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# You White People Have No Soul

## The Anthropologist as a Patient in a Healing Process by a Tukano Shaman

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*The account that follows is purposefully non-academic in form. Its aim is to communicate the personal experience of being healed by a Tukano shaman of Northwest Amazonia. Its place in the taxonomy of ethnological writings is somewhere between the regular journal article, in which we try to translate the field experiences into the universal language of scientific analysis, and the field notes, which we rarely dare publish, for if they show the way the raw data have been collected, they also contain dull parts that only make sense to the author.*

*So this is modified field account, accompanied by some implicit ethnological analysis. The specialist will find some clues to the understanding of shamanism in Northwest Amazonia, especially in regard to the role of names and dreams in the healing process. The curious reader will get some information about several aspects of the spiritual world of a complex and amazing culture area.*

*This area is inhabited by three main Indian groups: the Tukanoan, the Aruakan, and the Maku. The two former groups are sedentary riverine manioc cultivators. The Maku are semi-nomadic hunters that live in watershed areas. Riversides and watersheds are both entirely covered by evergreen tropical rain forest.*

*The main character of this account is a Tukano Indian named Beré. We were both 26 years old in July 1982, when the episodes narrated herein took place. At that time, I had already spent six months among the Maku, doing field work for an academic dissertation.*

*Concerning the authenticity of the dialogues, they were quite like I have put them in the paper. Of course I had to reconstruct some of them, as I had not been able to take notes during the time I was ill.*

Beré and I were quite upset, searching for solid ground on the flooded forest of the Marié River, when the black outline of a high bank suddenly appeared against the twilight of sundown. I immediately turned off the motor of my boat, for God only knew whether we would find another dry place to spend the night. A big storm was coming around, so we finished a fast palm leaf hut just before the rainfall. We jumped in, tightened our hammocks and fell asleep, trying to forget the hunger and the heavy raindrops that seeped through our clumsy roof.

This was the ninth day of a two men expedition to the unexplored headwaters of the Marié, where I expected to find the so-called Blowpipe People, a Maku group that was said to live in that area, totally isolated from any contact with white men and even with other Indians.

In the last few days we had been eating ants, worms and maggots, for during the highest peak of the flood period – as was the case in that awful month of July 1982 – the fish tend to disperse far inside the flooded forest, and game animals rarely show up for the hungry hunter that dares to adventure across unknown lands, like the one we were exploring. The Marié lies in a flat lowland, flooding much of the area during the rainy season. Game is naturally scarce in such regions. And there is no dry place to make manioc gardens. For this reason, there are no

Indian settlements all along its way down to the Rio Negro, except for three Tukanoan villages near the mouth where the banks are high, and except perhaps for the Blowpipe People in the headwater region.

According to my estimates, we should have been approaching our destination. So this high bluff where we had made our hut could be the beginning of an expanse of dry land where I expected to find what I was looking for.

By the dawn of the next day, while I was quietly thinking about it underneath our leaky roof, Beré stood up as if he were hearing something. Then he started to imitate woolly monkey shouts with a tube he had promptly made of parasite leaves. The monkeys suddenly appeared in the forest canopy, some 80 feet above us. I picked up my rifle and shot one of them. But as I was too anxious to get a bite of hot meat inside my gut, I shot from a poor angle and only managed to strike one of its legs. It escaped with the others, jumping from one tree to another, with its broken leg hanging and bleeding – a rather regrettable sight, as the breakfast was running away to die for nothing.

“Too bad,” said my companion. “*Boraro* doesn’t like such things to happen.” *Boraro* is the Tukanoan name for a supernatural being that is said to protect and multiply the game animals. He is described as a tall and furry humanoid, with sharp claws and enormous fangs. He has always a bad temper. To avoid his attacks, which take the form of invisible poisoned darts that cause severe illness, the hunter has to give him something in exchange for the killed animals. The Maku hunters state that it suffice to throw the feathers or the fur of their victims in the forest, while spelling evocative magic formulae, so that *Boraro* can make a new animal out of the mortal remnants. But according to the Tukano, one must give him human souls in exchange.

Soon after a frugal breakfast, consisting of worms mingled with a few handfuls of manioc flour, we started to inspect that tract of dry land on the left bank of the Marié, looking for trails, old huts or any other trace of human presence. We found an old trail a few minutes later. It went northwards, away from the river. There was no sign of machete work along the trail. It had been cleared by hand. So this was a clear sign of isolated Indians, for the contacted native groups use machetes to open and maintain their trails. When you cut juvenile rain forest trees with a machete, they will starve and die. But if you just break them by hand, not cutting them entirely, they will form a knot at the broken spot and continue to grow up. The Indians can tell the age of a hand-opened trail by the height of the young trees up to the knots. The trail we were on was approximately one year old.

We made a non-stop walk along this trail until the early afternoon, when it went down a steep slope and disappeared abruptly in a huge swamp. It was the end of the dry land. We were once again at the river level. I convinced my companion to walk a few more hours in the swamp, taking the general direction indicated by the trail. But none of us could stand such an effort, hungry and tired as we were. So we walked back and built a new hut by the edge of the swamp.

At sundown, when a storm approached, I lay in my hammock and thought about the outcomes of the ongoing year. I had already made six months of regular field work among the Yuhup Maku Indians. Compared to the Tukanoans, they were quite apart from the world of white people, but this seemed to be insufficient for the ambitious young man I was. I wanted to be the first white man amongst the Blowpipe Maku, the most isolated people I had ever heard about in the region. So I bought a motor boat and headed to the Marié. And as soon as I

realized that it would be quite foolish to travel all alone in that vast expanse of land, I stopped by the last Tukanoan settlement, and asked the people if one of them would come along with me to the headwaters for some reasonable pay.

A white man came out of a hut and stated that none of the inhabitants could leave the place, since they were all indebted to him. This labor relationship is in fact a disguised form of slavery. The white traders use to offer western goods to the Indians in exchange for forest products, such as natural rubber, vines, jaguar skins, rare fish, etc. But as the Indians do not understand the monetary value of things, the traders deceive them, pretending that their productivity is insufficient to pay their debts. If the Indians react, the traders cut off the supply of western medicines. The Indians almost always surrender.

As I insisted that I could not travel all alone to the sources of the Marié, the white trader replied unperturbed: "You pay me the debt of one of those red skins, and he becomes yours."

"Which one?" I asked bewildered.

"Your choice, amigo," said the trader with a smirk. I had the impression that he was mocking my moral embarrassment for having to buy a human being.

It was quite hot. I jumped in the fresh stream at the village port, but I forgot to take off my glasses. They sunk to the bottom. As I cursed the loss of them, the young native men jumped in the water. I chose the one who found my glasses.

"One hundred dollars," said the white trader.

So I paid, and there he was with me, deep inside a stretch of jungle that he would never have visited had I not paid for his debts. I had told him more than once that he did not owe me anything, and that I was going to pay for his help. But he kept on with a slavish attitude. I wondered why, as the heavy rain fell on our tiny hut by the edge of the swamp. Perhaps I should give him a chance to pay me back in some way that he prized more than the service he was hired for. What could it be?

I was falling asleep when the first blast reverberated through the dark of night, coming from inside the swamp. By the second and stronger blast, a few moments later, Beré was rekindling the fire with a frightened expression on his face, spelling fast and repetitive formulae in his own language. At the third blast – and this one was quite close – he lit a cigar made of large parasite leaves, and began to blow the smoke around us, repeating the formulae almost frantically. Then the blasts began to grow less and less strong, as if returning to the swamp. Beré lowered his voice and kept on with his monotonous litany until the dawn. I fell asleep every once in a while, and woke up just to see my partner in his non-stop praying.

Next morning he was markedly laconic, while we packed our gear to get back to the riverside. I was intending to check if the trail went to the opposite bank of the Marié.

"What was it last night," I asked.

"*Boraro*."

"What makes you so sure?"

"He always appears like that, blasting through the darkness."

"How does he make such a noise?"

"By beating the trees with his heavy club."

"Why did he come down here?"

"This must be a game house. You know, hills like this one are the houses where *Boraro* forms new game animals."

"Is he angry with us?"

"Oh yes!"

“Because I’ve hurt one of his children for nothing . . .”

“And because nobody gave him anything in exchange, so that he could make another one.”

“What spells have you murmured until dawn?”

“A prayer to send him away.”

“Would you please translate it into Portuguese?”

I am not able to reproduce every single detail of this amazing prayer. I only remember its general traits. It consists of an invariable refrain, “So go away, for we are human beings. Human beings live in a village.” After this refrain comes an introducing formula: “In the village, there is . . .”, followed by a long enumeration of objects. For instance: “In the village, there is the long house. The long house is made of posts, walls, and roof. Among the long house posts, there are the men’s posts, the family’s posts, and the women’s posts.” Then the prayer goes on to describe the roof and the walls of the house. When the description of the house ends, the prayer comes back to the repetitive formula: “So go away, for we are human beings. Human beings live in a village. In the village, there is . . .” Then come successively the ritual set of objects, the fishing set, the hunting set, the manioc processing set, the cooking set, and so on, always repeating the main formula: “So go away, for we are human beings.”

“Caramba,” I said to myself. “Lévi-Strauss hit the eye of the target! This is quite an instance of his opposition of nature and culture. *Bonaro* represents the fury of nature, and as we are in his domains, far away from any Indian village, Beré prays in order to evoke a village, with all its cultural elements.”

I must add that the outstanding role of the long house setting in this prayer is not fortuitous. The traditional Tukanoan settlements are made of a single long house. Each long house shelters a different clan. The Tukanoan clans are patrilineal, patrilocal, and exogamous. So all the men and children of a single long house are related to each other by male kinship ties, while the married women come from other long houses (other clans).

The traditional long houses have always the same basic structure. The men’s door is always facing the riverside. On the opposite side, facing the manioc gardens and the forest, is the women’s door. Between these two extremes, there are the family compartments. The posts that support the roof are classified according to this partition of the inner space.

The main Tukanoan ritual is known by the name of Jurupari. When this ritual is performed, the male adults enter through the men’s door, playing sacred trumpets that women shall not see. This performance is said to represent the beginning of the world, when the various Tukanoan phratries and clans came upstream to the river tracts they presently occupy. The long house is so important for these Indians that they even bury their dead in its floor. The men are buried underneath the dancing path of the Jurupari ritual. The women are buried near the family compartments.<sup>1</sup>

So I found it quite obvious that Beré’s prayer was somehow reproducing the traditional long house, despite the fact that he did not live in a long house since his early childhood. “To fight against the most dangerous creature of nature,” I thought, “he has to evoke the strongest element of his culture: the traditional long house setting. By doing it, he expels nature back to its wilderness. Such is the magic power of his words.”

A few yards after we started our way back to the river, we came across a spot of matted down leaves on the forest floor.

<sup>1</sup> For more information on this subject, see suggestions for further reading at the end of this account.

"A jaguar has been lying here all night long," said Beré. "He's been heeding us."

"Perhaps waiting for some food remains of ours," I replied.

"I doubt . . . This is no existing jaguar."

"So what is it?"

"Bad news."

"What kind, for God's sake?"

"*Boraro*."

"I thought your prayer had sent him away!"

"Me too. But he took the form of a jaguar and came back silently. I didn't notice, so I lowered the strength of my prayer and almost fell asleep. A rather clever *Boraro*, this one."

"Not all *Boraros* are so clever?"

"Oh no! Some are quite stupid . . . Not this one."

"So we better get our bags and flee."

"Now you're talking straight."

I had dubious feelings. Sometimes I had the impression that he was quite afraid of meeting the Blowpipe People. And as he knew I did not fear them, he was perhaps trying to frighten me with these jungle horror stories, in order to make me give up the search. On the other hand, there were the startling booms the night before. I really did not know what to think about it – and still do not know, by the way.

We kept on talking along the way back to the riverside.

"Are *Boraro*'s magic darts the only way he attacks?" I asked.

"No. Sometimes he stuns people to suck their blood and brains. Young ladies are what he prizes most."

"Oh really?"

"They say that last year *Boraro* seduced young ladies in the Indian villages near Miraflores.<sup>2</sup> He took the form of a handsome young man and fucked them. When the lady was coming good, *Boraro* took his natural form and devoured her entirely."

"Did he kill many young ladies like that?"

"Yes. Women did not go to manioc gardens anymore. People were starving."

"And so . . ."

"And so they called the police. The Colombian police. You know, the same ones that have been fighting the guerrillas. A group came down, armed with machine-guns. They found the handsome young man near a manioc garden and emptied their cartridges on him. They approached the corpse. They thought he was dead. But suddenly *Boraro* took the form of a big roaring jaguar and fled into the forest."

We finally arrived back to the left bank of the Marié. Then we checked if the boat was in order, and started to inspect the opposite bank. The same old trail went southwards. "If it cuts the stream perpendicularly and ends in a swamp northwards," I thought, "then its origin must be south of the river bed. The Blowpipe People must be somewhere in that direction. They probably come up here during the dry season to fish in the main stream and to capture frogs in the swamp. This explains why the trail is looking like abandoned. They only use it in the dry period."

So we walked southwards on the old trail, hoping that this time we would finally reach a

<sup>2</sup> A Colombian town in the Vaupés region.

high and dry land, big enough to carry a human group of hunters. By the beginning of the afternoon, however, we were once again facing an endless swamp. This was very confusing.

"Who the hell made this God damned trail anyway?" I cursed.

"The Blowpipe People," replied my nonchalant companion.

"What for? It goes from one swamp to another!"

"I don't know. Perhaps they made this trail to beautify *Boraro's* house. You know, the Maku are *Boraro's* friends."

"But the Maku fear him like any other Indian."

"This holds true for the Maku in our neighborhood. We taught them how to behave like human beings.<sup>3</sup> They didn't learn much, because they are too stubborn. But at least they learned to avoid the evil creatures of the forest. Now, the Blowpipe People live too far apart from our homeland. We never taught them anything . . ."

"So they are quite like *Boraro*," I suggested.

"You bet. They got perhaps completely transformed into *Boraros* by now."

"How does one get transformed into a *Boraro*?"

"By eating only meat . . . By fucking one's own sisters . . ."

"The Maku in your neighborhood fuck their own sisters.<sup>4</sup> Why didn't they all get transformed into *Boraros*?"

"Because we taught them how to plant and to make manioc flour, so they are a bit like us."

We spent the night near the new swamp, for it was too late to return to the river bed before the rainfall. Next morning I woke up feeling quite bad.

"I think I got a fever," I said. He came by and put his hand on my forehead.

"Yes, you got a fever."

"I had a strange dream."

"Tell me," he said.

"I dreamt I met my sister with two other young ladies. They were eating lots of candies. When I showed up, they laughed and teased me. They offered me the wet candies from within their lips. I had to kiss them in order to pick up the candies."

"This is no good dream."

"Why?"

"It seems that you've been poisoned."

"By whom?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"*Boraro*."

"You mean he shot me the other night, while disguised as a jaguar?"

"Yes."

We took more than half a day to get back to our first camp site by the river, for I was tired and weak. And the rest of that day, while Beré did some fishing, my state grew worse and worse. At sundown I began to vomit and trembled miserably.

Next day things did not get better. I could not stand up and walk, and none of the few

<sup>3</sup> The Tukano believe they taught the Maku everything that has to do with horticulture, house making, ritual, music, and myth. For the Tukano, the Maku are not true human beings: they live inside the forest, instead of living on the river banks.

<sup>4</sup> I was referring to the general Tukanoan belief that the Maku behave like animals because they prefer to marry amongst co-residents, which, for the Tukanoans, is the same as to marry one's own sisters.

things I ate stayed inside my stomach. I kept on vomiting and trembling like a mad dog. And my fever was getting higher.

“Hey, brother,” I said from inside my hammock. “I think I’m fading out.”

“I think you are,” he replied in his casual tone. “I have seen many people die vomiting and shivering like you.”

I did not quite approve the idea of dying like that. So I took my rifle from beneath the hammock. He guessed my intention:

“Don’t do that, if you please!”

“Gimme a good reason.”

“People will think that I killed you.”

I set the gun’s muzzle away from my head and shot ten or more times at the nearby trees, cursing the day I was born.

“Good,” he said.

Then he improvised a bed for me inside the boat, helped me to get in, and packed our gear. It was the end of my foolish adventure. We were definitely navigating downstream. Disappointed and sick, my reaction was to let myself die quietly.

By the end of the day, the motor’s propeller crashed against a sunken tree. There was no way to avoid it, for I was laying down and Beré was astern, controlling the rudder. Somebody should have been at the prow to watch for sunken trees and other obstructions in the river.

I was too weak to do anything but to lift my head and vomit overboard. So I charged him with the task of replacing the broken propeller. But his knowledge of mechanics was rather poor, and the motor of that boat a very complicated item. And I must have been quite confusing in my explanations of how to fix the damage. I could not put even two ideas together in order to form a coherent thought. I was alternating between peaks of delirium and a state of complete stupor. Beré decided to let the boat go floating downstream by night and to paddle during the day. He built a palm leaf roof over me, to protect me from the frequent storms and from the strong sunlight.

I cannot tell how many days we spent drifting like that, for I kept on delirating and falling in those awful states of torpor. I remember a sort of routine. Mingled with the sound of the paddles, there was Beré’s smooth voice, murmuring endless prayers in his language. Each time I lifted my head and vomited overboard, he came by and offered me an infusion on which he had blown cigar smoke and healing prayers. I remember him telling me that it was made of river water and turtle eggs. I also remember that once he applied his fist on my chest, sucked strongly through it and blew away while murmuring magic formulae.

One night, while he tried to find a place to lie down and get some sleep in the narrow space of my boat, his shoulders touched my feet accidentally.

“Your feet are quite cold, amigo,” he said. “I will heat them for you.” Then he embraced my feet against his chest and fell asleep.

That night I had a dream. When I woke up, I was more conscious than usual. I told him the dream in a straight blow.

“It was sundown,” I said. “We were navigating in an Indian canoe on Vaupés River.<sup>5</sup> You were paddling at the prow, while I paddled astern. Then we came by the long house of your paternal grandfather. You climbed the bank at the village port, while I waited for an invitation.

<sup>5</sup> The Vaupés River is the center of the Tukano land. The various Tukanoan sub-tribes and clans are said to have emerged from a hole at the bottom of its main waterfall.



Then I heard a voice coming from inside the long house: 'Beré, who is this white man that comes with you?' It was your grandfather's voice. I took it as an invitation and climbed the bank. When I arrived at the village plaza in front of the long house, you had disappeared. I got into the long house through the men's door. It was shady inside. When I got my eyes acquainted, I noticed various graves opened in the ground. They were all filled with water, and a dolphin was inside each one. The biggest dolphin was your grandfather."<sup>6</sup>

He lit a cigar, and kept smoking silently for a while. Then he started to talk:

"This is true dream. The Dolphin is the symbol of my clan, the *Buhuari Mahsa*.<sup>7</sup> You discovered this all alone in your dream, because you're dying. So you went to my grandfather's house to look for a soul, to look for a life. You white people have no soul. When you die, you will become nothing, while we go to our grandfather's house, our clan's house. So you went there to find a soul, to find a life, because your life is fading out. Now I am going to heal you in my grandfather's name, which is also my own name. Your name is not Jorge anymore. Your name is . . . <sup>8</sup> Now you belong to my people. Now I know what prayer I must blow on you in order to set you free from *Boraro*'s poisoning."

And he started a long prayer, evoking his male ancestors, from his grandfather up to the founders of his clan. After the prayer he told me some passages of his life story. His paternal grandfather had been an important *yat* (shaman) in the Vaupés region. Beré was his eldest grandson, so he inherited his name, as usual among the Tukanoans. The old man was training him to become a shaman, but he died before the boy's training was complete.

"Therefore my prayers had almost no effect on you," he apologized. "Fortunately you found the way up to my grandfather's place, so he helped me to find the good prayer."

After the old shaman's death Beré's father took him from the Vaupés region down to the mouth of the Marié, to work for the white traders. Then his father died. He was only 15 years old. With no close relatives anywhere in the region, he wandered from one Indian village to another, until he finally got settled in the last village of the Marié, where he had a distant paternal aunt. He used to work for the traders to pay the debt assumed by her husband, a man he did not like, but had to work for, because this man had been sheltering him without being his clan's mate.

Next day my vomiting ceased, and the fever was very low. So I was finally able to stand up and fix the broken propeller.

"So you are a *yat*, a true shaman," I said.

"Oh no," he answered. "I talk too much."

Two days later I was in Beré's village, eating a delicious chicken soup offered by his aunt. Her unpleasant husband really did not like to learn that Beré was set free from any debt. After the meal I lit a cigarette and contemplated the smoke disappearing into the fresh air of nightfall. Then I noticed that Beré was observing me with a gentle smile on his face.

"Do I still owe you anything?" he asked.

I stood up and gave him my rifle.

Twelve years later I returned to the mouth of the Marié, while delimiting the Rio Negro

<sup>6</sup> I remind that the inhabitants of a long house use to bury their dead in the house floor. I knew that long ago before I had this dream. What I did not know at all was the meaning of the dolphins, as we shall promptly see.

<sup>7</sup> People that Appeared.

<sup>8</sup> I shall not reveal.

Indigenous Area for the Brazilian Government. I asked for Beré when I arrived with the work crew in his village. The inhabitants told me that he was still living there, but had fled into the forest when he realized that I was coming by.

“Didn’t he tell you people that he saved my life?”

“No,” they answered. “He never talks too much.”

*Suggestions for further reading about the Tukanoan and Maku Indians:*

*The best text books about the Tukanoan Indians are CHRISTINE and STEPHEN HUGH-JONES’ monographs. The first one is a detailed analysis of the Tukanoan social structure. The second is an impressive analysis of male initiation, shamanism and myth.*

HUGH-JONES, CHRISTINE, *From the Milk River: spatial and temporal processes in Northwest Amazonia.* Cambridge 1979.

HUGH-JONES, STEPHEN, *The Palm and the Pleiades: initiation and cosmology in Northwest Amazonia.* Cambridge 1979.

*Those who prefer the Indian versions of myth and related rituals, may read two books written by Tukanoan natives:*

FERNANDES, AMÉRICO and FERNANDES, DORVALINO, *A mitologia sagrada dos Desana-wari Dihputiro Põrã.* São Gabriel da Cachoeira 1996.

UMÚSIN PANLÓN and TOLAMÁN KENHÍRI, *Antes o mundo não existia.* São Paulo 1980.

*The main published text book about the Maku is PETER SILVERWOOD-COPE’S:*

SILVERWOOD-COPE, PETER, *Os Makú: povo caçador do noroeste da Amazônia.* Brasília 1990.

*Other important published books about the area:*

CHERNELA, JANET, *The Wanano Indians of the Brazilian Amazon: a sense of space.* Austin 1993.

GOLDMAN, IRVING, *The Cubeo: Indians of the North West Amazon.* Urbana 1963.

JACKSON, JEAN, *The Fish People: Linguistic exogamy and Tukanoan Identity in Northwest Amazonia.* New York 1983.

KOCH-GRÜNBERG, THEODOR, *Zwei Jahre unter den Indianern. Reisen in Nordwest-Brasilien 1903/1905.* 2 Bände. Berlin 1909/1910.

REICHEL-DOLMATOFF, GERARDO, *Desana: Simbolismo de los Índios Tukano del Vaupés.* Bogotá 1968.