

The *Xapiri's* Gaze



Dancing *xapiri*

WHEN I WAS a very young child, my thought was still in oblivion. Yet in dreams I often saw strange and frightening beings we call *yai t^hē*.¹ This is why I was often heard talking and crying in the night. At the time we lived in *Marakana*, an old house on the upper Rio Toototobi.² Only a few children in our house dreamed this way. We did not yet know what troubled our sleep, but already the *xapiri* came to us. This is why later, once we were adults, we wanted to drink the *yākoana* powder to become shamans. The other children grew up without ever knowing what scared us so much.

It was during this period that I saw the spirits for the very first time. At nightfall, the warmth of the fire eased me to sleep in my mother's ham-

mock. After a moment their images would start to come down to me. They made me become ghost and sent me the dream.³ A path of light opened before my eyes and unknown beings came towards me. They seemed to appear from very far away, but I could distinguish them clearly. They had the appearance of tiny human beings, with black saki tails around their foreheads and their hair covered in white down feathers.

They approached with slow movements, in a blinding light, waving young *hoko si* palm leaves. With their arms decorated with scarlet macaw tail feathers and a profusion of bright, colorful bunches of *paixi* feathers, coated with vermilion annatto dye, they roared at the top of their voices, like a group of guests arriving at a *reahu* feast. There were so many of them, and they kept their eyes set on me. It was beautiful but terrifying because I had never seen *xapiri* spirits before.

When they finally got up close to me, my stomach dropped with fear. I did not understand what was happening to me. I would start to cry and yell and call for my mother. Then suddenly I would wake up and hear her voice softly telling me: "Don't cry! You won't dream anymore, don't be afraid. Sleep without crying now. Be calm!" Much later, once I had become a shaman, I understood that the frightening beings I had seen in my childhood dreams truly were spirits. Then I thought: "It really was the *xapiri* who came to me then! Why didn't I answer them earlier?"⁴

At that time, the spirits visited me constantly. They really wanted to dance for me, yet I was scared of them. These dreams lasted throughout the time of my childhood, until I became a teenager. First I would see the glimmering light of the *xapiri* approaching, then they would take hold of me and take me into the sky's chest. It is true, I often flew over the forest in my dreams. My arms were suddenly transformed into wings, like those of a big scarlet macaw. I could contemplate the tops of the trees below me, like you can from an **airplane**. Sometimes I started to fall into the void and was overcome with fear. Then suddenly my dream was interrupted and I would wake up in tears.

There was a reason I dreamed I was flying so often. The *xapiri* constantly carried my image into the heights of the sky with them. This is what happens when they fondly set their eyes upon a sleeping child to make him become a shaman. They tell themselves: "Later, when he is grown up, we will dance by his side!" and they continue to watch him with interest. So they never stop making him dream, frightening him the whole while. This is why he always becomes a ghost when he sleeps. He

does not get sick, but he flails around in his hammock, crying and yelling to the point that some adults in his house get sick of being woken by his wailing. But these are not childish tantrums. Only the children who see the *xapiri* in their dreams yell during the night. If this was not the case, they would sleep peacefully, like the others.

In my dreams, the spirits tied my hammock's ropes high up in the sky. They looked like **radio** antennas extended at my side. They became paths that led the *xapiri* and their songs to me, just like the white people's **telephone's** talk path. I was lying calmly but I could feel my hammock getting bigger and bigger. Then I had the impression I was growing bigger with it. I was still only a small child, but I felt myself getting huge. I would look around and see nothing but a large void. It made me dizzy. The sky's chest seemed so close, within reach. A sound rose up from it, like the one from groups of dancers yelling loudly when they arrive at a *reahu* feast: "Aō! Aō! Aō!" This was the clamor of the *xapiri* dancing as they came towards me, but I couldn't see them very well. Then after a while everything stopped. As I struggled to wake up, I still felt huge. But realizing I was still my normal size, I worried and asked myself: "I'm still so small! But how could I have become so enormous?" and wound up falling back asleep.

Other times, I contemplated the forest from the sky's chest again. But now a mountain of stone suddenly appeared in it, as tall as the one that stands over our *Watoriki* house. It rose in silence, close to me. In reality it was very far away, but its image nearly touched me. My eyes remained riveted on its slopes. I was scared and asked myself: "What is that? What is happening to me?" Much later, I understood why I often saw this great rocky peak in dreams. *Omama* had created the mountains to hide the path by which he escaped from our forest. They are not set down on the ground without reason.⁵ Though they may appear impenetrable to the eyes of he who is not a shaman, they are actually spirit houses. But at that time I was very little and I knew nothing of all that. I did not yet know who the *xapiri* were or even that they existed.

I also often dreamed that animals came after me in the forest. The first one I saw was a big tapir. It seemed very threatening to me. It began to chase me. I feared it would trample me. So I quickly climbed up a tree to get away from it. But the tapir started to grow bigger and bigger, until it got to my height. Frozen in place as I crouched on a branch, I watched it with terror. Then, just as it was about to reach me, I screamed and sud-

denly woke up. Later I understood that it was the image of Tapir, the ancestor *Xamari*, who wanted to dance with me.⁶

I was also often frightened by an enormous jaguar in my dreams. It followed my tracks in the forest and got closer and closer. I ran from it with all my strength, without ever succeeding to put it off the track. Eventually I would trip in the tangled forest and fall before the fierce jaguar. Then it leapt on me. But just as it was about to devour me, I would suddenly come to my senses, crying. Other times I tried to escape it by climbing up a tree. But it chased me, scaling the tree trunk with its sharp claws. Horrified, I hurried to the tree's highest branches. I did not know where to run anymore. The only escape was to throw myself into the void from the top of the tree where I had sought refuge. I started to flap my arms in desperation, as if they were wings, and suddenly I could fly. I glided in circles, high above the forest like a vulture. In the end I would find myself standing in another forest, on another shore, and the jaguar could no longer reach me.

Sometimes I was chased through my dreams by a herd of white-lipped peccaries. They would catch up to me and prepare to trample and bite me. I could hear their menacing tusks loudly crashing through the forest behind me. Yet I managed to escape them by climbing a tree, and once I was at its top I could fly through the sky's chest again. In other dreams I found myself near a watering hole with an enormous anaconda wrapped around me, trying to crush and swallow me in the mud. Or I was fishing on the banks of a river when a giant black caiman suddenly came crawling out of it towards me. I started to run right away but it chased after me and I couldn't outrun it, despite how heavy it was as it raced through the underbrush.

Sometimes I also dreamed that enemies attacked our house. These were people of the highlands, inhabitants of the place known as *H^waxi t^ha*, at the sources of the Orinoco and Parima rivers. These warriors covered in black dye⁷ burst into our *Marakana* house's central plaza and started shooting their arrows off all around. I was terrified. The strings of their bows snapped ceaselessly and one by one my elders fell under their arrows. So I tried to escape by slipping out of the house. But a group of warriors set off on my trail. I ran frantically through the forest trying to escape them. I scrambled up a hill, then climbed a steep mountain. When I reached its peak, I threw myself into the void and once again I was able to take flight. The warriors remained frozen on a great rock and

followed me with their eyes, powerless. Then suddenly I came out of my sleep.

Sometimes I also dreamed that I was climbing a tall *rapa hi* tree with yellow flowers. I climbed slowly, clinging to its trunk. Then I passed its main branches and finally moved to its top. From there I could contemplate the forest in the distance, seeing in every direction. I could see other houses, a great river, mountains, and hills. I observed spider monkeys jumping from tree to tree, macaw couples, flights of parrots, and herds of peccaries. It was very beautiful. After a while I wanted to go back down. So I looked beneath me. But suddenly all the branches I had used to climb so high seemed inaccessible to me. Alarmed, I asked myself: “How will I get back to the ground? What will I hold on to?” I did not know what to do. I tried to squeeze the tree trunk between my arms but its bark became increasingly slippery. Suddenly my hands lost their grip. I hurtled towards the ground. But at that very instant I woke with a start. Terrified, I would ask myself again: “What happened to me?”

Other times, I answered the call of the water-being women we call *Māuyoma*.⁸ These are the daughters of *Tëpërësikî*, *Omama*’s father-in-law; the sisters of the wife he fished out of the river in the beginning of time. I dived in to join them in the deep of a great river. But to my surprise, I came into the inside of a vast house, without getting wet at all. Everything here was dry and you could see as clearly as outside. The house’s central plaza was lit by the sun reflecting on the water’s surface. I stayed standing without moving, calmly looking all around me. Many doors led to paths cut through the forest. I watched the coming and going of *Tëpërësikî*’s daughters and daughters-in-law, as they went in and out of the home with their children. I found them really beautiful. Though their father terrified me, I couldn’t stop admiring them. Yet as soon as I tried to follow them, I woke with a start. Sometimes all it took was for me to turn back to the door through which I came in for my dream to end there and then. I was sorry that I could not stay in the water beings’ house!

The next day I asked my stepfather:⁹ “Who owns that house under the river I saw when I was sleeping? It was so beautiful; I would have liked to contemplate it longer.” He kindly explained to me: “You went to the house where *Omama*’s father-in-law lives with the fish spirits, the caiman spirits, and the anaconda spirits. The *xapiri* are starting to want you. Later, when you are a teenager, if you want to acquire the power of the

yākoana, I will truly open their paths to you.” This dream recurred often because as a child I spent a lot of my time fishing along the rivers. This is why the water beings constantly captured my image to make me dream.

Sometimes the images of other unknown beings like that of the *ayo-kora* cacique bird presented themselves to me in my sleep. Its feather adornments were magnificent, and their colors shone brightly in the light. Its presentation dance and songs were outstanding. This spirit did not scare me like the others. I felt happy to be able to admire it. Yet sometimes I also saw the moon spirit, which looks like a human being surrounded by a halo of intense light. It would fly in my direction and come very close to me before loudly bursting into laughter. It showed its prominent canines while its beard and luminous hair quivered in the dark. Then suddenly it disappeared downstream of the sky, where the sun rises.¹⁰ I can still remember it: its image truly horrified me! The unknown beings who appeared in my child dreams were *xapiri* spirits who watched me and were interested in me. At that time I did not know it yet. I was very worried by all these images seen in dream during my childhood. But much later, when the elders gave me the power of the *yākoana* to drink, I understood that they had come to meet me so I would become a shaman.

THE PEOPLE of our house were often annoyed when I sobbed or yelled during the night. My stepfather would patiently explain to them: “The spirits are watching this child and he is behaving like a ghost. This is why he moans and talks in his sleep.” He took a lot of care of me, just like my mother. He was a man of wisdom, a great shaman. When I woke in tears during the night, he would reassure me by saying: “Abandon that dream, come back from that ghost state! Don’t be scared! It is the animal ancestors that you are seeing. If you want, when you grow up I will let you drink the *yākoana* and they will build their house near you.¹¹ Then you will be able to call them in your turn.” Then he passed his two hands over me and blew. After a while I grew calm. Yet a few days later it would all start again. Countless *xapiri* would come back to me, resuming their presentation dance in blinding light, then disappearing as soon as I woke up. My stepfather comforted me again: “Don’t be afraid! You will get older and once you are an adult you will become a great shaman. You will really know how to make the spirits dance. You will protect your children

and the people of your house from the evil beings and cure them when they are sick.” When I heard these words, I calmed down and fell back asleep.

Just like me, my eldest son was worried for much of his childhood. He never slept peacefully. The spirits had also set their eyes on him. He dreamed that he hunted and that he traveled. He often saw the spirits dancing in the night. I told myself that later I too would have him drink the *yākoana*. Yet now that he is an adult I do not know whether he still sees the *xapiri* in his sleep. He has become a teacher, and he is often busy with the white people’s words. Maybe he will be afraid to set his thought on the spirits and forget the word drawings he has learned?¹² Or maybe he has already spoiled himself by thinking about women too much? I do not know.

When I was a child, my stepfather always kept me apart from women. He took care of me so that I could really become a shaman. My mother, my stepfather, my sister, and I most often lived apart from the others in a small house at *T^hoot^hot^hopi*, far from the people of the big *Marakana* house.¹³ So I did not live in the company of their daughters and sisters. This is why I feared women when I was a child. When I did mix with girls, I used to tell them: “Don’t get near me! I don’t want to feel the *puu hana* honey leaves on your arms! That would make my head spin and make me sick.” It is true, the smell of those leaves makes the spirits flee. They fear the women who wear them as if they were unknown beings, and if the youngsters start to copulate too soon the *xapiri* no longer want to dance for them. They are disgusted by their penis odor and find them dirty. They no longer come to visit their dream. In the same way, they hate the young hunters who eat their own prey. They don’t have dreams either.¹⁴ It is so. The spirits prefer children who grow up without looking at women.

When you are young, it is good to spend your time in the forest. It is bad to always have your thought set on women and to constantly dream of eating their vulvas.¹⁵ It is wrong to spend your nights desiring them and to try to cross the house on all fours to secretly join them in their hammocks.¹⁶ Better to concern yourself with being a good hunter and to always remain attentive to the game in the forest. This is how a young man will please the spirits and they will gladly come to him. Then they will consider that he belongs to them and will be prompt to dance and make him into a shaman.

This is what happened to me when I was a child. I grew up spending my time in the forest, and this is how little by little I started to see the *xapiri*. My attention was always focused on game and during the night the images of the animal ancestors presented themselves to me. Their adornments and paintings shone brighter and brighter in my dreams. I could also hear them speak and sing loudly. Then they suddenly disappeared when I woke up. This often happened to the elders' children, in the time when the white people were still far away from our forest. But since they have gotten close to us, the children and the youngsters are not the way we used to be. Today, the power of the *yākoana* often scares them. They are afraid that they will die from it, and sometimes they even lie to themselves to the point of thinking that one day they could turn into white people.¹⁷

When I was a child, I also got sick very often. I was very vulnerable. The evil beings of the forest and those of the epidemics were constantly after me. After a while, the shamans were tired of working to make me better! So they placed my image in a *yaremaxi* carrying sling¹⁸ and hid it in the bat spirit's house. Then it was safe in the darkness, out of its predators' reach. They searched for it everywhere, but could no longer find it. This is how the shamans of old worked. Sometimes they also hid the little children's images in the tapir spirit's pirogue to protect them from sickness.¹⁹ The tapir spirit's own daughter took care of them. She washed them, rocked them, and played with them while sailing on the waters, far from the evil beings starved for human flesh. This is how I finally stopped getting sick so often.

By passing their hands over me to chase the diseases out of my body, the elders of our house also gradually placed the images of the *xapiri*'s precious adornments on me.²⁰ They tied curassow crest armbands to my arms and put scarlet macaw tail feathers in them. They put parrot feathers through my earlobes. They covered my hair in white down feathers and wrapped a band of black saki tail around my forehead. All these ornaments were invisible to ordinary people's ghost eyes. Yet their images really were there, attached to me, and they protected the little boy I was. They alerted the spirits to the approach of evil beings. Then they could warn their fathers, the shamans, to repel them before it was too late.

The elders also dressed me with the tapir spirit adornments so I would become a good hunter.²¹ When a young man wears such precious things, the tapirs fall in love with him. They like him better than all the others.

When they see him walking in the forest, they tell themselves: “How magnificent this hunter is! He is looking for me, I must go towards him!” Failing that, no tapir would let itself be arrowed so easily, just to calm the elders’ meat hunger. I think the shamans put these adornments on children’s arms so they won’t lack game in their old age!

It was thanks to all this finery that the *xapiri* looked upon me with affection and that I constantly saw their images in dreams. These ornaments plunge children like me into a ghost state during their sleep. This also used to happen to the eldest of my three daughters. The spirits’ bunches of *paixi* feathers were placed on her when she was still a baby. She dreamed a lot and often screamed in fear during the night. She easily became ghost at that time. She could have turned into a shaman.²² The spirits watched her with interest, as they had done with me. When she was still a little girl, before her first menstruation, she sometimes told me: “Father! Later when I am more solid, I would like to truly see the beauty of the spirits like you do. You will make me drink the *yākoana!*” But now she is an adult and she is married. She may still dream of the spirits, but she no longer talks about it. Her thought is obscured by many other things.

THE *XAPIRI* sometimes also simply set their gaze upon children who drink too much honey. We prepare it by diluting it in water and the *xapiri* are very fond of it.²³ One of my brothers-in-law, who was also a great shaman, often fed it to me when I was little. He would tell me: “Drink this honey I just prepared for you! When you grow up, you will be able to make the spirits dance just like me.” It was very sweet, I liked that, and I really drank a lot of it. Then I would fall asleep, having drunk my fill. I would instantly enter a ghost state and start to dream. Suddenly everything appeared to me as bright as if it were in full daylight. I heard cries, murmurs, and strident whistling. I saw animals run in the forest, and in the distance I gazed at the *xapiri* dancing joyously. The bee spirits drew close to me, wanting to play. I was then surrounded with such an intense brightness that it frightened me and I wound up bursting into tears. It was so. Honey is the spirits’ favorite food and if children drink a lot of it, the *xapiri* easily appear in their dreams, even if they do not yet know how to recognize them.

Once I got older, my mother’s brother, my stepfather, and other sha-

mans of our house sometimes offered me a little *yākoana* powder.²⁴ They would call me when they gathered to repel the forest evil beings and I was playing nearby: “Come here! Try the power of the *yākoana*! Enter the ghost state and later you will become a shaman.” I was a little intimidated but still accepted a few pinches, which I went to snort by myself; or I got close to them so they would blow a little into my nostrils. I was very curious about what I would see. I remained lying on my hammock for a long time, not moving. I became a ghost and when night fell I dreamed constantly. I could contemplate the magnificent images of the animal ancestors and the sky and river spirits. This happened to me often, for as a little boy I liked to try the *yākoana*. This is how I was made to grow up.

Sometimes the elders also gave it to me at the end of *reahu* feasts, when all the men take it together at the center of the house before they begin their *yāimuu* dialogues.²⁵ They had me sniff a little, two or three times over. Then the power of the *yākoana* took me over and instantly made me die.²⁶ I rolled and thrashed on the ground like a ghost. I could no longer see anything around me, neither my house nor its inhabitants.²⁷ I whimpered and called for my mother: “*Napaaa! Napaaa!*” My skin remained sprawled on the ground but the *xapiri* took hold of my image. They sped away with it, far into the distance. It flew with them onto the sky’s back, where the ghosts live, or in the *aōpatari* ancestors’ underground world. In the end they brought me back to where my skin was lying and I came to my senses. I was getting older at the time and the *yākoana*’s power no longer scared me at all. Without it, I would not have seen all those things in my dreams. It wasn’t having too much plantain soup and peach palm juice that made me dream during my childhood!²⁸ And it certainly wasn’t the heady fragrance of the honey leaves that women wear in their armbands!

IF THE ELDERS had not made me drink *yākoana*, I would never have been able to kill my first tapir when I was still very young and I would never have become a good hunter once I was an adult. Yes, it’s true, I killed a tapir all by myself when I was barely a teenager!²⁹ All this happened because I had already seen this animal ancestor’s image in dreams. This is how. I had gone to hunt alone, and my stepfather had lent me his shotgun, which he had recently acquired from white people downstream.³⁰ I had been walking in the forest for quite some time when sud-

denly I noticed a dark figure on the edge of the path. Frightened, I worried to myself: “What could that be lying in the underbrush?” Then I recognized the tapir’s outline. I saw its eyes staring at me in the half-light. That really scared me. I spun around to run away. My heart was beating fast in my chest and I thought: “Maybe it’s going to attack me! Tapirs are dangerous. If I fire on it, it’s going to turn around and bite me or trample me!” I had already dreamed of tapirs and other animals—peccaries, deer, and caimans—that chased after me to do me harm. That is why I was scared and ran off!

Yet I did not go very far. I stopped my flight and waited for my thought to calm down. Then I slowly returned without a sound to where the tapir was lying. It was still in the same place. It looked at me again. This time I remained impassive. I looked around and located a young tree on which I could hoist myself if it decided to attack me. I quickly made a vine loop to slip over my feet.³¹ Then I took aim at the animal and fired. As soon as the **cartridge**’s sound rang out, I threw my gun to the ground and climbed up my tree. Yet the wounded tapir did not come after me as I had feared. On the contrary, after rolling around and moaning on the ground, it tried to escape in the opposite direction. Seeing that, I lost all fear. I came back down from my refuge and slipped another cartridge into my shotgun. The tapir was still lying out in the open and was trying to get back up. I aimed at it again as I drew close and fired. This time it died right away.

I ran back to our house. As soon as I got there I rushed to my stepfather to tell him the news: “*Xoape!*”³² I just killed a tapir with your gun!” He seemed really surprised and did not believe me at first: “You’re not lying? Is that true? Where is it?” I answered with pride: “It’s true! It isn’t far from here, downstream, where the trunk of a *rapa hi* tree is suspended.” He still didn’t seem convinced: “Is it really dead?” I loudly insisted: “*Awe!* It’s lying on the edge of the path. It’s true!” Finally, he decided to round up our household: “Let’s go cut up the tapir my son-in-law just killed!” Then we set off to bring back the heavy animal’s meat.

My stepfather told me I had done well to leave my prey in the forest. He taught me that when you kill a tapir, it is preferable not to touch it and even to avoid breathing in its odor. You have to leave it where it fell and return with your kin to bring back its meat. If not, the hunter who killed it runs the risk of forever coming back empty-handed. Later, I killed many other tapirs. But this one was the very first. I became a good hunter be-

cause I dreamed so much at the time. Now I am not as good. I worked with the white people in the forest a lot and they often made me eat my own prey. That made me clumsy with game.

AS CHILDREN, we gradually start to think straight. We realize that the *xapiri* really exist and that the elders' words are true. Little by little, we understand that the shamans do not behave as ghosts without a reason. Our thought fixes itself on the spirits' words, and then we really want to see them. We take hold of the idea that later we will be able to ask the elders to blow the *yākoana* into our nostrils and give us the *xapiri*'s songs.³³ This is how it happened for me a long time ago. The spirits often came to visit me in dreams. This is how they started to know me well. They would tell me: "Since you answer our call, we will dance for you and put up our hammocks in your spirit house!" I never stopped hearing their call throughout my whole childhood. Next I became a teenager, then a young adult, and it continued. I never slept without seeing them come down towards me. They did not frighten me anymore, and I had stopped crying during the night. Yet I kept talking and yelling out in my sleep. In the morning, my relatives would ask me: "What is happening? Are you becoming a shaman?" I merely answered that I had no idea.

This is how it is with us. The *xapiri* first look upon you fondly when you are a child. Then you know they are interested in you and that they will wait for you to become an adult before they truly reveal themselves. They continue to observe you and put you to the test as you grow up. Finally, you can ask the elders to make you drink the *yākoana* if you want. Then the old shamans will open the paths by which the spirits will come dance for you and build their houses. During childhood, we just become ghosts once in a while, and that's all. But you can only really know the *xapiri* after drinking the *yākoana* for a long time. Once you have reached that point, they no longer leave your dream. This is how one truly becomes a spirit being in one's own right! During the time of dream, shamans only see the *xapiri*'s presentation dance. They no longer dream of their children, their garden, visitors to their home, or their wife's vulva, as ordinary men do.

For shamans' sons, things go differently. They are born of the spirits' sperm.³⁴ They become other before the elders even have them drink the *yākoana*. The *xapiri* owned by their fathers also coupled with their moth-

ers to make them be born. This is why they do not really come from their human father's sperm. The shaman did eat his wife's vulva but it was the *xapiri* who made her pregnant through him. It is so. Shamans' sons are born and become spirits by themselves. They follow their fathers' path. The daughters of the *yawarioma* water beings snatch them as soon as they are teenagers to carry them off to their homes deep in the rivers. Yet it only happens this way if they truly carry the forest in their thought and if they spend most of their time there hunting, paying no attention to women. The spirits look upon good hunters benevolently. They know that they like game, that they track it without respite, and arrow it with agility. Thus, by constantly walking in the forest, young people wind up becoming other during their sleep. They start constantly dreaming of the *xapiri*. The *xapiri* watch them and fall for them. They tell themselves: "We want to come down and set our house up by him. He likes game, let's show him our presentation dance. Maybe he will want us too?"

The water beings are very great hunters. This is why they become fond of the young people whose thought is set on game. They consider them true inhabitants of the forest.³⁵ So their sisters like to take hold of their image to make them become spirits. Once they are taken this way, the young people enter a ghost state. They run through the forest elatedly yelling "Aë! Aë! Aë!" This is how the water beings' daughters attract them far from their own people. Once they have fallen in love, they stay with them underwater a long time. When they finally let them go home, they regain consciousness and suddenly find themselves alone, lost in an unknown forest. Then they tell themselves: "Oae! My real house is very far from here!" and they return among their people.

The *yawarioma* water beings are the sons, sons-in-law, daughters, and daughters-in-law of *Tëpërësiki*, *Omama*'s father-in-law, the one who brought him the plants that we grow in our gardens. These are the masters of the forest and the watercourses. They look like human beings, have wives and children, but live deep in the bottom of the rivers, where they are innumerable. They are really very good hunters! They cover the forest paths relentlessly, arrowing macaws, toucans, parrots, *hëima si* birds, and all sorts of other game.³⁶ Yet they never eat their own prey. Like us, they find that this would be a frightening thing. Instead, they give them to their sisters, who are many and very beautiful. These water beings share their homes with their father *Tëpërësiki*, but also with the elec-

tric eel, anaconda, and caiman spirits. Their hammocks are set up side by side underwater, where it is dry, just as they are in our houses. These are the beings that ordinary people's ghost eyes see as fish. Yet their images become *xapiri* made to dance by the shamans.

Omama grabbed one of these women of the waters by the arm. She was one of *Tëpërësi*'s daughters, who we call *T^huëyoma*. But he did not really catch her like a fish. My wife's father told me about it.³⁷ *Omama* went to the river by attaching a love charm to the end of a liana. Once he reached the riverbank, he cast his line and bait. The woman of the water saw him draw close and found him handsome. Then she took hold of the liana and let herself be pulled out of the water. *Omama* smelled good, he took her arm and hoisted her onto the riverbank. Then he married her and it is from her that we were all born.

Today the same daughters of *Tëpërësi* make young people inhale *xōa* love charms to capture their image and make them become other. You can hear their murmurs when you are hunting deep in the forest in the afternoon. And if a young hunter comes to meet them, they will seize him. Yet before they appear to him, they will first ask themselves: "Is he handsome and well-groomed?" They will sniff his skin without his noticing. They will inspect his tongue, his chest, and his penis. They will examine his nails. They will ask themselves questions about him: "Is this a good hunter? Does he eat his own prey?" They will only decide to bring him back to their home if they truly find him to their taste. Finally, if he really appeals to them, they will carry him away to their house under the waters.

This is how it goes. The young people start by losing consciousness because they have been tracking game in the forest for so long. They feel very weak and little by little they become ghosts. The animals they approach stare at them and start laughing like human beings.³⁸ Those they arrow whimper in pain. The trees call to them and the leaves touch them like hands. Then the women of the waters, taking advantage of their weakness, call them and take their image away to their home and keep them there a long time. It is during this stay that they begin to become other. These girls keep them stretched out in their hammocks. They wrap their arms around their shoulders to make them oblivious. They laugh at them when they ask them questions and never answer. Later, when the young men finally succeed in leaving them to go home, the girls will follow them to their own houses. They will hide at the back of their hearth

and remain behind them a little longer. Then, after a while, the young men will ask their elders to make them drink the *yākoana*.

AS I SAID, shamans' sons are also spirits' sons. This is why the *yawari-oma* water beings recognize them as sons-in-law and their daughters take hold of them so promptly. As for me, I am only the son of a human being. My father was not a shaman, he did not know the *xapiri*. So I did not know anything of all this when I was a teenager. The women of the waters never took me to their homes and laid me down in their hammocks! They prefer shamans' sons. It is so. But since I was a little boy, I simply never stopped seeing the *xapiri* in dreams, even without knowing who they were. It is only much later, once I had become an adult, that I presented my nose to the elders so they could give me their spirits. I came to want that all by myself. I thought it would be beautiful to really see things as shamans do and so, little by little, I fell in love with the *xapiri*.

The only thing that happened to me in the forest when I was a teenager was that I was attacked by the spirits of the white-lipped peccaries.³⁹ At the time, I was constantly hunting with the men from my house. Once, we had been tracking a herd of these wild pigs for a long time. This was in the late afternoon. We had just managed to surround them. They had slowed down and were now within our reach. We were preparing to arrow them, each from his own side. Like the others, I chose a prey and calmly prepared my bow. But the peccaries abruptly scattered everywhere. Part of the herd turned back to escape in my direction. Suddenly I found myself face to face with animals furiously charging towards me. Terrified, I tried to get away from them by climbing a young tree, but I tripped and fell. I hit the ground violently and lost consciousness for a moment. All this was very fast. Yet the peccaries had time to jump over me as if I were just a broken tree trunk lying on the ground. They crossed over my chest one after the other at high speed, without ever touching me. There were really so many of them and they smelled very bad. The snapping of their tusks was terrifying. I think it was then that their images attacked me. Yet I did not notice anything at the time.

After they had passed, I stood up, still trembling with fright, and I joined the other hunters, who had managed to arrow several prey. I said nothing about my misadventure. We cut up the downed prey and gathered the pieces in *maima si* and *kōanari si* palm woven bags. Night was

starting to fall, we were far from our house. We decided to camp in the forest and to cook the peccary innards in packs of leaves in order to calm our meat hunger.⁴⁰ Once I had eaten my fill, I peacefully fell asleep. Yet in the middle of the night I started to feel very bad. I woke with a start and suddenly saw everything that surrounded me with ghost eyes. I started to loudly vomit. Then I thought: "The peccaries are real ancestors!"⁴¹ Their images attacked me and are making me sick!" The next day we came home. I was very weak, I could not carry anything. The following night, I was still sick. I slept in a ghost state again. That is when I saw the peccary spirits appear in my dream. Countless numbers of them were coming out of a huge hole in the ground, from which a strong wind blew. Wearing their feathery finery, they were dancing slowly on a mirror, which reflected a dazzling light. This lasted a long time, then they abruptly disappeared. I woke up and thought: "What is happening to me? How will I get better?"

Some time later, my mother's sister's husband, who was also a great shaman, began to chase away the sickness that was in me. But he had barely started his cure when I fell deeply unconscious. I was inert, half lying on my hammock. Then my stepfather's mother, who was a very old woman, took a pot full of water and poured large amounts of it on me. I eventually regained consciousness. My ghost returned to my skin and I came to. When I opened my eyes, I saw my mother, her sister, my older sister, and my grandmother crying by my hammock as if I were already dead!⁴² Then the shaman's work continued for a long time and I was finally able to get better.

THIS IS ONLY what happened to me when I was barely a teenager. I was never taken away by the women of the waters! Yet in the ancients' time, they frequently seized young men's images, as I said. These young people disappeared, running into the forest, and that is how many of them became shamans. My stepfather, who raised me in *Marakana*, often told me about it. He himself had lived through it long ago. Now I want to repeat his words so that the white people can also hear them. This is what he told me.⁴³

When I was a teenager, my thought became other and this is how I started to become a shaman. One day I was hunting parrots in the

forest. I heard the tumult of their games in the trees above me. Suddenly I saw a water being heading towards me. He was imposing. A profusion of scarlet macaw tail feathers, toucan tails, and colorful *wisawisama si* feathered hides were attached to his curasow crest armbands. Judging by his adornments, he was a great hunter. Slowly, he came close to me and declared: "Try to arrow those parrots from here!" Surprised and frightened, I asked him: "Who are you?" He simply answered: "Me? I want to eat the parrots you will arrow. Move over there and try! But don't arrow their bodies, aim for the throat, just below the beak." I followed his words. I arrowed a first parrot, then a second, exactly as he had told me. Then he took my arm and said: "Brother-in-law! That's good, that's enough! I'm going to send my sister to take your catch."⁴⁴ I was very hot and sweating abundantly. Little by little, my thought was losing itself. I stayed in place without saying a word, without moving, standing up next to the dead parrots lying on the ground. Then after a while a woman of the waters made her way through the forest to me.

The leaves on the trees started to quiver in the wind and the forest filled with a shimmering light. She came close to me with small steps. Her lips were smiling, for she wanted to make her love magic take hold in me. She was very beautiful. Her eyes were magnificent and she had a nicely short vulva, with no pubic hair. I started arrowing parrots again for her. But as soon as they came spinning down, their cries instantly turned into the songs of *xapiri* spirits: "Arererererere!" The woman of the waters picked up their carcasses one by one, joyfully approving: "Awe! This is very good! You are an excellent hunter! Keep arrowing these parrots." One after the other, the parrots kept falling under my strokes: "Arererererere! Arererererere! Arererererere!" But as soon as they reached the ground, the arrows sticking in their bodies transformed into snakes! When I tried to pick them up, these reptiles threatened to bite me. My eyesight got increasingly blurry and I had trouble distinguishing things around me. I could feel myself losing consciousness.

Each time, the woman of the waters came close to me, laughing in a gentle little voice: "He he he he!" Then she picked up my arrows and handed them to me: "Here, take them, this is what you

are looking for.” Yet as soon as I tried to grab them, they instantly flew away, producing the same spirit song: “*Arererererere!*” After a while, I truly became other and now I also felt my bow fly away: “*Arererererere!*” I was more and more worried and I couldn’t stop wondering what would possibly happen to me. I was now completely under the spell of this daughter of *Tēpērēsiki*’s love magic. Then suddenly the spirits of the forest started flocking towards me. The images of leaves and tree roots came down first, making a joyful clamor and whistling with their *purunama usi* bamboo flutes.⁴⁵ Their hair was covered in white down feathers, black saki tails were wrapped around their foreheads, and their curassow crest arm-bands were decorated with a profusion of scarlet macaw tail feathers. They were followed by the images of termites’ nests, which ran every which way carrying me on their backs. Then came the turn of the images of stones, which nearly knocked me over and crushed me, then that of the sky, which came to tear out my tongue. Finally other *xapiri* carried my eyes off into the distance and this is how I too started to become a spirit.⁴⁶

After all that, the water being woman grabbed my wrist and pulled me with her into the forest. I started to run at her side, smashing the branches in the underbrush as I passed. I was very excited and kept yelling: “*Aě! Aě! Aě! A yawarioma* girl is taking me on her path! The light is blinding me! I’m scared! *Aě! Aě! Aě!*” No one other than me could see her, yet I was really running with her. Her path was very hot and I was dripping with sweat. I could no longer see anything around me. I could not have recognized my people or my own house. I had become other. I ran like this for a long time, crossing unknown forests. At the end, I stopped in a clearing far from my home, exhausted. The woman reassured me in a soft voice: “Don’t be afraid! We aren’t very far now. Now we are close to my father’s house.” After this brief moment of respite, we started running down her winding path through the woods faster than ever.

Suddenly I heard the growl of a jaguar accompanied by its cub. Frightened, I instantly warned my companion: “Let’s get away from this path, it is going to devour us!” This did not seem to worry her and once again she tried to calm me: “Don’t be afraid! This jaguar belongs to me. It will not attack us.” Yet I was not reas-

sured at all and insisted: “I’m really very scared! Let’s take a detour anyway.” Once again, she answered me gently: “No, it will not devour you. It is a domestic animal. Don’t be afraid!” I would not relent, so we took a little distance. Yet no matter how I tried to avoid the animal, we always found it on our path. It is so. The water beings consider the jaguar their hunting dog!

Finally, we reached a vast expanse of dark water in the middle of the forest. I remained standing on the shore without moving. I was still just as worried. Then the woman of the waters motioned to the lake’s surface with her lips and said: “We have arrived at my father’s! Let’s go! Let’s go in!” I protested forcefully: “No! I don’t want to dive into this lake! It is much too deep. Black caimans will devour me in there! I will drown!” She answered with a smile: “Don’t be afraid! You won’t drown and there are no caimans here. This water is just the outside of our home. The entrance is close by.” Despite these words, I continued to resist. Then she dived and came back to the surface holding a handful of earth out to me: “Look! It’s dry. It comes from the floor of our house. The door is here, close by. Cross it and you will see the interior with your own eyes. This is the truth!” Then, while I was still hesitating, she grabbed my wrist and pulled me underwater.

I was terrified that I would sink straight to the bottom of the lake. Yet I instantly found myself in a dry place, in an imposing house surrounded by vast banana, manioc, yam, taro, sweet potato, and sugarcane plantations. It looked like one of our dwellings, but much bigger. *Tëpërësiki*, the young woman’s father, was lying on one side of the house in his hammock, while all his children were settled on the other. From a distance, I looked in his direction but his daughter warned me: “Don’t even dream of getting near my father, or he will instantly swallow you up!” But her many sisters greeted us joyfully. They surrounded me as soon as I arrived and showed me a great deal of friendship. The young woman who had dragged me into the forest was their older sister. There were only two young men with them; they were their brothers. One of them said to the young girls: “Don’t make so much noise! Father could wake up!” Then *Tëpërësiki*’s wife, whose hammock was beneath her husband’s, said in a small voice: “Daughter! Are you back?” And without setting her eyes on me, she added: “Give the one squatting next to you some of these yams to eat! Have him drink some plan-

tain soup! Also offer him some sweet potatoes! Don't let him stay starving!"⁴⁷ The *yawarioma* beings do the *turahamuu* bride-service and we follow in their footsteps.⁴⁸ This is why a young man who becomes a shaman calls the parents of the water woman who kidnapped him "father-in-law" and "mother-in-law." It is so.

Once I had eaten my fill, the young girls took turns to come laughing into my hammock and play with me. One of their brothers repeated his injunction that they should not speak too loudly. But their father had finally woken up and we could already hear his deep voice resonating throughout the house. Yet his daughters did not seem to be concerned about it. They continued to follow each other into my hammock to amuse themselves and copulate with me. I was seduced by their love magic. This is why I remained with them for such a long time. Little by little, I metamorphosed to become a shaman. Meanwhile, *Tëpërësiiki* had begun to sing his songs so I could get to know them. At certain moments as he chanted, he spit the objects he had just named onto the ground: bamboo arrow points, large fruits from the *aro kohi* tree, and even peccaries and tapirs, for his mouth was truly enormous.⁴⁹ This is how I learned the words that allow one to regurgitate the sorcery substances, the spirits' weapons, and the burning cotton of the evil spirits that are in the bodies of the sick. This is how *Tëpërësiiki* gave me the mouth of the *ayokora* cacique bird spirits.

But after a while he started to get tired. He stopped singing and spitting things out. Exhausted, he sighed deeply. Then he exclaimed: "Have the visitor squat next to me! I am truly very hungry!" He wanted to swallow me! His sons, who had remained in the house to make arrow points, prevented him from attacking me. Trying to thwart his desires, they answered him: "He can't come now. He is still busy making friendship with our sisters." Despite this, *Tëpërësiiki* had me called several more times. But each time the young people lied in the same way. Growing weary, he finally took up his songs again. Then his sons whispered to one of my girl companions: "Sister! Return to the forest with our brother-in-law! Take him back to his house!"

This is how I finally returned home. The woman of the waters who had accompanied me home slept against me in my hammock all night. Then, as soon as the sun rose, she took me back among her people. Then everything started again. Her mother gave me

food to eat, her sisters played with me, and her father let me hear his songs. Later another young girl took me back to my house and at dawn I left with her, running through the forest and yelling. All this was repeated day after day. Each time a different woman of the waters dragged me far away and brought me home. I was truly seduced by their love magic and this is how I became a shaman. This is how it usually happens. When a young man's image is captured by *Tēpērēsiki*'s daughters, he runs away from his house every day, only to return at nightfall. But he no longer recognizes anyone there. He has become other and leaves at dawn to race through the forest. No matter how hard his people try to force him to stay in his hammock, they do not succeed. He cannot resist the call of these underwater women. No one else sees them, but they always remain by his side. His flights through the forest take him very far from his home. He can even enter and cross unknown people's houses and come back out without noticing, for he is blinded by the intense brightness of the water beings' path through the forest. These *yawarioma* beings can keep him in their power for a long time. The shamans of his house will then have to bring his image back, so he eventually regains consciousness.

This is how my stepfather became a shaman long ago, when he was a young man. At the time, he often arrowed tapirs; he was a very good hunter. This is why the sisters of the water beings took hold of him. He did not just ask the elders to make him drink the *yākoana* to become other. He did not become a shaman without a reason. It is said that his father was a great shaman in his own right, whose mouth could regurgitate evil objects from sick people.⁵⁰ He followed in his footsteps. As for me, I was not seduced by the women of the waters. I only dreamed of them sometimes. As I said, I am not issued from the spirits' sperm, like the shamans' sons. The *xapiri* merely danced in my childhood dreams, long before my wife's father opened their paths to me, and at first I did not recognize them. It was he who weakened me with the *yākoana* and the *paara* powder so that they would agree to set up their house by my side.⁵¹ Until then they must have found me so ugly and dirty. They must have hesitated to get really close to me! But once my stepfather had me drink the *yākoana*, I was finally able to truly contemplate their beauty.