

## Following a Blue Butterfly

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The Amazon forests are not only statistics. Nor are they only objects of negotiations, of political dispute, of dissertations, ambitions or sadness. To begin with, forests are creative and complex life systems. They include culture, spirituality, economy, infrastructure, people, laws, science and technology. And they have such a strong identity that it remains impregnated, like a kind of radar, within the perceptions, the view and the feelings. Even if you go very far away, even if you learn a lot and admire many things around the world, it remains.

I lived at the Seringal Bagaço, a rubber-tapper community in the Brazilian state of Acre, until I was 16. I care very much for the forest, and I have a great respect for it. The one who knows the forest doesn't enter carelessly, but with subtlety. There are the supplies, the protection and the dangers.

And there is also the mystery, something not completely revealed. Forms and lives which are nearly imperceptible. Each moment, you meet a new root, a liana, a texture, a color, a smell. The discovery of sounds. Even the wind in the treetops composes unique melodies, according to the resistance offered by the Brazilnut, the huge Samaúma or the Açaí palm.

In my childhood, the sound I liked most was the one that arised during the flowering period of the majestic Brazilnut-trees. Their flowers are polinized by huge bees, named Mangangá. Imagine hundreds of mangangás entering the flowers to extract their nectar! The flower has a narrow cavity. So, when the bees want to leave the flowers, they have to make a big effort to be released, using their wings in reverse mode, with full power. This makes a strong damped noise, like a powerful machine. One of my first memories of this world is the sound of mangangás in the top of the nut-tree close to our house.

Many people see the forest as homogeneous. I always saw it as a space of diversity. I appreciated paying attention to little things, like ants carrying leaves to a hole. The ants' path was very clean, as if it was brushed. Our own walkways to the rubber trees were full of leaves, sticks, roots and a kind of spineous branch that scratches your leg when you pass by. We used to call it "espera-aí", which means "wait there!". And I imagined how it would be nice to have a clean way, as the ants had it!

Another ant, the Tucandeira, has such a painful sting that it is hard to explain. But there was also a mythic reason to fear it. My uncle Pedro Mendes, who lived for a long time with the native Indians of the Alto Madeira region, used to say that the tucandeira ants were transformed into a kind of liana, the Ambé. If a tucandeira died at the top of a tree, its body would be transformed into the plant, and the legs would turn into lianas. If a tucandeira bit somebody, the first thing to do was to find an ambé liana, to cut it and to drink the water, because this was the antidote. I don't know if this is really the fact, but it used to assuage the pain.

My uncle taught us things we profoundly believed. He told us that, if we happened to be lost in the forest and saw a blue butterfly, we just had to follow it, because it would lead us to a cleared and cultivated space in the forest, and from there we would find the way home. This butterfly is very beautiful, big, almost the size of a hand. I never saw a blue color like this one. Which, in fact, is brown. Researchers and scientists have found out that there is a special engineering in the positioning of the scales on the wings which causes the effect of appearing blue to us, with the incidence of light.

Afterwards, I understood why the blue butterfly led us home. Because it likes to sit and sip on sweet fruit like bananas or papaya, ripe and already hurt by bites of the little Pipira bird. When the butterfly is hungry, it looks for the closest cleared and cultivated spot in the forest, where it can easily find some fruit. And surely there is a house nearby. Those myths seem to be simply beliefs, but they have scientific knowledge associated to them, obtained by the same principle of the academic method: Systematic observance of phenomena.

Long before Ecology came up as a branch of knowledge or Environmentalism appeared as a movement, the system of the forest already had its norms, its rules and laws, its sustainability and its enforcement agency, by a mythic code working as a legislation to protect the forest itself and the life forms living within. It was not allowed to fish more than necessary, because the "Mother of the Water" would drown the boat. It was not allowed to hunt in excess, because the "Little Man of the Forest" would beat the hunter up. It was not allowed to kill a pregnant animal, because the hunter would become "panema", without luck. And to turn the bad luck around the ritual would be so complicated that it was easier not to bother the animal.

The practices of access to the resources of the forest, mediated by this mythic code, led to a high degree of balance. People would only hunt if the dried meat hanging at the smoke of the cooking stove was nearly finishing. Therefore, if it was not allowed to hunt in excess, there was no meat for sale, only for the family's own consumption. If this rule was not respected, the "Little man of the Forest" would beat up the offender with a fire liana, with a knot at its end. The person would be beaten without the possibility of self-defense, because the entity was invisible. The hunter would have fever and be hurt all over. Even the dog, if it menaced an

unnecessary prey, began to jump and yelp with pain. It was the little man teaching the dog discipline.

There were many stories like this, and they made me afraid to walk around in the jungle. The first thing I did to overcome this fear was to fully respect the mythic laws. And since my childhood I have a huge faith, and I always believed that, being just to Nature, God would protect me.

But even with all those fears, my sisters and I enjoyed walking around in the jungle, because there we had a lot of fun. For instance, to build swings with very strong lianas, hanging down from trees, 30 meters high. Fishing in the creeks named Igarapés and gathering all kinds of wild fruit was a lot of fun. There are so many of them: Bacuri, Abiu, Taperebá, Ingá, Tucumã, Cajá and many others.

It was a world of traditional wisdom, with its social and cultural organization inseparable from the forest's existence. One day, the chainsaws and tractors arrived and demolished the mythic codes, creating the need for a jurisprudence which, not being within the human beings, needs institutions and mechanisms to be implemented and enforced. It is not a coincidence that the first big Federal Police Operation to enforce the environmental laws in the Amazon region, in the State of Mato Grosso, with 480 Federal Agents, was named after Curupira, the Spirit of the Forest in the native tradition.

Today, if we were able to open our sensitivity to the values of the forest, it would perhaps become easier to redefine what we mean by quality of life. Who knows, we may need a huge blue butterfly to lead us home, where the fruit of our decisions always wait for us on a plentiful table.