

The Lahu Settlement¹

Xavier Queipo

Y a medida que la noche se acumula en mi ventana, yo siento que no soy de aquí, sino de allá, de ese mundo que acaba de borrarse y aguarda la resurrección del alba.

OCTAVIO PAZ, El Mono Gramático

And as night gathers in my window, I feel that I am not from here, but from somewhere else, from that world that has just faded away and awaits the resurrection of dawn.

OCTAVIO PAZ, The Monkey Grammarian

We had set out northwards from the Acka village at dawn to cross, as we learnt from our guide Noon, the frontier of what is known as the Golden Triangle, where most of the heroin that is trafficked around the world is produced.

We had left the village sadly, after riding the currents of a mountain stream in a raft made from bamboo canes, and after enjoying a semiotic game with the Acka children, who made us think of anthropological frontiers as a product of the imagination of those who believe in them.

Our rucksacks had become somewhat lighter after two days of almost uninterrupted walking through forests of teak and bamboo, wild fig trees and cedars, orchid trees (*Bauhinia blackeana*), hibiscus hedges, golden shower trees (*Cassia fistula*), and thickets of jasmine, leopard lilies (*Belamcanda chinensis*), crossandras, palm trees and a species of *aglaonema* native to Malacca, with red flowers and revitalizing and even stimulant properties, as Noon clearly pointed out to us.

Noon, our guide in those forests, inhospitable and unknown to us, but so dear and so familiar to him, was a schoolteacher who used this activity in the summer months as a supplement to his meagre budget and as a recreational and didactic pursuit. It was a

¹ from *Ringside* ([Barcelona]: Sotelo Blanco, 1994)

pleasure for him to name all the plants and animals which we came across, and the fact that there were several biologists on the expedition seemed to bring out the didactic side in him.

On one of the few stops allowed us on the journey, he prepared an infusion with aglaonema leaves and the bitter fruits of the red hot cattail (*Acalypha hispida*), which, his experience suggested, would provide us with a dose of extra energy to help us to face the long day that still lay ahead of us.

Suddenly a great blanket of rain came upon us and being without shelter we kept our spirits up with the laughter provoked by our slipping and sliding on the slimy clay paths and our tumbles on the slopes across which, snaking through unbridled nature, we had, inexorably, to travel. Two hours or more of relentless downpour that, with unusual violence, lashed our bodies, accustomed as they were to a different level of meteorological expression. This journey will remain for ever on the shelves of my memory as a unique physical experience, as an epiphany in my contact with nature, as one more incentive to conserve beautiful places in a world that is falling to pieces in our hands, that we do not bother to look after, or care for, or treat as the most precious asset we have.

Our clothes had lost their colours and had all become the colour of the reddish-brown clay that covered us from head to toe. Such had been the intensity of the storm that, after a few commonplaces spattered with the occasional joke, we stopped talking with the sole aim in our minds of pushing on, reaching our destination as soon as we could, escaping for ever from that feeling which overwhelmed our senses and isolated us from the outside world, which plunged us into ourselves, each at once a victim and a part of nature. Orphans as we were in that unknown ecosystem, the mere presence, serene and distant, of our guide seemed to instil in us a fictitious tranquillity more desired than felt. We touched the thoughts we thought as if the reality had become naked and nothing remained but the rain, the forest and the deepest shadow of our consciousness.

Whenever it rains it clears; and so it was. The clouds gradually gave way, timidly at first, but then with resolution and intensity, to a sun that was now burning down more than ever. The raindrops lingered on the palm trees and on the dry bamboo leaves, which stirred as we walked past.

Midday was approaching and our guide hastened our progress, which rain had made more difficult. We were starting to feel the worm of hunger tickle our oesophageal hiatuses. His only reply to our requests was to mutter ...sorry, sorry... as he pointed to the path ahead, and to grunt something about what we would discover on the other side of the bamboo wood.

We arrived at a small clearing in the wood. There was a stream that fell like a horse's tail into a small lake that had steep and ill-defined banks and emitted a vile and sulphurous stench. Our guide told us about the hot springs' healing properties for all sorts of dermatological conditions, and of the miraculous cures of peeling eczemas and various alopecias that had resulted from continual bathing in them. We agreed to have a dip while Noon prepared lunch.

We put our bags to one side and, naked and happy, we decided to enjoy those comforting and therapeutic ablutions to the full. I stretched out, letting myself be pummelled on the back by the jets of warm and putrid water, letting myself be drawn along, letting myself be loved by the warm, enveloping fluid, feeling this most wonderful landscape, la perpetuità del vegetale, il tempo fragmentato e plurimo di ciò che s'avvicenda, si disemina, germoglia, si disseca o marcisce.

A rice dish with vegetables and some bamboo shoots boiled in the sulphurous waters were the delicatessen that Noon had meanwhile been preparing for us. As we dried ourselves, lying on a bed of grass and gravel, he too went for a dip. Once we were chatting over lunch, we talked about bamboo and its similarity to the blue agaves of the New World, and about that tendency both have to die as soon as they have sprouted, after decades of patient growth and a long wait during which they are distilling all the wisdom of the Orient or of the torrid Mexican deserts.² In a sort of abyss of consciousness I remembered the agave that Claudio had left in my care, and I thought of our gradually growing friendship and the sprouting to come.

Hours and hours trudging through a dense jungle, at each step hearing the musical call of the paradise flycatchers (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), the cooing of the wild doves, and the intermittent twittering and piping outbursts (co-co-ta-co, co-co-ta-co) of the Indian cuckoo. Hours and hours trudging on and on, our rucksacks loaded with bamboo shoots, white gardenia petals, rhizomes of aphrodisiac ferns,³ leaves with parallel veins and nameless illusions. Hours and hours of sweat running down our necks, of mosquitoes drowning in the waves on our soaking chests, of the fluff of unnameable flowers settling in the folds of our shirts, of our thoughts going round in circles, of tightness in our calves, of tenseness in our neck-muscles, of longing to arrive.

It was already evening when, panting like staggering mules, tired, dirty and

² Kawamura talks in his works about the *Phyllostachys bambusoides* and how well-documented its one-hundred-and-twenty-year cycles are in Japan, where they have had records for more than a thousand years, from shortly after when Almanzor left the cathedral of Compostela without the pealing of bells and without virgins of either sex.

³ This refers to the fern *Depania petersenii* (Kunze, 1837), creeping-rhizomed with dark brown scales, described for the first time by Kunze with the name *Asplenium petersenii*, which has as its area of distribution the belt extending from the island of Sri Lanka to Guangzhou, and which, according to Thai tradition, has aphrodisiac properties. Curiously, this fern also appears throughout the Azores archipelago, except on the island of Graciosa, its spores carried no doubt by the Portuguese sailors who plied the seven seas.

breathless, we sighted what looked like our objective for night and rest. At the entrance to the settlement there stood some kind of totemic figures, crudely carved wooden idols that represented a man and a woman with their sexual attributes -pubic hair on the man with his erect penis, and asymmetrical and disproportionate strawberries on the supposed Venus- sharply defined by an expressionist hand. Also, and this was something that leapt to our attention, a small sculpture crafted in teak, with the unmistakable shape of a helicopter. Noticing our exchanged glances, Noon told us about the visit that the Empress of Thailand had made two years previously to these and other settlements in the remote province of Chiang-Rai as part of a campaign for the Royal Development Project for the Hill Tribes, which attempts, with more enthusiasm than success, to convert the members of the ethnic minorities into citizens of the Kingdom of the White Elephant.⁴

In the village ... tutti in legno, tutti molte volte divorati dalle fiamme, degli incendi -accidentale oppure provocati- ma ricomposti ogni volta pezzo per pezzo ... the chief, a stout and friendly man, was waiting for us, dressed only in a skirt which fell from his waist to his knees, and with an ivory armband which could have been as much a mark of his social position as an unequivocal sign of an excessive foppery that seemed to be his most salient characteristic. We had hardly said -in a manner of speaking- two or three phrases of greetings and good wishes when we were already taking our leave followed by a crowd of bold and inquisitive children who, using beggars' tricks, demanded ... ten bahts, ten bahts ... for bracelets made with seeds and red fruits from the berry-laden hedges that encircled the settlement.

Noon showed us what would be our residence that night, a stilt-house set on eight wooden poles and with a roof of canes and palm leaves laid on top which, as we were to discover later, was more designed to let water in than protect us from the rain.

We went out to play with the children at a game like skittles and to take photographs of them teasing the domestic animals that were sheltered in the mud underneath our room, and to watch the sun set on a horizon that, turning from yellow to red to end up as indigo, seemed taken directly from a still out of Apocalypse Now.

From the guide's conversations, translated into our travellers' English from the Lahu dialect, which he used with some difficulty, we learnt that they cultivated both rice in dry fields, which was made possible by crop rotation and controlled burning, and opium, the source of the people's wealth and a cultural asset. As one of the objectives of that trip was to try opium in its natural environment, we talked to Noon, who, after a conversation and an

⁴. According to Brahmanic beliefs, the prince who possessed the most white elephants would be the strongest and most powerful. Ever since the possession of three white elephants was interpreted as a sign of good fortune and happiness for Rama II (1812 is the date of the capture of the first of them -a male- in Battambang), the white elephant remained on the flag of Thailand, until the year 1917, when the kingdom of Siam entered the First World War, on the allied side.

exchange of smiles with one of the men who had come out to meet him, announced that we would have the opportunity to try it after dinner.

Night had taken charge of the situation and the moon had appeared in all its splendour when we went into our stilt-house to sample the noodles with vegetables and the strong tea which someone had prepared for us as a message of welcome. The light was very dim, and it was better that way, because it was only when we were about to finish our feast that we noticed several battalions of cockroaches scattered all about the room, in the hope that we would leave them the scraps to banquet on.

As soon as we had finished -the noodles, delicious although a little too piquant- and while Lorenzo and I were engrossed in a seemingly endless discussion of the alleged homosexuality of some mummies found in the Caucasus, a passion-inspiring subject if ever there was one, a tall, thin man, with prominent cheeks, eyes deep in their sockets, blackened knees, and hands skilled in the manipulation of the pipe and resin, climbed up the ladder. Without uttering a word, he went to lie down on a mat next to the fire in the depths of the room and began to prepare for business.

There was a special atmosphere. We were all somewhat nervous. It was not like smoking grass, for all the mysticism we had ascribed to it when we had so few years and so much imagination. Nor was it our intention to test it as an antispasmodic, or as a cure for the French disease, which we were fortunately not suffering from. No, what we wanted to do was to touch something that up until now had been no more than an intuition, le paysage le plus magnifique, the other side, the sharp edge of the knife.

I was perhaps the most inhibited, the one who was the most cautious about that experiment, the one who measured fear by the beating of the heart. That was why, when Noon appeared at the door like a black sigh, asking for my expertise in a medical matter, I felt -in spite of an initial reaction of annoyance- the sensation of being freed from a burden. For an immense moment I felt the weight of my weary eyelids.

Surrounded by night, we raced across the settlement. Our destination was marked by small hand-held lights, like tiny fireflies which distorted the features of those who were talking without pause in a racket that opened a parenthesis at our passage. They smiled and turned their faces to us, while I felt the pride of experts and faith-healers.

On a mattress, with her legs open and a rictus of pain showing on her distorted, sweaty face, was a young woman, or perhaps a girl, with the skin of a fresh apple and undeveloped physical attributes, surrounded by another three women who were dithering around in a kind of agitated inaction.

I made my way through, and following the methods described in the standard text-

books, cleared the ground for an examination. I requested that Noon perform his function as interpreter and I managed somehow to find out about the extended period of contractions, and the delayed breaking of the waters that was putting not only the baby's but also the young mother's life in danger. The foetal suffering must have been immense, due to the degree to which uterine pressure had been extended in time. I established, not without a certain satisfaction, that the mother's hips indicated that there might be a sufficient birth canal. Despite that, the palpation put me on the alert. The child had entered the birth canal bottom first, which would complicate its descent and put its mental health at risk, even if it managed to emerge without external help. I took a decision. I was sweating with the combination of decisiveness and lack of confidence of one who is confronted, for the first time, with a difficult case, and has no other aid than his own conviction and certain vague images from his period of theoretical training. Something had to be done, and fast.

Ne disant mot de mon martyre, on ne se cache point de moi et je vois tout ce qui peut se passer ... It was a dangerous manoeuvre, an internal torsion. I looked left and right as if asking for approval. There was no-one who could give it. Anxious faces, drops of water from a sudden shower, fireflies and eyes like worlds that did not cease gazing at me. I had seen it in a treatise on obstetrics and in the slides from one of Don Alexandre's masterly lectures. There was no choice. Act now or forever have such inaction on my conscience. With a mental leap I changed the chip of insecurity for that of resolution and risk. Useless to ask for asepsis or gloves, or even boiled water, or more light or help. Press on. I slid my hand into the birth canal, its passage eased by the extreme dilation and by lubrication. I grasped the child by its ankles, and got it to do a somersault with double twist inside the girl-mother's womb, and it was then that she lost consciousness. The feet came out first, then the male organ and the hips and, with some difficulty, the body up to the shoulders. The head remained inside, with the danger of the half-born suffocating. One loop of cord around its throat, and that little body, smooth and soft, pink and damp, would not be born into the light of a starless night. I used my other hand to protect the back of its neck from an unwelcome opisthotonos and asked the forces of good for help so that all would turn out as in the text-books. And so it did -a precise cut of the cord, the knot of a sailor hardened by the cold of the Arctic, and a slap on the round, marbled buttocks, were enough for the Lahu baby to awaken his mother with his epiphanic cry. Tambores, tambores, tambores. Te golpeo cielo.

When I reached the stilt-house everything was in silence, in an indecipherable state. Who knows how much time had passed. Two or three hours, or more. It had rained and stopped raining. Someone had been at the point of death and someone had been born. They had grown tired of waiting for me and had let themselves be carried off by sleep and the lure of drowsiness. It was likely that they did not know about my activities, about my

technical success, and about the new life that had budded only a few metres away. I let them sleep on. Soon the day would arrive with a dawn brimming with treasures. I had not tried the light of reflections on the transparent wings of the poppy-juice, but I had tried other tastes, other emotions which would never leave the electric labyrinths of my memory.

Next morning I awoke to the hubbub of the voices of our young skittles-companions and the din of the animals that were leaving the village on their way to the pasture-grounds. My travelling companions, warned by Noon of my nocturnal work, had let me sleep a little longer.

We used up our last photographic plates and, after a breakfast of fruit and vegetables pilaued with rice and pineapple juice, gathered up our things to resume our journey. We were performing the farewell ceremony when an old woman, shrunken by age and work, offered me an orchid and kissed my hands with heartfelt intensity.

After a few minutes, once through the valley and on the top of the next hill, I glanced back at the scene where the previous night I had crossed the Rubicon of my own self ... i tronchi dei pilastre e delle travature, le pareti di tavole, i soffitti di bambú, i pavimenti ricoperti di stuoie ... and felt the mixture of alienation and familiarity that has been with me ever since.

We continued on our way. During a pit stop, Noon mentioned to me that following the traditions, if the newly-born had been a girl, she would have suffered the fate of a violent death, in spite of all my efforts. I thought to myself of the cries of innocent children on the banks of a river tormented by blood, of the wind that has just been born and is free, and of the wonder of the complexity and drama of men's behaviour.

The orchid, dry and pressed inside a notebook, went missing when once I was moving house. The kiss remains like stigmata on the backs of my hands, which are accumulating marks and veins, and, when I look at them in those low moments we all suffer from once in a while, I feel the pressure of those wet lips, the fragrance of the wild orchid, and the beneficial shade of the bodhi tree.⁵

⁵ The bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is the sacred tree of Thailand. The Buddhists frequently represent it in sculptures, paintings, poems, and religious stories. Under its shade, Gotama discovered the truth and became the Buddha, the Enlightened One.