

Chapter VI

THE FOREST OUTSIDE

To enter the Forest

The relationship between people and the forest is structurally and operationally analogous to that prevailing between two exogamous units, and is, therefore, the source and focus of strong emotions. It is a matter of give-and-take, a relationship based upon principles of reciprocity according to which concessions must be made in exchange for benefits. This form of interaction is satisfying because it is not based upon an artificial nature/culture dichotomy, but integrates the environment and social organisation into a common model, ruled by common mental processes. The approach between the two partners is similar in its anxieties and expectancies, in its courtship behaviour and metaphorical language. The partners speak different but mutually intelligible languages; they communicate through sensorial codes and shared semantic domains, codes pervaded with botanical, zoological and otherwise biological analogues applied to mate selection, sexuality, and family life, as seen within the context of exogamous exchange patterns.

Cultural norms establish the limits of what can be obtained from the forest-alliance and what must be given in exchange. At the simplest level, the forest provides food, and the allies provide women. The forest offers protection, and so do the allies. On a more complex level, the forest is a dimension replete with stimulations (and stimulants) just like women and sexuality, and at the same time it harbours perils, poisons, uncertainties. The forest smells of woman (*oma seriri mahyó*). To obtain its benefits—game, fruits, medicines, narcotics—men have to observe a multitude of prescriptive rules which aim at conserving this bountiful environment. The prohibitions of overhunting and overharvesting—whatever it be—are clearly formulated by shamans, elders, and most adult people. The many sexual restrictions are to be understood as mechanisms of population control which, together with the use of effective anticonceptive plants, constitute adaptive norms of importance. With these premises in mind we now can approach our stated field of research.

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Cosmic energy, as conceived by the Indians in the form of *bogá*, is imagined as acting vertically upon the earth, the forest, the river, and the entire biosphere. It is said that these energies 'descend and make things come alive'.¹ Shamanistic wisdom and everyday knowledge of this impact, this energy flow, is said to be essential for leading a satisfactory life, free of disease, with a close-knit family, and trustworthy allies. To acquire this knowledge from one's elders is a person's fundamental responsibility.

This cosmic influence upon the Tukanoan world is conceptualised as an interaction, as a vertical impregnation in the sense that the *bogá* energy complex inseminates nature and man, being then diffused horizontally through the physical environment. While the vertical energies consist mainly of undifferentiated *bogá*, the horizontal diffusion consists of derived energies conceived as colours, odours, flavours and temperatures. Many of these horizontally diffused energies are said to be transmitted by pollen; as a matter of fact, the forest is described as a pollen-charged environment.

Cosmic energies constitute man's vital force and man expends these energies in the course of his lifespan. The forest, however, is a depository, a vast storage place of vital forces upon which man can draw according to certain, culturally determined, rules. It follows that to destroy the forest or to misuse it would be equivalent to the destruction of a vital source of energy; even to ignore the forest would be man's loss.

The principal energies man has in common with the forest are formulated in sensorial terms, but there are others which deeply influence his states of mind. They all are essential to man's well-being; as soon as they diminish in the individual, they can be retrieved from the forest, in order to revitalize the person. This can be done by establishing a personal contact with the forest environment and its different components, or with the help of a shaman who pronounces spells or performs a curing ritual. For example, in some cases where energy loss in a person is believed to lead to a state of illness, the shaman will first pass a crystal over the patient's body and determine the precise kind of energy his organism has lost. He then will drink a hallucinogenic potion and visit in his trance a number of power-spots the patient has recently gone to, in order to discover at which particular spot lies the cause of the dysfunction. Once the shaman has finished this repeated scanning process, he will pronounce the necessary curing spells, accompanied by admonitions referring to operational ecological rules.

In Tukanoan theories of disease, the underlying idea is that the patient must be reborn into a state of good health. This implies the patient's symbolic return to the womb where he passes through a sequence of embryonic-foetal evolution, followed by his rebirth. In all these phases, shamans pronounce spells in which they invoke a sequence of phenomena observable in plant-growth, that is, dehiscence, pollination, germination, seed leaves, axillary buds, stems, flowers and