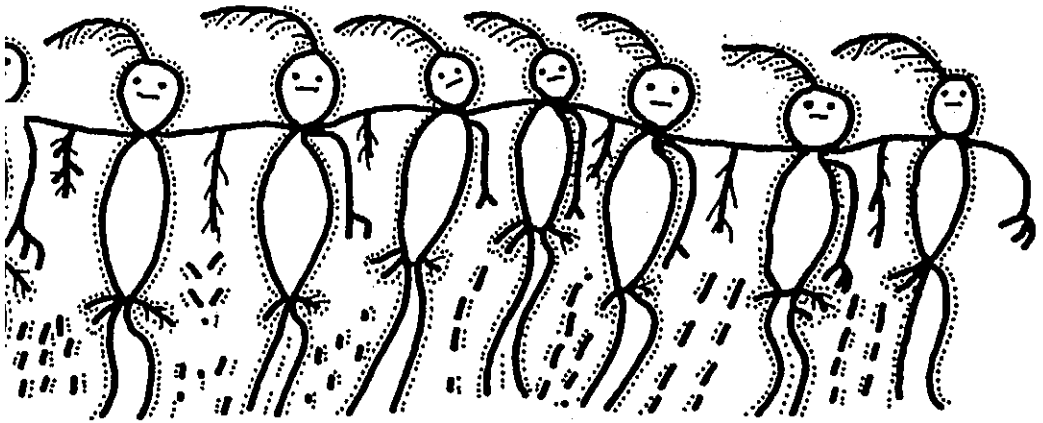


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1975

THE SHAMAN AND THE JAGUAR

A Study of Narcotic Drugs Among the Indians of Colombia

G. Reichel-Dolmatoff



Temple University Press
Philadelphia

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Temple University Press, Philadelphia 19122
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Published 1975
Printed in the United States of America

International Standard Book Number: 0-87722-038-7
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 74-83672

Title page art adapted from a drawing by a Barasana
Indian of the hallucinatory image of mankind's first
dance (Figure 56)

CONTENTS

Illustrations vii
Foreword, by Richard Evans Schultes xi
Acknowledgments xv
Introduction xvii

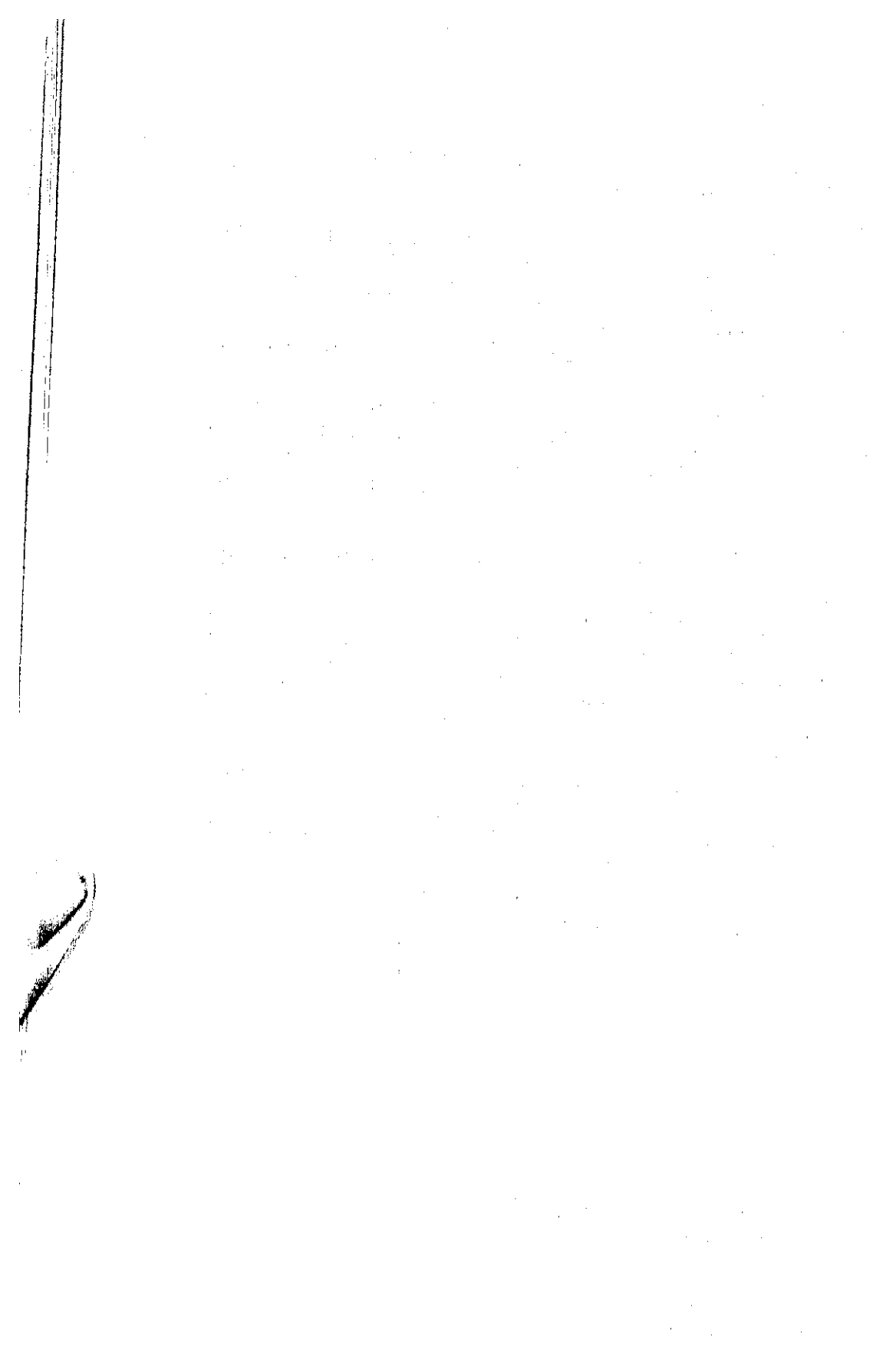
1. Narcotic Snuff 3
2. In Search of a Jungle Vine 25
3. The Shaman and the Jaguar 43
4. The Forest and the River 61
5. Tukano Shamanism 76
6. Jaguar Transformation 108
7. Yajé: Myth and Ritual 133
8. A Yajé Session 157
9. Spirits of the Forest 182
10. Conclusions 198

Appendix: Desana Texts 205
Notes 227
Glossary 249
Bibliography 251
Index 273

Jungle Birds Review

18.00

22 September 1978



FOREWORD

Anthropologists have viewed with fascination the inordinate primacy that the mind of the Amerindian accords to certain animals. In some northern cultures, it is the buffalo. In Mexico, it is the deer. Birds and amphibians, both real and mythical, play similar roles throughout aboriginal concepts of Nature.

The peoples living in the humid tropics have tended to accord particular attention to the boa constrictor or anaconda and to various felines, and archaeological studies indicate that the special symbolic significance of these animals goes back at least four thousand years. But it is perhaps the jaguar that surpasses all other animals in aboriginal ideas of creation, of the supernatural regulation of earthly existence, of the otherworldly life—in short, in the very being of many of our American cultures.

Why?

All aspects of the jaguar's supremacy have long been noted and described in ethnological studies: the prevalence of the jaguar motif in primitive art forms; reproduction of jaguar sounds and habits in Indian dances and rituals; the role of the jaguar in aboriginal folk tales; the frequent propitiation of spirits associated with the jaguar; the constant use of words for the jaguar in denoting certain medicines and medical practices; references to the shaman as "the jaguar" and his dressing as a jaguar in magic rituals; the common connection of the jaguar with sacred hallucinogenic plants and their use. Recent attention has focused on the intimate ceremonial connection between man and jaguar, especially in relation to intoxicants. Much of the paraphernalia, both archaeological and modern, employed in preparing and using narcotic snuffs is richly orna-

mented with jaguars. Some tribes customarily keep the snuff in jaguar bones, undoubtedly because of the cat's magical significance. The frequency and importance of the jaguar motif in these snuffing objects are so striking as to indicate inexorably that more than pure chance underlies this culture trait.

Ethnologists have added to the store of our knowledge about the jaguar in primitive culture in many geographically and ethnographically unrelated localities. Among the Tukanoans of the northwestern Amazon, for example, older shamans assume the guise of jaguars and are feared above all others. A jaguar that attacks a human being is thought to be a shaman, and any shaman suspected of such an attack may himself be killed. The spirit of the murdered shaman, however, enters another jaguar, so the danger continues. In the Colombian Putumayo, Indians turn into jaguars after taking the hallucinogenic yajé and chase deer and tapirs in the forest with great ease. Beautiful ceramic vessels from the Chavin Culture of Peru, at least three thousand years old, clearly depict jaguars in association with the narcotic San Pedro cactus. Throughout South America, a number of indigenous names for "varieties" of hallucinogens refer to the jaguar, as among the Kamsá of Colombia, who call one of their strongest hallucinogenic plants *mits-kway borrachero* (intoxicant of the jaguar). The Kubeo of the Colombian Amazon relate that caapi-intoxication causes the men to see people in the bright colors of the jaguar.

The examples are countless. A long list of them would merely fortify what is already well known. The question is: What are we now going to do with this absorbingly interesting and significant mass of data?

Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff has come forward to grapple with this problem. His years of very original and searching field work have provided him with information on a scale not often available to many other ethnologists. I doubt that there is any researcher into this highly complex field who will not welcome and appreciate his contribution. Reichel-Dolmatoff's interpretations are definitely Freudian; few are ready to accept all of them, and I must confess that I am numbered among those who view with reservation some of the far-reaching conclusions which he offers. Yet this book will live. It is a masterly attempt to unravel, in one man's way of evaluating the most intricate of data, one of the greatest enigmas of

modern ethnology. Its chief value may lie not in the success that the future will accord to all its interpretations and explanations, but in its originality, its boldness, its honesty and, not least of all, its effort to focus attention on the urgency of the task ahead and its encouragement of wider research and interpretative studies.

It has been said that the reason for the importance of huge snakes and large felines in native cultures is simply that the stealth and strength of these animals strike awe and fear into the Indian. But it is clear that such an explanation cannot withstand the scrutiny of any examination in depth. There have even been attempts to offer "biochemical" explanations: that the great frequency of jaguars and other felines and snakes in descriptions of caapi-intoxication might be due to an ability of the active chemical constituents of the hallucinogenic plant to induce visions of definite kinds of subjects. But there is not a shred of evidence that such specificity of action exists. One is left, then, with the near certainty that underlying the primacy of the jaguar in so many cultures are ancient, deeply ingrained and highly positive experiences that are now a part of the mind of aboriginal man. Reichel-Dolmatoff, with humility and sympathetic understanding, has tried in this volume to start us on the way toward clarifying some of the hidden reasons.

It might appear rather unusual that a plant scientist has been asked to write a foreword for such a book. The jaguar and shamanism both seem far removed from botany. At first, I felt somewhat apprehensive about accepting the invitation. But the day of the interdisciplinary approach is upon us. I consider it an honor to have been asked to offer my views on what the future may judge to be a major contribution to our understanding of thought in primitive Amerindian societies.

Man in primitive societies lives in a much closer and more personal association with his ambient vegetation than man in our modern technological cultures. Shamanism depends in great part on the supernatural powers resident in certain plants. These resident divinities are organic chemical constituents that allow mortal man to communicate through visual, auditory and other hallucinations with the spirit world that controls every aspect of man's earthly existence. Since natively used hallucinogens are, for the most part, of vegetal origin, the ethnobotanist comes face to face with those problems confronting the anthropologist, ethnologist,

psychologist and other specialists. As plants are a basic element in man's very existence, the botanist claims his sphere of interest in how they may have helped shape society. It is in this spirit that I have written the foregoing words.

RICHARD EVANS SCHULTES