

Ari's Burger: Vignettes of Iquitos (Part 3)

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Jimmy Weiskopf

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Abstract

This is the final episode of a three-part story¹ about a visit to Iquitos at the time of the new millennium by the narrator, who lives in Colombia and has been drinking *yajé* (ayahuasca) with its indigenous shamans. For a book he is writing about the subject, he decides to investigate its uses in Iquitos, where his host and guide to the rituals there is “Zappa”, an American expatriate who exports shamanic plants and runs ayahuasca ceremonies. Zappa is now trying to exploit a traditional plant remedy for diabetes and is unwittingly caught up in an international intrigue to do with the U.S. war against drugs. This episode starts when, after several disappointing ceremonies with unqualified or ill-intentioned healers, the narrator drinks ayahuasca with a skilled and ethical shaman.

Keywords: ayahuasca; Iquitos; narrative; *Banisteriopsis caapi*.

Jimmy Weiskopf was born in New York, educated at Columbia College and Cambridge University, England. He has lived in Colombia for the past forty years and is a naturalized Colombian citizen. He works as a journalist and translator and is the author of *Yajé: the New Purgatory*, the definitive book about ayahuasca practices in Colombia and winner of a Latino Book Award, and *Ayahuasca Weaving Destinies*, a fictional account of his initiation in ayahuasca at a time when the Putumayo was plagued by the production of cocaine and a war between guerrilla and paramilitary armies. jimmy_weiskopf@hotmail.com

Resumen

Este es el episodio final de una historia de tres partes sobre una visita a Iquitos en la época del nuevo milenio por el narrador, quien vive en Colombia y ha estado tomando yajé (ayahuasca) con sus chamanes indígenas. Por un libro que está escribiendo sobre el tema, decide investigar sus usos en Iquitos, donde su anfitrión y guía de los rituales es “Zappa”, un expatriado estadounidense quien exporta plantas chamánicas y dirige ceremonias de ayahuasca. Zappa ahora está tratando de explotar un remedio vegetal tradicional para la diabetes y es involuntariamente atrapado en una intriga internacional relacionada con la guerra contra las drogas de los Estados Unidos. Este episodio comienza cuando, después de varias ceremonias decepcionantes con sanadores no calificados o mal intencionados, el narrador bebe ayahuasca con un chamán experto y ético.

Palabras clave: ayahuasca; Iquitos; narrativa; *Banisteriopsis caapi*.

Resumo

Este é o episódio final de uma história de três partes sobre uma visita a Iquitos na época do novo milênio pelo narrador, que mora na Colômbia e bebe yajé (ayahuasca) com seus xamãs indígenas. Para um livro que está escrevendo sobre o assunto, decide investigar seus usos em Iquitos, onde seu anfitrião e guia para os rituais é o “Zappa”, um expatriado americano que exporta plantas xamánicas e realiza cerimônias de ayahuasca. Zappa agora está tentando explorar um remédio tradicional para diabetes e sem querer é apanhado em uma intriga internacional relacionada à guerra dos EUA contra as drogas. Este episódio começa quando, após várias cerimônias decepcionantes com curandeiros desqualificados ou mal-intencionados, o narrador bebe ayahuasca com um xamã hábil e ético.

Palabras-chaves: ayahuasca; Iquitos; narrativa; *Banisteriopsis caapi*.

The next day Cookie, the healer, and I took the Iquitos rickshaw to Morona *cocha*², where the Nanay river looped round before flowing into the Amazon, forming a big pool. Shacks of split bamboo rose out of the water, tall and wobbly, precisely where the sewage flowed in. Everything was in plain view: the woman squatting by a laundry basin on her porch, a canoe fishing at the outlet of a cement pipe, the fat sections of logs on a barge by the saw mill.

Cookie told me that the futuristic tower there was radar for watching the narco flights.

“You mean they’re growing coca here in Loreto? I thought that you only found that way over in the Ucayali.”

“Not as much as there used to be,” he replied. “The Indians liked it at first, they paid big money to the peons, but it wound up gobbling up a lot of their land”.

So, the situation was more like the Putumayo than I had thought!

A speedboat full of the beautiful people of Iquitos, already drunk, nearly clipped us as we got underway and a few minutes’ ride brought us to a patch of *várzea*, floodable jungle, where we followed a channel through half-submerged trees. This Amazonian Sudd³ quickly opened up into semi-circular bay, where we landed at Manacamiri, one of those mission settlements the Indians were crowded into. One line of board houses with tin roofs faced the water and bisecting it, the longer one followed a jeep track that ran into the

hinterland over a slightly hilly terrain. We passed a big mound of smoldering timber and saw sacks of charcoal by the roadside, ready for collection. It was a cottage industry around there.

Forty minutes along, we turned off and crossed the little wooden bridge that led to the domain of Cookie. He had had the property for some time, but it was only a few years ago, when ayahuasca tourism reached Iquitos, that he began to build a lodge for foreigners. But he hadn't got far: two wooden cabañas and toilets which didn't work, since he had run out of money.

Still, the cabins looked out on a precious *cocha*, fringed with reeds and full of fish and water birds, with a meter-long caiman as well.

When night fell, we had to feel our way to one of the cabins. It was strange to be alone in a little room with the healer but his quiet steadiness reassured me. In absolute darkness, he whistled the bottle, punctuating it with belches, and gave me a little cup, concentrated and -oh! – with an ugly taste.

It was a good brew, but not a dynamite one and although there was nausea, I mostly felt its slow filtration, as though a fat monster were cautiously crawling through my insides while my queasiness merged into the patterns of the thatch above, the squawks on the lake and his chants, barely melodic, melancholy in that “Andean” way and sung only a tone or two above a whisper; a series of sighs, you might say, as if his ancestors were retreating into the forest: inwards, ever inwards, past galleries no longer infinite to the last agitated songbird.

As the effects wore off towards dawn, I asked him about one detail of his praying that had worried me. Every time he had puffed over my head, he called the “powerful little father” to “undo the evil spells”. It was a customary for many healers, of course, but I was the only patient there. I had also been wondering why the *pinta*⁴ never came or started to and then was blocked. That was sometimes a sign that some rival was putting the whammy on you. I wasn't certain that I was free of Pedro⁵, though I had suffered no apparent bad effects since then.

“Did you see . . . an *influence*?”

“I told you, *el remedio está garantizado*”⁶.

“Come on, I'm not some college kid from Germany 'doing the jungle' on his summer vacations”.

“O.K, between drinkers, you understand. But, please, nothing of this to Leslie⁷. He doesn't want me to talk about witchcraft to his clients, though we both know it exists. Anyway, you're only on the edge of it. The spirit of my grandfather – the last real *sinchi*⁸ there was -- told me that the gringos are stealing one of our

plants: not you, though you might be in danger. Still, if you didn't get any *pinta*, it wasn't because of such 'influences'. Being a *blanco*, you're too distant from the *gente*⁹ around here. They'll talk to you the next time".

Indeed: the brew incapacitated me more than the first time and I became reduced to a body-less perceiver, drifting through the voices of the night. The deeper I reached into them, the more I went outside, reading the words through their echoes in the lake and surrounding forest.

It had been a sultry night, so I opened the curtains to let a little air in. There were many more stars and they merged into *pinta*, the first I had seen there: *Aceropunta*¹⁰, the phantasmal river boat with the white steel bow, converted into the Ship of Fools. For all of the mahogany fittings, white parasols, deckchairs and spittoons, the passengers were of today, on a cruise of loud music, booze, drugs and joyless fornication, irretrievably heading towards the falls.

The entrance into the new year gave a different pulse to Zappa's life. He lingered less at the gringo bars and more at the inbox, there were long-distance calls and conversations behind the bedroom door. In the dryness of the turning year, the unfiltered sun blunted the haste for a session and brought a white-out of the visible that was a counterpoint to the vagueness of the voices I had heard. Cookie returned from his first session with Leslie's clients, amazed by the tourists – all the gear they carried, their lobster sunburns, the way they asked him a million questions and diligently wrote his answers down. Even so, I was a little envious, because the rituals took place deep in the unspoiled forest, then I got to thinking that I could do something like that with Cookie, but independently. I only had a week to go and might as well blow the money that was left. Cookie said he would talk to a man who had a boat. The plan was to travel upriver and look for a community where we could do a session with a healer who had little or no contact with outsiders.

After a long day in the *peque-peque*¹¹, we reached a settlement which seemed to be exactly what I wanted: twenty basic board houses spread around a muddy field, no sign of tourism, *chagras*, hand-made baskets and pet spider monkeys. But, as I soon saw, the priests had got there long before, their imprint was on the home of the village elder, a plaster statue of the Virgin here, a crucifix there – but it wasn't intrusive and the half a dozen neighbors we drank *chicha* with were laidback. As Cookie delicately broached the subject, however, I couldn't be bothered anymore. It was as though all the contradictions I had run into in Iquitos had finally caught up with me and crystallized into an acute awareness of my true situation, just when I was pretending to be Schultes. You needed to establish a *relationship* with a healer in a community like that -- live with him, work a little, put up with the boredom and the drinking – and there was no time for that. It would be better to build on what I had already done in Colombia

There was no chance of another ritual with Cookie: Leslie needed him again. So I let Zappa talk me into doing my farewell session with another specimen of the shit-shack school, my first and only one with a woman shaman. Oh, she was quite a gal, Astaire, with her wild mane of gray hair, bluff manner and coarse humor. The session started well. By the time I realized that there was a point to her apparently friendly concern about my delayed reaction to the brew, it was too late. The taste was mild, I was confident of weathering the purge and every time she asked me whether it had taken hold, I told her not to worry, I was a veteran, and she would give out this little smirk I paid no attention to, until, wham, it had me on the floor, throttled by the horrors and too weak to find my way out.

Afterwards, I felt no grudge, for I sensed that she wasn't really malicious, just showing her skills and punishing me for boasting.

I was more angry with myself for trusting Zappa again but I had to cram it all in and Jeff¹², who was drinking the brew for the first time in two years, just about held me together when the rottenness ran wild.

His tales about being a secret agent and smuggler of jaguar skins were not to be taken seriously but he knew his jungles and shared my belief that there was nothing for us back home, in Amerika. Everything was too controlled, his talents counted for nothing unless he had a clutch of diplomas and no one was going to employ him for what he liked doing best.

But he was still very gringo saying, for example, it was a myth that the Indians knew the jungle better than a white man, like himself, trained in technology and survival skills.

“More than, say, Romualdo¹³. You know him?”

“How do you think Zappa got onto him in the first place? *Everyone* who's interested in wild plants knows Romualdo, man. He's the original *botánico*, the real guru. He explored these forests before they were *messed up*. He picked up a lot of secrets about medicine in all those years. But he's still an idiot, like the others”.

“Zappa doesn't think so”.

“Are you kidding, Zappa's gonna make millions out of him. Romualdo discovered this plant, figured out how to prepare it right and proved it can cure diabetes, the number six killer in the *world*. But he never thought to make use of it. The people around here are like that, sloppy and stuck in the past. He probably would have gone on like that forever, building roads for the government or clearing land for the oil fields, on a nigger's wage, if it hadn't been for some accident that slowed him down. So, he came to Iquitos and set up a consulting room in his house, some crappy place near Belén.

Preparing remedies for his neighbors, who were as poor as himself. After that, the word got around, he attracted classier patients and people with diabetes were flying down from Lima. I'm talking about educated Peruvians, not superstitious peasants.

The thing is, he's a simple guy and it got to be too much for him. He doesn't understand money, his relatives were ripping him off, his rivals were doing sorcery against him. The doctors were pissed off too, this halfwit, cutting into their trade.

So, Zappa stepped in: 'hey, why put up with all this heartache? Come work for me'. Of course, he had to sign a contract that forbids him to cure people with it anymore."

It sounded unethical to me.

"Stop it with your crap about the spirits! You're as uptight as Leslie. He's actually doing Romualdo a *favor*. And the world too now he's got this guy to fund it: the tests, patents, etc. He's only thirty, some dot.com millionaire from Switzerland who did ayahuasca with Zappa here".

"Well, if it's so straightforward, why hasn't he told me: he must be feeling guilty".

"Come off it: me, Leslie, lots of people around town know. Even Monty¹⁴, out there in the woods. Told Romualdo not to do it. That's why I don't want to drink at his lodge".

But it was never easy to get at the truth in such heat and I was so stupid with tiredness I might have been inventing things. It was probably just another ethno-botanical of the many offered on the net which would have their vogue before being superseded by other phony miracle cures.

I had no desire to confront Zappa about that or any other failings of his. I was too lazy, too embarrassed, and had enough to do saving myself without worrying about the sacramental. In any case, I was absolved by the irresponsibility of the wanderer: I would be off in two days' time.

I took that little hydroplane the 42nd Peruvian Air Force Group runs out of Morona. That the bird could land on water I accepted, but how it took off I never knew. As we lifted the whole Iquitos area spread out below us and I tried to do a fix on Cookie's retreat, but there was too much forest down there and then more and more as the route ignored the loops of the big river and went straight across a stretch of jungle where I didn't see a clearing or even a tributary for the whole hour or so of the flight: the rainforest didn't look so doomed from up there. We approached a stain in the wilderness that turned out to be Santa Rosa, I jumped out with a prayer of gratitude and one of the

launches that ferry back and forth landed me in Leticia without further ado. The following day I was back in Bogotá.

Over the following months we kept in touch by e-mail and it seems that Jeff had been right, because Zappa gave me a running commentary on his project. The Swiss investor returned, a contract was signed, a launch to transport materials was bought, workers were hired to clear the land for test plots of the plant, a laboratory and an ayahuasca temple.

Whatever I had discovered of yajé in Iquitos became irrelevant as soon as I got back to the routine of Saturday night sessions with don Rosero¹⁵: it was as though Pedro had never happened. Not even the spirits of which Cookie had given me a little taste echoed much anymore, fascinating as they were. None of it stayed with me, no influence, good or bad. Only a certain longing for that superficial charm of Iquitos when “*La bomba*”¹⁶ reached Bogotá six months later. And a little resentment too: against Zappa, for drinking at the source without understanding what a privilege it was, until that faded and I stopped writing to him.

A year went by. I was in Cartagena, covering an international environment conference, sitting before the computer in the press room in a post-deadline daze. I think it was the heat outside and the disorientation that made me think of Iquitos, and the quirk of sending a message to such a contrasting ambit appealed to me. I, among the delegates from all over the world, with their suits and endless wrangling over minor points of protocol, and he, in his bathing trunks, in the reality of what they were trying to save.

But he didn't reply and a few days later, just to be sure, I sent another message which got no response either. It was odd, because he was an instantaneous correspondent, as though he slept with the computer, alert to any message that might change his life. Even if he had been out in the jungle, there was no way to explain the silence that stretched into weeks, until I forgot about it.

A few months later, it came: he had been busted, in the States. It all went back to those piles of vines and leaves at his house. It was perfectly legal, so long as you didn't incite anyone to cook them into ayahuasca.

Zappa had been selling the plants for three years without a hitch, relatively small quantities compared to the dozen or so Peruvian suppliers, when one day a cargo was held up at the airport in the States. All the licenses and seals and stamps were in order: they had to be for the air freight company to ship them from Peru in the first place. Zappa didn't worry about it because the requisites were so complicated that it was bound to happen from time to time. Shortly after that, his father was hospitalized and during his flying visit to his bedside in West Virginia, Zappa made some inquiries: they had found some bugs, he was told, but at worst, they would destroy the plants.

But it seemed that it was merely a pretext for the feds to search the place he used as a clearinghouse for the plants in the States, his uncle's home in Denver. As soon as FEDEX left the boxes that had been seized on the driveway, they raided the house. They didn't even look at the plants, but were after evidence that Zappa or his associates had been cooking the plants. They even seized the computer, expecting to find a formula. But nothing turned up.

Meanwhile some funny things were happening in Iquitos. Everyone knew each other in the expat world there and the US anti-narco agents were part of it. Over the years Zappa had maintained a cordial, if non-committal, acquaintance with them. They were official and thus uptight, but they were homesick too and sometimes joined the gang at Ari's.

A few days after he heard of the raid, Zappa ran into them there and asked them about it. They didn't know what he was talking about, they said, but would find out what was happening.

At their next meeting, the agents assured him that he could continue to send the shipments. They vaguely added, however, that it would depend on whether he "cooperated" with them, presumably as an informant on the cocaine trade in Loreto, figuring that since he was into ayahuasca, knew a lot of foreigners and *also* worked with peasants and Indians in the uplands, he moved in the world of drugs. Zappa felt insulted because ayahuasca was the opposite, but he kept it to himself.

In the middle of this, a light plane carrying American missionaries was shot down by the Peruvian anti-narcotics force, there on the river some hours downstream of Iquitos. Along with all his other activities Zappa did a bit of freelance journalism and wrote a story on it.

A months-long stalemate followed. The feds didn't file any charges against Zappa but he wasn't going to risk returning to the States or sending further shipments of the plant. As word got round that he was in trouble, the tours dwindled and that, on the top of the loss of income from the shipments, was eating up his money.

He hadn't told me the whole truth about Hugo, the Swiss guy either. By that time the lodge was running on borrowed money, a lot of it in Zappa's name, but it didn't worry him because Hugo had promised to back it, but the minute he heard the news, he not only dropped the project, but told the lenders that he had nothing to do with his debts.

Even so, Zappa was resourceful, life was cheap in Iquitos and there was need to return to the States, until two unbearable pressures forced him to: his father was dying and the feds were getting nasty with his uncle, a retired

accountant and devout Adventist who didn't even know what ayahuasca was. When they claimed to have found traces of cocaine on his clothes, he caved in and agreed to become a prosecution witness in exchange for immunity. That his uncle had no idea of what they were prosecuting Zappa for didn't matter for the feds: they wanted to get their hands on him.

Zappa was arrested as soon as he got to the States. On the one hand, it was his duty to his family. On the other, he never expected to be a martyr. Since he was a straight arrow himself, he believed that fair play and due process would protect him. They might not mean anything in Peru, but in his own country they were sacred. It made sense too: despite the bust, the other exporters in Iquitos continued to send their shipments without problems

And so it seemed when the judge noted that DMT was only illegal in a processed or synthetic form, not in plants, and that none of the "evidence" listed in the warrant, like a laboratory for cooking the plants, had turned up. Nevertheless, the opposition had a whole arsenal of humiliations to break down his morale. They had already broken a promise to let him attend the funeral of his father, who died on his second night in jail, and now he was compelled to do periodical drugs tests and wear one of those ankle bracelets to keep track of his movements. He was also forbidden to communicate with his uncle, because they claimed he might "intimidate" him. Most of all, it was the separation from his family. His little kids could not understand why he had left them and the pathos of their thinking that his forced smile on the web-cam meant that he was happy where he was and would never come home nearly drove him crazy.

Zappa spent eight months in this void-- forbidden to travel or work; his family without money; his only capital, the house he had inherited from his father, pledged for the bail; and the bad guys trying to trick him into getting his wife to visit, so she could be arrested as well.

He finally decided to yield. If it was the only way of regaining his freedom and being able to see his wife and kids again, he would plead guilty. But when he told his lawyer, he learned that they were no longer talking about a few months. His only consolation just then was that some hotshot in the Denver office let it be known that the feds would eventually have to drop the charges. The idea was to ruin him, economically and morally. But if they were out to stop ayahuasca in Peru (where it was legal), why pick on him and not, for example, Leslie or other foreigners who were running tours? And if it was the commerce of the leaves, why were bigger suppliers left alone?

After a further year of waiting for the case to be settled, he went back to Peru. He was never declared innocent, by the way: they simply took off the bracelet, returned his passport and hinted that they wouldn't pursue him if he disappeared.

When he rejoined the expat community at Ari's, the ex-CIA type¹⁷ was no longer around. No one knew why or cared much. All they could tell him was that he had gone in such a hurry that the snakes on his farm were left without food and escaped, causing a panic that was reported in the press. That set Zappa to thinking. The last time he had seen him was three weeks after the missionary plane crashed, when copies of the American magazine which published his photos of the wreckage reached Iquitos. While the foreign correspondents in Lima had been running around for a helicopter, Zappa simply got on a passenger boat and snapped some shots as it passed by the plane.

By then it had become an international scandal. Bush had to suspend the interdictions and the Peruvian air crew and their Americans advisors blamed each other. It seems that there had been pressure to down a narco plane at that particular time, either to send a message to the Colombian narco-guerrilla and/or to spike some Latin American proposal to ease off on the drugs war that was going to be presented at a big international conference in those days. Too much pressure, which had led to a horrible mistake.

"If you want a real scoop, meet me here tonight, real late".

The snake guy turned up in his jeep and they drove into the jungle on dirt roads till they got to what looked like a frontier post – a fenced-in area with some barracks beyond in the darkness. After Zappa's friend flashed his i.d. card at the checkpoint, a Peruvian officer turned up in his pajamas and took them to a concrete shed, where, when the lights came on, Zappa saw that the wrecked plane was riddled with bullet holes, thus confirming the only surviving missionary's story that the attackers had machine-gunned it *after* it crashed, almost certainly with the intention of blowing up the fuel tank so that there wouldn't be any survivors. Zappa was so stunned that he forgot why he was there, then the guy shouted to him to snap off some rolls fast because no one was supposed to know they were there.

By the time the pictures were offered around, however, interest in the story was dying off. Moreover, the spin campaign was in full swing and despite being a powerful group in the States, not even the protests of the missionary organization had much effect: it was denial all along the line.

For a while, as Zappa reflected on what had happened, things fell into place, only to become jumbled again when he analyzed it further. That the dirty tricks boys of one genre or another had him in their sights because of the business with the plane, and had only used ayahuasca as an excuse, made sense, but where did the snake man fit into it? It was indignation, the guy had said. If it had been Peruvians or other gooks, he wouldn't have minded, but these were Americans – religious, patriotic ones – and stuff like that made him really angry. But maybe there was something else, Zappa guessed, some inter-service treachery: say, a Langley hatred of the narco-fuzz. Or, if

his friend had really been exiled from the Agency, as everyone said, it might have been his way of getting *revenge* on them. But Zappa had other priorities then, a whole broken life to mend. It wasn't worth getting obsessed with the matter, he figured. You could get killed or drive yourself mad.

It wasn't easy to pick up the threads. The plant export business was gone, the lodge was reverting to bush and the lawyers had taken all of Zappa's bread. But at least he was free and back with his family and had a lot of contacts. He went back to doing ceremonies, guiding tours round Loreto and testing Romualdo's diabetes remedy on patients from the slums, with promising results to a point, but it gradually became clear that it would never be efficacious without the support of a big pharmaceutical company. And finally, for self-protection, he took out Peruvian citizenship, which is what he should have done from the start.

Six months after his return, he got an e-mail from the CIA guy. He felt he owed Zappa an apology for getting him into trouble for the photos of the wrecked plane, but despite having warned Zappa to be careful, he had no idea at the time of the deepness of the shit they had landed themselves in. Somehow the word got out that he had been behind the exposure and they made up their minds to destroy him. He wasn't worried at first, because he relied on his military and secret service friends to look after him and thought the thing would blow over anyway. But the anti-narcotics crew were not only mortified, for once they were efficient, and after digging, found a weak point.

It had to do with that Swede¹⁸ at Ari's who had to leave town in a hurry when his past caught up with him. To further his crazy cassava leaf scheme, the Swede had bought a big plot of land in the forest, expecting that some institution would back him for an experimental farm. When the scandal broke, he needed cash in a hurry and offered the property to the CIA guy. The latter found that out that it might serve for a commercial timber plantation – the Peruvian government was keen on such enterprises at the time -- and bought it at a very cheap price. And then forgot about it.

It was an easy matter for them to plant coca in a remote corner: the place was vast and out in the wilds. Luckily, someone tipped him off that the Peruvians were about to arrest him and he escaped in the nick of time.

With this information, everything made sense to Zappa at last: not only the timing of his arrest, but also those enigmatic offers of "immunity". It was the snake man they wanted him to testify against and when he didn't and the snake man got away, Zappa was the only scapegoat who was left.

Zappa had so many roles -- zealot, explorer, hail fellow, businessman, shaman, expatriate – that he lost sight of who he was: a white man who believed in the vine.

Precisely because I was guilty of it myself, I sensed that behind all that play-acting of his there was a common failing of the white, educated *ayahuasquero* -- -- the illusion that ayahuasca would turn you into a superman -- as though its innate magic were not enough. So, when I heard this latest story from him -- we had resumed our e-mails by then -- I wasn't convinced. It was too melodramatic for my taste. It's a wicked world, true enough, and when you get into all the possibilities, there's no end to the conspiracies you can come up with. I just couldn't picture him in that movie.

Remembering that he was not even allowed to use ayahuasca in Peru at that time, he shouldn't have been so open about it, and especially, so indiscriminate about whom he invited. That it was illegal is beside the point. He didn't have the credentials, the command, for a slippery terrain like that, and on top of that, there were all those *influences*.

With the motorbike smugness of his, he became the apprentice of a sorcery that was far more explosive than he imagined. Iquitos was only a place for him, a place in the jungle where he could do ayahuasca freely, not a society of people with *sensibilities*. Not all of them were as dumb as Zappa thought, nor unaware that, despite the dollar, it was their country, their culture, their plants. And too many knew that he was doing rituals when he wasn't allowed to. With all that jealousy and resentment and hidden pride, the betrayal might have come from any direction—a healer, a neighbor, the local cops. But whether it was them or a tourist confused by the experience or one of the many clowns in the international drugs war circus, the mechanism has no importance. They were just so many agents of the spirits.

The irony is that Zappa had been *warned*, by someone who understood that you cannot play at being a healer, for if sickness is a force, so is that which counteracts it

That time we stayed up late, after that ugly scene on the *malecón*¹⁹, Zappa spoke of the night when the spirits had granted him his "sword": his crown, his diploma, his title of seer.

Doubtful, I knew by now. But assuming it was true and his maestro so wise, he'd either forgotten or ignored the rest. I pictured the two in the healer's yard, greeting the dawn after that session. Chickens pecking at the dirt, smoke rising out of the lean-to kitchen at the back, a little boy, sleep in his eyes, peeing off the balcony of the shack. And his guide, though not old in years, an ancient monument of stone.

He keeps it light, because the wisdom, when it is wisdom, you do not announce: it is the apprentice who has to grasp it.

The master is weary with the realization that there is nothing to teach and nothing to learn. Sighing to himself at the pointlessness of words, and as though it were nonsense between friends, he says:

“A sword is power. It’s satisfying to have it and feel you are protected at last. But it’s only the beginning of the real trials. There will be other prizes and it will get more and more thrilling as you fight your way to the light. Exhilarating, like a roller coaster, faster and faster till there is nothing you cannot do. But don’t let it get too fast, my friend, not until you learn that the spirits are not as amiable as they seem. They set you whirling on purpose, because they know the joy of it is irresistible and, then, when everything is a blur, they jab at you with the same sword, right there in your guts, to see what you are made of. You must never stop questioning the reason for the gifts. Oh, yes, they’ll be offered to you, crowns and jewels that will make your sword look like a toy. But some you have to *refuse*. They’re not given as freely as you might imagine.”

The end

Notes

¹ See part 1 (Weiskopf 2017) and part 2 (Weiskopf 2018).

² *cocha*: jungle lake.

³ Sudd: a vast swamp in South Sudan.

⁴ *pinta*: ayahuasca visions.

⁵ Pedro: a healer, recommended by Zappa, who gave the narrator a bad trip.

⁶ “*El remedio está garantizado*”: the medicine is guaranteed.

⁷ Leslie: a former professor of biology from the U.S. who runs reputable (and expensive) ayahuasca tours and recommended Cookie, his shaman, to the narrator.

⁸ *sinchi*: an ayahuasca sage

⁹ *gente* (literally “people”): the spirits of ayahuasca.

¹⁰ *Aceropunta*: an old-fashioned steam boat which appears in the visions (of Peruvian, not Colombian) drinkers, with a variety of esoteric meanings. Though the word usually refers to a sword tip, I believe it means “steel bow” in this case.

¹¹ *peque-peque*: an onomatopoeic Peruvian term for a launch with an outboard motor and/or the motor itself.

¹² Jeff: another American expatriate, who just about gets by as a jungle guide, but, among other tall tales, claims he once worked for the Peruvian Army’s intelligence agency.

¹³ Romualdo: Zappa's gardener and resident expert on shamanic plants.

¹⁴ Monty: head of an ayahuasca lodge on the outskirts of Iquitos, a relative of Romualdo and like him, a descendant of eminent shamans.

¹⁵ Don Rosero: the narrator's shaman in Colombia.

¹⁶ *La bomba*: a Peruvian pop song that is the rage in Iquitos at the time.

¹⁷ The CIA type/snake man: An American expatriate who is rumored to have been a contract killer for the CIA who was later disgraced and exiled to Iquitos, where he established a snake farm.

¹⁸ The Swede: another member of the expat gang in Iquitos, with a scheme for processing cassava leaves into a miracle drug that collapsed when it was learned that he was wanted for a financial fraud in Sweden and had to flee Peru.

¹⁹ *Malecón*: the riverside promenade in Iquitos, where Zappa and the snake guy once made cruel fun of a beggar.

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