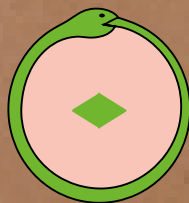
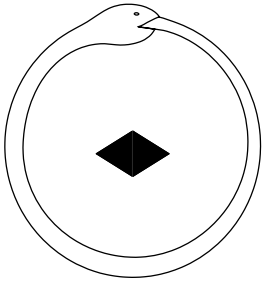


YOU, WHITES,
HAVE NO SOUL
Jorge Pozzobon



notebooks
SELVAGEM



YOU, WHITES, HAVE NO SOUL

Jorge Pozzobon

This text is part of the homonymous book *Vocês, brancos, não têm alma* [You, whites, have no soul] (Azougue, 2013) by anthropologist Jorge Pozzobon. The work brings together reports of his field experience with the Hüpda, in Upper Rio Negro, over 20 years, in the most diverse forms: short stories, chronicles and even film scripts. In the text, Pozzobon refers to the Hüpda as the Maku, a term that has fallen into disuse these days, as the anthropologist and ethnobotanist Pedro Fernandes Leite da Luz explains below:

“Although the anthropological literature has used, in the past, the name *Maku* to refer to the Hüpda, Yuhup, Dow, Nadĩb and Nukak peoples, this word is offensive to them, since it means “without language”, in the sense of non-human. There is, therefore, an understanding of no longer using a name that denies them humanity when referring to them.”

Beré and I were searching anxiously for a dry patch of forest on the flooded banks of the Marié River, when the black silhouette of a hill suddenly appeared against the sun setting. I immediately turned off the engine of my boat. God only knew if we would find another high place to spend the night. A great storm was approaching. We hurriedly put up a shelter of palm leaves, just before the downpour hit. We tied up our hammocks, jumped in and fell asleep, trying to forget the hunger and the thick raindrops that seeped through the roof of our clumsy shelter.

This was the ninth day of a foray into the unexplored headwaters of the Marié, where I expected to find the so-called *Zarabatana* [Blow-pipe] People, a *Maku* group who supposedly lived in that area, in total

isolation from any contact with whites or even other indians¹. In the last few days, we had been eating only ants, termites and larvae, since during the highest peak of the rainy season – as was the case in that gloomy July of 1982 – the fish tend to disperse a lot inside the flooded forest and the wild animals seldom appear to the hungry hunter who dares to venture into uncharted lands such as the one we were exploring. The Marié flows in a flat plain, flooding huge stretches of shore during the rainy season. Hunting is naturally rare in this type of landscape. And there are no dry places to plant cassava. Therefore, there are no indians or other residents along its extensive course towards the Rio Negro, except for the three **Tukano** villages near the river mouth, where the banks are high, and perhaps the *Zarabatana* People in the headwaters region.

According to my estimates, we should now be approaching our destination. This high bank where we built the shelter could very well be the beginning of a stretch of solid ground, where I hoped to find what I was looking for.

At dawn the next day, while I was silently thinking about these things, under that leaky shelter, Beré got up from the hammock as if he had heard something. And soon he began to imitate the cries of a paunchy monkey using an improvised bugle with leaves of parasitics. Suddenly, the monkeys appeared in the forest dossel, some 30 meters above our heads. I took my rifle and shot one of them. But as I was too eager for a hot piece of meat in the entrails, I fired from a precarious angle and only hit one of the animal's legs. It fled along with the others, leaping from branch to branch, its broken leg bleeding and dangling loose – a most pitiful sight that one, of breakfast, vanishing to die in vain.

“That's bad”, said my partner. “**Boraró** doesn't like it when this happens”. **Boraró** is the **Tukano** name for a supernatural entity believed to protect and multiply game animals. He is described as a tall, hairy humanoid with sharp claws and massive tusks. He is always in a bad mood

1. Although the term *Indians* is a rejected form that is now in disuse, since it does not qualify the original peoples as it should, we consider that it is better to keep the former way used by Pozzobon, understanding the time and historical context in which the author lived and wrote the article. However, we ask that everytime you find the word *indian*, please consider that the current term to designate original peoples is *indigenous*. (TN)

and often attacks people with invisible darts, causing serious illness. To avoid these attacks, the hunter has to offer something in exchange for the animals he kills. The *Maku* indians say that it is enough to throw the fur or feathers of their victims into the forest while whispering evocative magic formulas, so that *Boraró* can make a new animal from the dead remains of another. But according to the *Tukano*, it is necessary to offer him human souls.

After a frugal breakfast – grubs with a few handfuls of cassava flour – we began to inspect that stretch of land on the left bank of the *Marié*, searching for trails, old shelters or any trace of human presence. Within a few minutes of walking, we found an old path that went north, away from the river. There was no sign of machete blows along it. It had been opened entirely by hand. This was a clear sign of the presence of isolated indians, as indigenous groups in regular contact with whites use machetes to open and maintain their tracks.

When young trees in the rainforest are cut down with machetes, they wither and die. But if they are just broken by hand instead of completely hewed, they form a knot in the broken place and continue to grow. The indians know how to tell the age of a path opened by hand by the height of the little trees from the ground to the knot. The trail we were on must have been about a year old.

We walked non-stop along this trail until early afternoon. Then it went down a steep slope, disappearing abruptly into a huge swamp. It was the end of solid ground. We were at river level again. I convinced my partner to walk a few more hours in the swamp, taking the general direction indicated by the trail. But none of us could stand such an effort, hungry and tired as we were. We retraced our steps and built a new shelter on the edge of the swamp.

At sunset, as a storm approached, I laid in the hammock, thinking about my work. I had already done six months of field research among the *Maku* indians of the *Tiquiê* River, about whom I was writing my master's thesis. Compared to the *Tukano*, these *Maku* were reasonably isolated from the white world, but at the age of twenty-six this seemed insufficient to me. I wanted to be the first white person to make contact with the *Zarabatana Maku*, the last indians in total isolation in the Rio

Negro region. Therefore, I bought a motorized boat and entered the Marié. But I soon realized that it would be foolish to travel that vast stretch of forest alone. So I stopped at the last *Tukano* village and asked the locals if any of them would be willing to accompany me to the headwaters for a reasonable fee.

A white man came out of a hut and said that none of the inhabitants could accompany me, since they all owed him work. In fact, it is a disguised form of slavery. White traders like them used to offer *cachaça* [sugarcane liquor], medicines and other goods to the indians in exchange for latex, vines, jaguar skins, rare fish and other products from the forest. Since the indians do not understand the monetary value of things, traders cheat them all the time, saying that they do not produce enough to pay off debts. And if they react, traders cut the supply of *cachaça* and medicine. The indians almost always surrender.

Faced with the refusal, I insisted, saying that I could not travel alone to the headwaters of the Marié. The merchant replied impassively:

- You pay me the debt of one of these *caboclos*² and he becomes yours.
- But which? – I asked, perplexed.
- The choice is yours, mate – said the trader with a malevolent smile.

I had the impression that he was mocking my moral embarrassment of having to buy a human being.

It was very hot. I jumped into the water, in front of the port of the village, but I forgot to take my glasses off. They went to the bottom. When I surfaced, cursing for having lost them, the nearby indians dove. I chose the indian who found my glasses.

- One hundred dollars – said the merchant.

I paid. And now, there he was with me, in the far reaches of a forest he would never have visited if I had not paid him the debt. The curious thing is that he persisted in a servile attitude, even though I had told him several times that he did not owe me anything and that he would be paid for the services he rendered to me. As the rain poured down on our shelter at the edge of the swamp, I wondered why he still kept that

2. The *caboclo* is a person of mixed Indigenous Brazilian and European ancestry. The etymology of the word is uncertain, but one supposition is that it comes from the Tupi word *kari'boka*, meaning “descendent from the white”. (TN)

attitude. Maybe I should give him the chance to pay me back with something more valuable to him than simple manual labor. What could it be? I was falling asleep when the first bang reverberated through the night shadows from deep within the swamp. At the second bang, much louder than the first, Beré was reviving the fire with fear stamped on his face and whispering quick and repetitive formulas in the **TUKANO** language. At the third bang – this one was almost on top of us – he lit a cigar made from the broad leaves of parasitics and began to blow the smoke around our camp, repeating the formulas in an almost hysterical fashion. Then the bangs began to grow fainter and fainter, as if returning to the swamp. Beré lowered his voice and continued his monotonous litany until dawn. I would have a doze from time to time, and when I woke up, there he was in his relentless prayer.

The next morning, he was especially laconic as we packed up our stuff to go back to the riverside.

– What was that about last night? – I asked.

– **BORARÓ**.

– What makes you so sure?

– He always appears like this, bursting into the darkness.

– How does he make that noise?

– Hitting the trees with a heavy club he has.

– Why did he come here?

– This must be a hunting lodge. You know, the balls of high ground like this one are the houses where **BORARÓ** forms new prey.

– Is he mad at us?

– Of course!

– Because I wounded an offspring of his for nothing...

– And because nobody gave anything in return, so he could make another one.

– What was that thing you were whispering all night?

– A prayer to send him away.

– Could you translate it into Portuguese?

I am not able to reproduce all the details of this astonishing prayer. I only remember its general features. It consists of an invariable refrain: “Go away because we are people. People live in villages”. After this

refrain comes a preparatory formula, “In the village there is...”, followed by a long enumeration of objects. For example, “In the village, there is the *maloca*³. The *maloca* is made of pillars, walls and roof. There are three types of pillars: pillars for men, pillars for families and pillars for women”. Then, the prayer continues describing the roof and walls of the *maloca*. When the description of the *maloca* ends, the prayer returns to the repetitive formula: “That’s why you go away, because we are people. People live in villages. In the village there are...”. Then successively comes the set of ritual objects, the set of equipment for fishing, hunting, cassava processing, the kitchen objects and so on, always repeating the main formula: “That’s why you go away, because we are people”.

“Gosh!”, I said to myself. “Lévi-Strauss hit the bull’s eyes! This is quite an example of the nature-culture opposition. *Borará* represents the fury of nature, and as we are in its domains, far from any indigenous village, Beré prayed to simulate a village, with all the elements of culture”.

The prominent role of the *maloca* in this prayer is not unjustified. Traditional *Tukano* villages consist of a single *maloca*, usually about 20m long. Each *maloca* houses a different clan. Clans are transmitted through the paternal line. All the men and children of a given *maloca* relate to each other through male kinship ties. The married women come from other *malocas* (other clans) and the single ones, when they get married, leave to live with their husbands.

Traditional *malocas* always have the same basic structure. Facing the riverbank, there is the men’s door. On the opposite side, facing the cassava plantations and the forest, is the women’s door. Between these two extremes lie the family compartments. The pillars that support the ceiling are classified according to this internal space allocation.

The most important *Tukano* ritual is known by the name of *Jurupari*. In it, adult men enter through the male door, playing sacred flutes which women cannot see. For the indians, this ritual enacts the beginning of the world, when the various *Tukano* clans came to the stretches of river they currently occupy. The *maloca* is so important to these indians that their dead are buried there. The men, under the dance floor of the *Jurupari* ritual; the women, on the floor of the family compartments.

3. Traditional indigenous dwelling. (TN)

Obviously, Beré's prayer was somehow reproducing the traditional *maloca*, although he had not lived in one of them since his early childhood. "To fight the most dangerous creature in the forest", I thought, "he must evoke the strongest element of his culture, the traditional *maloca*. In doing so, he sends nature back into its own wildness, such is the magical power of words."

A few meters after taking the path back to the river, we found a place where the dead leaves on the ground had been crushed by something large and heavy.

– A jaguar spent all night right here. She was watching us.

– Maybe waiting for leftovers – I replied.

– I doubt it... This isn't a jaguar that exists.

– But then what is it?

– Bad thing.

– But what kind of bad thing, huh?

– **Boraró**.

– I thought your prayer had sent him away.

– Me too. But he turned into a jaguar and came back very quietly. I didn't realize. Then, I lowered the strength of my prayer and almost fell asleep. Very clever this **Boraró**.

– Are not all **Borarós** so clever?

– Oh no! Some are very stupid... But not that one.

– Then we'd better pack up and get out.

– Now you said it right.

I had mixed feelings. Sometimes I got the impression that he dreaded the encounter with the *Zarabatana* People. And knowing that I did not share his fear, maybe he wanted to scare me with those native horror stories, so I would give up the search. On the other hand, there were those strange bangs from the night before. I really did not know what to think about it – and, by the way, I still do not.

We continued talking along the way back to the riverside:

– Are the magic darts **Boraró's** only weapon? – I asked.

– No. Sometimes he stuns people to suck their blood and brains. What he likes the most are the girls.

– Really?

– One says that last year **Boraró** was dating girls from the villages near Miraflores, Colombia. He would change into a handsome guy and fuck them. When the girl began to come, **Boraró** would return to his natural form and devour her entirely.

– Did he kill a lot of young girls that way?

– Yes. Women no longer went to the swiddens. People were starving.

– And so?

– And so they called the police. Colombian police. The same one who has been fighting the guerrillas. A group armed with machine guns came. They found that guy near a swidden and did away with him. Then the police approached the body, thinking he was dead. But suddenly, **Boraró** turned into a huge jaguar and disappeared howling into the woods.

Finally, we arrived at the left bank of the Marié. We checked if the boat was in order and began to inspect the opposite bank, searching for traces of the old track. In fact, it would continue on the opposite bank. “If it cuts across the course of the river perpendicularly and ends up in a swamp to the north,” I thought, “then its point of origin must be to the south of the river. The *Zarabatana* People must be somewhere in that direction. They probably come here in the dry season to fish in the main river and catch frogs in the swamp. This explains the abandoned look of the trail. They only use it in the dry season.”

We walked south along the old trail, hoping to be this time on high dry ground, big enough to support a party of hunting indians. But in the early afternoon, we were again facing an endless swamp. This left me very confused.

– But who the hell made this damned trail? – I cursed.

– The *Zarabatana* People – replied Beré, with all the calm in the world.

– What for, if it goes from one swamp to another?

– I don’t know. Maybe they made this trail to garnish **Boraró**’s house? You know, the Maku are his friends.

– But the Maku are afraid of him, like all the other indians.

– That’s only true for the Maku in our neighborhood. We taught them to behave like people. It was with us that they learned to plant, to make a house, clay pots, everything that is a human thing. They didn’t

learn well because they are very stubborn. But at least they learned to stay away from the evil spirits of the forest. Except that those *Zarabatana* People live very far from our villages, right? We were never able to teach them anything...

– It means they're kind of like **Boraró** – I suggested.

– That's right. It may be that now they have all become **Boraró**.

– How do we become **Boraró**?

– Eating only meat... And eating our sisters...

The **Tukano** believe that the **Maku** do not behave like people because they prefer to marry among inhabitants of the same villages, instead of looking for women in neighboring villages. For the **Tukano**, getting married within the same village is the same as marrying one's own sister. Knowing this, I replied:

– But the **Maku** in your neighborhood eat their own sisters. Why haven't they become **Boraró** yet?

– Because we taught them how to plant and how to make cassava flour. It almost got them looking like us.

We spent the night near the new swamp. It was too late to return to the *Marié* before the downpour. The next morning, I woke up feeling really bad.

– I think I have a fever – I said. He came closer and put his hand on my forehead.

– Yes, you have a fever.

– I had a strange dream.

– Tell me – he said.

– I dreamed that I found my sister together with two other girls. They were eating candy. Lots of candies. When I appeared, they laughed and teased me, offering the wet candies between their lips. I had to kiss each one on the mouth to eat the candies.

– Bad dream – he said.

– Why?

– Looks like you've been poisoned.

– By whom? – I asked, already knowing the answer.

– **Boraró**.

– Do you think he threw a dart at me the other night?

– Yes.

It took us more than half a day to get back to our first camp near the river. I was tired and sick. And for the rest of the day, while Beré was doing some fishing, my condition got worse. At sunset I began to vomit and shiver like a dying wretch.

The next day, things did not get better. I could not get up and walk around, and nothing I ate would stay in my stomach. I kept throwing up and shaking like a mad dog. My fever was over 40° and rising.

– Oh my brother – I said from inside the hammock – I think I'm at the end.

– I think you are – he replied in a casual tone – here in this region a lot of people die vomiting and shaking like you.

I was not quite in agreement with the idea of dying like that. I took my rifle from under the net. But he soon guessed what I had in mind:

– Don't do it, please!

– Give me one good reason.

– People will think it was me who killed you.

I took the barrel of the gun away from me and fired about ten times at the nearby trees, cursing the day of my birth.

– Good – he said.

Shortly after, he improvised a bed inside the boat, dragged me inside and loaded the stuff. It was the end of my foolish adventure. Now we were definitely going down the river. Disappointed and sick, my reaction was to let myself die in silence.

At the end of the day, the engine's propeller broke against a submerged tree. There was no way to avoid it, since I was lying down and Beré remained at the stern, controlling the rudder. Someone needed to stay at the bow, keeping an eye on submerged trees and other obstacles in the river.

I was too weak to do more than lift my head and throw up over the edge. I put Beré in charge of replacing the broken propeller. But the boat's engine was too complicated for his little knowledge of mechanics. Furthermore, I think I was too confusing in my explanations on how to fix the damage. I could not put even two ideas together to form a reasoning. I was alternating peaks of delirium and states of complete stupor. So, Beré decided to row during the day and let the boat float

down the river overnight to gain time. He built a roof of palms over me, to protect me from storms and the equatorial sun.

I cannot say how many days we were adrift. I kept delirious and falling into those awful torpor states. I remember a certain routine. The sound of the oars mingled with the soft voice of Beré, whispering endless prayers in the *TUKANO* language. Every time I lifted my head and threw up over the edge, he would approach and offer me an infusion where he had blown cigarette smoke and healing blessings. It seems to me that the beverage was made from river water and turtle eggs. My memory of those days is made up of disconnected images. But I remember that sometimes he would put his clenched fist against my chest, suck the air through his fist and blow it away, saying magic formulas.

One night, as he settled to lie down and get some sleep in the cramped space of my boat, his back happened to brush against my feet.

– How cold your feet are! – he said – I will heat it up for you.

He said that, hugged my feet to his chest and fell asleep.

That night I had a dream. When I woke up, I was more conscious than usual. I told the dream in one breath.

– The sun was setting – I said – we were rowing an indian canoe on the Uaupés River. You were on the bow, I was at the stern. Then, we arrived at your grandfather's *maloca*, your father's father. You went up the ravine in front of the *maloca*, while I stayed in the canoe, waiting for an invitation. Then, I heard a voice coming from inside the *maloca*: "Beré, who is that white man coming with you?". It was your grandfather's voice. I understood that as an invitation and went up the bank. When I arrived at the yard in front of the *maloca*, you had disappeared. I entered the *maloca* through the men's door. It was dark inside. When I adjusted my eyes, I noticed several open graves in the ground. They were full of water and had a dolphin inside each one. The biggest dolphin was your grandfather.

He lit a cigarette and smoked in silence for a while. Then he began to speak:

– True dream. The dolphin is the symbol of my clan, the *Buhuari Mahsa*, that is, *Gente Aparecida* [People that Appeared]. You discovered it by yourself in the dream because you are dying. That's why you went

to my grandfather's house to look for a soul, to look for a life. You white people have no soul. When you die, you go to nothing, while we go to our grandfather's house, our clan's house. You went there to find a soul, a life, because your life is fading. Now I will heal you in the name of my grandfather, which is also my own name. Your name is no longer Jorge. Your name is... (I cannot reveal it). Now you belong to my people. Now, yes, I know which prayer I have to blow to rid you of **Boraró's** poison.

And he began a long prayer, evoking his male ancestors, from his paternal grandfather to the founders of the clan. After the prayer, he told me about some passages from his life. His grandfather had been a **γai** (jaguar-person, important shaman) in the Uaupés region. Since Beré was the eldest grandchild, he inherited his grandfather's name, as is often the case among the Tukano. The old man was training him to be a **γai**, but he died before the boy finished training.

– That's why my prayers had almost no effect on you – he said, apologizing – I'm glad you found the way to my grandfather's place. He helped me find the right prayer.

After his grandfather's death, Beré's father took him from the Uaupés region to the mouth of the Marié, where the two of them worked under the orders of a white merchant. Soon after, his father died. Beré was only 15 years old. With no close relatives in the region, he wandered from village to village until he finally settled in the last village on the Marié, where he had a distant paternal aunt. Since then, this aunt's husband, always indebted to merchants, forced him to work to pay off the debts. Beré did not like him, but he felt compelled to work, since this man had taken him in without the two being of the same clan.

The next morning I did not vomit anymore and the fever was very low.

I was finally able to get up and fix the broken propeller.

– So, you're a **γai**, a real shaman – I said.

– Oh no – he replied – I talk a lot.

Two days later, I was in Beré's village, having a delicious chicken soup offered by his aunt. Her obnoxious husband really was not happy to hear that Beré was out of debt. After the meal, I lit a cigarette and

watched the smoke disappear in the evening breeze. I noticed then that Beré was watching me with a friendly smile.

– Do I still owe you something? – He asked.

I got up and gave him my rifle.

Twelve years later, I returned to the mouth of the Marié as a member of the Funai⁴ team, which was recognizing indigenous lands in the Rio Negro valley for future demarcation. I asked about Beré when we landed in his village. The locals told me that he still lived there, but that he disappeared into the forest when he realized that I was coming.

– Didn't he tell you he saved my life?

– No – replied the indians – he never talks much.

4. Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas (National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples) is the official indigenist body of the Brazilian State. It was created in 1967 and today is part of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples. (TN)

JORGE POZZOBON (1955-2001)

An anthropologist from Rio Grande do Sul, he has lived most of his life with Hùpda-speaking peoples in the Upper Rio Negro. Pozzobon earned a degree in Philosophy and a Master's in Anthropology from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRS). He did his doctorate on *Ethnologie et Sciences des Religions* at the Université Paris VII - Jussieu (1992). He was also a researcher at the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi and served on the board of FUNAI under the management of Márcio Santilli.

The editorial production work of the Selvagem Notebooks is carried out collectively with the Selvagem community. The editorial coordination is by Mariana Rotili and the design by Isabelle Passos. The editorial coordinator of English translations is Marina Matheus.

More information at selvagemciclo.com.br

All Selvagem activities and materials are shared free of charge. For those who wish to give something back, we invite you to financially support the Living Schools, a network of 4 educational centres for the transmission of indigenous culture and knowledge.

Find out more at selvagemciclo.com.br/colabore

TRANSLATION

ANA LOUREIRO JUREMA

An everlasting learner, she is a proud member of the Selvagem Community, contributing as a *brincante da língua*, a language craftswoman, a tongue-reveller.

REVISION

JOANA FERRAZ

Dance artist and publisher, interested in the relations between thought, memory, dream and movement. Coordinates with Marina Matheus the dance platform and publishing house Acampamento.

SELVAGEM Notebooks
digital publication by
Dantes Editora
Biosfera, 2023

