

# Teachings of the Ash People of the Amazon Forest Die Lehren des Aschenvolkes des Amazonas-Regenwaldes

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 (audiotranscription)

Die kosmische Vision des „Aschenvolkes“ gründet sich — wie bei vielen indigenen Gruppen des Nordwest-Amazonas — auf den Glauben, dass alle Lebewesen ein „lebens System“ bilden, das auf einer Quantität von begrenzter vitaler Energie beruht. Die Energie fließt durch ein System, und jede Gruppe braucht davon eine bestimmte Menge. Die Hauptaufgabe des Schamanen besteht darin das Gleichgewicht zu bewahren. Die Ansammlung von Energie durch die eine oder andere Gruppe wird das System schwächen und Krankheit verursachen. Das bewirkt wiederum, dass Energie wieder frei und damit das Gleichgewicht wieder hergestellt wird. Die Handhabung von Ernährungsvorschriften und sexuelle Einschränkungen, sowie Reinigungsritualen zu verschiedenen Zeiten im Jahr gewährleisten, dass der Energiefluß aufrechterhalten bleibt oder innerhalb des Systems wieder eingerichtet wird.

## *Introduction*

Our fieldwork area of the Amazon covers about 400 square kilometres. Here we find the area of the Indian mountains which cover 10 % of the total land. Most of the cocaine is grown there, and most of the conflicts with the Americans happen there, who do spraying with their planes to destroy the cocaine. 90 % of this Amazon area is well preserved. There are no roads, there is difficult access and this area is inhabited by indigenous people. Apart from two small towns there are no non-indigenous people. I have been working there for the last 30 years. This yellow part on the map has never come out of the hand of the indigenous people. It belongs to them, it is their property. It is not the question that the indigenous people have been given back the rights for this land. It is recognized that they own it; it belonged to them even before America was discovered. Here on the map we see the Amazon basin and this territory here is the territory of the indigenous people that has been recognized and the parks. We are just talking about this 21 mill. hectares. On the Brazilian side there are another 11 mill. hectares. Another 9 mill. hectares which we try to get recognized, because recently Venezuela has recognized Indian land rights and the constitution. Here live several groups which have lived isolated. They have not been in contact with the Western world. In this part of north and west Amazon about 1 million square kilometres were recognized, approximately the size of France and Spain together. I am just highlighting this because it is perhaps the largest corridor in the world and it is important from a biodiversity point of view, because of the soils, and highly diverse also from the cultural point of view.

In this area the basic idea is to empower the indigenous people. In the law of Columbia the people have the right to their own government, to their own laws, they have the right to their territory, they have the right to be themselves and to con-

tinue being themselves, setting up their own educational programme, etc. Obviously it does not mean that they are restricted to continue to be in a traditional way. They are articulate with the Western world. They take and choose what they want from the Western world (as far as one can choose from the Western world). But at least they are deciding, they are discussing. This is what the laws say. Once the law exists, you have to make the law work. You may say that there is intercultural education. But then you have to set up a whole system of intercultural education and that is very complicated to do and takes years. The same you can say for health, for the Indian laws. You may say, the Indians have a right to their laws. You might like to see the laws. But the Indian laws do not exist in writing. They exist in their rituals, in their myths. And therefore when we talk about laws, it is not in the same way as we talk of laws in the Western world. This is a process one has to work on. But it is something being worked on. In this particular area, by empowering indigenous people we are seeking at the same time to conserve the rainforest. This was more of an introduction. What I want to talk about is the vision of these people, the way they see the rainforest.

### *The vision of the Ash People*

Here are some pictures to give you a feeling. Here is the rainforest. What is interesting with the rainforest - when you fly over it for hours and hours and hours of uninterrupted rainforest, where there has been no colonisation — beneath those trees you get some of the best thinking in the world. You get people there sitting every night and thinking, thinking 'how they hell do we relate to these strange white people'. And they are thinking and thinking and coming up with ideas. So we are not dealing with primitive people. We are with highly sophisticated people that live under this forest and who are working out how to deal with us. The rainforest as such is a most fragile ecosystem. The soil is very poor and it has a great variety of ecosystems, of different areas, for instance rocky areas. It is a place that is not inhabitable as a whole. There are certain places where you can live. And there are certain places where there are animals and where you can go hunting. These mountains are considered to be the houses of the animals, but it is not a place which you can use. One cannot use the whole of the rainforest. For the indigenous people, when they talk about living in the rainforest, they see in the rainforest the amount of energy. They live in a specific area, one tribe in that area and the next tribe in the next area. And in the territory they live they consider that the amount of energy in this world is limited. There is a limited amount of energy and you have to administer this energy. The energy that exists has to exist for human beings and for animals. It has to be distributed. All animals need their own quarter of energy to be able to survive. They see themselves as part of an integrated system and therefore their duty or the way they feel their responsibility is more than what can you get from the forest, but what can you give to the forest. How can you keep this energy flowing? How can you keep the energy between the animals, the plants and the human beings flowing? That is their responsibility. They have to make sure that they have enough energy to live and the animals have to have enough energy to live also. Therefore you cannot accumulate, you have to keep the energy flowing.

In their midst, as they say, at the beginning of the universe, before human beings started to live in this world, they were other worlds which disappeared. And when this world started, the energy, the human beings were born in the sea, at the east, where the rivers flow into the sea. The vital energy came up under the water, under the rivers, and started appearing in this world. And when it came up in certain places in this world, it was turned into animals. And those animals that were born in those places are the spiritual guardians of that particular place. They are responsible for that place to keep the energy and to see that all the animals and all the plants in that particular area have enough energy to survive. In certain places a genesis came up because it was the right place that would turn into human beings. But essentially, the animals and the human beings confer exactly the same energy. The human beings also had a place and that was where they were to live and they had to take care of their spot. So in an area of one hour, a diameter or a radius around the communal house the indigenous people grow their food. They walk around for one hour and grow their food there. And in this territory where they grow their food, it is their territory. They can take care of that particular space. Any animal that comes into that space, is giving itself up to the people. You can hunt the animal. You do not have to ask the permission. You might get a deer, you might get a tapir having come into that area. You may get that animal.



*In an area of one hour around the communal house the indigenous people can hunt any animal e.g. the lowland tapir (Tapirus terrestris) without permission. — Im Umkreis einer Stunde Gehzeit um das Gemeinschaftshaus ist die Jagd auf Tiere wie den Flachland-Tapir (Tapirus terrestris) erlaubt.<sup>1</sup>*

But anything beyond that circle, when you move in the forest you come into areas that belong to somebody else, that have guardian spirits, that have owners. You

<sup>1</sup> Photo: <[www.escolavesper.com.br/anta.htm](http://www.escolavesper.com.br/anta.htm)>

cannot use the trees, you cannot use the plants or the animals without special permission, because it has an owner. It is under the responsibility, it belongs to a particular animal. The animal can be a frog, it can be a jaguar, it can be a tapir. But it is the spirit that is looking after the particular area. When the Indians walk to the forest, the forest is totally inhabited. The forest is full. It belongs to particular animals. The forest is not a free place. The forest has owners, spiritual owners and you have to ask the permission. That's one of the jobs and one of the responsibilities of the shaman.

### *The role of the shaman*

We have heard about shamans here at this conference. I just like to add something for the shamans here. Our people that have inherited these models of thinking, who have been involved with models of interpreting the forest developed over thousands of years. We are dealing here with sophisticated and pragmatic models. We are not dealing with something that does not work. Because no society can survive thousands of years telling strange stories that do not work. Obviously, when this people have models of thinking, it is because it works. And their sophisticated way of understanding the forest is: they learn from their elders through meditation, through keeping a diet. It takes many years, it is not an easy, it is not a pleasant job. Not many people want to be shamans. But once they have this learning the shamans are very keen observers. They are looking all the time, when people are going to the forest, when they bring hunt. They are observing, observing all the time. They are observing the people's behaviour and every night someone chews coca and starts telling stories and one elder points deep into the discussions. And they are listening to the people, they are making comments, they are getting feed back, they are alert all the time. The shaman does not sleep. A shaman when he is awake he can see his thoughts like in a dream, and when he is dreaming he can control his dreams as if he was thinking. He is all the time alert. The shaman is someone who is highly specialised and he is keeping an eye on how the forest is being managed. He knows that they can only stay or live about 20 years in a particular place and then they move on, because the food and the animals go away from that particular area. They move on. So the shaman has to anticipate the situation. He has to say, 'well, we have only a certain amount of resources' He knows, he has seen, he is cautious in managing the forest. He is the person who sits down and meditates and thinks and comes into communication with the masters of the animals, which are the guardian spirits. And he asks the permission. He asks the permission and will get a message. When he sits and concentrates, his body will move and a particular sound will come. It will say, you can hunt one animal or two, or you cannot hunt the animals. And he knows. So he is going to tell the people to go and hunt at this particular place and to bring only one tapir or whatever it is, and give permission how many animals can be taken from the forest, and at what moment and where. They will only hunt animals for rituals. They will not hunt animals on the daily life. For the daily life they would only hunt animals that come into their space and there they don't have to ask permission. When human beings are born they get this vital energy. Through meditation the energy identifies with the human being, it becomes a human energy through the point that the shaman

can take this energy out and can travel and come back, because it is fully identified with the body. For a child as it is small, it is dangerous. A child can die easily because the animals pull that energy away, as it is not identified with the body. If one hunts an animal without permission, the energy of the animal which consumes a lot, starts becoming, is overtaking the energy of the person. So the person starts inciting like a tapir or being like an animal. Although he looks like a human being, inside he starts being like an animal. And by eating that, he becomes like the animal and the spirits of the animal, the owner of the animal, sees that energy there and hunts it. And the way the spirits hunt is illness. So they send illnesses or a poisonous snake or a branch falling on your head or whatever and you might die, you might not. But in that process you let go the energy and the energy recycles. So you have to keep diet and you have to be careful when and where you are going hunting. You have to have permission from the guardian spirits that comes through the shaman. Now, obviously that does not happen all the time and people go and eat and people hunt off and on again and the energy accumulates and the people fall sick. In order to deal with this they hold their rituals. The ritual is sacred because they hold the rituals in their houses. In the ritual, they connect with the vital energy of the beginning of existence. They tap into the vital energy. And when they tap in they can send back the energy accumulated in the community. They can send it back to the animals. So they re-establish a balance and then they go on three days of diet depending on what time of the year.



*The jaguar (Panthera onca) is the guardian spirit of the rainforest or rather its owner. The time of the jaguar is a masculine time, when men do the hunting. — Der Jaguar (Panthera onca) ist der Schutzgeist des Regenwaldes oder vielmehr sein Eigentümer. Die Zeit des Jaguars ist männlich, es ist die Jagdzeit der Männer.*<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the month of March, when they go from the dry to the wet season, they do about 20 days of fasting, but in a normal ritual they do about three or four days of fasting. Through fasting they send back the energy to the animals. They don't have many rituals. About every 20 days, every month, they have a ritual.

<sup>2</sup> Photo: <<http://eprentice.sdsu.edu/S03X1/asanders/rainforestquest/images/jaguar.jpg>>



They have it in one communal house and then in another and in another. So they move around. They do not use the environment in one single place. They move from one community to another, establishing alliances. One idea of exchanging is that you give to the animals and again when you go hunting you have to offer them coca and tobacco. You give to the animals and you receive from the animals. The whole idea is to keep the energy flowing in the forest. To keep the energy flowing you do it in your daily life. You give offerings. You receive offerings. Hunting is necessity. You must hunt because you take, and you must offer also. When the energy flows among the animals, the human beings, the whole ecosystem works because there is a permanent exchange between the animals, the plants and the human beings. These rituals are to tap into this vital energy and the rituals are held all around at different times of the year.

### *The cosmology of the Ash People*

The year cycle is determined by the equinoxes and by the solstices, because the sun is on the equator. On the equinoxes the sun goes east west exactly and then it moves 23.5 degrees south and 23.5 degrees north. In this drawing we have the equinoxes here in March and in September. And then we have the solstice in June. In this period it rains most in the forest, where the wild fruits are ripe. That's the time when you can go into the forest and eat the wild fruits. That's the time when the animals come out and eat these fruits. As it is a hunting area, it is considered a human area, a masculine time, because it is the man who does the hunting. It is the time of the jaguar, because it is the jaguar who is the guardian spirit of the whole forest or rather the owner of the forest. It is a time when there is a lot of food. When they hold the rituals, a large one, the semen has to go back to the origin when the humanity was born until the animals come back to the river again for sending with the ritual the energy back to them. This is a time where they don't have to have big rituals because there is enough food for the community. Around December is the dry season. It is hot, that is the time when all the cultivated food is ripe. It is feminine because the women work the gardens and it is anaconda, the big snake, which symbolizes that period of time. It is transitional between one period and the other, from the feminine to the masculine, from the anaconda to the jaguar. And it is in this period of transition from sedentarism to nomadism when it becomes dangerous, when there are a lot of sicknesses. From the dry to the wet seasons, the snakes come out, the rivers come up, they push the snakes towards the houses and a lot of people are bitten by snakes. This is when the big rituals are held and when they have to communicate with all nature, keep fasting and diets and re-establish the balance with nature in these two periods of transition of the rituals, with the plants, the fruits of the forests, and the fruits of the cultivated food. The energy of the plants is not coming from the east like the animals and with the human beings. The energy is coming from above. Above us, where we live in this earth, is the space of the stars. This is the space of the cultivated food. The energy from the cultivated food comes down with the stars. According to the description — because obviously when a shaman talks about a place he has it in his mind, he doesn't make a drawing, but he describes it. The universe is the shape of a bee hive. And the top of the world here is masculine, it is the skies, and the other

part is the earth, white earth, the yellow earth, the orange earth and the red earth. It is all held up by the big anaconda and the fire beneath. The sun and the moon go around in the river and they go beneath the top earth. This is the white earth where we live, then we have the stars, the earth of the cultivated food and the place of the wild food. The energy of cultivated and wild food comes from this particular world. Then the next world is considered the world of vultures, symbolizing social organization. Then comes the world of the music and the chant and the sun goes through this world. The top is the world of the thought. The world of the thought is a world where there is no air, no light. It is eternity also. The heroes that make this world always existed. They have always been living up here at the top. After making this universe they went up and lived up there. Therefore the sacred or essential number for the indigenous people is always four. Beneath it we have the feminine world or the world of the different earths where different beings existed. It was destroyed by water or by fire and one earth tumbled on top of the other and so one earth grows after the other. This is the feminine energy. The feminine is fecundity and the masculine energy coming from the sky with the sun is fertility.



*The anaconda (Eunectes murinus) symbolizes the period of cultivated food. It is the feminine time, as the women work the gardens. — Die Anakonda (Eunectes murinus) symbolisiert die Zeit der Reife für die angebauten Feldfrüchte. Die Zeit der Anakonda ist weiblich, da die Frauen die Gärten bestellen.*<sup>3</sup>

At the different times of the year we have different rituals. And in the rituals not only is re-established the balance with the animals, but also with their singings the songs go up in a spiral and move from this earth to the earth of music. And at the

<sup>3</sup> Photo: <<http://hem.passagen.se/pytonper/bilder/Eunectesmurinus2.jpg>>

moment, when the shaman has visited all the animals, when he has re-established the energy, he picks up the energy of that particular season, the season of wild fruit (13 or 15 types of wild food) or of the domesticated food. He picks up the energy as he goes in his thoughts around the world to the animals. Because the whole world is impregnated by the energy of for instance pineapple, if this is the time of pineapple. He has to pick up all the energy and through the ritual, through the thought, carries the energy up to the world of music and leaves it back with the owner of that energy. Another reason for illness is accumulation of energy in oneself, or letting overlap it creating disorder. Each season and at the transition of each season they must clean the world. In each ritual they talk about the next period that is coming in and they will say, you cannot eat this or that; you have to behave like this. There are rules set for every ritual for every 21 days; they are setting rules of how to deal with the environment. In the rituals they are cleaning the world and are sending the energy back up into the heavens.

*The communal house — a cosmic mirror*

This is a communal house. Before you had about hundred people living in one house, now you have about 20 people. This is where they hold their rituals and their gatherings. The communal house is a temple, a model of the cosmos, of the upper part. When they are building the communal house as you can see on this picture, there is the place where you have the spirits of thought, the world of music and the world of vultures. Outside the house you have the cultivated food and the forest. Inside the house you have four posts. If we project the cosmos on the communal house, the world of thought will be in the centre of the communal house. The centre of the house is the centre of the world, the navel of the world. This is where you connect with the stream below of vital energy while you are in a ritual. This is a sacred place. You don't put anything in the centre of a house. It is always a void place, it is sacred.

Then you have the music area. This is a dancing place where they can work but especially dance. They dance around the centre. They are sending the music that goes up in a spiral back to the world of music, carrying the energy of this world, cleaning the world.

The next space is the space where they live, where they eat. Each family lives in this particular space, between the posts and the fence. That is where you bury the dead, wrap up in a hammock around the fires there and that is where they eat. That is what you call the domestic area. And then you have the gardens and the forest. So you get the projection of the cosmos on to the structure of the house. In the same way you get the projection of the cosmos on to the house in a concentric way. You have the centre again, then you have the dancing area, then you have the area where they sleep, you have the gardens and the forest. So the world is a concentric circle and the shaman thinks in a concentric way. He goes around the world, picks up the energy until he comes to the centre. He can't do the ritual on his own. With the singing he takes all the energy up in a spiral. At the same time he is connecting with all the animals around offering coca. He does this through meditation.



The house always looks towards the east. They build all their houses looking towards the sunrise. In the back of the house you have the headman. The children, the wives and the men put their hammock between the posts and the fence.

The shaman of defense, that heals, has one specific place. There is another shaman, the younger. In shamanism there is one in charge, one responsible. One heals and the other sends the illnesses back. This is the aggressive shaman. When illness has come to a community, he throws it back to those people who send the illness. People are contaminated by eating certain food, particularly what is forbidden for them - fat and salt. They only use salt from the top of the palm tree, a vegetal salt. Once you are polluted inside other shamans can see you and can send illnesses, if they want to do you harm. So if you keep your diet, if you fast, you are invisible, you are transparent, you are clean. They cannot see you and you will not become ill. One special shaman sends back the illnesses, when they come in.

From the Indian point of view illness is not only an individual thing, illness is above all a social problem and an ecological problem. When somebody falls ill, the first thing they do is ask what went wrong with the society, what went wrong with the environment? Illness is an indicator that something is wrong. So there is one fellow that will say 'ahh — that came from that tribe over there' and then will send it back.

Then you'll have the assistant. On the right side is the side of truth and the side of the people. It is the men that live there and the wives come from other communities and intermarry. When we - as outsiders or visitors come there - we will sit on a certain side of the house.

The house is turned east. As the sun goes over the house the sun shines through holes on the wall. And as it shines on the roof, the fence and the wall - we have a sun dial. The sundial works for them. They will not say 6, 7 or 8 o'clock, but: I left the house at the time of the fence and came back at the time of the roof.

The sun doesn't shine in the middle, it disappears. It is the spot of thinking, the navel of the world, and like the top world, there is no sun and if you sit there you will not lose your culture and no illness can hit you. There in the centre you are safe from a shamanistic point of view. As the sun goes north - south, 23.5 degrees north and 23.5 degrees south at the solstices we get the same effect in the communal house. When the sun goes north in June, it lights up a certain part of the house. So the sun is also moving from one side of the communal house to the other as it travels. It works as a calendar. The sun is bringing the vital energy, the fertility. It is knitting, as it goes back and forth, life in the world in the middle of the house — the middle of the cosmos. The house is a model of the cosmos.

If we take the house particularly in rituals, all the people of the house will move to one part of the house and all the invited people move to the other side. Those that are invited bring the music, the potential wives, the wives bring the food, they are obviously representing the female aspect and the music is associated with anaconda also. It is the left side, the side of stinginess, meanness. Then there is the side of thruth. The allies are the stingy ones, we are the true ones. The headman has the invited people to his left and that is the side of the music, the anaconda, the food, and the women. On his right hand he has his people, the jaguar, the men, the community, and the wild fruit. We are reproducing the same aspect as we have it in the calendar around the year, being reflected in the house, and they move with the

sun, with the rituals which they perform every 20 days. In the centre are the leaders, the ones that take care. The ones that don't have conflicts, the ones that have settled problems. And in the front, you have the young fellows who are more aggressive, and when visitors come in, the unmarried sit here. It is a more aggressive side. But they are both dangerous areas. So when the sun is here like in the calendar, this is a kind of a mirror. It is working the other side round. The sun is in the south and signs in the north, in the female, as I showed you in the calendar. In a way, the communal house becomes a mirror to the calendar. The shaman sits in the house and is observing. He sees the sun move, he sees the energy come in, he is meditating about the forest, he is healing the people. It is a model of thought. You get the social organization, the cosmological movements and the people in their dances, their hunting, in working their garden and in their daily life, keeping the whole flux of energy moving. It is the duty of the human beings to keep the energy moving. For them the world is in permanent deterioration. And it is up to human beings to keep the world balanced and the energy flowing and to keep the world healthy. And the communal house is the space through which they keep this world healthy.

Now if you go to a place like this and visit these places nowadays and you spend enough time and chew coca at night and talk with the people you will find exactly what I have said. This is a straightforward, rational interpretation. It is the way I see things. It is not the truth, in the sense that people who do genetics, people who do meditation they will have different interpretations. And they will say, this is the way Martin see things. Ok, they would probably see it in another way. But if you go there, you will see all this. You will see the dancing; you will see how the sun works in the ritual, the whole thing works like this. How you interpret the myth depends on your knowledge, on your way you see it. It depends on the state of mind you are in. Myths change all the time. Myths have nothing static, nor is the society.

This society is also westernising and young people are going into the western world. And it is up to us to decide if we want to sit with them and want to build a world on the base of their knowledge and protect the rainforest or if we want through conventional development destroy this forest and these people who are the natural guardians of the forest.

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MARTIN VON HILDEBRAND is an important leader in the work to support forest communities and protect the ecosystems and biodiversity of the Amazon tropical forest. He is one of Colombia's most active proponents of indigenous rights and tropical forest conservation. Since the 1950's, however, the tropical forest and indigenous peoples of the Colombian Amazon have suffered from various waves of colonization and exploitation in the region. His intense involvement with environmental and indigenous issues began in the early 1970s, when Hildebrand was living among Indian communities in the Colombian Amazon. In 1972, Hildebrand was appointed to a government position in the National Institute of Anthropology. He set up a centre in La Pediera, Amazonas, as a base for supporting local indigenous processes in gaining land rights and autonomy. He briefly left Colombia in 1979, for doctorate studies in Ethnology at the Sorbonne, Paris. Hildebrand has been the leading force in achieving collective indigenous rights to over 21 million hectares of tropical forest, and in stimulating a political will towards the inclusion of significant indigenous rights within the 1991 Political Constitution.

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