

THREE DAYS ON THE RIVER.

There are four people on the boat, Luis, a Venezuelan artist, Sese, the Indian boatman, Julio, the navigator and mechanic, and me. Luis and I have contracted Julio to take us up the Orinoco from Puerto Ayacucho to the farthest navigable point of the river. This is deep in Yanomami territory and normally out of bounds, but we have obtained permission through Eleazar, a friend of Luis' who works in the Department of Indian Affairs, on the reasonable pretext that we are researching indigenous building methods in the various communities. It is the third day of the trip. The river is enormous and reflects the sky. After a while it becomes easier to watch the jungle passing in the reflection than to look up.

In the early morning, out on the lagoon two dolphins appear, sighing as they break the surface. We head the boat towards Tamatama military installation, where we have to stop to clear our papers and passes. There are butterflies on the sand by the landing stage. Luis and I inspect a building. The people in Tamatama explain that it will be up to the Yanomami community in Ocama if we can continue, but we will only be able to find that out once we get there. We continue upriver towards Esmeralda, a settlement crouched at the foot of a mountain of rock. Buying petrol takes time and we go for a walk around the town. There is a large, green-crested iguana on a tree trunk. As we are picking up strange crystals from the ground, Luis asks Sese why such stones are not often used for ornament by the Indians. He says that stones come from the ground and are not living. I wonder about the difference between organic and mineral cultures, about the difference between extraction and cultivation. As we reach the boat there is a tortoise on a rock and an iguana in the grass. We head on towards Ocama. It is difficult, as the water is low and sand has

blocked some of the channels. We get stuck three times and it is nearing sunset as we approach Ocama. As we round the corner the water ahead of us is suddenly full of people, mostly women and children. Many of them have wooden piercings through their lips. Almost all have wads of coca leaf held between their teeth and lower lip, padding their mouths out. Adult men line the bank, some of them armed with spears or ancient muskets, most dressed in the bright red Yanomami loin cloth. They are not smiling. As the boat is very slowly brought to the landing stage the people press in, I hear some muttering “Turista, turista,” Julio replies insistently “Ministerio.” There is some laughter. Julio tells me and Luis to step down and see if we can get permission to land. I suddenly find myself in front, walking towards a menacing group. As we make our way slowly up from the landing stage, a young man with rouged cheeks and blackened eyes begins flirting outrageously and coquettishly with me. He continues whilst we talk to the representatives. Luis is very articulate, explaining our presence and what we wish to do. The talking goes on for a long time. There are two problems, the first is that our permission is only as far as Ocama and there should be additional permissions from both the military and the parks authority to continue. This problem is possible to get around – although we did pass a boatload of tourists at Tamatama who had been detained by the military for going upriver without permission. The more serious problem is that there has been recent fighting between different Yanomami groups. The priest (who was welding when we arrived), the head man and the official of the administrative district all, in different ways, confirm this. We are told that we can, however, stay the night, and are shown an empty building that we can use. Later in the evening, after we have cooked and eaten, a Yanomami man comes to our hut and tells us, in his own way, that there is a war going on. It started by one group kidnapping some women from another group. This happens frequently and sometimes

leads to conflict. He describes how the fighting has escalated and tells about going in a war party against the other group. He, himself, claims to have killed a man with a lance and shot a man with a musket. The story is performed and the sounds of the fighting evoked. There is enormous intensity as he mimics the firing of the gun and the sound and recoil, then slaps his chest to show where the ball hit the other. He makes the sound of his dying – a sigh – and it is incredibly sad. He dances around, as if the fight were in progress, pointing at himself to show the places where wounds have been received. Finally he leaves.

In the early morning Luis and I talk. He agrees to try again to get permission to go on. Whilst we are waiting for the meeting, in the still early hours I go down to the riverbank where a cloud of pale-yellow butterflies is fluttering around the damp sand, settling and flying off. A man comes down to the river carrying a homemade shotgun, two spears and a tin can. We greet each other and he climbs into a small dugout canoe and pushes off noiselessly. In the meeting, which lasts for three hours, Luis explains many times that we have the permission of a government organisation for our trip and that we do not dispute the right of the tribe to restrict access, but the access does have some agreed rules. He says we were told by all the necessary organisations in Puerto Ayacucho that we had all the permits needed, and that we have come in good faith, that this is a difficult situation for us. In the end there is agreement that we have come legitimately, that there is no objection to us continuing if we go back to Esmeralda and get the right permission. We use the radio in the village hall to send a message to Puerto Ayacucho asking Eleazar to contact us in Esmeralda. The boat goes back downriver. Julio seems happy. We have no direct contact with Eleazar, but at Esmeralda the difficulties of getting a further permit are apparent: there is a plane due the next day,

Friday, the next one not until a week later. We cannot go on. The air is oppressive and a storm builds. Flurries of wind shake the jungle and a pig rooting by the water's edge moves away. The storm breaks at sunset. Luis and I sit in a bongo drinking the bottle of rum we had hidden in my bag. The lightning is extraordinary, arcing between clouds and making livid nets across the sky. By this intermittent light we watch a large, splay-footed brown frog climb slowly up the plastic awning out of the water and shelter with us. The river begins to rise.

In the morning we start going back downriver towards Tamatama. We stop at a Paeroa community, and are taken for a walk through the jungle up to one of the mountainous rock outcrops that stick out from the Orinoco floodplain. On the way up the steep path our guide points out fresh jaguar droppings and paw prints in soft earth beside the track. From the top we have a view stretching across miles of jungle towards distant mountains; huge, purple flowering trees stand out here and there above the jungle canopy. We swim in the river before continuing, stopping again at a small Yanomami community of huts in a thatched enclosure where we are invited to look around. The community here is flourishing, having established a way of dealing with visitors on the basis of exchange that does not interrupt their way of life. By contrast, at Ocamá visitors were clearly seen as a threat. For Luis this is evidence of the baleful influence of the church. On the floor of the first hut there is a dead monkey with a small baby monkey huddling against the body. As we go through the village we see other dead animals and birds, as well as maniocca cakes (a large flatbread) being prepared for a planned fishing trip. The community has just returned from a successful hunting expedition. Going back into the first hut, the hair of the dead monkey has been singed. The heat has made the muscles stiffen so that the blackened corpse now lies on the floor

arms akimbo. The baby monkey still huddles close. A little later I see a man carrying the stiff body towards the river and am momentarily horror-struck with the idea that Julio has bought it for us to eat. This later becomes a running joke between the four of us. In one of the huts we are introduced to a woman whose cheeks are powdered black. This, we are told, is a sign of mourning, her husband was one of those killed in the raid dramatized for us in Ocama, probably by the man who acted the conflict out for us. The woman's situation is desperate as, without a husband, she has no status in the community. Unless she can find someone to look after her, she will be dependent on handouts for food and will slowly starve. Being able to connect the strutting perpetrator with the suffering victim is profoundly disturbing. Monkeyless, we leave, stopping at two more settlements on the way downriver. Luis seems to take on the air of a government inspector as we look at the buildings and discuss how they are made. We stop for the night where we can hang our hammocks on the veranda of a hut. Mangy dogs roam around and it begins to rain. It rains all night.