

Lies

by Dan Peplow

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Driving, pouring rain. Then sun. A cold night. Morning fog. Half-moon and a roiling bank of heavy gray clouds.

I'm walking along a path between the boarding house and the river. The echo of crowds, and cars, and planes that filled my ears the day before were surprisingly remote.

A dense tropical forest crowds both sides of the river. Mangrove trees obliterate the riverbanks creating mudflats, marshes and swamps.

Unseen, Indigenous people living in voluntary isolation, tribal descendants of escaped African slaves.

Miners.

Men on barges dredge the river bottom seeking gold.

Brightly colored birds swarm in and out of the canopy of the dense tropical forest.

Unseen toads, frogs, monkeys and birds, noisy from sundown to deep sleep the night before, are unseen and silent in the morning.

Wallowing beetles in black water along the river edge.

The River.

An area of multiple frontiers where native Amazonians, tribal people of African descent, migrant gold prospectors, state functionaries and international investors interact.

Dugout boats dock at a Chinese store in an opening that spans both sides of the river where the edges seemed intent on closing-up with new vegetation if the men there should ever lay down their machetes.

Dugout boats with outboard motors, go upstream, downstream and crisscross the river. Coming, going and racing to leave. Men in green fatigues transporting barrels of fuel in boats, motor upriver to unseen camps deep in the forest.

Pumps, pipes and drums stacked on bare earth between the store and the river.

Women sit on a terrace with a thatched roof and watch the men come and go. Barrels, boxes and bags are loaded and evenly distributed along the length of the dugout trees by men in a hurry to leave.

The River.

Rivers represent borders to state collectives, but to the Wayana they are the avenues of transportation, contact zones, and social spaces where conflicting interests meet in a context characterized by highly asymmetrical relations of power.

People not loading boats, or traveling on the river, or working on the dredges walked along the shore or sat waiting by the river.

I skirt the muddy bank to the river where I was to meet a guide and a boat that would ferry us upriver. The ground is saturated and soft. I carry food. A large bag of rice. And eggs.

A boat leaves the fast-moving current and enters the shallow cove where I stand. An Indigenous man in the bow jumps out into knee-deep water and with a rope pulls the boat to rest in the soft damp sod above the water line. The other man in the center of the boat, my 'fixer' climbs out.

He takes my things to load in the boat and says in passing, "You can call him Mikey".

"Is that his name?"

"No, his name is Tetalekau Twemoeman."

"Why call him Mikey?"

Because visitors can't say his name.

Stepping into the boat I feel the river support my weight and am overwhelmed by ancient memories in that paradise of dampness and silence. I suddenly become a powerless ward in a primordial world.

We push off. I sit in the middle of the boat. My guide behind me. Mikey lay in the bow facing back, eyes closed. Is he sleeping?

The helmsman confronts the current and takes us upstream at full throttle.

We travel without speaking, like sleepwalkers through a house of secrets. With eyes closed, sometimes furrowing his brow, Mikey signals his helmsman, like an enraptured conductor, guiding him home with a single hand, this way, that way, careful, faster, caution, go ahead.

At Mikey's village we learn a young Wayana woman named Cecilia Pikmane (15), a student at a boarding school, had taken her life in the village.

Officials dispatched a helicopter and a medical team. "Was that a good thing?" asked an elder named Ipokan Ėtë.

Mr. Alemin asked, "... was this team able to treat our people and cure the suicide epidemic?"

Pëtuku Eitëk spoke of another suicide in the area. "Drastic change in culture, customs, and social institutions are because economic development programs force the Wayana to accept a Western lifestyles. And money. It's hard for young people and that depresses them. They no longer have landmarks to guide them, and young parents and elders do not understand the 'new way'. They have no answers."

When the Wayana describe the conditions in which they are forced to live they describe how they no longer have any sort of future in their traditional tribal family, how they are excluded from the democratic market system, how many people have become inconsolable and have given up on life, and how social oppression and prejudice from members of the majority culture contribute to the trauma of assimilation and to the stressors causing so many people to commit suicide. And they describe the flood of evangelical sects who claim Cecelia committed suicide because of the sins of her parents.

Christian Schoen, a Door to Life missionary, described how his family sacrificed their comfortable American lifestyles in order to make first contact with the hostile Wayana tribe that had, "little previous contact with the Good News of the outside world."

They created the Indigenous people's written language, taught them how to read and write, and translated the Bible into their language. He claimed with pride, "It is a sacred Truth, the Wayana no longer live in fear of their evil spirits."

Pëtuku Eitëk, an 85 year-old elder, recalled that his people, "... used to live in harmony, happy and proud. We lived in community," he said. "People woke up early imitating hawk songs. The men went hunting or fishing and the women went to search for cassava, pineapples, and yams. In the evening families gathered around the fire." They claimed that the indigenous youth find themselves without hope because they do not know what to do.

"Then suddenly", he said, "modern schools and modern religion arrived. New foods. And strong alcohol and drugs too." These things have upset his people's way of life. Most of Pëtuku's "brothers" regret these changes but say it is too late to turn back. Traumatized, people describe their hardships and ask for help.

Christian Schoen said he came here to rid the Wayana world of evil spirits. Did he lie?

Tetalekau Twemoeman, who had been bringing order to the boat we came in, stood and said quietly, "The Devil is one person with a plan who calls it Truth. Evil is when people cooperate and call their plan the Truth. Liars do not fear evil if there are enough people who share Convenient Truths without protest.



I am a Washingtonian. I'm the son of Mennonite grandparents on my mother's side and Karelian refugees on my father's side. I broke my leg logging when I was 19. After three months in a cast up to my thigh, I promised myself I would never sit down or watch that much TV again. I got a good education and learned skills that has taken me around the world where I have met people from all walks of life. The memory of many of them haunt me. Last week I visited with a charming young woman who happens to be homeless and on the same day with a financial services professional who said he believed it's the fault of people like the young woman for the situation they are in. I prefer the company of the young homeless woman.

—Dan Peplow