriors or navigators. The reference to women and children participating in canoe travel suggests that the use of watercraft extended beyond logistical or military purposes, forming part of broader social and subsistence practices that integrated all members of the community.

3.1.4. Guaraní canoes down the Paraná river (4)

The Guaraní occupied and actively navigated the interconnected river systems of the Paraná and Paraguay, where their settlements formed an almost continuous chain along the banks and islands (Noelli, 1996). These waterways were not merely routes of communication or subsistence but central spaces of mobility, exchange, and cultural reproduction. Their expansion, rather than a single migratory movement, was shaped by demographic pressures, agricultural practices, and religious

motivations such as the search for *yvy marä'ëy*, the "Land Without Evil" (Ertle-Wahlen, 1969–1972; Susnik, 1975).

Canoes enabled constant travel between communities, the transport of goods, and the organization of warfare, practices deeply intertwined with their ideological and ritual life. The circulation along the rivers thus materialized a worldview in which travel, war, and belief were inseparable. Early colonial testimonies, such as *La Argentina y conquista del Río de la Plata*, an epic poem written by the Spanish archdeacon Martín del Barco Centenera and published in 1602, provide vivid depictions of these riverine landscapes and their inhabitants. Divided into twenty-eight cantos composed in royal octaves, the poem combines erudite and popular elements and holds significant historical value for the insights it offers into the social realities of the region. In one passage, Barco Centenera recounts the sighting of two women paddling down the Paraná with a chief, a fleeting yet evocative image that attests to the vitality and inclusiveness of Guaraní fluvial mobility.

3.1.5. "Pelota" swimmers from Santiago del Estero (5)

Friederici (1907:26) describes the use of leather boats, including the so-called *pelotas*, whose distribution he limits to Uruguay, Rio Grande do Sul, Mato Grosso, and the Llanos de Moxos region. These vessels, made of stretched hides, were propelled from the outside either by horses or by Indigenous swimmers who pulled them using a rope held between their teeth. In this context, he also notes that *gaucho* women from Santiago del Estero were known for their skill and agility as *pelota* swimmers, enjoying a distinctive advantage in navigating these craft. This brief remark, though secondary in Friederici's account, highlights both the gendered dimension of local practices in the use of these watercraft and the presence of women as active participants in traditional aquatic mobility.

3.1.6. The Payaguá of the Paraguay River (6)

The Payaguá people were described in early accounts and through çout a few centuries as corsairs of the river, ferocious warriors that always attacked from their canoes (Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, 1902 [1555]) and that the Guaraní from the Jesuit Missions had to repress their fury against them (Nussdorfer, 1954 [1735]).

But in more recent ethnographic work, Susnik (1976) describes the canoes of the Payaguá people of Paraguay as an element of their daily life, used in every scenario, for subsistence (fishing, hunting, and later on selling canoes to Europeans), and for war, where they stood out as the pirates of the river. Canoes were also a symbol for the Payaguá family, practically dwelling on them, and in case of separation, the women and children kept the canoe to guarantee their subsistence (Susnik, 1976).

3.2. Living on the water: *outstanding cases*

In this second section, we present three cases that we have recognized as outstanding cases for their characteristics as well as for their continuity: the Guató from Pantanal and the Yagan and Kawesqar women paddlers from Tierra del Fuego.

3.2.1. Guató women of Pantanal (7)

The Pantanal region has been inhabited since at least 5000 years by a mosaic of Indigenous peoples, which explains its current linguistic and sociocultural diversity (Herberts, 1998; Eremites de Oliveira, 1996, 2002). Among these peoples are the Guató, who occupy a vast area of the Pantanal extending from the southwest of present-day Mato Grosso to the state of Mato Grosso do Sul and into Bolivia. Their presence has been documented since the sixteenth century by travelers and chroniclers (Moure, 1862; Schmidt, 1942).

The Pantanal forms part of the Upper Paraguay River basin and is recognized as the largest floodplain in the world, characterized by a highly complex hydrological regime with annual cycles of flooding and drought. During the sixteenth century, the Guató began to be described as “canoe Indians” (Eremites de Oliveira, 2018; Eremites de Oliveira and Milheira, 2020). For this people, water is a central element, and the single-log canoe defines much of their way of life (Eremites de Oliveira and Milheira, 2020). Today, there are three Guató communities: one in Mato Grosso do Sul (the village of Uberaba on Ínsua Island) and two in Mato Grosso, in the municipalities of Barão de Melgaço and Poconé (see https://pib.socioambiental.org/en/Povo:Guat%C3%B3).

Moure (1862) had already noted that the Guató differed from the other Indigenous groups of the region in one essential aspect: they live constantly on the water and even spend both day and night in their canoes. The boats are crafted with uncommon perfection, making them elegant and lightweight. Since polygamy exists among them, each woman has her own canoe to manage, they were in charge

of paddling sitting in the stern of the canoe (Eremites de Oliveira, 1996: 135-136). Moreover, the Guató multiplied their canoes according to the number of family members, so it is not unusual to see a Guató man followed by five, six, or even ten canoes carrying his entire family (Moure. 1862: 38–39). Figure 2 shows a 19th century watercolor by Hercule Florence where the Guató family is depicted on their canoe, with their dog, and the woman clearly seen, in charge of the vessel sitting in the stern.

Today, they are the last surviving canoe people among the many Indigenous nations that once inhabited the lowlands of the Pantanal.

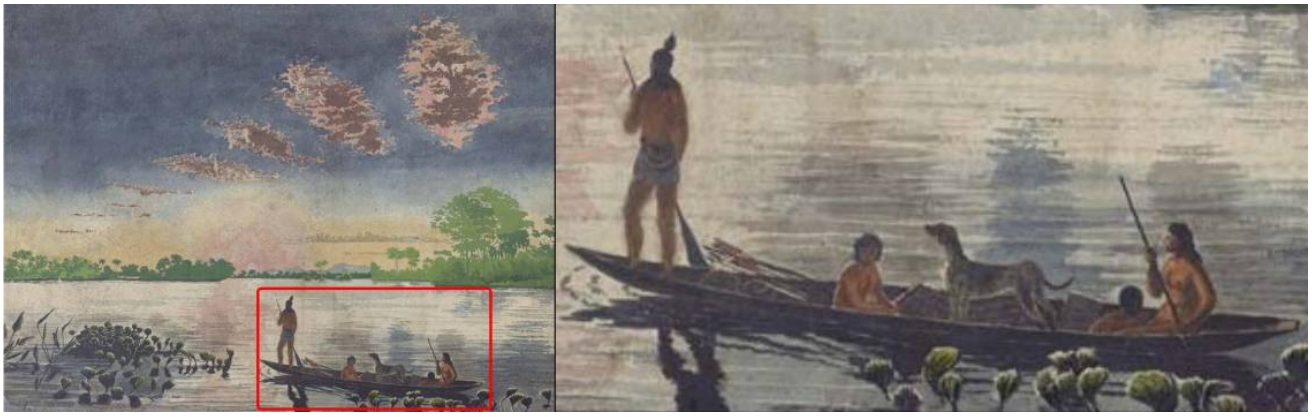

Figure 2. Art by Hercule Florence ca. 1835, A) Guató family in their canoe. B) detail of canoe. Source: Hercule Florence, ca. 1835. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Untitled_(canoa_de_Guat%C3%B2s,_ao_por-do-sol)_by_Hercule_Florence.jpg

3.2.2. Yagan women of Tierra del Fuego (8)

The Yagan people traditionally inhabited the southernmost islands and channels of Tierra del Fuego and the Beagle Channel. Their life was deeply tied to the sea, moving constantly between coasts and islands in canoes that served as transport, workspace, and home (Vairo, 1995). According to Aguilera (2023), Yagan watercraft comprised dugout canoes, bark canoes, hide boats, rafts, and *dalkas* (sewn-plank boats). The distribution of people on board followed a consistent pattern: one or two women sat at the stern, with the elder woman steering; the middle section held the central fire, the cargo, and the children; and the men, usually one or two, occupied the bow, responsible for observing conditions and hunting (Aguilera, 2023:376). Propulsion was mainly by paddles—short *pagayas* or longer composite oars pivoting on oarlocks—and, when the wind was favorable, by simple sails (Aguilera, 2023).

Ethnographic records highlight that Yagan women were skilled navigators and divers, playing an indispensable role in family mobility and subsistence (Figure 3 A & B) . As Bridges (2000) explains, they managed the canoes, which were the most valued possession of the household. Although men built them, the canoe was considered to belong to the woman and the family: she maintained it, loaded it, and steered it through channels and bays. Gusinde (1986) described women's exceptional dexterity, noting that they paddled smoothly and could keep direction precisely even in wind or swell. Women were also responsible for unloading and securing the canoe at landfall and for preserving it from damage. While men hunted sea lions, guanacos, or birds, women fished, collected shellfish, and often dove to obtain food, activities that required strength, endurance, and intimate knowledge of the maritime landscape.

This gender complementarity characterized Yagan society. L. Bridges (2000) emphasized that work was shared rather than hierarchical: men made the canoe and hunted, while women paddled, swam, cooked, and gathered water and firewood. Remarkably, "all women knew how to swim while it was rare to find a man who could do so" (Friederici, 1907:7). In the canoe's center, the family fire burned continuously, tended by children who learned navigation from their mothers. The Yagan's daily existence unfolded between water and shore, and the woman's role at the stern—steering the canoe, diving, and maintaining the fire—symbolized her central place in the social and ecological fabric of this maritime culture (Cárdenas, et al. 2011; Aguilera, 2023).

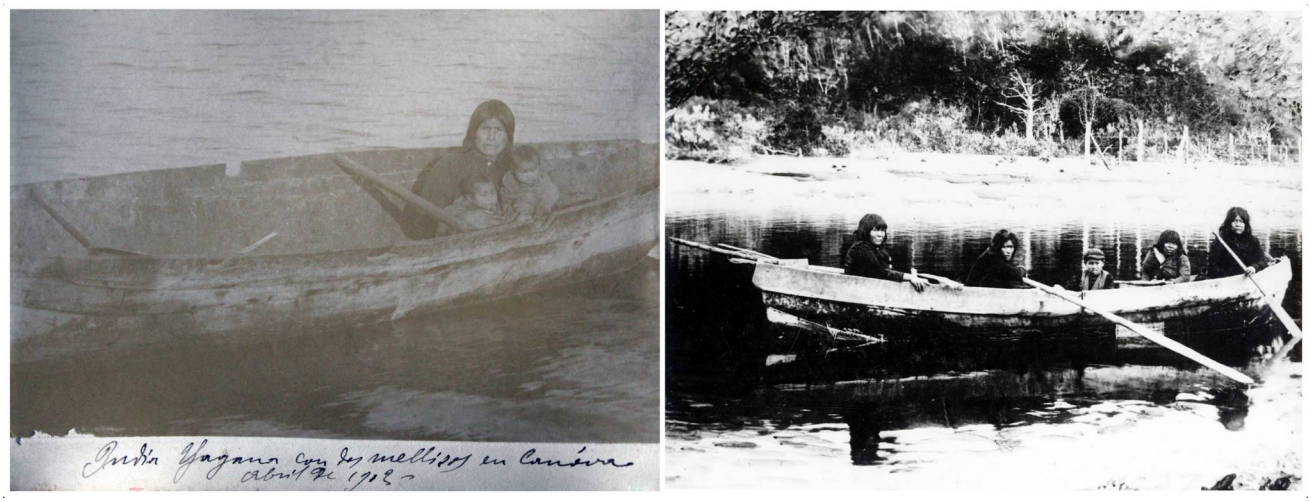

Figure 3. The Yagan and their canoes. A) Yagan women with her twin children, April 1902, unknown author (Credits: Album 16 - Archive of Museo Maggiorino Borgatello, Punta Arenas, Chile, reproduced with permission. B) Four women and a child rowing a canoe. FC00935 – No date, author or place. On the back it reads "en los canales de la Terre de Feu" - Archive of Museo Maggiorino Borgatello, Punta Arenas, Chile, reproduced with permission).

3.2.3. Kawésqar women divers and paddlers (9)

The Kawésqar inhabited the western Patagonian channels from the Gulf of Penas to the Strait of Magellan. Like the Yagan, they lived in a maritime environment where navigation was essential to mobility, hunting, and gathering. Their canoes included dugout, hide, and sewn-plank types (*dalkas*), built mainly from coihue (*Nothofagus dombeyi*), fastened with vegetal fibers and sealed with moss (Emperaire, 2002). A *dalka* could carry up to ten people. The internal organization of crew and cargo mirrored that of other southern groups: women sat at the stern to steer, men at the bow hunted or watched ahead, and children tended the central hearth. The Kawésqar also used short paddles and, when favorable winds allowed, raised a simple mast with a seal-skin sail (Emperaire, 2002).

Women's participation in navigation and subsistence was fundamental (Figure 4 A & B). They were known for their resistance to cold and their diving ability, descending into icy waters to collect shellfish and other marine resources while children kept the fire alive aboard (Emperaire, 2002:78–79, 91–92). Carabias (2018) notes that even after technological changes, traditional practices such as carrying embers and maintaining a hearth on board remained central to Kawésqar life. Historical records, including Coppinger's 19th-century expedition, describe elderly women acting as helmswomen, steering from the stern while younger women paddled or fished (Emperaire, 2002:120). This pattern reflects both gendered cooperation and the critical maritime knowledge held by women.

Visual and written evidence alike depict Kawésqar women as expert paddlers and divers. Engravings from Beauchesne's voyage (1698–1701) show women rowing and diving simultaneously to collect seafood, illustrating the intertwined roles of navigation, gathering, and childcare aboard the canoe (Figure 5) (Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes, Manuscrit 223). In cold weather, women carried burning embers in the canoe to warm themselves after immersion and to rekindle the fire ashore (Emperaire, 2002:91–92). These practices underscore the centrality of women's labor and expertise in maintaining Kawésqar mobility and survival. Their endurance, skill, and adaptability allowed these seafaring people to thrive across one of the harshest maritime landscapes in the world (Carabias, 2018).

Kawésqar women were renowned for their endurance and diving ability. Ethnographers noted that, even in freezing conditions, they plunged repeatedly to collect shellfish at depths reaching eight meters, while children guarded the fire and men prepared hunting gear (Emperaire, 2002:78–79, 91–92). These activities demonstrate women's crucial participation in maritime subsistence and navigation. Early accounts describe old women acting as helmswomen, steering the *dalka* from the

stern (Emperaire, 2002:120), while other women rowed or fished. Despite later technological changes, their skills and practices embodied the resilience and adaptability of seafaring people whose lives were inseparable from the waters of the Patagonian channels.

Figure 4. Kawesqar women paddlers. A- Kawesqar family, woman paddling in detail -(Credit: Album 16, March 1902. Archive of Museo Maggiorino Borgatello, Punta Arenas, Chile, reproduced with permission). B) Kawesqar women and children in a canoe (Credit: DB666 – Photograph by Alberto de Agostini, 1929, Bahía Edén, Western canals of Patagonia.- Archive of Museo Maggiorino Borgatello, Punta Arenas, Chile, reproduced with permission).

Figure 5. Engraving depicting Kawesqar women seen in watercraft as well as diving to collect seafood. (Credit: Service Historique de la Défense, Vincennes (Francia). Manuscrit 223. Relation journalière d'un voyage fait en 1698, 1699, 1700 y 1701, par Monsieur de Beauchesne, capitán de navío, aux îles du Cap Vert, coste du Brésil, coste deserte de l'Amerique meridionale, Destroit de Magellan, costes du Chily et du Perou, aux isles Galapes, Destroit du Maire, isles de Sibald devard, isles les Essorts, fait par le Sieur Duplessis, ingénieur sur le vaisseau le Comte de Maurepas.)

3.3. Women, Watercraft, and the Sacred: Archaeological Perspectives on Death and Divinity

This third section examines archaeological evidence that links women, watercraft, and the sacred in different regions of pre-Columbian South America. In southern Argentina, the burial of a Mapuche woman within a *wampo* (dugout canoe) suggests a symbolic voyage across the waters of death. On the northern coast of Peru, Moche imagery portrays a priestess riding a *caballito de totora*, while ceramic representations of the Moon Goddess emphasize her role as a female deity who governs fertility, fishing, and navigation through her control of the tides. These materials reveal how boats and navigation were not only practical technologies but also potent metaphors for transition, fertility, and divine connection. Together, these cases illuminate how archaeological contexts encode cosmological ideas in which femininity, water, and passage between worlds are deeply intertwined.

3.3.1. Mapuche way of life, lake Lácar basin, Argentina (10)

The Mapuche have been living in what is now part of Argentina and Chile.Historically, until the arrival of Europeans, this native people inhabited both sides of the Andes in Patagonia. In Mapudungun, “Mapuche” means “people of the land,” although they were known as Araucanians, a name given by the Spaniards to the people of this nation.

These peoples have a political organization with chiefs called *longkos* and war leaders known as *toki*. The *ngenpin* are spiritual guides responsible for transmitting ancestral words and knowledge. The *machi* (or male *machi* dressed in traditionally female garments) are in charge of performing sacred rituals and possess healing powers. The use of medicinal plants is common among Mapuche women, although only some become *machi* through a spiritual calling received in dreams or visions (*Ngenechén*) (Montecino, 1995).

Mapuche funerary contexts include burials in canoes, identified both by the position of the bodies and by the negative impressions and remains of wood. In the case of women, these burials were sometimes intentionally differentiated (Inostroza, 1985), and in some instances, the bodies were covered with hollowed-out logs (Robles Rodríguez, 1910). Ricardo Latcham (1915:59) notes that the “Araucanians” used the same word for both canoe and coffin. Their oldest coffins were the rough canoes made from a hollowed-out log, the same type they used to cross rivers. This custom did not arise from a need to protect the corpse but from the idea of burying the deceased together with the objects they had used in life. Gradually, the practice became more widespread, and when the deceased did not own a canoe, relatives would make one to contain the remains—perhaps with the belief that it would serve to cross the ocean to the land of the dead (Latcham, 1915: 59).

A few years ago, a team of researchers presented the case of the Mapuche woman burial in a canoe (Pérez et al., 2022) dated to 880 years BP. Pérez et al.(2022) argue that the coffin structure is deliberately modeled on a *wampo* (or is a symbolic representation), reflecting Mapuche cosmological beliefs about death as a voyage across water to the realm of the dead (Nomelafken or “the other side”).

Figure 6. Recreation of Mapuche burial in wampo (Source: Pérez et al. 2022)

3.3.2. Moche's ceramic vessels and beliefs (11)

The Moche society was a theocratic and militaristic state that developed between 200 and 800 CE (Tantaleán, 2021). It emerged in the coastal valley of the same name, in the La Libertad Region, along the northern Pacific coast of present-day Peru, and expanded to the valleys of Piura (to the north) and Huarmey (to the south) at the height of its influence (Santillana, 2010; Tantaleán, 2021).

The geography of the Moche territory was characterized by its desert oceanic coast, fertile coastal valleys, reed wetlands, and the guano islands off the shore, all of which held an important role not only economically but also religiously (Tantaleán, 2021). Moche society developed intensive agriculture supported by a complex hydraulic system, along with highly specialized craftsmanship in textiles, ceramics, lapidary work, precious metals working, masonry, and mural painting, among others (Santillana, 2010; Tantaleán, 2021). The sea occupied a central place in the economy, both for obtaining food resources and for maritime trade, as evidenced by the presence of *Spondylus* and *Strombus* shells—ritually significant objects obtained from the warm waters of the Ecuadorian coast (Santillana, 2010).

At the political level, Moche elites deployed various strategies of domination and social control (Tantaleán, 2021). The rulers simultaneously concentrated political and religious authority, as evidenced by monumental constructions, tombs with rich funerary offerings, and complex ceremonial iconography (Tantaleán. 2021). The religious discourse that legitimized their power revolved around supernatural beings who demanded human sacrifices as part of worship rituals (Tantaleán, 2021).

Priestess on a reed raft

In Moche iconography, it is common to find representations of women engaged in both ritual and domestic activities (Castillo and Holmquist, 2000). These depictions have been classified by Castillo and Holmquist (2000) into three distinct categories: natural women, women with supernatural traits, and skeletal women. Focusing on the second category, there are representations of a Moche deity in scenes depicting the maritime transport of prisoners on large reed rafts, either toward the guano islands, where the captives were sacrificed, or back to the coast (Castillo and Holmquist, 2000), as shown in Figure 7A.

This supernatural woman is known as the Moon goddess, a deity of female fertility who, through the association between the menstrual and lunar cycles, both lasting 28 days, and the latter with the change in the tides, controls the seas and protects fishing and navigation (Larco Museum, 2021). Archaeologist Rebeca Carrión (2005) argues that the Moon goddess was considered a deity capable of controlling the El Niño phenomenon and water shortages on the Pacific coast. In this sense, she interprets that what is brought back on the rafts are jugs of fertilizing water and guano for the crops (Carrión Cachot, 2005). A different interpretation is that of Castillo and Holmquist (2000), who argue that these types of representations could be showing the transport of the blood of people sacrificed on the islands during the return to the coast.

The goddess Luna, as can be seen in Figure 7 B, is depicted with long braids and feminine tunics, and, in several scenes, holding bundles of wood as if they were scepters, aspects from which archaeology has also associated her with feminine textile art (Larco Museum, 2021). Her body ornaments also highlight her position of power (Museo Larco, 2021).

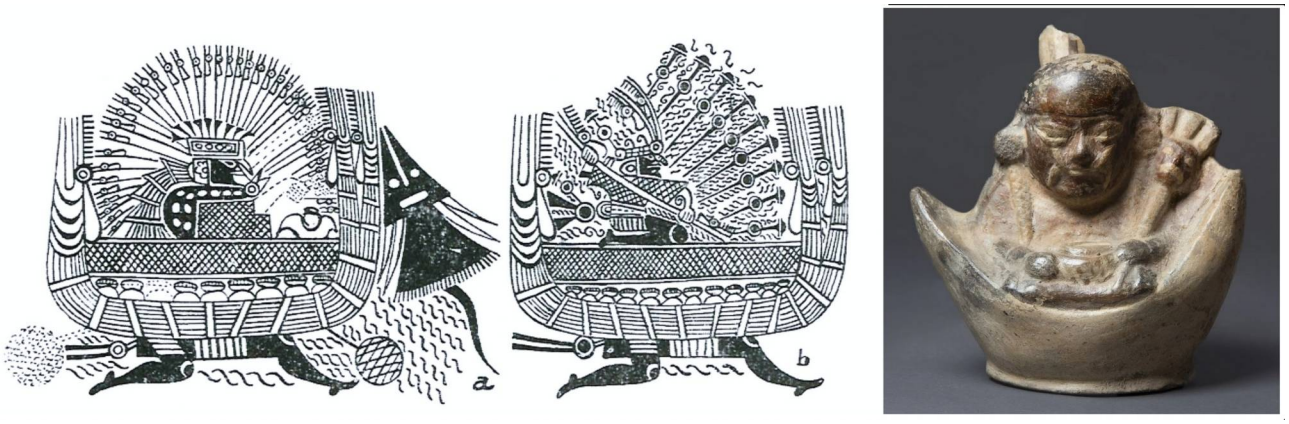

Figure 7. Representations of the Moche priestess and the Goddess of the Moon and Navigation. A: Pictorial depiction of the goddess sailing and carrying water jars. Source: Carrión (2005, p. 81). B: Sculptural bottle depicting the goddess sailing on a crescent moon. Source: Museo Larco – Lima, Peru.

In the pottery found in San José de Moro (a site located in the Jequetepeque Valley), corresponding to the Late Mochica style (550 to 750 AD), representations of women with supernatural features, and in particular sailing on rafts, appear frequently and increasingly limited to the sole representation of women on this means of transport, which is associated, in turn, with an increase in this period in the burials of women wearing costumes similar to those depicted in elite tombs (Castillo and Holmquist, 2000). This has been considered an indicator of the political and religious power that these priestesses had within Moche society and their leading role in rituals and human sacrifices (Castillo and Holmquist, 2000). In one of these tombs, a bottle was found painted with the representation of a priestess on a totora raft (Castillo, 2007).

3.4. Women and girls in watercraft: recent ethnographic records

This fourth and last section examines eight recent cases that document women's engagement with watercraft across diverse regions of Brazil, Colombia, and Guyana. Emerging ethnographic evidence demonstrates both the continuity and transformation of traditional navigation practices, highlighting their persistent cultural significance within local livelihoods and identities. Collectively, these accounts prompt a reconsideration of the gendered dimensions of aquatic traditions, positioning women as active participants within the fluvial, lacustrine, and maritime lifeworlds of South America.

3.4.1. The Warrau people from Imbotero Creek in Guayana (12)

Among the Warrau people of Imbotero Creek, in northwestern Guyana, canoe travel has traditionally been a fundamental aspect of daily life and socialization. From early childhood, individuals learn to navigate the flooded mangrove landscape: by the age of three or four, children already assist in paddling alongside older companions, and by six they can handle a canoe independently, often taking responsibility for younger siblings. Canoeing is not structured by age or gender—anyone, whether child, adult, or elder, may paddle or steer, and men and women alike share roles and positions within the vessel without hierarchy (Holtzman, 2024).

Figure 8. Warrau women and watercraft A: Woman sailing a dugout. B: Woman paddling a dugout canoe (credits: photographs by Robert Holtzman 2024, reproduced with permission)

As Holtzman later observes (2025), this long-standing mode of mobility is now undergoing rapid transformation. The introduction of motorboats and chainsaws has altered both the material and sensory dimensions of canoe life: traditional adze-hewn, square-bowed canoes are increasingly replaced by engine-adapted designs, reshaping not only how people move through the watery terrain but also their embodied and social relationship with it. Photographs taken by Holtzman during fieldwork seasons among the Warau (2022-2025) captured girls and women using watercraft, sometimes using a sail (Figure 8 A), sometimes paddling (Figure 8 B).

3.4.2 Uros Women in tula boats at lake Titicaca (13)

The Uros are an Indigenous people living on the waters of Lake Titicaca, which lies between Bolivia and Peru. They inhabit artificial floating islands constructed entirely from *totora* reeds, a plant that grows abundantly in the lake's shallows (Kent, 2006; Arnold, 2024). Their settlement pattern and lifestyle distinguish them from neighboring Quechua and Aymara communities, and they maintain a strong sense of identity through their claimed descent from the ancient Uros, a pre-Aymara population that once occupied a large part of the Titicaca basin (Kent, 2006). The Uros make use of *totora* in nearly every aspect of daily life: it serves as the raw material for the floating platforms of their islands, for their houses and roofs, and for the fishing rafts that traditionally allowed them to navigate and fish on the lake (Kent, 2006; Arnold, 2024). Families have customary rights over certain reed-cutting areas, ensuring access to materials. Men are usually responsible for harvesting and assembling the rafts, while women dry the reeds and make the ropes that bind the bundles together (Arnold, 2024). The photograph from the 1940s showing four Uro women on a reed raft with a reed sail exemplifies this close relationship between gendered labor and aquatic mobility (Figure 9A).

Over the past decades, however, profound changes have reshaped the production and use of reed rafts. By the 1960s, traditional *totora* boats were increasingly replaced by wooden ones, which proved more durable and capable of carrying heavier loads (Kent, 2006). This transition reflects broader processes identified by Villar et al. (2024), who describe the decline in *totora* use across the Altiplano as local economies became integrated into global markets and industrial materials such as plastic and concrete displaced plant-based technologies. As knowledge of reed working declined, the social institutions that once managed communal reed harvesting, such as the *ayllu*, also weakened. Today, while only a few older fishermen remember how to build traditional *totora* boats, reed rafts persist in a new role as symbols of cultural heritage and tourist attractions. Tourism on Lake Titicaca brings tens of thousands of visitors each year to the floating islands, offering short raft rides as part of organized tours (Kent, 2006). The recent photograph (Figure 9B) from 2024 of a Uro woman poling a reed raft carrying tourists captures this ongoing transformation, where ancestral skills in raft making and navigation are recontextualized within a modern, market-oriented economy that sustains the community in new ways.

Figure 9. A: Four women sailing in a lake reed raft with a reed sail (Smithonian Institution 1946). Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology, No restrictions, via Wikimedia Commons, source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bulletin_(1946)_(20239645128).jpg

3.4.3. In the Amazon river, Brazil (14)

In the Amazon River basin, a great diversity of Indigenous groups continues to inhabit the region, moving along its extensive network of waterways. Rivers are central to everyday life, serving as the main routes of communication, transport, and subsistence. Among riverside communities whose livelihoods depend largely on forest resource gathering, women rely on watercraft for their daily activities (Almeida et al., 2015). In the so-called “liquid territory” of the state of Amazonas, Brazil—where the forest remains flooded even during the dry season—rivers are also the primary means of access to healthcare. Different types of watercraft are used according to specific needs, adapting to the natural cycles of flooding and ebbing (Souza et al., 2024). As explained by José Basini (Laboratório Panamazônico, Universidade Federal do Amazonas, personal communication, 2023), practicality and necessity make waterborne mobility a shared skill: all members of riverine families, including children, are able to steer or paddle a canoe or other vessels.

In 2015, photographer Federika Odriozola documented several of these women’s movements along the Amazon during a research exchange between Montevideo (Uruguay) and Manaus (Brazil). Her images (Figure 10 A and B) capture both the use of traditional watercraft and the ordinariness of these everyday navigations.

Figure 10. River Amazon, near Manaus, A- a woman paddling her canoe with two children. B- A woman with her baby being transported in a motor boat (credits: photographs by Federika Odriozola, 2015, reproduced with permission).

3.4.4. Atlantic coast of Paraná State, Brazil (15)

Along the Atlantic coast of Brazil, traditional watercraft have long been central to the livelihoods and cultural identities of coastal populations. Historical accounts such as Alves Câmara's *Ensaio sobre as construcções navaes indigenas do Brasil* (1888) document the diversity of vessels once used along this extensive coastline. In the southern and southeastern regions—corresponding to the present-day states of Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Paraná, and Santa Catarina—the caiçara communities developed a maritime culture deeply tied to fishing and to the use of dugout canoes. These canoes, often fitted with added strakes and a distinctive type of keel known as the *patilha da proa*, were designed to withstand the ocean's surf when crossing the coastal bar. The caiçara way of life, shaped by the confluence of Indigenous, Portuguese, and African traditions, represents one of Brazil's most characteristic littoral cultures (Santos, 2011). The *caiçara* canoe remains not only a means of subsistence but also a powerful symbol of identity, embodying the material and symbolic dimensions of caiçara culture.

Figure 11. Caiçara canoes in the coast of Paranagua, Paraná state, Brazil, where two women can be seen on board (Source: personal archive of one of the authors, ca. 1985)

In the literature addressing caiçara fishing and canoe-building traditions, women have seldom been mentioned (Denadai et al., 2008). Field studies indicate that few women own canoes, and when they do, the vessels are often inherited from deceased husbands. Only a small number of women rely directly on their canoes for livelihood, usually fishing with their children or participating in community activities such as *pesca da lula* (squid fishing), which is traditionally carried out by families. While the gendered division of labor in caiçara communities remains pronounced, women rarely venture into the open sea and often express fear of it, they actively participate in collective moments such as hauling canoes ashore, a task involving the entire community. In recent years, some women have become involved in canoe restoration and regattas, expressing new forms of engagement with maritime heritage (Denadai et al., 2008). A photograph taken in Paranaguá, Paraná, in 1985, (Figure 11) depicting two women aboard a caiçara canoe during a family outing, offers a rare visual testimony of women's presence on these vessels along Brazil's southeastern coast.

3.4.5. The Karajá people (16)

Along the Araguaia River, between the states of Goiás, Tocantins, and Mato Grosso in Brazil, live several Karajá-speaking peoples of Jê linguistic origin (Karajá, Javaé, and Xambioá). In accordance with their riverside way of life, the Karajá have a mythology inspired by the aquatic world (Ferreira Lima and Camargo da Silva, 2012).

The information refers to Karajá society as matrilocal and predominantly matriarchal, in which women play a central role in the education of young people and in the transmission of culture (Costa, 1978). In this regard, in an interview with Saveriá Djorié, she states that women hold a strong presence in Karajá symbolism and mythology (Karajá, 1991).

Karajá women are particularly known for creating ceramic figures known as “Karajá dolls” (recognized as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Brazil by the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage – IPHAN) (Ferreira Lima and Camargo da Silva 2012). These figures depict scenes from daily life, as well as ritual and mythical themes and canoe navigation.

Although we know this photograph was taken making a pose for the photographer (Figure 12 A), both men and women went on canoes where men were in charge of fishing and women were paddling. The ceramic figure of the Karaja canoe represents three people, at least two of which are female, one of them appears to be pregnant (Figure 12 B).

Figure 12. Karaja and their watercraft. A) Photograph of Karajá couple, man with bow and arrow, woman holding a paddle in a canoe. B) Karajá ceramic figure representing a canoe with three people on board, in the center a pregnant woman (Credits: both belong to Demicheris collection of Museo Nacional de Antropología 1950/1960, B) photograph by Alejandro Ferrari 2025, reproduced with permission).

3.4.6 Women paddling canoes in the north of Colombia. (17)

In the northern region of Colombia, around the mouth of the Magdalena River and the Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta, traditional navigation remains deeply intertwined with the amphibious lifeways of local communities. The palafitic settlements of El Morro (also known as Nueva Venecia) and Buenavista exemplify this enduring relationship. As Nieva Sanz (2023a) documents, canoes, in particular Indigenous dugouts, continue to play a central role in everyday life, despite the gradual shift toward fiberglass boats. In these communities, nearly every aspect of daily activity depends on watercraft: fishing, the transport of goods and freshwater, wedding and funeral processions, garbage collection, school transport, and others. As one local resident put it, “without a canoe, one cannot live.” Women of all ages are commonly seen paddling or poling through the canals and lagoons within the village, highlighting their active presence in local navigation practices.

Nevertheless, gendered divisions of labor and status remain deeply embedded in the maritime culture of the Ciénaga region. Although women frequently navigate canoes within their communities, men typically retain ownership and command of the vessels and undertake fishing or travel beyond the village limits (Nieva Sanz, 2023a). Along the narrow strip of land separating the Ciénaga Grande from the Caribbean Sea, the possession and governance of canoes continue to be closely linked to masculine identity and social authority (Nieva Sanz, 2023b). Exceptions do exist and some women fishers or boat handlers who assume these roles following the illness or death of male relatives. But they remain exceptional cases that challenge prevailing gender norms. Visual documentation by Nieva Sanz (Figure 13: A and B) further illustrates these dynamics, capturing women and girls poling and paddling canoes across the Ciénaga del Pajaral, revealing both the persistence and transformation of women’s engagement with navigation in this fluvial-lacustrine landscape.

Figure 13. A- Three girls in a canoe. B- Woman poling standing in a canoe (Credits: photographs by Daniel Nieva Sanz, 2022, reproduced with permission).

3.4.7. Emberá people, Baudó River, Chocó, Colombia. (18)

The Emberá are an Indigenous people inhabiting the humid forests along the Baudó River basin in Colombia's Pacific region and the frontier with Panama (Alberda et al., 2024). Their social life is structured through networks of reciprocity and exchange that link households, neighbors, and extended territories. These exchanges encompass food sharing, cooperative work, and participation in rituals and festivities, extending also to trade with non-Indigenous groups and involving both material and spiritual dimensions (Pardo, 2020). Rivers occupy a central place in this network of relations, serving simultaneously as routes of mobility, sources of subsistence, and spaces of social and spiritual connection, shaping Emberá relations with the environment and with one another.

Emberá's principal means of travel along rivers is the dugout canoe (*shampa*), shaped from a single tree trunk with axes and adzes (Stipek, 1976). Designed for maneuvering through currents and rapids, these canoes are essential for fishing, transport, and communication between dispersed settlements. The 1970 photographs (Figure 14 A and B) record two scenes that reveal the close relationship between Emberá women and river navigation: one shows a woman paddling alone in her canoe, and the other a woman with her children pushing their dugout through a rocky stretch of the river. These images highlight both the technical skill and the embodied familiarity required to navigate the dynamic waters of the Baudó. Yet, as Alberda et al. (2024) note, the intergenerational transmission of

canoe-building knowledge has declined under environmental and social pressures, leading to the loss of traditional navigation practices. The images thus stand as rare witnesses of women's centrality in Emberá aquatic life.

Figure 14. A- Emberá woman pushing her canoe through an unnavigable area with her two children. B- Emberá woman poling her canoe at the stern (Credits: Moser, Brian 1970, Published online in 2024 by Biblioteca Virtual Banco República of Colombia, available at: A: https://cdm17054.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/iiif/p17054coll35/301/full/full/0/default.jpg, and B: https://cdm17054.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/iiif/p17054coll35/82/full/full/0/default.jpg)

3.4.8. Tukano, Apaporis River, (Vaupes/Amazonas limit, Colombia) 19.

The Tukano people inhabit the Northwestern Amazon, along the upper Rio Negro and the Uaupés River in Brazil and Colombia (Azevedo, 2022; Basini and Tavares, 2014). This region, marked by numerous rapids and waterfalls, shapes navigation and fishing practices and influences the distribution of Indigenous communities whose lives depend on the rivers due to the absence of roads (Basini and Tavares, 2014). The Uaupés basin hosts over fifteen Indigenous languages and more than 200 settlements, including Tukano- and Tariana-speaking peoples, often described as "river Indians," in contrast to the "forest Indians" such as the Maku (Basini and Tavares, 2014:23–24). In their cosmology, rivers and canoes are central: according to a creation myth, the ancestors of humanity were "Fish-People" (*Wa'î-Masa*) who reached the surface of the earth in a *cobra-canoe*, a sacred vessel of transformation (Ramirez and Fontes 2001; Basini and Tavares, 2014).

As “river indians” the Tukano move along the rivers in their canoes. In figure 15 A and B, Tukano women are shown navigating forest waterways in dugout canoes The images illustrate the centrality of rivers and canoe travel in everyday life, used for transport, fishing, and carrying goods.

Figure 15. A- Tukano woman traveling with child, dog and cargo in a dugout canoe. B- Tukano woman traveling by canoe with bananas and other objects.(Credits: Moser, Brian 1970, Published online in 2024 by Biblioteca Virtual Banco República of Colombia, available at: A: https://cdm17054.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/iiif/p17054coll35/1225/full/full/0/default.jpg B: https://cdm17054.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/iiif/p17054coll35/1224/full/full/0/default.jpg)

3.5. Data synthesis

To systematize all the data collected, every time women are mentioned in relation to navigation or watercraft an entry was included in a table, inserting the data in the following fields:

- N.º of reference linking to the map,
- geographic location/ /region/watercourse
- Indigenous group,
- type of source (archival doc, ethnographic, archaeological, visual, photograph),
- date or time frame,
- document title or type,
- original text or visual description,
- comments,
- activity or use,
- reference or citation, gender/nationality of authors.

For recent times, we also included the search of photographs depicting women in traditional watercraft and this data was also adapted to the table format [Table 1]

4. Discussion: women and watercraft

Some of the earliest studies of Indigenous navigation in the Americas, such as those by Alves Câmara (1888), Friederici (1907), and Wissler (1917), adopted primarily classificatory approaches focused on the typology and distribution of watercraft. Only recently has a renewed research impulse emerged in South America, positioning Indigenous navigation as a subject of archaeological, historical, and ethnographic investigation across various regions (Aguilera, 2023; Alberda and Ramos, 2024; Bonomo and Ramos, 2023; Delaere et al., 2025, Holtzman, 2024; Nieva Sanz, 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Saccone, 2022a, 2022b; Saccone et al. 2024; among others). Despite this growing body of scholarship, the intersection between women and watercraft remains largely unexplored.

This section addresses this gap by examining the ethnohistorical, archaeological, and ethnographic data presented on Indigenous women's involvement with watercraft and navigation. It considers the spatial distribution of available evidence, explores gendered roles on board, and identifies types of vessels associated with women. Moreover, it examines how social and disciplinary biases have contributed to the marginalization of women within maritime narratives, while acknowledging that their participation in navigation may have been expressed through roles and practices that are less visible archaeologically.

4.1. Environmental diversity: mapping indigenous women's use of watercraft

Using the information from the "geographic location" column, we produced a map showing places (Figure 1) where Indigenous women have been observed or described as paddlers, boat owners, or otherwise involved with watercraft. By analyzing the "description" column, we also identified the types of watercraft they used and the activities they performed. The resulting map includes nineteen locations across South America, encompassing a wide range of environments and Indigenous communities in which women and girls have been reported or recorded engaging in navigation or maintaining a strong relationship with watercraft.

Although the sources vary in nature (archaeological, ethnohistorical, ethnographic, and graphic) and refer to different time periods, we chose to display them together to illustrate the broad spatial and cultural distribution of these practices. Some references derive from written documents, others from photographs or unpublished materials. They are not contemporary, yet taken together they offer a panoramic view of the diverse contexts in which boats have been integral to women's and girls'

lives. These nineteen documented cases likely represent only a small fraction of the broader universe of women historically and culturally linked to navigation in South America.

The environments represented on the map range from the icy waters of the Tierra del Fuego archipelagos to the warm swamps of northern Colombia near the Caribbean, from the high-altitude lakes of Bolivia and Peru to the vast river networks of the Amazon Basin and the Atlantic coast of Brazil. This geographical variety highlights the adaptability and persistence of women's nautical practices across contrasting climates and ecological settings. The map (Figure 1) is therefore not intended as an exhaustive inventory but as a visual synthesis of diversity. Observing the distribution of these cases reveals that Indigenous women's participation in navigation was not exceptional or marginal, but widespread across the continent. If these presences have long remained overlooked, it is perhaps less due to a lack of evidence than to our previous lack of aim, attention, and assessment.

1.1.1 4.2. Diversity of Women's Roles on Board

The evidence surveyed demonstrates that Indigenous women in South America assumed a wide range of responsibilities in relation to watercraft, extending far beyond the passive or ancillary roles often attributed to them in archaeological and historical narratives.

One significant dimension concerns ownership and property rights. Among the Payaguá, for instance, the canoe was regarded as a form of family property. In cases of marital separation, it was the woman who retained the canoe, ensuring her ability to provide for and sustain her household independently (Susnik, 1976). This association between women and canoes as material resources highlights not only their practical knowledge of navigation, but also their central role in securing subsistence and social continuity.

Women were also documented in positions of authority on board. Ethnohistorical accounts describe a Kawésqar girl acting as helmsman—or more aptly, "helmsgirl"—steering a canoe as it approached a European vessel. Steering, a task requiring both skill and trust, highlights that female participation was not restricted to labor-intensive activities, but extended to positions of control and responsibility.

Propulsion tasks such as rowing, paddling, and poling were commonly associated with women across diverse contexts. In many cases, women were observed not only paddling but also engaging in auxiliary tasks such as swimming to recover or guide a canoe. These activities demonstrate women's familiarity with the full spectrum of basic navigation skills and their embodied engagement with aquatic environments. Women also took part in sailing, from Uros women navigating reed rafts with

sails to more recent examples of Warrau women sailing dugout canoes—demonstrating their technical skill and agency in aquatic mobility.

The relationship between women and watercraft also extended symbolically into the mortuary sphere. Archaeological contexts, such as Mapuche burials (Pérez et al., 2022), suggest that canoes functioned as metaphors for passage and transformation in death, reiterating the enduring connection between women and waterborne mobility. Other groups, such as the Payaguá also used canoes in funerary context (Susnik, 1976), although no specific evidence of women buried in canoes was located. Likewise, in the Moche worldview, the goddess Luna has also been depicted on ceramic vessels sailing on a totora raft, in one case accompanying the tomb of a priestess (Castillo, 2007; Castillo and Holmquist, 2005).

Finally, ethnographic records illustrate the persistence of gender inclusivity in canoe use into the present. For example, Holtzman (2024: 147) notes that in Imbotero Creek, Guyana, “men and women paddle with others of the same or opposite gender, and as with age, there is no gender-based priority of paddling role or position in the canoe.” This observation challenges assumptions of gendered exclusivity in paddling roles and underscores the flexibility and diversity of practices across different cultural settings.

Taken together, these examples reveal a spectrum of roles—from ownership and steering to paddling and symbolic associations in death—that complicate simplistic gender binaries and affirm women’s active participation in the maritime traditions of South America.

1.1.2 4.3. Types of Watercraft Associated with Women

The ethnographic, historical, and archaeological records indicate that women in South America were not limited to a single type of vessel, but instead were associated with a wide variety of watercraft across different cultural and environmental contexts. This breadth of evidence demonstrates that women’s participation was not confined to marginal or exceptional cases, but extended across nearly all known categories of Indigenous boats.

In the southernmost regions, for example, women were active users of bark canoes among the Yagan and Kawésqar. The latter were also associated with plank boats. Historical sources also document the so-called “pelota” swimmers—women who used these devices made of branches covered with hides to cross or maneuver in aquatic environments—further highlighting the diversity of technologies with which they were engaged. In the highlands, women were recorded in connection with the reed-built

boats or rafts of Lake Titicaca, vessels that were and are central to mobility and subsistence strategies in the Andean lacustrine landscape with propulsion by sail or by poling.

Elsewhere, women's association with dugout canoes was widespread. Among the Mapuche of southern Argentina and Chile, women's participation in canoe use is attested both in daily activities and in symbolic contexts. Similar patterns can be traced in the lowlands, where children and women frequently used dugouts along the Amazon, in the Pantanal, and along the Atlantic coast of southeastern Brazil women were seen in war canoes. These examples illustrate that dugout canoes, as one of the most enduring and geographically widespread forms of watercraft, were by no means exclusively linked to male activities.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that women were and are connected to all of the principal types of Indigenous South American watercraft. Whether bark, hide, reed, or dugout, these vessels formed part of women's daily practices, economic contributions, and symbolic worlds. Indeed, when considered alongside classic typologies of South American watercraft (Alves Câmara, 1888; Friederici, 1907; Wissler, 1917), women can be recognized as participants in, and in some cases custodians of, virtually every major category identified by early scholars. This challenges the persistence of androcentric assumptions in maritime archaeology, which have too often relegated women to the periphery of aquatic traditions.

4.4. The challenge of finding the earlier evidence

One of the major difficulties in reconstructing women's roles in early navigation lies in the absence of female chroniclers. Historical records were overwhelmingly produced by men for male audiences, meaning that women's experiences were rarely documented or were filtered through male perspectives. This creates a double challenge: not only are women's voices missing, but researchers must search for traces of their presence in sources that were never intended to record them.

Official documents often make explicit the exclusion of women from exploration and navigation. For instance, in the royal instructions given to Diego García, Juan de Sandoval, and Gonzalo Hernández Platero for their 1526 voyage to the Río de la Plata, the king ordered that no women were to be taken on board: "*por evitar los daños é inconvenientes que se siguen é cada día acaecen de ir mujeres en semejantes armadas, mandamos é defendemos firmemente que en la dicha armada no vaya ninguna mujer, de cualquier calidad que sea…*" ("to avoid the harm and inconvenience that result and daily occur from women going on such expeditions, we firmly order and forbid that no woman, of whatever condition she may be, shall go on the said fleet") (pp. 191–192). Any woman found after

departure was to be disembarked “in the first Christian land” encountered. This prohibition reflects the systematic exclusion of women from early maritime enterprises and helps explain their virtual invisibility in written records.

Yet, the absence of written testimony does not imply absence of participation. Other potential sources —such as rock art panels depicting watercraft—remain largely unexplored from a gender perspective. Although gender is notoriously difficult to detect archaeologically, evidence of early navigation exists across the world. In light of this ubiquity, it seems unreasonable to assume that only men used early watercraft.

5. Conclusions: *paddling through gender prejudices*

This paper has sought to reposition Indigenous women at the center of South American maritime lifeways by tracing their relationships with watercraft across diverse regions, time periods, and cultural contexts. Far from being marginal or exceptional actors, women appear repeatedly in ethnohistorical, archaeological, and ethnographic records as paddlers, steerswomen, divers, owners, and even symbolic custodians of canoes. These findings directly challenge long-standing androcentric assumptions that have framed navigation as an exclusively male domain, both in historical sources and in archaeological scholarship (Ransley, 2005; Amarante, 2021).

The geographic and cultural breadth of the evidence is striking. From the Guató of the Pantanal to the Yagan and Kawésqar of Tierra del Fuego, from the Uros of Lake Titicaca to Amazonian and Atlantic coastal communities in Brazil, Indigenous women’s aquatic agency is visible across the continent. The recurrence of women in such varied contexts demonstrates that their involvement in navigation was, and in some cases is, integral to Indigenous technologies, subsistence strategies, and mobility systems (Gusinde, 1986; Bridges, 1998; Susnik, 1976).

Equally significant is the diversity of roles women assumed in relation to watercraft. Ethnohistorical accounts and ethnographic observations alike describe women not only propelling canoes but also steering, maintaining, and inheriting them. In some societies, such as the Payaguá and Yagan, women retained canoes as family property, highlighting their authority in matters of mobility and survival (Susnik, 1976; Gusinde, 1986). Archaeological contexts extend this association into the symbolic sphere: canoe burials, for example, attest to the enduring metaphorical connection between women, watercraft, and transitions between life and death (Pérez et al., 2022). Taken together, these strands of evidence compel us to move beyond reductive binaries of “male navigators” and “female passengers,” and to recognize women’s contributions as multifaceted and indispensable.

Moreover, evidence indicate that women were not restricted to one type of vessel but were associated with virtually all major categories of South American watercraft, including dugouts, reed boats, bark canoes, hide boats, and even pelota floats (Alves Câmara, 1888; Friederici, 1907). This range highlights both their practical expertise and their role in sustaining and transmitting technological traditions. Contemporary ethnographic cases further emphasize continuity and transformation, showing that in many communities paddling remains a non-gendered activity learned in childhood and practiced throughout life (Holtzman, 2023).

The difficulty of locating women in early written accounts reminds us that their invisibility is not the result of absence in practice, but of bias in documentation. Male chroniclers and early European regulations often excluded women from maritime spaces, yet the persistence of Indigenous women's nautical practices demonstrates that these prohibitions did not extend to their own communities. Our methodological framework, guided by Aim, Attention, and Assessment, and informed by a "purple lens" (Villarmarzo et al., 2021), illustrates how shifting our perspective makes women's presence both visible and undeniable.

Yet the processes that once obscured these women in the historical record continue to operate today. Access to aquatic spaces and maritime practices is still uneven, particularly for indigenous women, who face social, institutional, and sometimes legal barriers to participation in navigation, fishing, and boatmaking. Their absence from museum displays, school textbooks, and public narratives reproduces a long-standing erasure that separates women from water and technology. Paradoxically, however, many of the most visible socio-environmental struggles related to rivers, coasts, and water rights in South America and beyond are being led by women: from Rapa Nui to grassroots initiatives such as *Encanto al Arroyo* or *Orillarte*. These movements reclaim the very spaces from which women were historically excluded, linking care for water to care for community and territory. In this sense, contemporary women paddlers, artists, and fisherfolk are not only reviving traditional knowledge but also challenging enduring gendered divisions of the aquatic world.

In conclusion, acknowledging Indigenous women's relationships with watercraft does more than "add women" into existing narratives; it reconfigures our understanding of aquatic traditions and the gendered landscapes of mobility in South America. As Conkey and Gero (1991) and Wylie (1997) remind us, feminist archaeology is not about token inclusion but about transforming the interpretive frameworks that shape our understanding of the past. By highlighting women as paddlers, owners, divers, and navigators, we contribute to a more inclusive and accurate maritime archaeology, one that recognizes the complexity of Indigenous societies and dismantles inherited prejudices about who belongs on the water.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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All data are available upon request by contacting the authors of this article.

Authors contribution
E.S. Conceptualization, Data curation and analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Visualization, Writing – Original draft, review and editing.
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Table 1. Women and watercraft from all sources across South America.

N.º (ref on map)	Geographic location / region/ watercourse	Indigenous group (if known)	Type of source (ethnohistorical, ethnographic, archaeological, text/visual)	Date or Time frame	Document title or type	Original text or description of images	comments	Activites/uses (rowing, poling, steering, ownership, construction, etc.) type of watercraft	References/ authors
01	Atlantic coast of Sao Paulo, Brazil	Tupin ikin	Ethnohistorical text	1550s	Vera Historia ...	"*Resistiram em sua canoa durante duas horas a trinta e algumas canoas nossas. Quando tinham acabado as suas flechas, os.Tuppin Inba os atacaram e os capturaram e alguns foram logo mortos e atirados. Os dous irmãos não ficaram feridos, mas dous dos seis mammelucos ficaram muito feridos e também alguns dos Tuppin Ikin, entre os quaes havia uma mulher.*" (Staden 1900 [1557]:97)	A woman in a war canoe	War Canoe	Hans Staden (1900 [1557]) German, male
02	Paraguay River	inknown	Ethnohistorical text	1540s-1550s	"Comentarios"	"*...los naturales del río, cuando el agua llega encima de las barrancas ellos tienen aparejadas unas canoas muy grandes para este tiempo, y en medio de las canoas echan dos ó tres cargas de barro, y hacen un fogón; y hecho, métese el indio en ella con su mujer y hijos y casa, y vanse con la cresciente del agua donde quieren, y sobre aquel fogón hacen fuego y guisan de comer y se calientan...*"	Whole family, man, woman and children living on the canoe for months, cooking, etc.	Making fire, cooking and living onboard, on big canoes	Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca 1902:86 [1555]). Spanish, male
03	Chaco	Mataraes	Ethnohistorical text	1540s	"Memoria de Pedro Hernández Secretario del Adelantado Álvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca"	p. 204 "*Luego el dicho Domingo de Irala mandó abrir el testamento deJuan de Ayolas é de don Carlos de Guevara factor de V.M. é sus bienes se gastaron é distribuyeron en pagar sus deudas écumplir las otras mandas: publicamente era culpado Domingo de Irala que por nigligencia suya é por otras ocasiones que dió, mataron a Juan de Ayolas é cristianos, especialmente que habiendole dado el principal de los mataraes ocho canoas que anduviesen con el con hasta ochenta Indios é sus mugeres é hijos, para le dar de comer, dió lugar é consentimiento á los Indios Payaguás que los matasen á todos á cuya causa los Indios Payaguás tuvieron atrevimiento de se levantar contra él é no darle de comer como lo hacian de la entrada que fizo se le murieron sesenta e cinco ombres de los trabajos é por malos tratamientos que Juan de Ortega su capitan les hizo.*"	Whole families on canoes	Women with their families, (80 indians with their women and children in 8 canoes)	Pedro Hernández ([1545]) Spanish, male published in: Schmidl, U. 2009 [1545]
04	Paraná River	Guaranís	Ethnohistorical text (poem)	1602	*La Argentina Epic poem*	*"Por vn pequeño rio de bosaje* *Las balsas y la barca caminavan,* *Quando vimos venir vn gran salvaje,* *La canoa en que viene governavan* *Al parecer dos nimphas de buen traje,* *En viendo nos a priessa se tornava,* *Y des que al Parana garnde llegaron* *En medio de vn remanso se pararon."*	Two indigenous woman steering the watercraft, calls them "well dressed nymphs"	Steering or paddling a canoe	Martín del Barco Centenera 1602 Spanish, male
05	Santiago del Estero (Argentina)	-	Ethnographic	1907	Die Schiffahrt der Indianer	Die Pelota Süd-Amerikas findet sich in der ganzen Pampa-Gegend, in Uruguay, Bio Grande do Sul, Matto Grosso, in der Moxos-Gegend und in den Llanos. Der Form nach ist sie rund, viereckig oder dreieckig, je nach Anordnung der den Band stützenden Beifen oder Stäbe.	Pelota swimmers	Swimming, pulling a hide float	Georg Friederici 1907, German, male

						Ihre Fortbewegung erfolgte anscheinend fast immer von aussen durch Pferde oder schwimmende Indianer, wobei der Schweif oder ein mit den Zähnen gefasster Lasso die Verbindung vermittelten. Die Gaucho- Weiber von Santiago del Estero genossen früher eines grossen Bufes als gewandte Pelota-Schwimmerinnen.			
06	Paraguay River	Payaguá	Ethnographic,	Desde siglo XVIII a S XX	Etnografía Paraguaya. Guía del Museo Etnográfico Andŕes Barbero. Asunción, Paraguay. *Cultura Payaguá . pp. 65-66.*	"El payaguá vivía "en la canoa" como pescador por su pauta subsistencial y como pirata fluvial del R.Paraguay y a la vez su dueño hasta los fines del siglo XVIII…" "Las canoas simples que los Payaguáes usaban durante la pesca por río, eran más pequeñas; los remos tenían la forma lanceolada y los mangos solían ser artísticamente tallados" "Cuando un Payaguá murío, su cueropo era cargado en un "yo'ork" – canoa – y llevado para el entierro en una de las islas del R. Paraguay, lugares estables de cementerios payaguaes. Pero la canoa payaguá simbolizaba también "la propiedad de la familia"; en el caso de la separación, era la mujer con hijos la que quedaba con la canoa como su garantía de la existencia subsistencial;" "el hábito canoero circunmstanciaba también una variación física de estos pampeanos: el poco desarrollo de los músculos de extremidades inferiores, y la deformación de los senos de las mujeres, las cuales, viajando en canoa como tarea diaria, amamantaban a sus hijos mejor con los senos alargados. La vida de ls Payaguáes era la canoa"	Payagua women breastfeeding in their canoes. Canoes as a way of living	Paddling and breastfeeding in case of separation, the women and children kept the canoe to guarantee their subsistence	Susnik, Branislava Slovenian-Paraguayan Female,
07	Pantanal, Mato Grosso	Guató	Ethnographic	19th and 20ths cent	Ethnography Master's thesis	Moure, Amédéé 1862. Les indiens de la Province de Mato-Grosso (Brésil). Paris: E. Thunot. Oliveira, Jorge Eremites 1995 Os Argonautas Guató: aportes para o conhecimento dos assentamentos e da subsistência dos grupos que se estabeleceram nas áreas inundáveis do Pantanal Matogrossense	Women own their canoes	Ownership/in charge of paddling	Moure 1862, French, male Oliveira 1995, Brazilian, male
	Pantanal	Guató	Ethnographic /visual	ca. 1835	Painting: watercolor and China ink on paper, 32 x 43.5 cm	Painting depicts a Guató family in their canoe, man in the bow, two children and dog amidship, and woman sitting steering or poling in the stern. (Figure 2)	Family on board	Woman paddling canoe in the stern	Hercule Florenace,1835, French, male
08	Tierra del Fuego	Yagán	Ethnographic/ visual	SXVII SXX	Ethnographic Visual Academic	Travelers' jounals accounts, several articles Missionaries photographs PhD Thesis (analysis of 1299 documents)	Women steering or paddling	Yagan woman with twin babies in canoe	Aguilera 2023
09	Tierra del Fuego	Kawesqar	Ethnographic/ visual	SXVII SXX	Ethnographic Visual	Travelers' jounals accounts, several articles Missionaries photographs March 1902. Archive of Museo	Women ususally appear paddling or poling in the	Girl steering women and children on	Beauchesne's voyage (1698–1701)

					Academic	MaggiorinoBorgatello, PhD Thesis (analysis of 1299 documents)	stern	canoes	Alberto de Agostini, 1929 Aguilera 2023
	Tierra del Fuego	Kawesqar	Ethnographic/ visual	Early XVII	engraving	Engraving depicting Kawesqar women seen in watercraft as well as diving to collect seafood.	Woman paddling with child, fire in canoe, others diving	Tending child in canoe, Paddling, diving	Monsieur de Beauchesne (Captain)
10	Lake Lacar, Argentina	Mapuche	Achaeological	ca. 880 years BP.	Academic article	Woman burial	Funerary practices	Woman in wampo burial	Perez et al 2022
11	Northern coast of Peru	Moche	Archaeological	between 1800 and 1200 BP	Ceramics	Ceramic vessels depicting female priestess on reed raft Ceramic representation of goddess of the Moon and navigation	Symbolic use	Priestess in reed raft anthropomorfic goddess of moon and navigation	Several academic
12	Imbotero Creek, Guyana	Warrau	Ethnographic	2022-2025	Academic PhD thesis	(Figure 8 A and B)	No gender/age distinction when paddling	Women paddling woman use of sail	Robert Holtzman (US, male)
13	Titicaca Lake, Bolivia	Uros	Ethnographic/ visual	1946		Photograph (Figure 9 A)	Reed raft with a sail	4 women on a tula raft with a sail	Smithsonian Institution. Bureau of American Ethnology
	Titicaca Lake, Bolivia	Uros	Ethnographic Photograph	2024	photograph	The photograph shows a woman dressed in typical clothes poling a reed boat standing on the stern, transporting a group of tourists Photograph (Figure 9 B)	Reed boat	Poling /tourism	Photographer Hugo Pacheco Méndez (Mexican, male)

14	Amazon River, near Manaus	-	Photographs	2015	photograph	Photografph A shows a woman paddling in a canoe with two children (Figure 10 A and B)			Federika Odriozola, Uruguayan, Female
15	Alantic coast, Paraná State, Brazil	Caiçara	Photograph	1985	untitled	Photograph shows two dugout canoes with added strakes, in one of them there are two women, one of them holding an oar/paddle (Figure 11)	“canoa bordada”	Riding the canoe/ holding a paddle.. paddling?	Personal archive of one of the authors, Uruguayan, female
16	Araguaia River, Ilha do Bananal, Tocantins, Brazil	Karajá	Ethnographic collection photographs and ceramic vessels	1950/ 1960	untitled	Demicheri’s collection of Karajá composed of photographs taken in the 1950s/1960s, painted paddles and ceramic vessels, some of which represent canoes with people. The pho	Woman holding a painted paddle. At lease two women, one pregnant in canoe	Woman holding a painted paddlers	Demicheri’s (Uruguayan, male) ethnographic collection
17	Magdalena River, Ciénaga del Pajaral, Colombia	-	Ethnographic	2022-2025	Photographs	Photographs of girls and women paddling, poling canoes	Palafitic houses, conected by canoes	3 girls in a canoe, a woman standing poling a canoe	Daniel Nieva Sanz (Spanish, male)
18	Baudó River (Chocó, Colombia)	Emberá	Ethnographic	1970	Photographs	A woman with two children pushing the canoe through some rocks in the river A woman sitting in the stern paddling a dugout canoe	Even if river is not navigable in some stretches	Woman and 2 children pushing through rocks Woman paddling	Moser, Brian 1970, (British, male)
19	Apaporis River, (Vaupes/ Amazonas limit, Colombia	Tukano	Ethnographic	1970	Photographs	Tukano woman traveling with child, dog and cargo in a dugout canoe. Tukano woman traveling by canoe with bananas and other objects.	River indians navigating forest waterways	Women paddling and carrying children, animals, goods.	Moser, Brian 1970, (British, male)