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Fear No Spirits: A Pilgrim's Journey through the Brazilian Churches of Ayahuasca

Robert Tindall

This is an intimate account of a pilgrimage through the “Holy Land” of Daime, the Brazilian frontier state of Acre, in which the author weaves together accounts of his own healing experience. It also portrays the extraordinary variation and vitality of the communities there, both indigenous and Catholic/Afro-Brazilian, who use ayahuasca as a sacrament.

*Horatio: Oh day and night, but this is
wondrous strange!*
*Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it
welcome.*
Shakespeare *Hamlet* 1.5.173-74.

Acre is the holy land for work with Daime in Brazil. Bordering Peru and Bolivia, it is the westernmost state of the Amazon rain basin, and still possesses 90% of its original forest. Acre is still very much raw frontier, hosting some of the heaviest cocaine trafficking in South America, a powerful presence of evangelical Christianity, and serious rural poverty. It was also the home state of Chico Mendez, who, in resistance to the massive land theft and senseless deforestation being practiced by the wealthy newcomers to Acre in the 1980's, organized and imbued with an environmental vision the forest workers of the Amazon—a fight he continued up to the day of his assassination by a local rancher and strongman, Darly Alves da Silva.

Acre hosts a landscape dotted with the churches of Daime, which light up at night like phosphorescent jellyfish floating in a dark, tropical sea. My botanist friend, Sean, and I had come in our pilgrimage through the churches of ayahuasca to the small city of Rio Branco to experience the roots of the movement in Brazil.

Within the movement originating with Mestre Irineu, two main streams developed: The Church of the Universal Flowing Light, or Santo Daime, which claims to hold most truly to the original form transmitted by the Mestre; and the Barquinha, or “little boat,” whose work, with marked Afro-Brazilian elements, was initiated by a disciple of Irineu, Daniel Pereira de Mattos (known as Frei Daniel). And there

are the native traditions underlying the lineage of Mestre Irineu, as practiced for thousands of years by the indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin, arising and co-evolving out of their seamless communion with the forest: the womb and gift of Pachamama.

Through all the communities, seeds of distrust toward foreigners have been sown. Among the Indians bio-piracy by Westerners, who ingratiate themselves into local tribes and smuggle out their healing plants only to patent them and reap profits for themselves (sending back baseball caps and t-shirts by way of compensation), has so alienated the healers of the forest that they have begun keeping their medicines to themselves. The extent of this tragedy is not easily imagined until the degree of knowledge of these peoples is fathomed. As well, certain Daime communities have closed their doors to participation by Westerners after getting what they perceived as bad press, or will no longer donate bottles of ayahuasca to hipsters who smuggle them into the U.S. and sell the sacrament at a huge profit. In spite of these abuses, the doors of most churches remain open, and the pilgrim is welcome to join in the work.

I first arrive in Alto Santo, a neighborhood thirty minutes outside of Rio Branco, in the night, traveling dirt roads through area recently carved out of the jungle. It is warm, the stars are bright, and the slat-board pioneer houses we pass are dark. Then a vision leaps electric out of the night. Beneath blazing fluorescent lights, I see two lines of men and women dancing, facing one another beneath a huge, open air structure. A gigantic cross with two crossbeams (the Caravaca Cross adopted from Northern Spain—the second crossbeam represents the second coming of Christ), stands illuminated in the front yard. I get out of the car and hear music and singing—a sound like a polka

band riding in the back of a flatbed truck on their way to heaven. As I draw closer, I see the women wear white dresses with green sashes, multi-colored trailers descending from their shoulders. The men wear white suits with a green pinstripe descending their pant legs. As I enter, dazzled by the lights and colors and already buzzing from a shot of ayahuasca I had drunk earlier at the Barquinha church, I see that the men also wear a silver brooch in the shape of a Star of David with a crescent moon resting within, indicating they are *fardados*. (*Fardado* is sometimes translated as “star-person”—giving a New Age airiness to a fundamentally military conception: *farda* in Portuguese describes a “military uniform”). The women are wearing silver crowns. They are doing a four-step dance, moving back and forth in a tightly disciplined line, beating out their steps with maracas they hold in their right hands. A band, composed of accordion, conga drum, tambourine, electric guitar, bass and classical guitar, jams away in the space between the two lines. The high pitch of the women’s voices gives me the image of a psychedelic subway train charging, relentless and happy, through the night.

I am led in a numinous daze across the concrete floor to a booth at the far end of the structure, where a dignified man with a bushy moustache waits like an amiable bartender. I look within and see an altar with a candle burning before a photo taken during the 1930s of a stocky forest worker, his expression truly transported, gazing into another world. The altar is covered with bottles of ayahuasca.

The man smiles at me and pours, waiting for my signal to stop. I drink and a seat is set out for me. I sit and try to follow the hymns of the dancers, but the Portuguese is very fast. Someone sitting next to me hands me a hymnal, which helps some, but then I close my eyes and listen and angelic mists and swirling mandalas begin to draw me on. I open my eyes. The music has stopped. I see a new frontier, a new people without artifice, a world of exquisite possibilities. This, I realize, is the new frontier for humanity, open and immeasurably happy.

My language acquisition abilities have suddenly been radically enhanced, and I can understand the Portuguese being spoken around me. I enter into conversation with Henrique, a professor of mathematics and physics at the University of Acre, and we proceed to discuss the Buddhist doctrine of *sunyata*, emptiness, and its relation to work with entheogens. Then Henrique begins to ask me penetrating questions about the United States, which instead of provoking my usual liberal self-righteousness stir an immense

well of sadness within me. A proto-fascist ruling clique has seized power in my beloved homeland. I cannot speak for grief. Henrique looks at me with comprehension.

“The daime is working on you, isn’t it?” he asks, as waves of agony rise and break within me.

As the music commences again, I take a maraca and join the line, getting down the four-step but give up trying to sing from the hymnal at the same time. Later I am taken to the altar and introduced to the figure in the photo: it is Mestre Raimundo Irineu Serra. I study him. He looks as if he were wearing a Noh mask, the one for representing vision into other worlds. I make my bows. May the humble inherit the earth. It appears to be happening right here.

The Barquinhas wear sailor’s suits when they make a major journey, bright white with epaulettes and a white cap like a fez with a braid wound around it. They are right to do so. During the ceremony I see my guardian angel, my guiding spirit, as a blazing figurehead on the prow of the ship of my soul, cutting through the darkness with his omniscience, and I realize the carven prows of those old Viking ships were no mere decorations.

Struggling with our bags and attempting to orient ourselves after the three-day bus ride from Rio de Janeiro to Rio Branco, Sean and I encountered Luis, a young lawyer from São Paulo who had recently transplanted himself in Rio Branco to work on environmental issues and indigenous rights. He was small of stature, clean cut and alert, and seemed to engage the world around him with a boundless optimism. And he spoke an English he had learned from his mother. It turned out he was a Daimista, a member of a Barquinha church. He offered his assistance, as well as his opinions about the communities we had come to visit. It gave me some pause. The usual rivalries among groups existed in Rio Branco, too, I decided.

Some days later he met us at our hotel and oriented us to the work of the Barquinhas, explaining that the church of the little boat is a synthesis of Catholic Christianity with Umbanda and Candomble, the Yoruba spiritual practices brought over by the slaves from Africa, and elucidated a very complicated system of correspondences between deities: Oxala, the masculine father spirit, related to Christ; Yemanjá, the Holy Mother, feminine power, related to Mary; and other Orixas, or spirits, such as Oxossi, the power of the forest and native healing wisdom; or Xango, the power of justice, related to stones and through his spouse, Oxum, to waterfalls. I scrambled to take notes,

despairing of distinguishing mantra from yantra and tantra.

But no matter. We were going to get to experience Umbanda soon. The community was in the midst of a twenty-day long *romería*, a cycle of worship of São Sebastião in which they drank ayahuasca every night, and there was to be a major work soon.

Arriving the following evening, we pass through a wooden gate and enter an open structure like the one where people danced in Alto Santo, except the floor is of hard packed, red earth. In the center, spread out on a surface of sand, I notice miniature figures arranged in a village scene. We continue down a flight of stairs and enter the patio of the church, a cross lit up at the entryway, a dirty little scamp of a dog curled up right on the threshold. It could be any Catholic church in Latin America, with its little bell tower and niches for saints, its exterior a muted orange painted over smooth adobe. We and everyone else step over the dog, respecting its presence there, and enter. Within we cross a clean floor of white tile and face an altar covered with images of saints. A massive banquet table with a white tablecloth surrounded by chairs sits in the middle of the room, a statue of São Sebastião, chained to a tree and pierced by arrows, upon the table. Rows of seats line the back and side of the church. I wander off and sit on the wrong side. A musician tuning his guitar gestures me back. Women on one side, men on the other. I look around and note that most of the faces are African in descent, unlike in the Santo Daime church in Alto Santo.

Luis leaves us, and Sean and I sit quietly in the pews. Finally a bell rings, and he reappears dressed in white and gestures for us to come. We go out and see two lines have formed, one of women and the other of men, who are filing forward to drink ayahuasca. We reach the head of the line, are given the sacrament, make the sign of the cross with the cup, and drink. The ayahuasca is very bitter and strong.

We go back in and take our seats. The core of the community takes their places around the banquet table. A curtain has been drawn over the altar, covering the entire front of the church. The mantric cycle of praise commences, most of which I don't understand, except I can recognize the Credo being repeated over and over, and the names of Jesus, Mary, the Heavenly Father, and São Sebastião. Musicians accompany the prayer. As the ayahuasca begins to take hold, I notice the curtains are slowly parting in front of the altar. I hear a voice say to me, *Fear no spirits*. Okay, I think, I don't fear spirits. In fact, I feel completely comfortable with them.

Something very powerful begins moving, like a spiritual storm front, through the church. I see people rising from their seats and standing, very erect, two fingers of their right hand raised at the level of their faces like antennae. Piercing whistling tears through the air, sounds I cannot imagine the human vocal apparatus being capable of making. The spirits of the *preto velhos*, the old blacks, have come and the group possessed by the old African spirits files out.

Then Luis reappears beside us, smiling. "Time to drink again," he says. I look out and sure enough, the line is forming anew. I start to say, "I think I may actually have had enough already," but then I shrug and go out and drink.

The curtain is parting more rapidly now, in imitation of the opening of the heavenly realm, and then the ayahuasca strikes like a blinding cloud of light. Seated in profound *miração* I behold the blazing guardian of my spirit boat as an intricate ritual of prostration is carried out by men and women in sailor's suits facing the altar before me. Then in the middle of a song I come to Christ and lay my burden down before him, my long journey filled with wounds and bewilderment. I feel his hand on my forehead as I relinquish my addictions: to coffee, to hyper-vigilance, to finding the perfect woman, and see the shell of my former self in California and feel deep compassion for the man I have been.

It all seems a blaze of light, a stupefaction, a vanishing; the guitar and Catholic liturgy weaving fresh neural pathways through my mind.

Then the curtains slowly close, and the community vanishes to doff their sailor suits. Luis comes up to us and announces, "The evening is just beginning." Sean and I look at each other in astonishment. How can we take any more? We already feel irradiated by spirit. But the lines to drink are forming again outside. "We're moving on into the Umbanda portion of the work now," he explains.

We drink again and go out to the structure with the floor of packed red earth. I now have an opportunity to study the figures arranged in the sand in the center. Luis explains they are the Holy Family, or rather, the Holy Ancestors, the Yorimba. Their skin is deeply black, their garments and eyes pearly white, and they are spread out in a tableau of village life, one fellow playing the banjo, the white-haired, ample matriarch enthroned in the center, the patriarch, thin and tall like a reed, capable of walking a hundred miles at a stretch through arid ground, standing beside her. At their backs, as if on the other side of the world, is the European Holy Family, little white-skinned baby

Jesus in cradle, Joseph and Mary and Donkey in attendance, angels guarding the way to his cradle.

The band commences, conga drums prominent. Luis turns to me and says, "Whatever you do, don't stop dancing." It's a slow dance, widdershins, men and women moving in two circles, a dance to draw energy and life out of the earth. I begin, awkwardly, but eventually get the hang of it. A four step inside a square, then a step forward. In the center, many women and a few men are smoking pipes, using the tobacco for purification and to send messages to the divinity, spitting and bowing, hunched over close to the earth. After a time I see Luis, his arms folded behind his back, pipe in mouth, stooped forward in a posture of aged dignity close to the altar. Somehow he makes me think of a young Abe Lincoln. Young women are led around and in by their elders; the sick and simple are brought forward. The earth becomes wet with spit. The drums beat. We move in a circle around the center, but the center does not radiate out. Rather it absorbs our energy. It is dark, inchoate, liminal. A bardo space, the votive pit in Hades in which Odysseus spilled the blood of the ewe and ram, and poured libations to summon the unnumbered dead... a terminal where the spirits negotiate their transit to other worlds.

Then the power goes out, and candles are lit, blazing, scintillating around the forms of the dancers in white. It's breathtakingly beautiful, and I begin to understand the dance. Power of old Africans, pulse rising from the earth, ayahusaca working through the body. I am grateful that I am allowed to dance on the periphery and not drawn in. I do fear these spirits. I am not ready to experience *atuação*, or mediumship, with the spirits of Umbanda.

An old man is dancing out there in the crowd; a mulatto, stringy from a life of hard work, dirt poor. Sean has taken a seat and I walk over and clap him on the back. We're both smiling in rapture.

"See that old man?" Sean asks me, tipping his head in the old forest worker's direction.

"Yep. He's been checking us out."

"I want to be an old man like him, drinking ayahuasca and dancing with the spirits."

We decide we love this old man.

The old man comes around in the circle of dancers again and we watch him. He pretends not to be observing us, but I smile and give him the thumbs-up sign. He breaks into a huge grin and nods back at us. He must love us too.

The dance concludes in the dark of the early morning. Sean and I ride back together in a taxi. He

turns to me from the front seat and says, "Man, I don't know how I am going to return to my life in California after this." My own life in California is so inconceivably distant and inapplicable; I can only nod in agreement. My Western intellect, which I had imagined as being fairly open, has had all its fundamental premises blown this evening. The only useful shred of the Western Intellectual Tradition I can think of is, "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Luis and I are supposed to meet in the center of Rio Branco, not far from where I stood earlier in the day watching children leap from the girders of the bridge into the brown swirling waters of the river fifty feet below. A smell of burning plastic wafts through the marketplace, but bars selling pitchers of juice made to order from the cornucopia of fruit growing in the Amazon compensate for the stench. It's a couple days later, and Sean has been pretty much shut up in his hotel room since the night at the Barquinha, playing guitar and watching Brazilian television. I'm out and about, but have the same problem as he: What does one do with one's life after having gone to the heavenly realms? The world seems dull and grey in comparison.

This evening is solely a work of mantra, of praise, and while I still don't know what to make of tantra, I have a deep feeling of gratitude for my experience of it. Luis appears and while we wait for a local bus to take us to the Barquinha church, a young man, his hair and beard gone wild, comes ranting through the station, a voice crying from the wilderness, and a sign of the strength of the evangelical movement in Acre. The Brazilians don't seem to do anything halfway in this land of spirits. What voice speaks through him? I wonder. Are we not all equal in this? Are we not all dreaming?

The bus comes and we board. We talk about the situations in Brazil especially designed to push a North American's buttons, and I hesitate the opinion that sometimes anger can help set things straight.

Luis turns and looks me in the eyes. "There is never any reason to get angry. Ever."

I look back and realize he is right. Fierce defense in preservation of the world is one thing. Anger at a person or situation is another. North Americans, I realize, have an illusion of a right to elbow room that Brazilians know doesn't exist. In fact, we even accept anger as a kind of social lubricant. I fall silent. The truth is, I've been sick. Changing the subject, he explains to me that when the *preto velhos* come that

evening and atuar in the bodies and minds of the mediums of the church, I can go for an interview with one of them. He will translate for me. I will need him especially because the old Africans speak with very thick, archaic accents.

Later that evening a little girl comes and taps my thigh while I sit in the church, gesturing for me to follow. I enter a back room with another floor of hard packed red earth. Those who had been possessed by the preto velhos earlier in the evening have taken up their places within, lined up against the walls in their consultories, altars of African and Christian figures by their sides, pipes smoking. It's a scene transported straight from Africa.

Luis meets me at the door and leads me up to small black woman with a grave but pleasant expression, sitting close to the earth on a stool, a pipe in her hand. She is not old, but somehow she gives the impression of being wizened. I take another stool and sit before her. I'm told I can ask her any question, if I have an illness she can work on it, anything I want. I ask a question and the answer she gives is simple and clear—grandmotherly wisdom. She adds it would help if I light a candle to my guardian spirit and take a shower with certain herbs. I relax. Whoever these old Africans may be, they're thoroughly down to earth.

"Open your hands," she tells me.

She stands and puts her palms on mine, and then lightly feathers my forehead, saying prayers over me. She sits back down and regards me shrewdly. I thank her. I tell her I am very happy to be here.

"You are very welcome to our church," she replies.

Luis, who has been translating, adds, "I think they like you."

I make a short bow and go out.

The romería finishes for the evening, but the daime is not done with me. Standing outside trying to speak I find my eyes closing and my consciousness drifting off. My interlocutor, Laura, realizes I am beginning another *miração* and she finds me a chair and puts me at the foot of the cross in the garden. The daime is coming on very strong indeed, and I suddenly feel nauseous with fear and adrift in a dark cloud. I take out my prayer beads and struggling to seize the tiller of my consciousness, begin my abbreviated form of the rosary.

Soon my head is tilted back and a warm light is pouring down from above—am I imagining this? Is this really a hand I feel on my forehead?

Margerie from São Paulo appears out of the night, delighted, and pulls up a seat beside me as I am swept into warm colors and light in profound adoration of

Maria. I open my eyes and it is as if they have finally focused: I am in a garden of eternity. The colored lights on the cross that had drawn me upward go out, and a little girl runs up and leaves a candle burning before us. Through the *miração*, I see a woman in white kneeling across the way. As Maria speaks to me waves of gentleness reach recesses of my heart I had despaired of touching. I am crying with joy.

Laura joins us. The women are delighted, stroking my back and laughing with me, and first Laura sings a hymn to Maria, and then Margerie gets excited and leafs through a book in the darkness and finds one of her own. I feel left out because I don't know a song to Maria. But then I remember The Beatles' "Let it Be." I sing. Cheesy as it sounds, it is exquisite, like breathing diamonds and stars out into the universe.

The last time we see Luis he takes us to his home. We cross the Rio Branco and enter the park named after Chico Mendez, pass the scored rubber trees and enter a small compound of slat-board houses raised upon stilts. A family is washing themselves at the community water trough as we file by upon the wooden planks that provided a walkway through the mud. A simple padlock hangs at his door. We enter the tiny space, dominated by a refrigerator, fan, and an ironing board. A few books sit on his shelf. The room bespeaks his voluntary, disciplined frugality. We sit on his bed and he pours us glasses of *guarana*, the ubiquitous Brazilian soft drink. Luis' work is going well. He tells us how his plans to set up collectives and train forest workers, allowing them to reap the wealth of the forest while sustaining it for future generations, are meeting acceptance in the new socialist-minded government of Lula. As well, the power to enforce these new environmental and indigenous rights laws is being given, without which they would be meaningless in Brazil.

In my last image of Luis he is standing with a hymnal in his hand, singing for us about the stars guiding us on, about the *caboclos*—helping spirits of the Umbanda spiritual tradition related to the spirit of the natives of the forest—and about Santa Maria, the sacred use of *cannibas sativa*, more commonly known as marijuana, to worship the Virgin Mary. The songs have the simplicity and melodic beauty of medieval plainchant, as well as the depth of religious feeling. His high, clear voice competes with the television that his neighbors, right on the other side of the thin slat-board wall separating their domiciles, have turned on and set blasting. Luis shows no impatience at all.

A buffalo emerges out of the darkness with a slow,

stately gait, an apparition of gentle strength in the thick jungle surrounding the *Forteleza*. It is two weeks after my visit to the Santo Daime community in Alto Santo, weeks filled with ceremonies that seem to have anointed my eyes with spirit: the buffalo moves as symbol, both part of and transcendent to the world. As we had searched down roads of thick mud, pulling up to *fazendeiro's* shacks to ask directions, the sun set over the vast, open landscape dotted by cattle and gigantic palm trees and I wondered if we would ever find this elusive "fortress" out there in the jungle. But we did, and as we ascend a winding path I can see on the horizon above another brilliantly lit open-air structure like the church at Alto Santo. The sound of singing reaches our ears, accompanied by the hum of a generator.

Beneath the Caravaca Cross, I attempt to scrape the mud off my shoes. The feeling out here is raw frontier, only the most basic essentials, the church floating on its little concrete slab like a postage stamp on a verdant sea. The scenario is similar to the one at Alto Santo. Men and women are dancing opposite one another with the maracas, the band jamming away in the center. But there are differences. Here the men wear business suits; blue slacks and jacket, white shirt and blue tie. It gives me pause. While the guys in the suits at Alto Santo meant business, the fact the suits were white with a green pinstripe gave them the aspect of a chorus line in a cabaret, taking the edge off of my own Pavlovian reactions to the uniform. This seems almost evangelical. A little alarm goes off in my mind. Suits spell danger, the world of narrow-minded authority I have never learned to fully trust.

I am taken to drink. A very ample cup is poured for me. I toss it down and go and sit, feeling some resistance in myself and wondering what it could be. I watch the little children of the *Forteleza*, who dance in their own sections, singing the hymns from memory, and then running off to play together. I attempt to follow the music, to surrender myself to the experience, but the reverse is happening. The monotony of the singing, the concrete, the florescent lights, are becoming unendurable. Why can't they use natural lights? I complain. It is impossible to travel through florescent lights. They're a brick wall into the world of spirit. I stare at the concrete pad, feeling absolutely cut off from the earth. Suddenly my body launches me out of the structure, across the lawn, past someone vomiting in the darkness to the outer perimeter of the compound, where I lean upon a post and look off into the jungle. I'm feeling torn between worlds. The jungle is out there calling while I am stuck with my obligations within the compound. The human world against the

natural world. As I have done so many times in my life, I lean against the fence and gaze with yearning into the freedom outside.

My head drops onto the post. A *miração* washes over me, and I hear the voice of grandmother *ayahuasca* speaking to me. She says, "You have the ability to transform into an animal. It's a precious gift you have been given, but not everyone can understand it. You can live in both worlds, the human and the animal, and move back and forth without impedance."

I am deep in this dream when I hear the sound of approaching footsteps behind me. I turn around and see that two men in suits, *fardadoes*, have come out for me. Ah yes, the Brazilian imperative to incorporate into the group. "Yes, I am fine. Quite well, actually. Thank you so much for coming to check on me. I will return momentarily..." I dissemble, but to no avail. I realize they are concerned that in my state a spirit might attack me or I will be led off by a will-o'-the-wisp into the forest. I surrender and return to the safety of the church. I know I am radiating foreignness at the moment, but I cannot sit with the others, and I find a seat on the outskirts and clutch my prayer beads, holding on for the rest that is to come.

It comes hard, waves of repressed material bubbling up and bursting in my mind. It is the *apuração*, the stage of purification, the emptying out of the storehouses of consciousness. Working my prayer beads, struggling toward the light, I find myself gesticulating and grimacing and can imagine what I must look like to the watchful *fardadoes*. But there is nothing for it. I am holding on for dear life.

Then a spirit flashes into my consciousness. An Apollonian face, a superhero in green with eternal, beautiful young man's vitality. Hermes, messenger of the gods. His piercing eyes meet mine and I know him and his hand flashes out and he slaps a jewel into my forehead and is gone.

"A spirit just came and put a jewel in my forehead," I say to myself in the rich silence he leaves in his wake. "Cool."

Jewels, of course, have medicinal properties. As the *miração* unfolds further, I see how my masculine life was being subtly warped by my adversarial relationship to my father, how my resisting of his conservative perspectives was preventing the growth of aspects of my own masculinity. I see the only possible stance toward my father is veneration, and to allow all superfluous material to fall away. After all, he is the father that gave me life, and through him is one avenue to the Father. Only through complete acceptance of my own father could I develop as a fully real-

ized male in my own right, I realize.

I can stand again, and I go in to join the congregation. As soon as I pick up a maraca to enter the line the music stops. Standing there like the guy who missed the train, someone approaches me and takes me to meet the padrinho, Luis Mendez do Nascimento, who had been a disciple of Mestre Irineu. He is a small, thin old man, a forest worker with a beaming face who when I am introduced asks me if the Fortelesa had been difficult to find. I answer it was “well-hidden,” and we both burst into delighted laughter.

People are taking seats in preparation for something. I find myself seated smack in the middle of the congregation, fully integrated back into the human world listening to an impassioned, learned disquisition on the economic history of Acre. The speaker, a university professor, orates before us without notes, focusing his story around the figure of the *seringueiro*, the rubber-tapper whose impoverished, solitary existence, as well as his heartless exploitation by the capitalists and landowners, is remembered and honored at the Fortelesa. It was, I realized, a Marxist analysis—or a Christian one—where the poor worker, the least of men, is the fundament of the entire economic superstructure, and as the gospels repeatedly stress, the very person of Christ. The padrinho sits, his legs crossed like a gentleman, listening with rapt attention, as does the rest of the congregation. As the narrative takes up the story of Chico Mendez, given with great veneration and a specificity of detail that reflects the depth of grief still existing within the elders of the community, I realize that the man has been speaking for over two hours and there is still no sign of restlessness in the group. Nor is his energy flagging, unlike my own. The discourse concludes with a vision of humanity’s collaboration with the forest, of the salvific power now emerging from it, and of economic justice for all people of Acre.

I am again struck by wonder for this frontier of humanity. Where in the United States, I think, would people sit and attend to a discourse of such depth and vision about their own community and its future, as we once had done in the founding and early days of our own country?

The speechifying continues far into the morning. I realize through my exhausted haze that the padrinho is welcoming me to the church. Then to my astonishment, in the ultimate gesture of acceptance of me as a visitor, he cries out, “Viva os Estados Unidos!” “Long Live the United States!” There are few places indeed upon this earth where the common people will still cry

out for the long life of the United States of America. But now I understand. Venerate the father, and by so doing awake him to his true nature.

The Kaxinawa Indians are sitting in plain view the entire time, but it takes me two weeks to notice them. Finally, browsing through the brilliant seed necklaces and bows and arrows in a little trading post in the center of the park in Rio Branco, I take a good look at the Indian behind the counter: small indeed in stature, high cheekbones, jet black hair, a sing-song accent to his Portuguese, and a deep sense of self-possession in his brown eyes. Suddenly inspired, I reach into my backpack and pull out my journal, flipping hastily to the back pages where I have my list of contacts. “You wouldn’t happen to know Fabiano Kaxinawa?” I asked in my clumsy Portuguese.

“Yes. I am him,” he responds with amusement.

According to the Kaxinawa¹, knowledge of ayahuasca was received by their ancestor from a village of anacondas. A hunter named Yube, seeing an anaconda emerge from a lake and transform into a beautiful woman, made love to her and returning to her village, married her. After a year his snake wife told him there would be a ceremony with *nixi pai*, ayahuasca, and warned him not to drink: “You will become scared and will call out the name of my people and they will kill you.” But the hunter drank anyways and cried out in terror, “The snakes are swallowing me!” When the hunter cried out, his wife coiled herself lovingly around him and began singing sweetly in his right ear. Then his mother-in-law did the same thing, singing in his left ear. Finally, his father-in-law coiled himself around all three of them and placing his face upon the hunter’s forehead, accompanied the song as well. But still, the anacondas were offended and he only managed to escape from the lake with the help of a little bods fish who returned him to his human wife and home. But his anaconda family got him in the end, crushing all the bones in his body. He remained alive only long enough to instruct the people in the making of the brew and the songs he had learned in the snake world. He died and where he was buried four kinds of ayahuasca grew from his limbs, each of which when drunk show a different part of his life.

The work is held far outside of Rio Branco, at a center the Kaxinawa have created as a bridge between cultures. Recognizing that isolation is no longer an option for them, but also clear they do not wish to lose themselves into the maelstrom of dislocation and economic anonymity of Brazilian culture, they have opted to become bicultural. The Kaxinawa themselves come

to the center to learn Portuguese, how to ride a bicycle, how to work an ATM and a cellular phone, while non-natives such as ourselves come to be educated in the ways of the Kaxinawa. Walking through the compound we encounter classrooms with chalkboards and ancestral figures, rough-hewn and primitive to uneducated European eyes.

A fear is eating at me as we take our places for the ceremony in an elegant wooden structure with a high sloped roof of woven palm fronds, that ayahuasca really is just a sort of Prozac, temporarily lifting the mind up, but not going to the root of our being's dilemma. That I am fooling myself and will return to California with some good stories but the same old self. I am weary too of the fundamentalism of Daime. The doctrine, salvadores, messengers, the weary repetition of the word Jesus—not as a mantra to enter the divine, but as a vaguely oppressive fixture of belief—and the casting of the entire movement into a New Testament mold. Then a young guitarist who accompanied us turns out to be a strange bird: a daime evangelist. His attempts to dominate the group go on until I begin grumbling that if I don't have to hear the word "Jesus" again for a year I won't be at all displeased.

The Kaxinawa sit patient and vigilant, happily joining in with the songs about our precious savior Jesus. But the Kaxinawa work with ayahuasca, not daime, and I saw that evening that daime is only a brief portion of the territory of grandmother ayahuasca. The brew they chose is a light one, a very gentle visitation which, when it comes, makes me put my hands on the earth: things, dear, fresh, particular things; the earth, our ground, to bring me home again.

We wear red stripes on our faces. The young men of the tribe wear headdresses and crowns of feathers, feathers of flight spring from their upper arms. When the evangelical portion of the evening subsides, they sing into the night like an animal sings into it, like the forest sings to itself, in its native tongue, accompanying themselves with flute and maracas. Portuguese and English, even the guitar itself, seems a rude imposition upon this world, even as we attempt to praise it with our barbaric Indo-European tongues and instruments.

And so the natives rock us into the night with invocations and sounds such as we have never encountered before, ending each song with bursts of child-like giggling. At the end of one, Fabiano, who turns out to be an apprentice shaman, explains to us that the entire tribe gathers to sing that piece whenever someone is leaving the village for a long journey, to wish them happiness and good-fortune on their way. The image of a people gathering to sing for one another, thereby

opening and creating a dreaming way through the forest, makes me lament anew the cold mechanisms of my own culture with its straight-cut roads lined with advertisements—the culture responsible for, as of this date, the killing of 85% of the Kaxinawa people.

As we leave a huge white bird cuts the early morning sky, a lean aerodynamic ascetic, all stomach and bill, honed to transparency by his habitat. I watch him with awe as he sails over the forest, from which a rich symphony of sound is now emerging. I and the forest and the albatross all caught up in the same dream of Pachamama.

Author Note

"Fear no Spirits" is excerpted from a forthcoming book, "The Jaguar that Roams the Mind," a narrative pilgrimage into the medicines of the Amazon rainforest. After the Brazilian section, the pilgrim continues on his way to Takiwasi, a center for the treatment of addiction, and then to an apprenticeship with the master healer Juan Flores Salazar at his Mayantuyacu center in the jungle outside of Pucallpa, Peru.

End Note

1 The Kaxinawa ayahuasca myth is adopted from "Two Ayahuasca Myths from the Cashinahua of Northwestern Brazil" by Elsje Maria Lagrou (2000).

References

Lagrou, E. M. (2000). Two ayahuasca myths from the Cashinahua of Northwestern Brazil. In L. E. Luna and S. F. White (Eds.). *Ayahuasca reader* (pp. 31-35). Santa Fe, NM: Synergetic Press.

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