

# Ari's Burger: Vignettes of Iquitos

## Parte 1

Jimmy Weiskopf

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### Abstract

This is the first of a three-part account of a visit to Iquitos at the time of the New Millennium by the narrator, who lives in Colombia, has been drinking yajé (ayahuasca) with its indigenous shamans and for a book he is writing about the subject, decides to investigate the rituals in Peru. It is in the form of a travelogue divided into vignettes: his voyage upriver from Leticia to Iquitos, his impressions of a city which revolves around eco-tourism and his encounter with his host, Zappa, an American expatriate who exports shamanic plants and runs ayahuasca ceremonies but lacks the due rigor and respect for indigenous traditions, the narrator believes, who measures what Zappa does against the relatively unspoiled source of Native-American healing he experienced in the Putumayo. Despite Iquitos's lack of authenticity, he is charmed by its local color, friendliness and reminiscences of the age of the rubber boom, but does not ignore the poverty, provincialism and backwardness of a big city which, like any other in the Amazon, is losing its original environment and indigenous customs, nor the absurd division of what he regards as a single nation of the Amazon into three countries which equally exploit its jungles. But he makes those points in a humorous rather than propagandistic way as he ruefully relates his hassles at the border control, sights of a useless military presence and other "folkloric" incidents.

**Keywords:** Ayahuasca; Iquitos.

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The ass, approaching next, confess'd  
.....  
One fault he hath, is sorry for't,  
His ears are half a foot too short;  
Which could he to the standard bring,  
He'd show his face before the King:  
Then for his voice, there's none disputes  
That he's the nightingale of brutes.  
(Swift, *The Beasts' Confession*, 1738).

## One

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The taxi-driver, I give it to him, did keep his word to pick me up at four in the morning to catch the boat to Iquitos. I suppose I should have been more trusting: my daughter, who lived in Leticia, had recommended him. But I hadn't been to the jungle for some time and being suddenly dropped from the sky into this sensually-richer dimension disoriented me at first. How to register, for example, the frog that mysteriously appeared in the bathroom of the hotel as I was having my pre-dawn shower? It was nearly the size of a chicken.

I clambered onto the launch in the dark in Tabatinga, in Brazil, and we crossed the river to Santa Rosa, the island on the Peruvian side, for the immigration control. There were about thirty people on the boat, Colombians, Peruvians and a few from Brazil. The woman in charge, who worked in a shack with no electricity and had to inspect our papers with a flashlight, let them through with that satisfying thump of the rubber stamp, saying "*Bienvenido a Perú*" to everyone.

When she opened my Colombian passport, however, she snarled.

"You are definitely not a Colombian".

"Look, *Doctora*," I replied, with a false smile, "there is my name and photo".

"You can't be".

"*Doctora*", I went on, my tone betraying my annoyance. "As you know, it is one thing to be a citizen of a country because you were *born* there, and another if you are *naturalized*, like those Peruvians who settle in the United States".

It was grotesque to stand under a tin roof in the dark, arguing about papers, when I was supposedly on an adventure in the Amazon. Finally, I got stamped, but there was no "Welcome to Peru".

It was all one country, with the same horizons of leaf and furious daily rainstorms that quickly evaporated like a gray mood into that deep blue around the unmoving clouds and left you feeling so free of worry in the

sun as you splashed through the mud and were intoxicated by the smell of hummingbird nectar, baby puke and the vapors of sex.

After the launches in the Putumayo, where you were low in the water and close to the banks and the kids fishing a little way out in those fragile canoes, the boat was a disappointment. It was more like a floating bus, with a long row of double seats separated by a passageway and covered by a hard roof, and the pilot in front, managing a steering wheel. The twin engines in the stern caused a tremendous shudder.

The river was no more than a broad sheet of water, lined by trees and undergrowth, and broken in places by cattle fields and small settlements which, after the first hour, belonged to Peru and were situated on little hills along the banks. They rose up from shabby riverside stores to the barracks, the school and, at the highest ridge, the church. What the crop-headed recruits dressed in black t-shirts were defending was not clear.

Every now and again we had a distant view of one of those three-decked, long-distance passenger ferries, Mississippi river boats painfully crawling along the river, with rows of hammocks showing through their open sides and little figures leaning against the rails at the top.

Around five in the afternoon, there was an increasing density of occupied bank, then we rounded a bend and saw before the bows a pile of wood, tar, metal and cement, looking like a ruined monument from a distance – it gave no idea of the city behind it. A climb up a steep flight of steps brought me, disconcertingly, onto a crowded downtown street. I hailed a taxi and told him to take me to “Ari’s Burger”. In no time at all we were there, a bright cafeteria at the heart of the district where all the tourists congregated, the Plaza de Armas.

It lay on a corner, the front facing the Plaza, the side a street that ran down to the river. I ordered a coffee, served by a waitress in a miniskirt with a red Santa cap. But I was in no mood to linger. I needed to call my host, Balaam Zappa, my only contact in Iquitos. As I searched among the unfamiliar coins I needed for the public phone, it struck me that I didn’t even know what he looked like. But when he turned up half an hour later, we easily recognized each other. I was the only foreigner of a certain age sitting there with his luggage, while he was an American on a motorbike.

The Harley wound through the center of town and then followed a long straight thoroughfare that brought us to a turning just short of the airport. On a dirt road, we entered the kind of “suburban” district you see on the outskirts of big towns in the Amazon – a mix of wooden shanties on stilts and villas of exaggerated concrete, separated by lots of spiky grass littered with garbage.

An iron gate opened onto the long driveway of his house, a modern white-brick bungalow with a roofed-over patio in front. A big garden paralleled the

drive and extended some way behind the house. It had a tropical lawn, dotted with palma de *Cristo*, that *platanillo* with a bushy coil of red flowers and lots of fruit trees – *pomarrosa*<sup>1</sup>, lemon, plantain, guava.

As we sat down on rockers, I noticed a cluster of *aguaje*<sup>2</sup> palms on the facing property. Their fronds worked a silvery shuffle of light that was oddly familiar and I realized that we were practically in the jungle.

## Two

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My first job was to check out the market of Belén, where they sold all sorts of exotic medicinal plants.

That done, it only took a day or two to establish a routine of going to Iquitos around eleven and returning around three in the afternoon. It was the same language and essentially the same way of life as Colombia, at least in the hot-climate towns.

Among the minor differences, one was especially genial – the moto-taxi, a motorbike that hauled a three-seat rickshaw with a canvas top. They caught the breeze, ran in scores along every road and the ride took less than half an hour. There were more of those superfluous army bases, indigenous settlements of thatched roofs on the narrowest wasteland, cement blocks housing stalls selling handicrafts, roadside vendors of sunglasses, lottery tickets and dusty fruit, *colegios* of peeling stucco, a university of prefabs on a little campus, barrios of jerry-built cubes, and, every now and again, a patch of forest. The jungle was eating the city and the city the jungle, with unkempt extensions of land in suspension.

The colors of the manmade were lime, cream and rose but everything was marked by damp and the effluents of third-hand technology. Buses were many but cars were few, as though Iquitos had jumped into the age of internal combustion without bothering about the automobile. The moto-taxi was king.

My first stop was usually Belén, which was congested and very dirty, with narrow lanes stinking of garbage, rotting fish and stagnant water, because this was the season of the year when the whole lower section of wooden houses raised high on stilts was flooded by the river. To prove that I had nothing to fear from the natives, I'd deliberately eat at the filthiest street stalls.

From there, another moto-taxi would take me through a sector of raised sidewalks where squat broad-leaved trees gave shade to simple but well-built wood-plank houses that harked back to the days when the city lived primitively but well, in sleepy isolation from the world, and then into a more modern part of chicken grills, hotels, discount stores and banks. Just before this broad road ended in the Plaza de Armas, you passed a Casement-era building,

prefabricated in Europe of wrought iron, with a projecting balcony of railings that cornered the street. Like the descendants of the Chinese immigrants who ran the hardware stores in Belén, it was a reminder of the odd way a modest city deep in the then remote Amazon had been connected with the rest of the world, especially thanks to its direct link with Liverpool and Hamburg by steamer in the late 19th and early 20th century. This and similar relics of the rubber-baron age around the Plaza de Armas were occupied by coffee shops, stores selling Indian wares and internet cafes. It was clear that Iquitos lived off tourism and military installations.

And from every store and stall between Belén and Ari's Burger, a single sound filled the air, the wail of a heartbroken woman singing:

*Ayayay me duele el corazón*  
*Ayayay me duele por tu amor*  
*Ayayay me duele el corazón*  
*Ayayay me duele por tu amor*  
*Ayayay, me duele por tu amor*

There was little to distinguish this song from the rest of the demented (but loveable) *tecno-cumbias* you heard in Iquitos. The rage was provoked by the singer, the first *indiecita* from the jungles ever to top the charts. Her very name was an enchantment – Rossy War. It was the perfect national anthem for the slums of Amazonia, places that had no history, no depth, no subtlety beyond the senses. You lived and you died. You loved and were betrayed. It hurt, as indigestion does, and the only relief was to chant your heartburn over and over again.

## Three

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Some of the customers at Ari's were regulars – that stratum of office workers, small businessmen and pensioners that pass for a middle class in these provincial cities, sitting at the same tables saying the same things year after year. The other locals – families bingeing on sundaes, army officers and touts of every kind – were complemented by foreigners: pale northerners benumbed by the heat, kids wandering around South America on ten dollars a day and idealistic first-world gals in search of ethnic chic.

Then there was Zappa's circle, expats who had washed up in Iquitos and seemed to have nowhere else to go. A caricature of the Raj, they despised the Peruvians at the same time that they bitched about things at home.

From the corner where they sat you saw the only skyscraper, of a sort, in Iquitos, abandoned when it was half built and then fired in the riots against

Fujimori. Cracked plaques over voids, strands of rebar like tortured fingers, weeds hanging from the dusty fissures, a gouache of decay over the looming walls. It rotted before your very eyes, like the lives of those exiles.

One, supposedly, was a contract killer for the CIA., who had got out of hand, been awarded a fat pension on the condition that he would never go back and now ran a snake-breeding farm. There was a Swede with a scheme for processing cassava leaves into a miracle drug. His claim to be an expert on tropical agriculture may have been plausible, because he had, in fact, once worked for the U.N. The local paper – a smudgy rag – later exposed him as a fugitive from a financial fraud.

The only one I liked was Jeff, a jungle guide who at least preferred to be out in the bush than sit in a café. But when he told me that the Peruvian general staff had commissioned him to film the assault on the Japanese embassy – with the soldiers, from the inside – I began wondering. It didn't square with the fact that he was in trouble because he lacked a license to be a guide.

What was Zappa doing with these fantasists and remittance men? That he needed to link up with the tourists, that was business. But why were these misfits his *friends*? If you were on the path of ayahuasca (and had a Peruvian wife and children) your values had to be different, as they were when we were alone. But when he roared out of the gate on his bike, he was compelled to put on that don't- take-any-shit-from-the-natives attitude.

True, nice as they were, the Peruvians were a little *servile*. Oh, I knew that behind the smiling front they were playing a double game but there was too much scraping before the dollar. On the TV Zappa's wife, Marina, watched all day long, you saw an advert, in cartoon format, sponsored by the Peruvian tourist board. In a landscape of green fields, blue skies and gum-drop flowers, a family of tall clean-cut backpackers walked through an Andean village where cuddly little peasants were outdoing themselves to be hospitable to them. "Be nice to the tourist," it said, against a sound track of *quena* and *charango*, "he is your friend. He brings employment to our smiling land of Peru".

Loving the tourist spilled into more intimate areas. There was a sexy shallowness to the *iquiteñas* of the swampland class that went with their bare brown skin, graceful posture and remarkable poise on the broiling streets. I gradually discovered that a good many were open to certain arrangements. The market was favorable to gringos, provided they were young, not too ugly and had some money to spend. Whenever I wandered round the Plaza de Armas, I'd see one or another in the hot clutch of a slinky teenager, though it was more of a temporary marriage of convenience than vulgar prostitution. Like a boyfriend, the kid would go to the movies with her, spend time with her family and hang out with her friends, with exclusive rights until his visa ran out. While there was no particular name for them, Iquitos was rife with *jinetas*.<sup>3</sup>

A few days after my arrival, I was sitting in front of Zappa's house, struggling to fill in my diary on a sleepy, hot afternoon, when a convoy of moto-taxis drew up and someone shouted: "Don Baa-laam, open the gate, we have your plants". They entered with a heavy cargo of cardboard boxes full of ayahuasca vines – rods and poles, green and brown, twisted or smooth – which formed a veritable woodpile on the patio. I had never seen so much *yajé*<sup>4</sup> in my life. There were likewise sacks and sacks of *chacruna*<sup>5</sup> leaves, which were now spread on the cement floor of a thatched kiosk that Zappa had just built in the garden for his rituals. "Now we can cook and drink," Zappa told me. "I was waiting for some fresh vines and this *chacruna* is a special variety that gives fantastic visions".

When I woke up the next day, three men were scraping the bark off the vines in the front yard and in the little hut there was a gang of teenagers dealing with the leaves: two were Marina's little brothers. Because of the phyto-sanitary regulations, each leaf – and there were thousands of them – had to be wiped with a rag to get rid of dust and bugs. They were then threaded with a needle to form long festoons that hung from the rafters of the place. At the garage in back of the house Zappa had installed an air conditioner and there the bark-less vines and deloused leaves were stored until they were ready to be packed and sent by air to his clients overseas. The paperwork was complicated, but Zappa employed a man who handled that. The price to the final consumer was ridiculously high, by Colombians standards, 200 to 300 dollars for a kilo of vine that would have cost 20 or 30 in the Putumayo (assuming an indigenous healer would sell you some).

In the kiosk, the next morning, Zappa took me, step by step, through the process of cooking ayahuasca: the right way, as opposed to what I had learnt from the *taitas*<sup>6</sup> in the Putumayo, but what I observed was a horror. Granted, intercalating the layers of leaf and vine, while novel to me, looked valid. Likewise, his steady reduction of the original amount of water to a more concentrated brew than that of the *taitas*. But you didn't have to be an expert to know that using a *pressure cooker* (on the gas fire) was not the way to prepare a shamanic potion, not to speak of the granulated vitamin C he mixed into it (supposedly to take away the bitter taste). The final straw was an incident that, when I told it to my *yajecero*<sup>7</sup> friends in Colombia, was simply not believed: a menstruating bitch wandered into the hut and literally shed her doggy blood on the floor while the brew was cooking.

Trying to be tactful – I was a guest, after all – I told him that any contact with menstrual blood was the taboo of taboos for the indigenous school of ayahuasca in Colombia, backed by what I thought were credible stories about the horrible experiences drinkers had when it was violated. Granting a certain exaggeration, I nevertheless thought the general principle was sound, namely, an avoidance of alien influences at a time when the remedy makes

you vulnerable to all sorts of invisible energies, both good and bad. To a lesser extent, the same was true of a pressure cooker and vitamin C: a respect for what the *taitas* called the “delicacy” of the drinker wasn’t the same as superstition.

He looked at me as though I were a beginner. “Well, that just goes to show you how ignorant they are. They mechanically repeat the practices handed down to them by their ancestors for hundreds of years and talk about ‘the sacred’, when it’s only mumbo-jumbo. Like when they shit all over the place and they blame their epidemics on witchcraft”.

Zappa sensed my unease and softened his tone, but it wasn’t that he’d hurt my feelings. I was worried about what would happen when we drank the stuff that night.

With the cooker, the job was done by midday and we rode into town on his bike. Halfway along we were stopped by some traffic cops, hoping to find a minor violation they could use to mulct money out of a gringo. In a Spanish that wasn’t great, he told them not to hassle foreigners who were putting money into the pockets of Peruvians, waving his American passport in the air, as though a square of green cardboard made him a superior being. He thought I was mad to have taken out Colombian citizenship.

When I got to Ari’s lunch he spoke to a young man from Pennsylvania called Jamie. He had been working as a volunteer in the clinic of an American missionary group, but was fed up with Peru and about to return to the States. “Well, you can’t go back without trying ayahuasca. Come round to my house tonight”.

Zappa had narrowly escaped being sent to jail for running ayahuasca ceremonies. Law and order being what it is in Peru, on the other hand, he reckoned he could still get away with it so long as kept his clientele small and selective, but I knew, if he didn’t, that gringos were more likely to freak out on ayahuasca than Latinos, especially when, like Jamie, they were lonely, young, depressed and at odds with the country.

And also that, if they had a bad trip, they might easily denounce him to the police. So, after Jamie left, I asked Zappa how long he had known him. “Never saw him before in my life”.

That night, I strung up my hammock in the kiosk before the others arrived. If you ignored the streetlights, it was a good setting: peaceful and sheltered by the garden. After a while Zappa came by with the man who did the paperwork for the exports, who was with his wife: the prototype of the bluff middlemen who grease the wheels of an unbelievable bureaucracy, then Marina arrived, in a long Hindu dress. Zappa had already put the bottle of ayahuasca, some cups and a big leaf-fan on a table there, when we heard a motor-taxi at the gate. It was Jamie.



He doused the one light bulb, put a beaded headband on and did a little whistling song into the open top of the bottle, blowing the smoke of a cigarette into it at the same time. Then he handed round the cups. The sweet gassy taste of the granulated vitamin C was vile, but didn't disguise the underlying bitterness.

For a moment, when the nausea came on, I wondered whether I had been too opinionated. The brew had the "body" of ayahuasca. But my initial intuition was confirmed: it wasn't alive with spirits like the real thing and I knew it would not make me vomit and bring visions.

Still, Jamie staggered outside, heaved with a full throat, came back and went out again. Meanwhile, Zappa, leaning back in his webbed chair, sang a falsetto song that went up a note, reached another, fell down again and then repeated itself. Jamie still hadn't returned to the kiosk and I went out to the edge of the garden, where he was bent over his vomit, looking very pale. When I asked him if he was o.k., he didn't respond, indeed he was virtually paralyzed. I called out to Zappa and we had to drag him inside. On him at least the *purga*<sup>8</sup> was doing its work.

The others were calm, probably, I suspected, because the medicine hadn't affected them either. A while later, I went into the house, had a shit and returned to the hammock. Several times, in the flat lay of the moonlight which brought the outlines of the shrubs into high relief, I sensed a presence, but the voices choked in the act of speaking. It was a relief to see that the bitch blood wasn't going to cause a memorable bad trip. Instead, the spirits, evil or not, did not take any interest in the matter. There was no *pinta*,<sup>9</sup> only an intermittent contact with the shadows of the trees and the diminishing illusion that something would come. Zappa's employee just sat there, unaltered, and drew Zappa aside to talk shop.

Later it rained and one side of the kiosk started to leak. Zappa cursed and said it was typical of the Peruvians. At times there was a resentful sloppiness to their work but it also had to do with the way you treated them. The dollars Zappa had gave him an edge and he knew it, and that lord of the manor pose provoked their indigenous malice even more.

Marina went to bed, prompting Zappa's employee and his wife to leave as well. With Jaime asleep, the session was now only Zappa and myself, and though it was only around one a.m., he yawned and went to bed, a sharp contrast with the ceremonies in the Putumayo, where the indigenous healers kept relatively still for the first few hours and then, when everyone was purged, irrupted into a frenzy of chanting to rouse the visions of all, chiding any of their followers who fell asleep. If I wasn't particularly exalted (and Zappa not much of a shaman either), I was at least receptive to a visit from the spirits, but that was impossible without the stimulus of a guide. So, as the medicine kept me awake without putting me in touch with the supra-world, I

fell into one of those dull, endless early-hours voids which, as I later learned, were typical of the denaturalized rituals in and around Iquitos.

## Four

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After a day of rest, it was Christmas Eve and Zappa invited me to his customary visit to the family of Marina. In the early evening, not nearing midnight (as most did), we squeezed into a moto-taxi and rode to a low, dimly-lit district tucked into the center, a recently-invaded land of shade-less boxes made of concrete blocks instead of the neat wood with arbors of the older neighborhoods. The only landmark was the soccer stadium, threadbare as the rest.

It was a little store made up of one stifling hall opening straight onto the street, the front part partitioned off by dusty shelves, the back holding some furniture and a sewing machine and TV, with a tiny bedroom on the side. There was no tree (thank God) and the only refreshments were cakes washed down with the beer Zappa had bought. No father either, he had gone long ago. You might have expected the mother to treat Zappa as a savior but she was more bewildered than grateful that he had rescued her daughter from poverty. Zappa tried to get things going but the atmosphere was too sullen – you could hardly breathe – and we left after an hour, with a feeling of relief. Marina did not seem to mind that the party, if that was the idea, had been a failure. She did not expect more of Christmas, it seemed. She loved Zappa and all that, but I had the idea that he was just a big, over-enthusiastic kid for her. Ayahuasca, the website, the exports, the expats at Ari's, the guided tours he did as a sideline – all of his passions made little sense to her, except that they paid the bills. Despite her veneer of New Age sophistication, with its optimism about a spiritual rebirth of mankind, she was as free of illusions as her mother, the stamp of the swampland class of Loreto.

(To be continued)

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Pomarroza*: the *Syzygium jambos* Is native to Southeast Asia but it has been sown in the Amazon and many other tropical regions as an ornamental and fruit tree.

<sup>2</sup> *Aguaje*: *Mauritia flexuosa*, a palm tree also known as *moriche* (Colombia, Venezuela), *buriti* (Brazil), *canangucho* (Colombia), or *aguaje* (Peru). It grows in and near swamps and other wet areas in tropical South America.

<sup>3</sup> *Jinetera*: woman who prostitutes herself with foreigners.

<sup>4</sup> *Yajé* (*yagé*): name given in Colombia to the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine (also known as ayahuasca).

<sup>5</sup> *Chacruna*: *Psychotria viridis* is a perennial shrub of the Rubiaceae family. In the Quechua language it is called *chacruna* or *chacrona*, which derives from the Quechua verb chaqruy 'to mix'. In the Amazon, its leaves are commonly used as an admixture to the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine in the preparation of the Ayahuasca brew.

<sup>6</sup> *Taita* (lit. 'father'): name given in the Putumayo region of Colombia to the healers and masters in the preparation of the ayahuasca brew.

<sup>7</sup> *Yajecero*: person who drinks *yajé* or *ayahuasca* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*).

<sup>8</sup> *Purga*: to purge.

<sup>9</sup> *Pinta* ('painting'): visions induced by the ingestion of the ayahuasca brew.