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## CHAPTER ONE

### Birth

“*Beeru! Ejo! Kromi waave!*” whispered a voice, at first distant and confused, then painfully close to me. The words were strange, and yet I understood them. It was the middle of the night. How difficult it was to tear myself from the comfort of sleeping beside a warm fire. Insistent, the voice repeated the words: “*Beeru! Ejo! Pichugi memby waave! Nde ro ina mecha vwa!* White man! Come! Pichugi’s child is born! It was you who asked to watch!” Suddenly everything became clear. I knew what was going on, and I felt angry and discouraged. What was the good of asking them several days in advance to call me at the first signs of labor if they let me sleep while the event was taking place? For a child’s coming into the world was an increasingly rare occurrence in the tribe, and I had been very eager to see Pichugi give birth.

It was her brother, Karekyrumbygi, Big Coati, who was leaning over me. The fire played on his broad, quiet face; his massive features showed no emotion. He was not wearing his labret (lip ornament), and a thin stream of glittering saliva flowed through the hole in his lower lip. Seeing that I was no longer asleep, he stood up without another word and vanished into the darkness. I followed at his heels, hoping that the baby had only just been born and that I would find something to satisfy my curiosity as an

anthropologist: for it was quite possible that I would not have another chance to see a child born among the Guayaki.

There was no telling what I might have missed – what gestures made during the event, what unusual words of welcome addressed to the new arrival, what rites of greeting for a baby Indian might have been irretrievably lost to me. No matter how precise my questions were, no matter how accurate or faithful an account I received from an informant, neither could replace direct observation. For it is often in the innocence of a half-completed gesture or an unconsciously spoken word that the fleeting singularity of meaning is hidden, the light in which everything takes shape. That was why I had been waiting with as much impatience as the Indians for the birth of Pichugi's child. I was determined not to let the slightest detail escape me: for this was something that could not be reduced to a simple biological process. It had a very definite social dimension.

Every birth is experienced dramatically by the group as a whole. It is not simply the addition of an individual to one family, but a cause of imbalance between the world of men and the universe of invisible forces; it subverts an order that ritual must attempt to reestablish.

A short distance away from the hut in which Pichugi and her family lived, a fire was burning; its heat and brightness barely tempered the cold of the June night. It was winter. A screen of large trees protected the small camp from the south wind; everything was quiet, and over the faint and steady rustling of wind-shaken leaves, the only sound came from the dry crackling of family fires. Several Indians were there, crouching around the woman. Pichugi was sitting on a bed of ferns and palm leaves, her thighs open. With her two hands she was holding onto a stake solidly fixed in the ground before her. By pulling on it, she was able to work in harmony with the muscular movements of her

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pelvis and thus ease the “fall” of the child (*waa*, to be born, also means to fall). Reassured, I realized that I had been unfair to Karekyrumbygi. In fact, he had warned me in time: a bundle suddenly appeared, I stole a glance and saw traces of blood on it, and then, suddenly, a passionate wailing came from it. The child had “fallen.” The mother, who was panting slightly, had not uttered the slightest moan. I was not sure whether this was because she was stoical or simply not very sensitive to pain. In any case, the Indians are reputed to give birth very easily, and I had the proof of it before my eyes: the *kromi* was there, howling, and everything had taken place in just a few minutes. It was a boy. The four or five Atchei who surrounded Pichugi did not say a word; nothing could be read on their attentive faces, and not even a smile came to their lips. If I had been less experienced, I might have interpreted this as an example of the brutal insensitivity of savages before what in our societies evokes powerful and joyful emotion that is immediately expressed. *When a child is born, the family gathers round. . . .* In reality, the attitude of the Indians was no less ritualistic than ours; far from denoting indifference, which they would find scandalous if they detected it in anyone, their silence was actually deliberate, intentional, and the *discretion* they displayed on this occasion was their way of showing concern for the infant: from now on they had to look after this helpless member of the group, they were responsible for keeping him in good health. From now on they would have to protect him from those-who-cannot-be-seen, the nocturnal forest dwellers who were already lying in wait for the young prey and who needed nothing more than a signal, a noise, a word to locate and kill him. If these enemies learned that Pichugi’s baby had been born that night, it would be all up with him; he would be smothered to death by *Krei*, the deadly ghost: thus, while a woman is giving birth, one must *not talk or laugh*—the birth of a child must be kept separate from any human noise.



Preparations for childbirth.



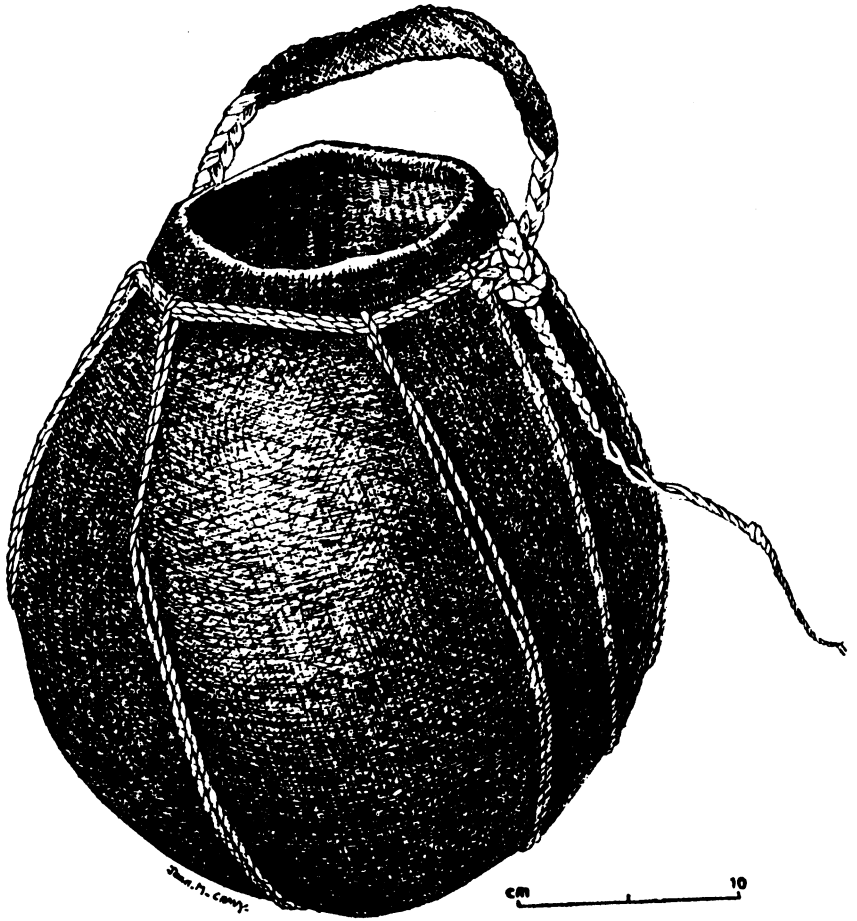




Purification ritual after Pichugi has given birth.







*Daity*, container for transporting liquids.

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So I knew that the Guayaki were happy, especially since their preference for boys had been gratified. Not that they had less affection for girls: girls were coddled with as much tenderness as their brothers. But the nature of life in this tribe was such that the arrival of a future hunter was welcomed with more satisfaction than that of a girl.

Among those who formed a sort of protective circle around Pichugi, two people would play a particularly decisive role. The *kromi chapira* (the young child with bloodshot eyes) had just let out his first cry. He was still lying on the ground. A man got down on his knees, holding a long splinter of bamboo in his hand; this was the Guayaki knife, and it was much sharper and more dangerous than one would think. With several precise and rapid movements, he cut and tied the umbilical cord: the separation from the mother was complete. On the ground nearby was a large *daity* – an egg-shaped container woven from fine strips of bamboo and covered on the outside with a layer of wild bee's wax, which made it waterproof. It was filled with cold water. The man cupped a little water in the hollow of his hand and began to bathe the child. Pouring the water over all parts of the small body, he firmly and gently washed away the fluids that covered it, and the cleaning was soon finished. A young woman then crouched down, took the child in the crook of her left arm, and pressed him against her breast. This was to warm the baby after his cold bath in the chilly night. With her right hand, she began the *piy*, a massage of the limbs and trunk, her fingers softly kneading the baby's flesh. This woman is sometimes called *tapave* – she who has taken into her arms – but more often *upiaregi* – she who has lifted up. Why do the Indians prefer to name her after this apparently insignificant action of lifting the child from the ground rather than the action of taking him into her arms and rubbing him to make him warm? The choice is not arbitrary;

it is governed by a subtle logic. First of all, the verb *upi*, to lift, is the opposite of the verb that means to be born: *waa*, to fall. To be born is to fall, and to cancel this “fall” the child must be lifted, *upi*. The function of the *upiaregi* is not simply to provide warmth and comfort; in Indian thought it consists, above all, of completing and closing the process of birth, which is begun by a fall. To be born in the sense of falling is, so to speak, not yet to be born, and the act of lifting assures the infant access to, ascension to, human existence.

This ritual of birth is undoubtedly an illustration of the myth of the origin of the Guayaki, which is essentially the myth of the *Atchei Jamo pyve*, the Guayaki’s first ancestors. What does the myth tell us? “The first ancestors of the Guayaki lived in the huge and terrible earth. The first ancestors of the Guayaki came out of the huge and terrible earth, they all left it. To come out, to leave the earth, the first ancestors of the Guayaki scratched with their nails, like armadillos.” To transform themselves into humans, into inhabitants of the world, the original *Atchei* had to leave their underground dwelling. To reach the outside they *rose up* the length of a vertical tunnel they had dug with their nails, like armadillos, who hollow out their burrows deep under the soil. The progress, clearly indicated in the myth, from animality to humanity, therefore involves abandoning the prehuman dwelling, the burrow, and overcoming the obstacle which separates the inferior animal world (the lower) from the human world of the surface (the higher): the act of “birth” of the first Guayaki was an *ascension* that separated them from the earth. In the same way, the birth of a child takes place not at the moment of the *waa*, the fall that renews the old union of man and earth, but at the moment of the *upi*, which breaks this bond: here is the individual’s true beginning. The woman raises the infant, tearing him away from the earth on which he was left lying — and this is a silent metaphor

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for that other bond which the man broke several moments earlier with his knife. The woman frees the child from the earth, the man liberates him from his mother. Text and image, the myth of origin and the ritual of birth express and illustrate one another, and every time a child is born, the Guayaki unconsciously repeat the first episode in Guayaki history in a gesture which must be read in the same way that one listens to a spoken word.

The fact that the sequence of events in the myth determines the organization of the various phases of the ritual (or, inversely, that the pattern of the ritual furnishes the story with its syntax) is even more evident in the correspondence between one moment in the ritual and one sequence in the myth. Once the umbilical cord has been cut and tied, the infant is bathed, so that his first movement toward human existence consists of contact with water, whose presence here, while obviously necessary, is also probably dependent on the ritual order. In deciphering the meaning of the bath as a ritual act and not only as something performed in the interest of hygiene, it is helpful to conceive of it as the operation that precedes and prepares for the *upi*: in this way, the joining of child and water is preliminary to the separating of child and earth.

Though it is somewhat obscure, there is a reference in the myth to water – in leaving the earth, the mythological Atchei had to pass through water: “The path of the first ancestors of the Guayaki for leaving and going out upon the huge earth was through a lovely water.” The myth also seems to justify the reference to water because of the state in which the first men found themselves at the bottom of their hole: “The first ancestors of the Guayaki had very stinking armpits and bitter skin, very red skin” – which is as much as to say that they were dirty and, like a newborn child, they needed a bath. The mirror play between myth and ritual is confirmed even more decisively by the fact that for

the Guayaki a camp in which a woman has just given birth is called *ine*, stinking. The secret order of things is thus uncovered little by little, the history and the ceremony share the same logic, the same mode of thought imposes the law of its unconscious forms on the succession of words and gestures, and once again the old forest is witness to the faithful celebration of their juncture.

The Indians were still silent. Words would have been useless, for each person there knew what he had to do. The woman continued to hold the child, who was now warm. Once again the *jware*, the man who had given the bath a moment ago, intervened. He began massaging the baby's head vigorously. The widely spread palm of his right hand pressed forcefully on the skull, as though it were material to be molded. This is exactly what the *jware* was trying to do: he was hoping to give the head the rounded form the Indians consider to be the most beautiful, but, as might be expected, the massage had no real result. This "deformation" was the *jware*'s responsibility, but others could also work on it — it was proof of affection for the baby and the desire to participate directly in the ritual — and even the mother during the next three or four days would submit the child's head to the same treatment. The man stopped and gave up his place to another Indian. The wind played on the fire and sometimes opened a slash of light in the darkness. Indifferent to the cold, the Guayaki gave their attention exclusively to the *kromi*: they were committed to welcoming him, and the slightest deviation from the seriousness of their work could have been fatal. The glances, the movements of the hands and naked bodies around the new Atchei, circumscribed a space filled with the devotion, even devoutness, which marks the relationship of adults to children among the Indians.

The birth had gone very well; the delivery of the afterbirth had followed quickly upon the baby's coming into the world. A man gathered up the pile of ferns on which the placenta had

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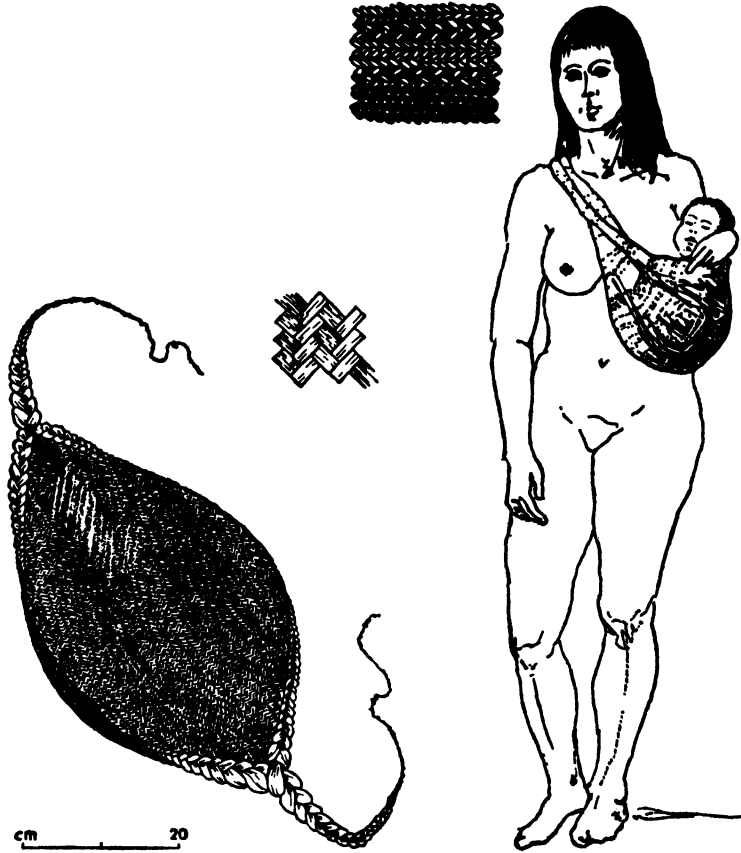
slipped out, put the bundle together, and went off to bury it at some distance from the camp — for the sake of cleanliness, naturally, but also, and even more importantly, from a basic prudence: the dangers contained in the matter that had issued from a woman's entrails had to be kept at a distance. Of course, the mere burying of the afterbirth was not enough to neutralize it, and more had to be done to exorcise the demons it had attracted.

This was the object of the second phase of the ritual, which would occupy a good part of the next day's activities: the safety of the adults had to be watched over once the safety of the child had been ensured.

For tonight, everything seemed to be over. The *upiaregi* gave the baby to his mother, who placed him in the wide carrying cloth she had strapped around herself. From now on, this would be the infant's home, day and night; he would leave it only when he began to walk. In the meantime, he would live in complete symbiosis with his mother, who would be quick to anticipate his cries by giving him her breast at the first sign of a grunt or grimace. It is rare to hear a child crying among the Indians; he is not actually given enough time to cry, for as soon as he opens his mouth to wail, the breast with its milk is stuffed inside, cutting short any display of bad humor. This is a doubly effective system, since it allows the adults to rest and keeps the child in some sense permanently replete.

Pichugi studied her baby, and the infinite tenderness of her smile made one forget the destitution of the tribe for a moment. She stood up and went back to her hut with the child in her arms, not needing any help; she did not seem very worn out. Her two husbands, Chachugi and the old Tokangi, were not there, but she would have company because an Indian and his family were going to spend the night with her. Making no more noise than before, the Indians separated, and each went back to his *tapy*. "*Opa,*"





Strap for carrying a baby.

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murmured Karekyrumbygi, “it is finished.” Several minutes later, everyone in the camp was asleep. The wind and the forest continued their endless dialogue, the fires crackled in the night, and there was a new member of the tribe.

There was nothing tropical about the gray dawn. The sun had barely reached the horizon of the low sky, and my body, still frozen with the night’s cold, waited in anguish for the warmth of day. The camp consisted of eighteen huts – or rudimentary shelters – which formed a rough circle around a cleared space. On all sides was the thick, dark wall of vegetation, the tangle of creepers, branches, and parasite plants extending like a roof over our heads. A little farther off, a small clearing broke the continuous stretch of forest. At this time of year, the grass that covered it was more yellow than green; but this morning, it was white with frost that would not disappear until the sun was at its height. A few naked children were already running around. “Are you cold?” “*Duy pute*. Very cold,” they answered, shivering and smiling. They did not complain: like their parents, they put up with it. The Indians had been awake and about for some time. Usually the men did not even wait for daybreak to go off hunting, but today they felt *kyrymba ia*, without courage; numb with cold, their muscles would not be able to pull back the bow, and the hunters preferred to doze for a little while around the fire. In addition, some of them would have to be present for the *kymata tyro*, which had been made necessary by the birth of Pichugi’s baby. Sitting on her heels, she nursed the baby. “He eats well,” she said, “he will be *bretete*, a great hunter!” Kajapukugi – Big Wildcat – was getting ready to leave without his bow and arrows, armed only with his metal machete. “Where are you going?”

“*Kaari kymata eru vwa*. Into the forest to bring back *kymati*.” The word *kymati* refers to a kind of creeper called *timbo*, whose

toxic effects on fish are known to a great number of South American tribes and used by them in a special fishing technique. This creeper contains a substance that literally asphyxiates all the fish when it spreads through the water. But the Guayaki do not use *timbo* for fishing, only for rituals. This, then, was what Kajapukugi had gone off to find.

I questioned Pichugi's husbands, her principal husband, Chachugi (the *chachu* is the great wild pig) and her secondary husband, Tokangi (the toucan). Neither one of them had spent the night in the hut they all shared. Chachugi had slept at his brother's. He was the *apaete*, the real father of the newborn child: not in the sense of biological paternity, but according to the institution of polygamous marriage. At the moment of birth, both husbands of the woman are the fathers of the child, but unequally, so to speak, since the *japetyva*, or secondary husband, has a status and privileges that are clearly inferior to those of the *imete*, or principal husband. That is why Tokangi — even if, in spite of his age, he had been able to obtain Pichugi's favors — would only be an *apa vai*, a sort of half father to the child. Without question they would show affection and respect for each other, but Pichugi's son would nevertheless know that of his two fathers Chachugi was the Father. I joined Chachugi in the hut. He was stringing his huge bow, which was about eight feet high. He then tested the points of his long wooden arrows with his finger, sharpening the dull ones with the pierced shell of a big snail, a creature that is quite common in the forest. "*Nde bareka o? Are you going hunting?*"

"Go. Yes." He was not very talkative.

"Why didn't you sleep in your *tapy*?" "*Pané vwa*. Because of *pané*," he answered laconically, without lifting his eyes from his work.

The idea of *pané* occupies a central place in Guayaki thought. The Indians had already referred to it often in connection with

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both serious and “futile” situations in their daily life, and I would later learn from a thousand other instances not to underestimate what for them was almost an obsession and what, from a certain point of view, directed and regulated a great part of their actions and outlook on life. I should not have been surprised by the brevity of Chachugi’s response, since the rules of conduct imposed on him as the husband of a woman who had just given birth were so self-evident to him. What is *pané*? This apparently harmless little word is actually highly charged and designates the worst thing that can happen to an Indian: bad luck with hunting. The scope of this kind of failure for a hunter can be understood when one considers that the entire economic life of the tribe depends on hunting and gathering, especially hunting. To come back empty-handed from the forest means that one has nothing to give and thus, in the end, that one will get nothing in return, for the balance of food production is too precarious to support the dead weight of a *pané* individual very long. The men therefore must kill animals to feed the tribe. For a Guayaki there is no possible alternative to the role the group has given him: by definition and on principle, his vocation is to be a hunter. As the mainstay of the community and the concern of each man’s individual honor, hunting or not hunting determines the very limits of the society. So a hunter’s main and constant concern, his obsession, we might say, is scrupulously to avoid any circumstances that might make him *pané*. Chachugi was in precisely this situation, for a husband is directly implicated when his wife gives birth. First of all, he must not be present – that is why Chachugi left the hut. If he so much as saw his wife in labor, the penalty for this visual contact would quickly descend on him – he would become *pané*. But he had taken precautions. Out of fear that he might accidentally catch a glimpse of Pichugi, he had resolutely turned his back on the place where she was; and until the celebration of the ritual was completely

over, he would not go back to her. Perhaps because of this, because of the dangerous situation he was in, he was not very eager to talk about these things. And I did not want to insist. Indians are not information machines, and it would be a great mistake to think that they are always ready to answer questions. They answer if they want to, if they are in a good mood, if they have the time. Usually, most of them would rather sleep than talk with an ethnologist, and in any case the best information I received was often what the Indians volunteered spontaneously. Be that as it may, Chachugi had finished checking his arrows and was about to leave — he even seemed in a great hurry.

Of all the hunters present, he was the only one to go off into the forest that day. It was not, however, a good day for hunting: it was cold and the animals would be taking cover in their holes, in the hollows of trees, and in the depths of the foliage. Yet Chachugi had not prepared his weapons for nothing; his behavior was not at all unreasonable, and if anyone had a chance of encountering and killing some game, it was he. It was even probable that, if I had asked him, he would have answered that he was *certain* he would come back with something. Not that he considered himself a better hunter than the others — such an idea does not exist in Guayaki psychology. Of course, each Indian would say with conviction: “*Cho ro bretete*. I am a great hunter.” But he would never say, “I am the best hunter of all,” and would be even less likely to say, “I am better than this man or that man.” Although each Guayaki hunter feels that he is really excellent, none would dream of comparing himself to the others, and each would admit with good grace that perfection is a quality that can be shared by everyone equally. Chachugi’s certainty, therefore, did not stem from arrogance, which he would have been incapable of, but from sure knowledge: “*Ure kwaty*. We know.” That was always the Indians’ comment when I did not understand their explanations or

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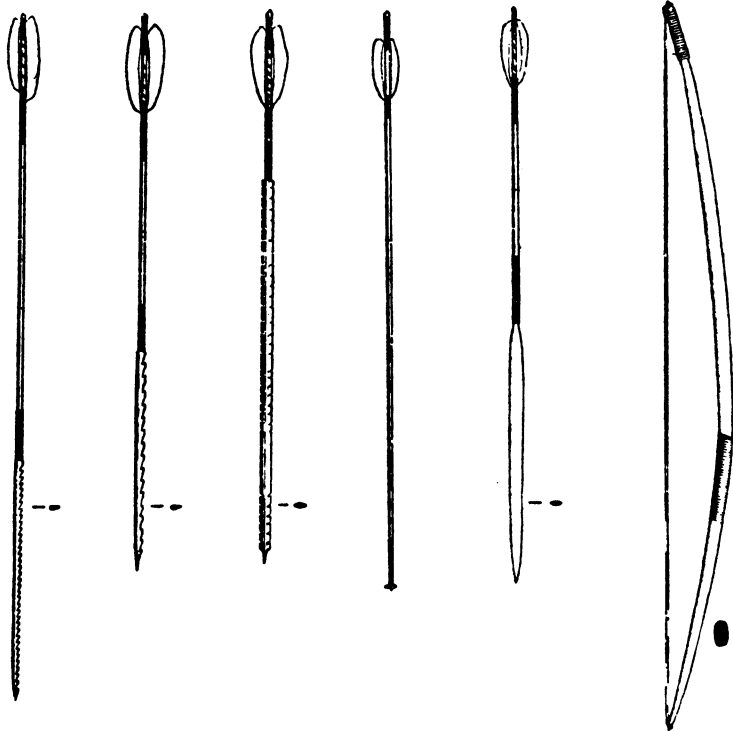
when something seemed too obvious to them: “We know; that’s the way it is . . .” When what they were saying became dogmatic in this way, I knew that I was on the path of some particularly interesting piece of information and that it would be wise to pay attention.

Where did Chachugi’s knowledge come from? From the fact that for the Indians the world around them is not a purely neutral space but the living extension of the human world: what happens in the one always affects the other. When a woman gives birth, the situation of the group is profoundly changed; but the disorder also affects nature, and the very life of the forest is given a fresh impetus.

Since the previous night, since the birth of the baby, Chachugi had been *bayja* – he who attracts living creatures – the center around which the inhabitants of the forest converged. In the wake of his silent progress through the jungle, there emanated from him what our words are almost incapable of describing – a power that surrounded him but was not under his control, a power that with every step he took spread the signs of his presence. When a man is *bayja*, animals come in great numbers: Chachugi knew this, and that was the source of his certainty. If there was ever a time when a hunter could use his talents at his leisure, that time had come for Chachugi: he was going hunting because he knew he would find animals, he was *bayja* because his wife had just given birth (*bayja* only affects men and can only be caused by women). This was why he had taken such care to stay away all night and not look at his wife: he would have been mad to risk *pané* on such a day, when his chances of bringing back game were for the moment so much greater.

But that was not all. Chachugi was not going off to hunt just to take advantage of an exceptional opportunity, an easy way to increase his food “production.” Actually, it was not the desire for





Types of arrows used by Guayaki hunters.

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food that made him go out and brave the cold; even if he had had abundant stores of meat in his hut, he would still have gone. Very simply, there was no way he could *not* go into the forest, for he was completely involved in the situation of Pichugi's giving birth and was not free to choose. He was obliged to go hunting not in order to bring back meat so much as to *save his own life*: a terrible threat weighed on him; being *bayja* had brought him face-to-face with a deadly risk, and in order to escape it he absolutely had to kill some animals. What was this threat? The power of attraction that he now possessed, and which the Guayaki seemed to think of in some sense as the man's invisible double, was driving in his direction the very creatures he had to shoot with his arrows — the wild animals.

Apparently, then, everything was for the best: it would be all the easier for the hunter to fulfill his mission because the animals would be running toward him — the terms of the problem and the means for solving it went hand in hand. In fact, because of the hidden presence of the double who accompanied him, the man benefited from the "complicity" of the animals, who would practically jump into the path of his arrows. In reality, things were not so simple, and the strange call the animals responded to only helped a little — for all the animals would respond, without discrimination.

The Guayaki divide animals into two main classes: there are the animals normally hunted by the Indians (monkeys, armadillos, wild pigs, roe bucks, etc.), and then there are the jaguars. Jaguars are the first to discover that there is a man in a state of *bayja* in the woods, and the Indians say, "*Ache bayja bu bai pu tara iko*. When a Guayaki is *bayja*, jaguars come in great numbers."

As Chachugi walked swiftly along the path, therefore, he was being watched by a thousand eyes. The entire forest was silently stirring with hidden life, and the hunter knew that even if he

could not see them or hear them, the jaguars were close by, spying on him from the dark thickets or squatting on the low branches of trees. They would be lying in wait for the man, biding their time for the right moment to attack him and tear him apart, drawn by the *ete-ri-va*, the strange power that accompanied Chachugi that day. They were the threat that weighed on him, and he could overcome it only by killing one or more animals. In other words, if the man did not fulfill his role as a hunter by snatching away from the forest some of the game it had so amply provided that day, he himself would become the prey of that other hunter, the jaguar.

This, then, was no ordinary hunt. The jaguar was usually Chachugi's rival, since both were after the same animals. But for now, the man was both hunter and hunted, for he himself was the animal the jaguar would be trying to tear apart. In order to win back and hold onto his threatened humanity, in order not to regress to animality by becoming the jaguar's prey, he had to prove himself as a hunter, as a killer of animals. To remain a man, he had to be a hunter. Chachugi had two alternatives: to die like an animal or kill like a hunter. This is the effect of *bayja*: it provides the man it infects with the means to reaffirm his humanity by giving him the power to attract animals, but at the same time it increases his danger because of the many jaguars who will approach him. To be *bayja* therefore means to live in ambiguity, to be both hunter and hunted, to exist somewhere between nature and culture. This is perhaps the deeper meaning of *bayja* underlying the conscious explanation given by the Guayaki: the danger threatening Chachugi was only a concrete manifestation of the unsteadiness of his ontological situation; the price of life was to run the risk of death.

This helps to explain why Chachugi took such care not to be with his wife or let his eyes rest on her. For just as the hunting expedition he undertook that day had a cosmological dimension and even a sacred dimension — steeped as it was in ritual — so the

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ill fortune that would befall the man if he gave in to his curiosity would have consequences far more terrible than the normal “technical” *pané*. He would find himself irrevocably defenseless in this confrontation with the jaguars just when he was most in need of good luck. This time, to be *pané* was not simply to return to camp empty-handed; it meant that he would fall under the fangs and claws of wild beasts. And if he did not return in a few hours, we would know what funeral oration to deliver: “*Baipu ro upa*. The jaguar devoured him completely.”

Of course, I had no idea what Chachugi was thinking. (It would have been very naive of me to imagine I could penetrate the inner world of a savage.) But I do know that, careful not to give in to the misleading calls of the forest and brave as usual, he walked briskly into a world that was dangerously alive.

In reality, he was walking ahead of himself, in quest of his own self, his own substance. Not that he was already lost to himself, but as we have seen, this was the risk he ran. The important thing was not so much to avoid dying (the Indians are not afraid of that) as to force the earth he was walking on, the animals who lived on it, the men who inhabited it, and the forces that controlled it to recognize him. The possibility of dying in the jungle was a lyrical expression of a deeper questioning of his being: he was in effect being put to death, even though symbolically, and this shook him to the core of his existence. Everything was happening as if the world had shut Chachugi out, as if it wanted to deny him the place he had held in it until now. He was therefore committed to reimposing his own existence on the world, to reaffirming by his acts as a hunter his right to live on the earth.

Yet what was the source of the brutal subversion that was affecting Chachugi’s fate this way; what sudden power – insuperable in that it was forcing the man to follow the path it had chosen – was trying to annihilate him by bringing him face-to-face

with death? (The real state of the world had ceased to be pertinent: Chachugi was sure that jaguars would come in great numbers; they were thus really present in the forest.) To ask such a question implies that we are not satisfied with the conscious explanations given by the Indians and that we want to descend to a deeper meaning, the realm of their unconscious attitudes.

Very explicitly, the Guayaki believed that Chachugi's situation was related to the fact that he was *bayja*, and this was because his wife had just given birth. As a consequence, when a woman gives birth she puts the life of her husband (or husbands) in danger. But men are not threatened by *bayja* only in cases of childbirth: the threat is also present during a daughter's first menstrual period and when a woman has aborted (either accidentally or deliberately). It seems, then, that the dangerous force of *bayja* is let loose only when a woman's femininity erupts in both her own body and the social life of the group. Sociologically, an abortion or a woman's first period has the same effect as a birth on the life of the tribe, and these events are always integrated in the traditional way: through ritual, a raw, immediate event is socialized and transformed into a mediated symbolic system; or, to put it another way, in and through the space of the ritual the natural order becomes the cultural order. Should we then link *bayja* to the woman as woman — that is, to what is impure in her (according to the Indians, at least), something which threatens to contaminate the men, who take great care to avoid it, as I observed on a thousand occasions?

The differences in the way the ritual is carried out are sufficient to answer this question: although each of the three situations mentioned earlier requires the same ceremony of purification (at that very moment being prepared by the men who had helped Pichugi the night before), only in the case of a birth must the husband go off hunting. Of course, the first menstruation, an

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abortion, and a birth all have certain things in common and pose identical problems to the men of the tribe (since all three situations produce *bayja*, with all its dangers) and impose the same ritual obligations on them: all this makes up an integrated whole, a system that could no doubt be covered by one general explanation. But the birth was clearly too special to be confused with the other situations. The group attached greater meaning to it; it held a “surplus” of signification, an excess, so that the surplus or excess ritual of Chachugi’s hunt was only appropriate. The *bayja*, whose danger he was trying to overcome by hunting, was not the ordinary *bayja*, which could be expelled by purification with a *timbo* creeper.

The difference in the ritual response clearly stems from a difference that exists at the level of the problem *bayja* poses for the men: What is it about a birth that forces the woman’s husband to go off hunting, when in other situations this is not necessary? The difference, quite simply, is the child. Although the woman’s relation to the man is all that determines the purifying ritual that follows the first menstruation and an abortion, it is only part of what determines it in the case of a birth, since now there is an additional bond, a bond uniting the man to the newborn child and making the husband of a woman into the father of a child. From the child’s presence emanates an aura of much greater danger; anguish enters the father’s soul, and he goes off to fight in the dark thickets. The symbolic weight of the woman, who is felt as a threat by the men, tends to obliterate the existence of the child: one forgets him because he is too present. Birth therefore demands a more complex ritual than the rituals concerned with other aspects of female biology. For the man it has two parts: the purifying bath liberates him from the *bayja* that originated in his wife, and the ritual hunt can be interpreted as having to do with the child.



Why does a baby's coming into the world put its father in such a dramatic position? The father has to go out and compete with great numbers of jaguars for the game that will save him from their attacks. Therefore, at the very moment when the child enters the world, which everyone wants to make welcoming, peaceful, and friendly for him, this same world becomes hostile to the father; it becomes charged with aggressiveness and tries to annihilate him by throwing unusually large numbers of jaguars on his trail.

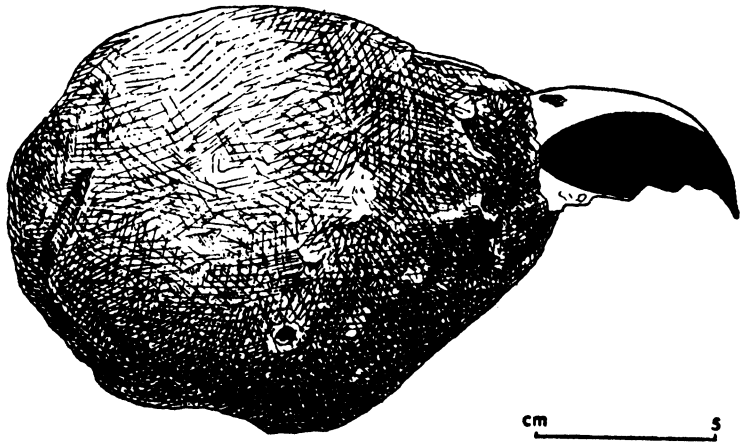
Mysterious and mocking, the rule of this division becomes codified in a dry law: the joining of the world and the child signifies the separation of the world and the father. Indian thought, as expressed in their actions, seems to say that the father and the child cannot live together on the earth. The jaguars, bearers of death and messengers of the child, delegated to restoring the order of the world, fulfill a destiny unconsciously thought out by the Indians as a form of parricide: *the birth of the child is the death of the father*. The father, whose existence has been challenged, can survive only by killing an animal; this vanquisher's act imposes him on the jaguars — that is to say, on the child himself, whose power they incarnate. By its very nature, a birth is a provocation to social disorder and, beyond that, to cosmic disorder: the birth of a new being can come to pass only through the negation of another human being, and the order destroyed by a birth can only be reestablished through a compensatory death. Even if the father escapes the jaguar by killing an animal, symbolically he has already been sentenced to death by the birth of his child. In the end, the ritual actions of the Indians lead to the discovery — repeated again and again — that men are not eternal, that one must resign oneself to finitude, and that one cannot be himself and someone else at the same time. Here there is a curious meeting ground between savage thought — which is unconscious of itself in that it is ex-

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pressed only through action — and the logos of Western thought most powerfully in command of itself: the Indian and the philosopher share a way of thinking because, in the end, the obstacle to their efforts lies in the sheer impossibility of thinking of life without thinking of death.

The fact that fear of the jaguar — not as a beast of the forest but as an agent of invisible powers — is central to the Indians' thought was confirmed by information I had acquired several weeks earlier. While I was away, a woman gave birth. The next day, her husband went off hunting, but he came back that night empty-handed: "*pané,*" he commented soberly. Perhaps he had not been scrupulous enough about observing the restriction against looking. In any case, the situation was becoming increasingly dangerous, and he could only hope for purification through *timbo* to keep the danger at bay: "What are you going to do?" "*Ai mita tatape jono bai pu ia vwa.* Throw beeswax in the fire so there will not be any jaguars." There is only one other situation in which the ritual burning of wax takes place: during an *eclipse*, when the blue jaguar, the celestial jaguar, tries to devour the moon or the sun. Then the smoke from the burned wax rises up to him and forces him to retreat; the threatened star is saved, and the end of the world is once again put off.

The sun, which was almost overhead now, had melted the frost. The air was warmer, and the Indians had emerged from the torpor brought on by the cold night. A group of women was coming back from the forest; bowing under the weight of their large baskets made of woven palms, they strained their necks in an effort to hold up the load that hung from their foreheads by a large band. They were bringing back fifty or sixty pounds of oranges, which they immediately distributed to all the members of the tribe. The oranges were not passed from hand to hand but thrown



Ball of *ganchi* wax used as glue, pressed around a toucan's beak.

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on the ground in front of each person. Since the ground sloped, the fruit rolled and bounced all over. These oranges were not native; they had nothing to do with the *apepu*, the wild “orange” that was abundant in the forest but was much too acidic for the Guayaki’s taste. These oranges had been brought into Paraguay by the Jesuit missionaries in the seventeenth century during the famous Guarani conquests. The Jesuits had long since disappeared, but the orange trees had remained, had even proliferated – no doubt because the animals and birds had carried the orange seeds deep into the jungle, so that a traveler would occasionally round a bend in the path and be delighted to discover a peaceful orange grove in the heart of the forest. When the fruit was ripe, the wild pigs, birds, monkeys, . . . and Guayaki would gather there and feast.

Kajapukugi had also returned; he had not had to go far away, because *timbo* could be found everywhere. He had brought back a thick bundle of creepers and stripped them of their bark. With short blows of his machete, he sliced off thin shavings, which fell in curls and little by little formed an impressive pile. He worked without stopping because the purification would begin as soon as Chachugi returned, and since everyone who had been involved in the birth would have to undergo the ritual, a considerable quantity of *timbo* would be needed. The *kymata tyro* (*timbo* cleansing), or purification by creeper, takes place so often among the Guayaki that it seems to serve as an almost universal panacea. Rather than using it only at certain crucial times in the life of an individual or of the group, they resort to the ritual bath every time they need to protect someone (usually a man) from a possible danger – this was the case at the moment – or stop a process that has already begun and threatens to become more serious. A man might be sick, for example, because he has disobeyed a food taboo. His health and even his life are in danger, and to drive

away the “spirit” of the illness that is in him they make him undergo *kymata tyro*. But whether preventative or therapeutic, the *timbo* is always used as part of a ritual, and its purely symbolic effectiveness arises from its distinctly “supernaturalistic” etiology.

So Kajapukugi was preparing the *timbo*, which would allow them to exorcize the *bayja*, drive it away from the men who might be its victims and the women who run the risk of transmitting it to other men. The jaguars are not the only danger brought by the *bayja*.

Less immediately present than the lords of the forest, but just as dangerous, is a fearful monster who rules the sky, sometimes visible but more often hidden – the *memboruchu*, the Great Serpent, the rainbow. The rainbow’s bands of color are actually two giant serpents, one inside the other. When the rainbow stretches the curve of its body across the sky after a storm, the Indians greet it with furious shouts: it has to be driven away, frightened by the noise. It is usually so dangerous that it is better not to point at it. But its true malevolence is unleashed against men who are victims of *bayja*. It tries to swallow them alive, and as long as they are not purified by *timbo*, the *memboruchu* lies in wait above, ready to swoop down on them, to attack them in the streams and clearings.

The Great Serpent is frightening because he announces the presence of death, but what is worse, when he stretches across the sky, the Indians know that the jaguars want to tear them to pieces: this is why it is urgent that men who are victims of *bayja* undergo the purification ritual.

It was early afternoon. Chachugi emerged from the forest. He had avoided *pané*, since two large *kraja*, howler monkeys, were hanging from his left shoulder. No one said anything; he gave the two animals to the other Indians. He did not keep either of them because he was not allowed to eat his own game, and since his