

Based in Rio de Janeiro, **Ineke Holtwijk** was Latin America correspondent for over fifteen years for, among others, *de Volkskrant* and national television news. In 1995 she published *Cannibals in Rio* about life in Brazil, which won her the Golden Donkey Ear (a prize for the best-selling literary debut of the year). That same year her children's book *Asphalt Angels* appeared, about a street child in Rio. In 1999 she published *Nostalgia for the Horizon*, a collection of travel stories about Latin America.



The press on *Asphalt Angels*:

Unparalleled depiction of life on the streets. PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

Readers will inhabit Alex's life, for a time, and they will understand and admire him deeply. KIRKUS



PUBLISHING DETAILS

Rooksignalen, Op zoek naar de laatste verborgen indianen in Brazilië (2006)

356 pp (96,000 words)

With illustrations, notes and references



TRANSLATED TITLES

Asphalt Angels. Asheville (NC):

Front Street, 1998. Also in German

(Aare, 1999).



RIGHTS

Atlas

Herengracht 481

NL - 1017 BT Amsterdam

T +31 20 524 98 00

F +31 20 627 68 51

E mnagtegaal@amsteluitgevers.nl

www.uitgeverijatlas.nl

NLPVF

Singel 464

NL - 1017 AW Amsterdam

T +31 20 620 62 61

T +31 20 620 71 79

E mail.office@nlpvf.nl

www.nlpvf.nl

Ineke Holtwijk

Smoke Signals In Search of the Last Undiscovered Indians of Brazil

It is amazing to discover that in a country as modern as Brazil at least fifteen totally unknown native Indian tribes live deep in the Amazon rainforest; no one can say what kind of language they speak, what they call themselves or what their customs are. In 1995 a group of semi-naked nomads was discovered only twenty kilometres from the inhabited world, in Rondônia, which lies across the main transit route for cocaine from Bolivia. Rapid tree clearance had caught them by surprise and stranded them in a small stretch of forest surrounded by pasture.

On behalf of Funai, the Brazilian government organisation for native peoples, the sertanista Marcelo – wilderness guide, explorer, ethnographer and human rights activist – led a mission to seek out the last native peoples of Rondônia. He is one of the key figures in journalist Ineke Holtwijk's fascinating book. When she heard

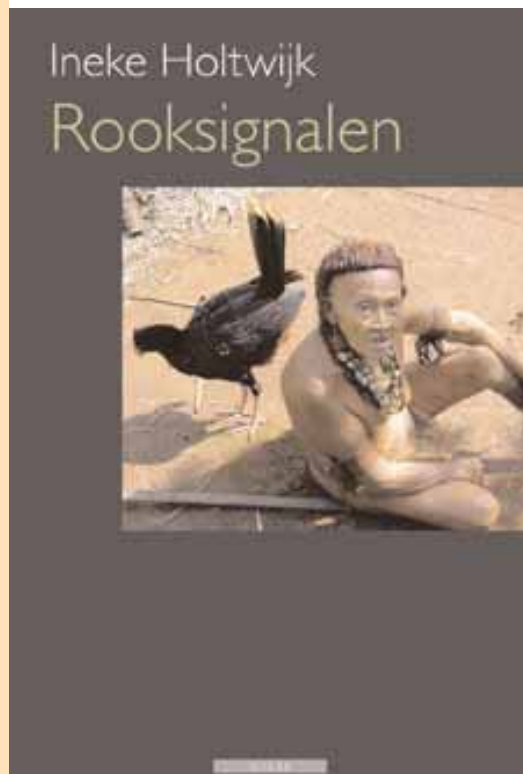
about the stranded Indians, she travelled to Rondônia and accompanied Marcelo on his expeditions. She studied the group of Indians for ten years, deeply moved as she witnessed their introduction to the western world.

The eleven natives turned out to be the last survivors of two primitive tribes and their reactions to modernity were very different. One family was inquisitive and eager, skilfully copying the whites. The other group, led by the clever shaman Babá, shunned the strange white people who answered the call of nature in holes in the ground and shot monkeys out of the trees with tubes that went bang.

Holtwijk immersed herself in the history of the Brazilian Indians, a history now tragically bound up with clear-felling. She talked to experts, among them a specialist in Indian languages who warns that Rondônia is going the way of California. Not one of the more than a hundred languages once spoken there by local Indians has survived.

Books about Amazonian Indians usually look at only one side of the story, whereas Holtwijk shows us the complex reality of the Amazon, with its drugs trade, advancing soya cultivation, illegal logging, corruption and increasingly bitter battles over land.

Holtwijk holds the reader's attention on every page. Travel description and research form a seamless whole, with close attention to detail and atmosphere, so that the reader comes to dread the approaching dénouement. Holtwijk makes the tension, emotion and excitement of first contact tangible and explores the unavoidable dilemmas it presents. Is it not truly remarkable, the author notes with astonishment the first time she watches a confrontation, 'to be able to witness our own pre-history'?



Sample Translation

Smoke Signals

In Search of the Last Undiscovered Indians of Brazil

(Rooksignalen)

by Ineke Holtwijk

(Amsterdam: Atlas, 2006)

Translated by S.J. Leinbach

[chapter 5, pages 85-99]

Paying a Visit

I am awakened by the sound of screeching parrots. The sheet is wadded up at the bottom of the hammock. I'm in the jungle, and it's been over a year since Marcelo first stood face to face with the Indians. My forehead is wet, and droplets of moisture cover my whole body, which is sweating like a block of Gouda in the sun. Last night the jungle veterans next to me crawled under the insect netting in nothing but their boxer shorts, but anticipating a nocturnal mosquito onslaught, I got decked out like a knight on his way to the Crusades: long sleeves, jogging pants and socks. But all this came at a price; the steamy garments cling to every inch of me.

Light gushes in through the hole in the hut that serves as a door. Marcelo's hammock is empty, and the mosquito net is hanging over the beam above, twisted into a braid. I gather that I'm the last one to get up since I don't see any tell-tale bulges on the undersides of the other hammocks. I find my campmates sitting around the wooden table in the kitchen. We have company. On the end of the bench sits a small woman with yellowish brown skin and slanted, Asiatic eyes. Stick-like legs protrude from grubby shorts, and her bare chest is crisscrossed by colorful plastic necklaces which I recognize from the photograph of the Kanoê in the newspaper. Something resembling a bone is sticking through her nose. A skullcap sits atop her smooth, almost clean-shaven head. This moon woman looks me over from head to toe, and I do the same to her. The astonishment over our respective dimensions is mutual.

'This is Wajmoró,' Selma says.

We shake hands and smile at each other. Clucking, gurgling noises come bubbling out of Wajmoró's throat. Our interpreter Munuzinho translates: 'You afraid of me. I afraid of you. You very big. You look like jaguar.'

It must be the tiger-print shirt I had thrown on without much thought. When taken out of their context, things acquire new meaning. What passes for fashion in the world of asphalt can signify an ancestral spirit in the jungle. In the world of the Amazonian Indians, the dead often return as animals, and I've read that the jaguar is a popular choice for reincarnated spirits. To complicate matters further, their mythology also envisions the converse: jaguars who pretend to be people. Could this Indian think that I'm an ancestral spirit?

Wajmoró gives me nothing to go on in that department. She hasn't finished examining me, not by a long shot, and is now inspecting my legs with great interest.

'Everything big and fat. Pretty,' she says.

Considering that 'big' and 'fat' are probably the biggest compliments you can receive from a malnourished people, I thank the Kanoê with a slight bow. She laughs, and then I see black teeth that have been filed to a point. Another physical ideal we don't share.

'The Kanoê heard the jeep drive in yesterday, and Wajmoró was here at six in the morning to size up the situation,' says Marcelo, coming over from the vegetable garden behind the kitchen. He was inspecting the cassava plants, long green stems with thin, finger-shaped leaves.

'But I thought they lived in another forest? How could they have heard that?'

'Indians hear a lot more than we do. If it's quiet to you, they can hear an airplane approaching in the distance.'

I know from Marcelo that Cousin Wajmoró is the most cheerful of the Kanoê. When she stays at the camp, she often begins singing songs in her hammock long before daybreak.

I spoon down my breakfast, as Wajmoró follows every movement. Amazonian cuisine turns out to have a new surprise in store for me: porridge made from a 'milk' consisting of finely ground Brazil nuts.

‘First thing is to pay a visit to the Akuntsu.’ Marcel says. The Akuntsu live alternately in three different villages. The day before our arrival, Paulo encountered them in the huts nearest the Funai¹ post, a good hour’s hike away.

‘If they’re not in the first village, it’s going to be quite a trek. The other huts are deep in the forest,’ Marcelo informs me. ‘If they’re even there.’

Marcelo has seen signs that they are about to pull out. Babá had confided in the interpreter Passaká that they were going on a hunting expedition. I know from the field reports what this can entail: sometimes the whole family comes along and the expedition lasts for days. They sleep under makeshift shelters made of palms or just spend the night in the open air, a simple hammock as their bed.

‘Hurry up. Let’s get a move on,’ Marcelo ordered. ‘We need to get there before they run off.’

He hasn’t been to see the Indians in a week, and that makes him restless. The Akuntsu come to the camp only sporadically, and contact with them is unstable. If something rubs them up the wrong way, they may disappear for a couple of weeks, possibly in retaliation, Marcelo thinks.

I grab my things and decide to play it safe by dousing any exposed body part with insect spray I bought in Holland as well as No Pick, a mosquito-repellant miracle soap I picked up in the jungles of Colombia.

Wajmoró, the moon woman, is sulking. She wants us to visit the Kanoê village first.

‘The Kanoê look down on the Akuntsu. They see them as filthy wild Indians,’ one of the men explains.

Marcelo has taken the discontented Wajmoró aside under a palm tree and speaks to her with the help of Munuzinho the interpreter. It is a tender scene. He takes her one hand and Munuzinhu the other. ‘We’re definitely coming to visit you. You can tell Txinamanty. We’ll be there soon. The new white woman will come to your village too.’

¹ Fundação Nacional do Índio, the Brazilian Indian Protection Agency

He hands her two slaughtered chickens, which we bought on our way here. Wajmoró immediately rolls the meat in green leaves and puts it in her carrying basket, which is already filled with maize and various leaf-packets, whose contents are a mystery. She walks to the kitchen and takes a look inside the backpacks, to see what we are taking to the Akuntsu. Then she makes the rounds of the sleeping hut, where our hammocks and clothing are, peering in the other bags to find out what else we're taking. She apparently agrees with our choices, as she now begins lethargically preparing her own departure in the kitchen. She swings the basket onto her back and slips the envira handle onto her forehead. She picks up her machete and the bow and bundle of arrows which have been leaning against the tree-trunk wall of the kitchen the whole time, and claps them under her arm.

Without so much as glancing in our direction, she leaves the camp.

'It's a constant problem,' Marcelo says. 'If the Kanoê had their way, the Akuntsu would get nothing from us. They want the best for themselves and want to have everything first.' He starts rummaging around on the kitchen counter.

'Where's the rope?' The rope we bought at the supermarket in Vilhena belongs in the backpack. It's a present for Babá, the Akuntsu chief.

'In the back of the Toyota,' Paulo replies. He is standing by the table, loading a cartridge into the rifle he cleaned the night before.

'Have you got tobacco? Babá asked us for tobacco yesterday,' Paulo asks. He closes the chamber with a click. Then he holds the rifle up to his shoulder to check the sight. The gun is coming with us. Revolvers and rifles are standard issue for Funai field workers. There's always a chance of running into a jaguar or an aggressive wild boar. 'But mainly it's in case we come across a tasty piece of meat,' observes Chico, the man who enjoys monkey meat in nut milk. The guns are also meant to discourage the Indians from attacking the aid workers. A 'tribe' with firearms commands respect. Peaceable contact with isolated Indians does not rule out the possibility of a subsequent attack. The Indians have their own logic, and besides, they have every reason to be deeply suspicious of whites. In the last 25 years, 150 Funai field workers have been killed by Indians who were either wild or

who had only recently been contacted. But it was against the rules to shoot at the Indians, even in self-defence, even if arrows were whizzing past your ears. *Morrer se preciso for, matar nunca* is their guiding principle: ‘Die if necessary, but never kill.’

From the perspective of the post at Omerê, the Kanoê live to the right and the Akuntsu to the left. The Kanoê are nearer, in a forest on the other side of the hilly, grass-covered plain, over which Marcelo and I had a bumpy ride the night before. The Akuntsu live in another forest, which begins on the other side of the creek.

The stream is spanned by a tree trunk. This improvised bridge proves to be the first obstacle on the way to the Akuntsu. I put on my game face and gulp. The trunk is dishearteningly round, mossy and slippery, and to make matters worse, the ‘bridge’ is angled upwards. The water flows past, seven meters below. The banks are steep, the prospects mixed.

‘The BBC reporter who was here a few weeks ago fell off with all his gear around his neck.’

‘Don’t look down; you’ll get dizzy.’

‘That’s the best place to climb back up if you fall in the creek.’ Chico helpfully points out the tree roots protruding from the muddy slope, which I can use to pull myself to safety, in case of a mishap.

But sometimes a person can surpass herself. With my gaze fixed on a non-existent horizon, I climb onto the tree trunk and shuffle to the other side.

We goosetstep our way through the forest, with Chico leading the way, swinging his machete left and right, clears away branches. A path in the jungle only stays a path for a few days. We form a complete delegation: apart from Chico, the group consists of Selma the nurse, Passaká the interpreter, Marcelo with the backpack and Paulo with the rifle. Everyone wanted to come along, happy to have a break in the routine. Munuzinho stayed behind to man the post.

We climb and squish, rise and fall. The ground is springy thanks to a thick layer of decomposing leaves. It is dark in the forest, and it smells mildewy and moist.

With its fallen, rotting trees and leaves, a jungle is a forest in a permanent state of decay.

There are ferns the size of bushes, but most trees are as thin as lampposts. They have to climb skyward if they are to get any light. Everything is green, with the exception of orange mosses and the occasional waxy red flower.

It is warm and insects buzz around us. Every now and then we stop to listen to the birds. One of them shrieks as mercilessly as a whistling kettle. But there are also birds that coo or produce gentle trills or tuneful melodies. The variety of sounds is a surprise. One of the birds makes a noise like the sound of a gurgling stream, amplified a hundred times. Marcelo points to its nest: a woven basket hanging from a branch with an opening underneath.

After ten years of intensive exploration, Marcelo can see at once where the Indians have been. He points to notches in tree trunks, which they carve in search of larvae, and bark that has been hacked away in order to make rope from the envira on the inside. Broken twigs are the first sign that Indians have been past. 'Indians don't cut branches, they break them.' He recognizes footprints in the forest floor and can tell whether they were left by whites or Indians. Indians always walk barefoot; this means their toes are spaced further apart.

Before I left on this trip, I put in some extra hours on the treadmill at the gym in Rio de Janeiro. That seemed like adequate preparation for the physical exertions that my stay in the jungle would require. Setting 5 (climbing and descending) was a walk in the park compared to the handicap race I am now subjecting myself to.

There are slippery slopes, soggy patches of quicksand, and treacherous holes, concealed under a thick layer of leaves. The liana are tough stalks, some as thick as my arm. They cover the ground like netting and tie bushes and branches together, creating an impenetrable wall. I am tripped up by a liana many a time.

Walking through the jungle also turns out to involve a lot of crouching: there are bushes with razor-sharp thorns that can rip open your clothes, branches that smack you in the face, trees with needles that can pierce your skin through three layers of clothing and others that secrete a sticky substance that could give super

glue a run for its money. In addition to all the hills that have to be climbed, there are countless fallen trees that block our path like barriers at a tollbooth. Sometimes they are high (i.e. thick), soft (i.e. half rotted) and slippery, and there's nothing to do but to climb over them on our hands and knees. Along the way I count a total of 22 tree-trunk bridges which I now scamper over without so much as batting an eye.

This exhausting trek takes place in a steam bath: leaves, tree trunks, ferns, mosses – everything seems to exude moisture. Rivulets of sweat run past my hairline and down my back. My eyes fill up too, and my denim jeans stick to my legs. There's no sense in wiping it off, and in this humidity, evaporation is out of the question.

'You can hardly keep up with the Indians, when you go on a hunt with them,' Marcelo says as he gives me his hand to help me over a gigantic stump. 'They run through the forest.' I can't imagine it. At the suggestion of Selma the nurse, I tucked the legs of my jeans into my socks. I also borrowed a cap from her. At first I turned down the offer because of the heat, but a story about huge swarms of wasps that drop from the trees the moment a footstep causes the ground below to vibrate, persuaded me of the value of a head covering.

A Noah's ark of creepy-crawlies is lurking around every corner, just waiting to make a meal out of me. An exotic menu of pink city meat doesn't come by every day. There are ticks, wasps, ants – in various sizes and colours – which bite, and mosquitoes, which leave large, red, stiff blotches on my arm. Selma warns me about especially stubborn and invisible invaders, like the louse that crawls up your trouser leg and marches straight for your crotch. This glutton can't be removed – even with alcohol – and it causes the most awful itching. Another unwanted visitor is the *bicho do pé*, the chigger. The female bores into the skin to lay her eggs. The hole she creates is too small to be seen, but after a few days a hard white lump with a black tip will appear, which then steadily increases in size. If the chigger happens to nestle in the sole of your foot, shooting pains make walking sheer agony. The only way of getting rid of this subcutaneous menace is to wait a few days and cut it out with a knife. The coalition of Bayer repellent and Colombia No Pick is

powerless in the face of such a hostile invasion. But, as I tell myself, there's no point in fearing the inevitable.

To Marcelo's relief – and mine even more so – we find the Akuntsu in the first village. They heard us coming. An older skinny man with a big smile suddenly emerges from the bushes. 'That's Babá,' whispers Selma, who is walking behind me. With his squinty eyes, Babá also has something Chinese about him, but he is a shade darker than Wajmoró and his features are coarser. Babá has on filthy Bermuda shorts and a T-shirt. A bundle of envira rope dangles down his back like a long plume. When we come closer I see that under his T-shirt he is wearing necklaces, which, like those of the Kanoê, had once been plastic buckets. He also has a cheery piece of bucket hanging from each ear.

The reception is ebullient. Babá does not seem to want to let go of Marcelo's hand. From time to time he tugs at Marcelo's arm and stomach as if to say: looks like you've put on a pound or two. Everyone is all smiles. Then Babá walks ahead of us across an cluttered field of maizestalks and cassava plants.

We end up at a clearing with two huts of greying palm leaves and a free-standing shelter. Together the huts form a semi-circle, which makes the space between seem like a corral. Four women with curious eyes approach us. I recognize them as Babá's wives and daughters from pictures Marcelo showed me.

They have swollen bellies and are much shorter than I had imagined; not one of them comes above my armpit. All are naked, apart from necklaces and arm and leg decorations. Their skin is spotty with dirt, and their straight, jet-black hair is cut at right angles, leaving their foreheads exposed. One of the women and one of the daughters appear to have a tic. Their upper bodies lean forwards and shudder, a movement which is sometimes accompanied by a small step.

On the shoulder of the girl sits a toucan who is calmly taking it all in. 'Indians often have a parrot or monkey as a pet. Mostly they just take it from the nest and adopt it,' Marcelo explains. The women comment on us in excited tones. They take

hold of our hands and put them on their heads. Everyone gets this treatment, including me. One of the women puts my hand on her chest.

‘They seem to think you’re a nurse too,’ Selma says.

Then they point to my eyes. I’m the only one in the group with blue eyes and maybe the first such person the Akuntsu have ever seen. The women bring their faces close to mine and look intensely into my eyes, as if they want to see what lies behind them. This is followed by more animated commentary.

I am struck by how culture-bound our greeting rituals are, with all the polite phraseology surrounding them. Here, curiosity about the other is expressed without the slightest trace of embarrassment. The women grab and squeeze my breasts.

Marcelo chuckles. ‘You’re so big they can’t believe you’re a woman.’

When I unbutton my tropical shirt for further inspection, the women grunt in satisfaction.

The chief invites us to sit on benches. The women stand behind us and continue to chatter. The language they speak sounds like Chinese to my untrained ear: *oorooroo-wainay-ohmay-acheechee*. They sing like birds with constant variations in pitch.

Marcelo has sat down next to Babá. The Indian tells him a story, punctuated with expansive gestures. Making hissing noises, he imitates a snake that recently crossed his path. From the menacing gestures that follow – he makes a fist and waves both arms in the air, before dropping them again with a great expulsion of air – I gather that things didn’t turn out so well for the snake. Babá laughs the hardest of all at his own story, which he follows up with another adventure, also accompanied by copious gesticulating.

Passaká the interpreter apologizes: ‘I don’t understand everything. He speaks so differently from us.’

Babá, who is visibly pleased with the guests, does not seem to be bothered by the communication breakdown. He babbles away and smiles a lot.

‘They’re very needy,’ says Selma. ‘They want to show you everything; they want to learn everything about you. But it wouldn’t hurt if they washed themselves

once in a while.’ The women stand around her, pulling her hair and showing her various spots on their skin. They pay no attention to the small wasps swarming around them.

‘They have their own medicinal herbs for a lot of what ails them, but since seeing the pills and salves, that’s all they want.’ Selma is not happy about this new dependence. But a blunt ‘no’ would not be understood and could damage the fragile relationship. So out come the band-aids.

An ancient woman emerges from the most distant hut. That must be Ururu, possibly Babá’s sister. Is it because her skin hangs off her body in a thousand folds that she looks more naked than the others? She has difficulty walking. She is extremely bow-legged and her knees are thick lumps. Selma thinks her legs were deformed after she was crushed by a falling tree many years ago. ‘It’s a common hazard of jungle life.’

Ururu has a pet too. A reddish brown monkey hangs from her arms and regards us with curiosity. He follows a set route on the moving jungle gym that the old woman represents for him: hanging onto her armpit, he proceeds to her head and then scurries back down to the armpit via her neck, where he begins the whole process over again. Ururu pays absolutely no attention to the movements of the monkey. She picks up a stick, knocks a papaya out of a tree and lowers herself onto the ground a short distance from us with the help of the stick.

It is clear who lives where in this tiny settlement: the larger hut belongs to Babá and his wives and daughters, and the second hut is for the old woman and Pupak, the other man in the group, who is on a hunt at the moment. The free-standing shelter is used as a storehouse. Their supply of maize sits on a wooden rack, high enough off the ground that animals can’t get to it.

The Akuntsu are inventive handymen. The benches are short sections of tree trunks, flattened out on the underside, so they don’t wobble when you sit on them. On the top there are indentations for your buttocks. The wood is exceptionally light, so the benches can easily be transported. The huts are simple, disposable affairs: a few thin tree trunks are driven into the ground. Palm branches and fibres

are bound to the tree trunks, creating a framework over which two-metre-long (or longer) palms are laid. The ends of the longest palms meet at the top of the structure, forming a peaked roof. An opening in the front serves as an entrance. If the family is off on a hunt, the opening is closed with a separate partition made of palms.

The furniture consists of thin hammocks woven from fibres and crocheted rope bags and carrying baskets made of palm reeds for storage. These objects are arranged in a definite order. Items not needed for everyday use, like their supply of maize cobs or sowing seeds, are kept on a high pallet of thin trunks between several poles. Smaller objects, such as shells, are stored in sections of hollow bamboo. The bamboo tubes are sealed by a wad of leaves. The oblong and semi-circular pacova leaves, which look like boats, function as plates.

The leaves are multi-functional. You can roll up leftovers in them and take the little packets along on a journey. In the dry season the nights can be freezing cold. The Akuntsu have no blankets or cloths to sleep under. Underneath or alongside their hammocks, they build a fire, which is left burning the whole night. Fires were made with flint and a special piece of wood, until Marcelo introduced the Indians to matches and a lighter. At night the Akuntsu use torches for light: branches dipped in liquid rubber, which is tapped from a tree.

Everything in this miniature society is homemade from whatever resources the jungle provides. There is no waste. Presumably, the Akuntsu make their tools and implements with the same techniques developed by their ancestors thousands of years ago. The greatest change to occur in this miniature world in the last several centuries was probably Marcelo's introduction of two products from the outside: the knife and the lighter. In the isolation of the jungle, the source of knowledge is experience, passed from generation to generation, not external science. That's how it was for us – the Europeans – in the Stone Age. All of a sudden I realize how special this situation is: I am gazing into our own prehistory. This is more or less the way we lived as well. The Akuntsu are like Ötzi, the frozen mummy found in the Alps in the early 1990s. Ötzi lived in the Bronze Age and wore a goatskin

cloak, armed with a bow and arrows. Like the Akuntsu he had a basket he wore bound to his back, but instead of making his containers out of bamboo tubes, he used birch bark. In all likelihood Ötzi cut the goatskin with sharp rocks; before meeting Marcelo, the Akuntsu used not only rocks but also sharp pieces of bamboo and animal teeth. Ötzi was found with bits of birch fungus, a primitive laxative – his antibiotics. The Akuntsu have their herbs, leaves and bark.

And here I stand, a time traveller. I am looking at a way of life that has been frozen for millennia in this little patch of rainforest. I stand here in wonder, at us as well as the Indians. We get excited if we dig up pottery shards or axe heads from thousands of years ago. And how many scientists examined Ötzi in the hope of learning something more about own past? Every aspect of him has been analysed, including his DNA. A special museum was built in his honour, and his image adorns backpacks, lighters and mouse pads. The glacier mummy became a hero. Why don't we take the same care with the Akuntsu and the Kanoê, the last survivors of prehistoric peoples? They are our living prehistory, with their tools, religion and myths still intact.

Ururu quickly crept back to her hut, and I decide to follow her. When I enter her domain, she glances indifferently at me and goes about her business. She grinds the cassava into flour with a large wooden pestle. The pestle, which she holds in her left hand, comes down again and again with a dull thud. She has a large, muscular hand, a claw that looks out of place on her fragile body.

It's a lively household. Ururu sits on the ground, her legs folded, next to her fire, and the monkey swings wildly on a liana that hangs from the wall. Then he jumps around Ururu and starts licking her, staring at me all the while. There is also a parrot. He is kept in a bamboo tube with a wad of leaves in the top and let out if he makes a noise. When the monkey bothers the parrot, Ururu steps in and puts the bird in a bamboo cage. She never once looks in my direction. Occasionally she mutters something to herself. I might just as well not be there.

I admire this elderly woman. She no longer goes along on the hunting expeditions, Marcelo told me. But if the group moves to another hut, she goes with them. It must take a tremendous effort on her part: clambering over rocks and tree trunks with all your possessions on your back, and with those knees.

But does Ururu have a choice? Can she afford to show weakness in the obstacle course that is jungle? The sick and the weak are a burden to the group. If she doesn't want to be cast out, she will have to be strong. Ultimately, the most important thing is collective survival. It is customary for the Yanomami Indians, whom I visited in the early 1990s, to kill a baby after its birth if the mother has another child who cannot yet walk, the logic being that the mother can only carry one child at a time. Infanticide also occurs if there is too little food for the group.

We can afford to be merciful to the sick and the weak. Respect for the elderly and infirm is even regarded as a benchmark of civilization in our moralistic society. But how merciful can you be in an environment like the jungle? If you are on the run, like the Akuntsu? Maybe solidarity isn't a social norm for them.

One of Babá's wives shuffles into the hut. She is bringing the old woman food: meat rolled up in a banana leaf. So the grandmother eats from the communal pot.

No words of thanks are spoken. Without so much as a sound Ururu places the rolled-up banana leaf in the smouldering ashes and digs out pieces of meat with her fingers. Could thanking be a sign of weakness? Or are giving and receiving appreciated differently in a less individualistic society? Or as Babá's older sister, does she have an automatic right to this gift? Or are giving and possessing irrelevant in this society because nature is inexhaustible, a shop where everyone can take whatever he needs?

Later I ask Marcelo about it. Nature has long since ceased to be inexhaustible. In some areas, like the forest where the Akuntsu live, the hunt is becoming less productive. And Indians certainly don't share everything, he says. 'That's a romantic prejudice dreamt up by whites.' Food can be shared; it's up to the hunter and the hunter's wife. 'Food belongs to whoever grew or shot it.'

There are many aspects to giving. For the Indians, giving is also about creating a bond. ‘The recipient then owes you. He is in your debt. That’s very common.’

The degree of solidarity varies from group to group. Marcelo recalls an old woman who asked to be brought to the forest after her husband died. She couldn’t care for herself anymore. ‘She was buried alive, with her head above the ground.’ Most of the groups also kill babies with birth defects, but not if the group is settled and there is enough food to go around. Marcelo once succeeded in persuading the Nambikwara whom he was living with at the time to spare the life of a baby with a harelip.

Meanwhile, outside the hut, the others are also busy with their pestles. In a hollow fruit about the size of a small melon from the Brazil nut tree, Babá prepares the rapé in honour of the guests. Today he’s making an everyday rapé from green tobacco leaves without the hallucinogenic nut. Babá brushes some green powder onto the palm of his hand and inserts a long, thin bamboo shoot into his nose. Another ingenious construction: the bamboo is like a pipe, with the shell of a Brazil nut as the head, which holds the powder.

After Babá it’s the women’s turn. They snort the substance with their eyes closed. After a few minutes a green liquid starts dripping from their noses.

Would the guests like to try? Yes, they would.

I manipulate the bamboo shoot and inhale deeply. The rapé stings as it goes into my nose, and it smells musty. I feel nothing and think nothing.

With great difficulty Marcelo has been trying to explain to Babá that he was in the city for a few days. He wants to know if the Akuntsu saw any lumberjacks or other intruders in the forest during that time. Babá begins waving his arms vigorously and making growling noises. Passaká translates: Babá hasn’t seen any white people but he is afraid the Funai people will leave, says the interpreter.

The Akuntsu chief has more to say. He points to my thigh and pokes it with his finger. The interpreter: Babá would like to have the guest as his new wife. She is

big and fat. He's had to make do with the same women for so long. In exchange he offers Marcelo his two wives.

Marcelo politely declines the offer. Babá clearly gets a kick out of his own joke. He laughs and merrily slaps Marcelo's hand with his own. Marcelo, who is not much of a laugher by nature, grins. I doubt whether women have any say in this society.

The chief has another question. 'He wants friends,' says the interpreter. If Marcelo finds the other Indians, he should send them Babá's way. 'He wants them to come to live here.'

I venture to ask what Babá thinks of the Westerners who live around him.

It's clearly an awkward question.

Passaká hesitates and takes a deep breath. He slides closer to Babá, until he is crouching down in front of him. Then he takes hold of the Akuntsu's chief's hands and begins to talk. He goes on for a long time, much longer than it could possibly take to translate my question.

Have I gone too far? Did the interpreter not understand my question?

'We're too direct,' Marcelo explains. 'They talk for hours and never ask questions.'

Although the question may not have been translated, I do get an answer.

Babá talks and points to the forest. He motions as if he's pushing something away and then points to the other side. The torrent of words flows on and he forms his hands into a blowpipe. He also raises his index finger and even laughs from time to time.

The translation: 'He is still afraid of the whites from the other side. They killed his wife and children and many members of the tribe. That's why he's alone now. He gets help from Marcelo. If not for that, he'd be dead too. He knows that the bad people come from the other side.'

I decide to ask a follow-up question: 'Is life better or worse now?' Upon hearing this question Babá points at the sky. The women standing behind him have grown

quiet and listen to what Babá has to say. The interpreter nods understandingly and translates: ‘He is still afraid. They had to run. There were a lot of whites.’

Babá waits in patient silence. He is clearly familiar with the procedure of translation. After that he clacks his tongue as if to add emphasis to Passaká’s words.

The first few months after being contacted by the Funai people, Babá was so terrified that he scarcely dared to leave his hut, according to Marcelo. He would sit next to the doorway and peer outside every few minutes to see if anyone was coming. Marcelo suspects that the tic exhibited by his wife and daughter is also related to some past trauma. His greatest fear is that the group will take flight again and resettle in another forest, where they’ll wind up being murdered.

‘Tell him that he doesn’t have to be afraid. We only bring good whites here,’ Marcelo says to Passaká. The message about good whites seems to have sunk in; in any case Babá nods affirmatively.

Cautiously, I risk another question. ‘What does Babá see when he uses rapé?’

All the Westerners listen intently to the interpreter: ‘He sees everything. He sees the world, water, rocks. Everything.’

6

Of social climbers and underdogs

‘These Indians are survivors’, says Marcelo, when we’re back at the camp’s tree-trunk kitchen. We’ve all taken a bath in the creek; the second and last meal with supermarket meat from the cooler has been eaten, the news broadcast on the radio has just finished, the generator is chugging along and Chico again sings the praises of Amazon cuisine. I’ve been here less than 48 hours, but the routine of camp life already seems familiar.

Babá’s request for protection has left Marcelo agitated. ‘We can’t imagine how much they’ve suffered. They’ve lost their land, and they’ve been constantly on the run. Their huts and fields have been bulldozed. They’ve been shot at and seen their relatives bleed to death in front of them. And here they are. They are friendly, generous and cheerful, and they’ve made new huts and new fields. They’re heroes.’ This is the Marcelo I know from the Funai reports. The impassioned but sentimental crusader against injustice. At the same time he has a practical side and lends his talents to every aspect of the agency’s work. The caring he shows toward ‘his’ Indians is touching.

Before it gets dark he shows me the garden he created, telling me about his ongoing fight against snails, beetles and other pests. The pineapple we have for dessert is from the garden. Besides the cassava plants, there are beans, herbs, maize and even fruit trees. As a *sertanista* you not only need to know about legal procedures and carburetors but also agriculture. You have to be able to find your way in the jungle, hunt and slaughter wild animals, build a hut, interpret a satellite photo and keep away incensed landowners. Marcelo and his men laid out another garden on the other side of the creek. Time and again this garden is raided by the Akuntsu, which annoys Paulo and Chico no end. They’ve never been able to harvest anything. ‘Let them work their own field.’ Marcelo intervenes: ‘No, it’s good that they’re getting something to eat.’ He explains the situation to me: the

Indians are malnourished. Because the forest has become so small, the wildlife population is on the decline. ‘It’s getting harder and harder for them to find food.’

The throaty screech of a parrot cuts through the night, and insects buzz around the only lamp. Selma is doing the dishes and the pans clatter.

‘Did you see the scars on Babá’s arm?’ Marcelo asks.

I have to disappoint him. I only saw the tiny holes in his lip into which sticks can be inserted, as ornamentation.

‘Babá still has buckshot in his arm. And the old woman lost six children. All of them killed by whites.’

And did I know that the wife and child of Pupak, the young man I didn’t see, were also shot? ‘Pupak has a scar from where a bullet grazed him.’

The interpreters Munuzinho and Passaká, who are listening in from the wooden table in the kitchen, announce that they are turning in for the night. Could the subject of our conversation be making them uneasy? A trauma? Or are they just tired?

‘Pupak looks so old because of everything he’s gone through,’ says Selma. ‘He’s probably in his early twenties, but looks forty.’

Selma was posted here for a few weeks but she’s hoping for an extension. ‘I’m getting more and more attached to them,’ she says, speaking of the Indians. ‘They’re so sweet.’ Her mother had been afraid when she told her she was going to work with Indians with whom Funai had only recently established contact. She only knew the news reports of Indians who took whites hostage in protest. ‘Indians kill. Watch yourself.’ Her friends in São Paulo wondered why she was bent on spending time with ‘those wild animals’. But she felt the pull of adventure. ‘They have no idea what they’re talking about. To them Rondônia is the end of the world.’

‘Babá asked me for clothes,’ says Paulo, looking up from his game of dominoes with Chico.

This is one of the many dilemmas. Marcelo is opposed to giving the Indians clothes. Clothes tear and become dirty in the forest. Considering that the Akuntsu

don't like to wash, dirty clothes can make them more vulnerable to infection. They don't know how to deal with clothing, he explains. 'If I get the chance, I take the clothes away from them. But the problem is that Babá keeps asking everybody for them.'

'And shoes,' says Paulo. 'He stares at your shoes until you take them off and let him try them on.'

'Yeah, we know the story. The thorns prick him, he says,' Marcelo laughs. 'Paulo, remind me to pick up some flip-flops for the Akuntsu next time I go to Vilhena.'

The younger Kanoê now wear clothes as a matter of course. They constantly ask for clothes, and shoes too. And because they do wash, they are sometimes given an article of clothing. 'There's just no stopping it,' says Marcelo.

The Kanoê generally show up at the camp in full regalia. In other words: a strange mixture of Western attire and traditional ornamentation. Shorts or long trousers, a T-shirt, lots of necklaces, bracelets and anklets, a plume of envira down their backs and a hat, or at least a skullcap. The Kanoê are vain and conscious of their appearance. One time when I ask to take their picture, they insist on first grooming themselves at some length. They bathe, comb their hair and put on clean shirts.

Txinamanty gives the Akuntsu their hand-me-downs. Marcelo sees it as an attempt by the Kanoê to 'civilize' the Akuntsu. The Kanoê are moved by an urge to corral the Akuntsu, whom they regard as dirty Indians. For example, they give the Akuntsu the same kind of skullcaps they wear themselves. Marcelo has repeatedly seen the Kanoê put these caps on the head of any Akuntsu who had the audacity to go around without one. Most of the necklaces the Akuntsu wear also come from the Kanoê, who traded them for game or crops.

The Kanoê's sense of superiority was apparent from the very first contact, Marcelo tells me. After the meeting with the Akuntsu the two chiefs, Babá and Txinamanty, shared a powerful rapé. Txinamanty had danced, sung and shouted, and at a certain point Babá was expected to imitate her, which he obediently did. It

was like a purification ritual. When it was over, Txinamanty used a pair of scissors she had recently been given by Marcelo to shear off all the Akuntsus' hair, as if she wanted to cleanse them. Marcelo had a strong impression that the Akuntsu didn't want to go along with this. The scene smacked of humiliation. And then of course there was the incident with the new soup pot that Wajmoró had swiped because she felt it was too good for the Akuntsu. I had never thought that discrimination could exist among primitive Indians. I had automatically assumed that all Amazon Indians were pretty much the same and that they formed a collective where property and appearance were of no significance.

At the camp by the creek, I get a crash course on relationships and power struggles in the jungle. It is just as complicated as in the outside world, maybe even more so, since the European Union is a handkerchief compared to this crazy quilt of nearly 200 nations and fragments of nations, all of whom speak a different language.

We have alliances; they have intertribal marriages that unite villages and tribes. We have twinned cities, athletic tournaments, conferences and relief funds. They have courtesy visits, feasts, shared rituals; they exchange gifts and hold athletic competitions of their own. We kill each other in wars over oil, land and power. In their case the trouble often starts over women. One tribe will steal the other tribe's women. Then the injured party will retaliate, which in turn sparks further reprisals. There are imperialist tribes that subjugate other, more docile tribes, and atrocities are commonplace. It is a system of ever-shifting alliances.

Land had never been a problem; the jungle was infinitely large. But conflicts over land are increasingly common among the Indians, because the tribes are losing their homes and hunting ground to the Brazilians and must compete for whatever piece of forest remains. We had slavery. Although Wajmoró was treated as a virtual slave by the others, slavery is unknown among the Amazon Indians. Some warlike tribes, like the Mekens (where our interpreter Passaká is from) do take prisoners of war. Babá is apparently familiar with the Mekens' reputation; Marcelo told me that the chief had asked Passaká if he would be killed by his tribe

if he went along with him on a visit. The Indians did not sell prisoners of war as we did, though they did sometimes give them as gifts to other tribes, as a way of maintaining friendly relations. The women came out of it the best; in most cases they were married by their new ‘owner’ and from then on treated like a member of the tribe. Male prisoners, on the other hand, often ended up in the soup pot.

In his *Índios do Brasil*, one of the best books on the subject, the anthropologist Julio Cezar Melatti writes that only one Brazilian tribe is known to have kept slaves: the Kadiwéu, who now live along the border with Paraguay. The Kadiwéu were an atypical people. They were fierce warriors and horsemen, which automatically gave them a strategic advantage over other tribes. They exploited this advantage to the hilt: they lived on what they could steal from others, or they compelled other tribes to pay ‘taxes’. If they were faced with a shortage of babies, they would steal children from their neighbours.

Had the Akuntsu and the Kanoê been sworn enemies in the past? It’s one of the many questions that neither Marcelo nor the interpreters can answer. In the historical literature, which mentions only the Kanoê, incidentally (and then only infrequently), the explorers say nothing about a war. Munuzinho, who must have been born around 1920, does not recall it either.

It is likely that the two groups seldom had any contact before deforestation began. The one thing that is clear is that the Akuntsu and the Kanoê have been driven together since the arrival of the whites. But their relationship is far from idyllic. Six months after first making contact, Altair observed them bullying each other like schoolchildren. In his report he writes,

The Kanoê say that Pupak shot Txinamanty in the foot four days ago. But according to the Akunstu’s version, Txinamanty came to their village and made the sound of a monkey. Pupak ran out with his bow to shoot the monkey. The rest of the story appears to be a fabrication. But whenever the Akuntsu are now mentioned, the Kanoê spit in their direction to show their distaste.

Marcelo thinks the two groups are prone to escalating conflict since they share the same territory, a state of affairs that began, by his reckoning, about five years before they first made contact. Shortly after establishing contact, the Funai mission encountered a barrier of vertical sticks behind one of the Akuntsu villages. At first they didn't understand the point of it. Was it some kind of ritual structure? It turned out that the Kanoê had actually used the sticks to construct a kind of border. 'They divided the forest into two,' said Marcelo.

Because the groups speak different languages, communication has probably always been difficult. Neighbourhood quarrels can be sparked by temporarily fallow fields. The Akuntsu told Marcelo that they had to go deeper and deeper into the forest because their fields were constantly being raided. Marcelo suspects the Kanoê of being the guilty party. If nothing else, Wajmoró confessed to Munuzinho the interpreter that she spied on the Akuntsu from behind the trees and stole their crops when they weren't there.

And yet the conclusion that the Akuntsu are underdogs is too simple. The Kanoê look down on the Akuntsu and may even want to enslave them, but at the same time they are deeply afraid of them. They attribute supernatural powers to them. As soon as a Kanoê starts to cough, the rest of the family immediately thinks that the Akuntsu have sent evil spirits to torment them. The tape recordings that the filmmaker Vincent made during his visits to the camp in the first few months after contact had been established confirm that there is a great deal of latent hostility between the two groups. The fear of being killed by the others is a recurring theme. Txinamanty tells Munuzinho the interpreter: 'Mamma and my brother were walking. We ran into the Others. I don't go there because they will kill me.' Txinamanty thinks Munuzinho should also watch his step with the Akuntsu. 'You shouldn't go round there because they'll kill you. If you go there, you have to take off your clothes. Otherwise they'll think you're white.' And later she said, 'They [the Akuntsu] only want to fight. They want to kill us with arrows.'

Of the Kanoê, Babá says, 'I don't forget those people. They keep saying they want to kill me. The Kanoê are no family of ours. I'm scared of them.'

On another occasion he confides in our interpreter Passaká: ‘I was alone. Then the Kanoê came after me and found me. Then they wanted to kill me. So I ran away from them.’

Since the arrival of Marcelo and his staff, the established order in the forest has been under strain. At Marcelo’s request, the Kanoê moved to the forest where they now live. The idea was that the Akuntsus would be able to move around more freely, since the two tribes initially lived in the same forest, the one that begins beyond the creek.

At first Marcelo was surprised that the Akuntsu never visited the camp. The interpreter explained to him why not: their path was blocked by the Kanoê, who lived midway between the two. Even the one time that Pupak had accompanied the nurse, he was intimidated in the Kanoê village. Why?

‘A mystery,’ says Marcelo. ‘But if you ask me, the Kanoê are jealous. They want to keep everything to themselves, including us.’