

Article

Religious Elements in *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015): Transforming the Dichotomies between an Amazonian *payé* and Western Expeditioners in the Wake of the Rubber Industry

Isaak Deman 

Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, 3000 Leuven, Belgium; isaak.deman@kuleuven.be

Abstract: *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015), directed by Ciro Guerra, narrates the parallel stories of Theo and Evan whose main purpose is to find the *yakruna* plant in the Amazon rainforest. Both men are guided by the *payé* Karamakate. The first story depicts Theo's encounter with Karamakate and their travel through the Amazon for *yakruna*, which can cure Theo of his disease. Along the way, one comes to witness the parallel often disturbing events in the wake of colonialism, capitalism and the Catholic missionary movement. The second story narrates Evan's encounter with Karamakate three decennia later, but this time, the viewer is informed about Theo's preceding story and comes to see the devastating consequences. While Theo ultimately fails to utilize *yakruna*, Evan manages to find and utilize the plant, which leads him towards a radical self-transformation. In this way, Evan and Karamakate succeed where Theo and Karamakate failed. While *Embrace of the Serpent* has been hailed for its cinematography, its representation of the ecological decay, and the effects of Western colonialism, further reflection is needed with respect to the religious elements in the film. In doing so, this article proves that the film deals not only with the socio-political and ecological realities on the ground, but also with existential questions.

Keywords: sacrality; Amazon; indigenous; Western expedition; epistemology; oneiric reality; memory; rituals; *payé*; Catholic mission



Citation: Deman, Isaak. 2021. Religious Elements in *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015): Transforming the Dichotomies between an Amazonian *payé* and Western Expeditioners in the Wake of the Rubber Industry. *Religions* 12: 391. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12060391>

Academic Editors: Frank G. Bosman, Margaret Steenbakker and Raphaël Koers

Received: 30 April 2021
Accepted: 25 May 2021
Published: 27 May 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

With its 46 international awards and 33 nominations, *El abrazo de la serpiente* [*Embrace of the Serpent*] (2015), directed by the Colombian Ciro Guerra, can be considered a successful film. It has been critically well received across a wide spectrum of international review-aggregating websites, film magazines and newspapers. The black-and-white depiction of the Amazon rainforest, the use of indigenous actors and languages, the different intelligible camera shots and angles, as well as the content of the dialogues, all make the film shine out as one of those special contributions to world cinema. *Embrace of the Serpent* depicts the fictional parallel stories of Theo (played by Jan Bijvoet) and Evan (played by Brionne Davis), and is partially based on the diaries of Theodor Koch-Grünberg (1921), a German ethnologist, and Richard Evans Schultes (Schultes and Hofmann 1979; but also Schultes 1988; Schultes and Raffauf 1992), an American botanist, both of whom traveled through the Colombian Amazon rainforest at the beginning of the 20th century and during World War II respectively. The main purpose of these two scientists is to find the *yakruna* plant¹ in the Amazon rainforest. In order to do so, both men are guided by the local *payé*² Karamakate.

The first story depicts Theo's encounter with young Karamakate (played by Nilbio Torres) and their travel through the rainforest for the *yakruna* plant, which, so Theo believes, will cure him of his life-threatening disease. Along the way, the film depicts their relationship and the parallel often disturbing events in the rainforest in the wake of colonialism, capitalist exploitation of the rubber industry and the Catholic missionary movement. The second story depicts Evan's encounter with old Karamakate (played by Antonio Bolívar Salvador) in pursuit of *yakruna* for mere botanical interest, so Evan says. This story shows

a similar path through the Amazon but this time the viewer is informed about Theo's preceding story and comes to witness the devastating consequences three decennia later. While Theo ultimately fails to utilize *yakruna*, Evan manages to find and utilize the plant with the help of Karamakate, leading both to experience a radical self-transformation. In this way, Evan and Karamakate succeed where Theo and Karamakate failed.

Embrace of the Serpent has been critically hailed for its cinematography, its representation of the destruction of the Amazon, and the effects of Western colonialism and capitalism on local tribal cultures and their immediate environment (cf. Chang 2015; Kiang 2015; Mintzer 2015; Tewksbury 2016; Bergahn 2017; Mutis 2018). The choice of Guerra to depict the story through the eyes of the indigenous protagonist Karamakate cannot be overlooked, as it transforms the colonial hangover of viewing 'savage tribes' in need of education and Enlightenment based on Western epistemologies intrigued by a mismatch of Christian *ethos*, evolutionary progress, scientific thinking and mass-production. Instead, the film places both the Western expeditioner and the indigenous *payé* on equal level by bringing the two into dialogue and in need of mutual help and transformation. In doing so, it "eschews the dichotomies typical of imperial exoticism" (Bergahn 2017, p. 32).

But while the film makes use of a lot of natural elements, imageries, and dialogues that are categorizable in religious terms, it is striking that none of the above-mentioned critics have engaged with the issue of 'religion' in the film. The rather obvious sceneries of the Catholic missionary movement and the horrible consequences in its aftermath, as well as the use of motifs like dreams, "myths and spiritual beliefs of the Amazonian Indians" (Bergahn 2017, p. 31) have been highlighted, but rather superficially and disconnected from the overall theme of religion throughout the film. Indeed, there has been a lack of deeper reflection on the religious elements used in the storyline, especially the tension between the local *payé* rituals, imageries, and epistemic truth claims of reality, including the question of self-transformation, on the one hand, and the Western, Christian worldview in the wake of capitalism and secularization, on the other hand. This article seeks to demonstrate this dichotomy through the analysis of Theo and Karamakate's story, and the ultimate transformation of this dichotomy through the analysis of Evan and Karamakate's story. In doing so, this article proves that the film deals not only with the socio-political and ecological realities on the ground, but also with the questions of what constitutes reality, good and evil, sacrality, and life beyond death.

2. Religious Elements in *Embrace of the Serpent*

While this is not the place to engage in detail with the question of what constitutes the term 'religion', it is necessary to briefly explain the use of 'religion' in order to talk of religious elements in *Embrace of the Serpent*. Indeed, as the film seeks to overcome dichotomies between the indigenous and the Western explorers by providing the narrative through the eyes of Karamakate, one could argue here that the use of 'religion' is not justifiable for describing various imageries, narratives and epistemic truth claims intrinsic to Karamakate's perspective and within the film in general, since 'religion' in and by itself is a term that is constructed by Western intelligentsia and for Western ideological purposes. This critical stance has become known as "deconstructivism", in which scholars like Jonathan Z. Smith (1982), Russell McCutcheon (1997), Talal Asad (2003), and William Cavanaugh (2009) have all pointed out, in various ways, that the term religion (and even the secular) is historically emerged and a social construction that is contestable and non-existent in non-Western societies and mindscapes. Those who define 'religion' and the 'secular' do so for purposes that are ideologically and/or politically motivated.

But while this critique has to be taken seriously, a critique that is indeed applicable to *Embrace of the Serpent* as well, one can agree with Kevin Schilbrack (2013) who points out that one could talk of religion despite the validity of deconstructivist critiques. To use a Western concept like 'religion' should not necessary lead to the disruption of non-Western terms and concepts. Instead, one could use a term like 'religion' hermeneutically based on similarities in the way non-Western people describe and understand their reality to be

informed by a “superempirical” reality that is the basis for their own “practices, beliefs, and institutions that recommend normative paths” (Schilbrack 2013, p. 110). Whether or not this superempirical reality is explicitly stated by the practitioner him- or herself, and whether or not a term like ‘religion’ is used, the very similarities between epistemic worldviews on an implicit level that have an ontological basis in a superempirical reality, can lead one to speak of religion since this concept is linguistically at the disposal of Western vocabulary. One has to maintain a “critical realist” stance (Schilbrack 2013, p. 91) nonetheless by accepting that, at a certain point, these hermeneutics might come into tension as not all phenomena might be befitting a generalized *etic* category like ‘religion’.

That is why I propose, as a nuance to Schilbrack’s immediate usage of religion, to talk of ‘religious elements’ in the sense that one can investigate those phenomena that are transmissible in English terms and intrinsic to the fields of religious studies and philosophy. Rather than speaking of the ‘religion’ of Karamakate and of Theo and Evan, one can instead investigate how these characters envision reality (as in epistemology), values (as in axiology), the questions of good and evil, sacrality, afterlife and so on. After all, one can agree with Irvin Goldman, a specialist in the Cubeo Hehénewa people of the Vaupés region, that the “insistence upon a categorical distinction between religion and society, arises from our stubborn determination to deny the native a serious voice in constructing a theory of society” (Goldman 2004, p. 9). With this at the back of the mind, let me now turn to the use of religious elements in the *Embrace of the Serpent*.

2.1. The Imagery of the River

The opening scene shows the camera hovering over the water of the Vaupés river towards young Karamakate (literally “he who tries”; Guillén 2016) who is seated in squat position near the river bench. The very fact that the river is first depicted is no coincidence. As Guerra mentions in an interview, “[f]or the Amazonian people, they see the river as a gift—a gift of life. If the rivers are running it is because life is existing” (Tewksbury 2016). The Vaupés river, and later the Inírida River towards the end, play an important role throughout the film as they are used as a means of transportation throughout the jungle. But next to their ‘usefulness’ in terms of transporting between various parts of the Amazonian jungle, they carry a symbolic, quasi-mythological connotation in them. Indeed, through the dialogues of Karamakate, the viewer comes to understand that the river embodies a divinity or, at least, a supernatural force: “the anaconda’s son”. Guerra explains:

“In Amazonian mythology, extraterrestrial beings descended from the Milky Way, journeying to the earth on a gigantic anaconda snake. They landed in the ocean and traveled into the Amazon, stopping at communities where people existed, leaving these pilots behind who would explain to each community the rules of how to live on earth: how to harvest, fish, and hunt. Then they regrouped and went back to the Milky Way, leaving behind the anaconda, which became the river. The wrinkled skin of the serpent became the waterfalls” (Guillén 2016)

That the anaconda is the primordial being believed to have initiated creation and, above all, the river after descending to Earth has also been demonstrated in other existing studies (cf. Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971; Hugh-Jones 1988; Roe 1982; Goldman 2004). Even the diary of Koch-Grünberg incorporates a “snake myth”, where the people of the Caiary river tell the story that there was once a giant snake coming from the west who swam through the river. At every turn, various animals, ranging from swine to tapirs to an alligator, tried to kill the snake in its travel. But none managed to do so. Only after a hurdle among the Caiary people, the snake could finally be caught and killed by the locals (pp. 358–59). In any case, the embodiment of the snake is symbolized in the river; a place of continual movement with various rapids and curves. As Goldman, focusing on the Cubeo tribe, mentions, the anaconda’s “heart and its soul enter into the river itself: into its fish, birds, and fowl, into trees, into human houses, and, through hallucinogens, into ritually engaged human beings” (Goldman 2004, p. 33). One ought not to identify the river with

the anaconda as such; rather, “[t]he Anaconda, as the ‘heart’ and representation of the river, endows it with its own nature, so that in the mythical aspect, at least, the two form a special dyadic entity; they do not become one, but are interdependent” (Goldman 2004, p. 91).

That Karamakate has a deep understanding of the river movements is already clear at the beginning, when he looks at the small vibrations of the water as a signal that people are about to arrive by canoe. Slowly, he looks up and, in a fraction of seconds, a canoe appears carrying Manduca, a tribesman from the Bára tribe, and Theo. In what follows is at first a moment of distrust between Karamakate and the newcomers, as Karamakate is a lone *payé* and a child survivor of the rubber exploitation. In fact, he has a strong dislike for “white people” and those, like Manduca, who are cooperating with the whites. The reason for them to seek Karamakate, is to find healing for Theo who is suffering a deadly disease. The river as the means through which Theo and Karamakate come to meet is striking. Unlike the anaconda myth, the river does not carry the same symbolic connotation for Theo, who originates from Tübingen, Germany. In fact, if one goes by the Christian tradition that long characterized the German regions, the river is symbolic of baptism, purification and rebirth. It is therefore striking that, in this particular scene, it is a seriously ill Westerner who seeks healing from a local *payé*, rather than reversed.

That Theo, throughout the film, does not understand the river in a way that co-aligns with Karamakate is clear. At one moment on their journey, Theo tries to paddle along with Manduca and Karamakate, but he is only met with laughter by Karamakate and so he gives up. In a later scene, the viewer sees Manduca and Karamakate paddling the canoe, while Theo sits in the middle exhausted from the disease that is slowly deteriorating his health. At one moment, both Manduca and Karamakate are tired of the labor, so they take a rest while the canoe slowly hovers over the river. At that moment, in a well-meant gesture, Theo decides to pick up the paddle in order to move the canoe further. However, he is immediately rebuked by Karamakate, who mentions that he is not using the paddle properly. One sees indeed that Theo is less rhythmic and more uncontrollable in his paddle movement. Karamakate tells Theo that he has to “listen to the river”. This time, Theo does not feel discouraged, so he tries again and starts to rhythmically paddle with the movement of the river, which Karamakate approves. In those two instances of paddling, the emotional bond between Theo and Karamakate is clearly under strain due to the epistemic differences in the way both men understand the river. While for Theo, the river is just a force of nature which man has to control in order to reach towards the next destination, for Karamakate, the river is much more than a mere force, but a living being which man relates to.

These epistemic differences are clearly dependent on the stories that have been transmitted to both men from childhood onwards: for Theo, the river does not signify anything ‘superempirical’ in the sense of a divine force, while for Karamakate, the river and the ‘superempirical’ are one. As a consequence, Karamakate has taught himself to be reliant on the river: the river provides life and he, as a *payé*, is completely dependent on it. This dependence brings him in closer harmony with the force of the river, both as a natural force and a divine force. To use the river merely as a means towards an end is considered highly disrespectful. Even the slightest unharmonious movement can disrespect the river. “To listen to the river” implies that Theo has to respectfully hear and observe how the river moves both as a natural and superempirical force, and how he, as a human agent, has to use his own power. These epistemic differences towards the river bring a clear gap between both men, but young Karamakate has not taught himself to be considerate of Theo’s epistemic worldview either. Indeed, Theo is considered to be the outsider who is ignorant towards the local rituals, narratives and knowledge and who thus has to be taught the lessons of the river. Theo, being rooted in his own epistemic worldview; a mismatch of the centuries-old Christian narrative combined with a growing scientific, rational and mechanic mindset as it unfolded in Europe, is of course limited in his knowledge and even more so, since he is after all the outsider. Nonetheless, his choice to persist in trying to listen to the river the second time shows that emotional barriers can be put aside when one is able to let go of one’s own epistemic worldview while trying to immerse in that of

the other. By appropriating the story of Karamakate, the two come to a momentum where further dialogue becomes possible.

The challenge to envision the river in a different light is also clear when old Karamakate goes into dialogue with Evan in the parallel story. A bit towards the end, old Karamakate asks Evan:

“‘How many edges does this river have?’

‘Two.’

‘How do you know that?’

‘There is one and there is one, one plus one equals two.’

‘How can you know that?’

‘Because one plus one equals two.’

‘Well, you are wrong. The river has three, five, a thousand edges. A child can understand that easily, but not you. The river is the anaconda’s son.’”

It is clear that Evan’s mindset is intrigued by a mathematical, mechanical worldview in which he envisions only two river benches. This epistemology is influenced by the scientific revolution that characterized the Western hemisphere from the 17th century onwards, whereby factual truths can only be made based on empirical observation. As Evan mentions in this scene: “I am a man of science. Of real, palpable facts”. For him, all other narratives stories, such as the creation of the world by God, are “beautiful, but just a story”. Karamakate, on the other hand, transforms storytelling beyond mere story into the realm of an oneiric reality, as he replies: “It is not a story. It is a dream, you must follow it”. He thus seems to imply that stories, no matter how ancient, continue to live on in the dream-world; a remarkable claim, indeed, as a lot of humankind’s lifetime is invested in dreaming. For Evan, however, dreams like stories are mere illusions and they cannot be trusted as a means to make epistemic truth claims. For Karamakate, the oneiric reality is as real as the empirical world; in fact, informs the way in which one ought to use one’s senses and in which one ought to understand the world. In this way, the river, as the embodiment of the giant anaconda, is a phenomenon with many endless facets and edges which leads its own life and which cannot be reduced to simple equations. Unlike a child who has the imaginative capacity to understand the river in this way, Evan has rationalized the river to simplified terms. Interestingly, Karamakate mentions that, in doing so, Evan is also following a dream (albeit a wrong one).

The river is a recurring factor that shows the epistemic tensions between young Karamakate and Theo, as well as between old Karamakate and Evan. While for Theo and Evan, the river seems to be nothing more than a water stream on which one can navigate, for Karamakate, it is a divine force which has its own life and its own way of communication. Humankind has to listen to the river and treat it with respect in order to be in harmony with the river and, consequently, the deity embodying it. To treat it disrespectfully is to mistreat not only the divine force, but also the Amazon people in general. Thus, for Karamakate, and in contrast to Theo and Evan, the river is a sacred place.

2.2. Sacred Plants and Trees

One of the main features in the film is that of plants and trees and their medicinal powers. In order to keep Theo alive and give him the strength to carry his disease during their journey for *yakruna*, Karamakate continuously blows the “sun’s semen” in the nose of Theo. That this medicinal powder has a strong effect is clear by Theo’s reaction every time he is provided with the necessary dose. The “sun’s semen”, a means to denote its origin, is most likely equivalent to the virola, “a jungle bush whose cortex is rich in hallucinogenic alkaloids” (*Embrace of the Serpent Press Kit* 2015). The cortex of this bush is mixed with *caapi*, “a creeping vine of great hallucinogen power,” in order “to produce visions of the spiritual world” (*Embrace of the Serpent Press Kit* 2015). Young Karamakate has profound knowledge of the plants and trees around him, and he knows exactly what mixtures to give to Theo

as well as the quantities. This knowledge, which he probably acquired throughout his solitude, is also a knowledge that he must have acquired through storytelling when he was a child. The fact that Karamakate correlates the medicinal powers of the plants and the trees to be used under certain circumstances with the gifts of the extraterrestrial gods, shows that Karamakate inherited the stories of his people as a child before his tribe was brutally murdered by the rubber exploiters. Like the river and the deity that embodies it, some particular plants and trees carry a pathway to deities and have to be treated with utmost respect. They are sacred plants and trees. In fact, “[a]rchaic trees were also humanlike and were thought to be capable of becoming people”. In their essence, they are “compatible with characteristics of the *payé*” and act as “agents of his transformations” (Goldman 2004, p. 319). Moreover, within various trees lie the hearts of major powers, such as the hearts of the “Anaconda, the jaguar, and the Thunder God” (Goldman 2004, p. 320). Thus, the forest is the perfect place for the *payé* to gain extraordinary knowledge and pursue his perfection and transformation.

But young Karamakate’s profound knowledge of these plants and trees and their preparation for medicinal and hallucinating purposes stands in shrill contrast with his older self. When the film shifts to Karamakate and Evan, it becomes clear that Karamakate has not only forgotten where to find *yakruna*, but also how to prepare *mambe*, a “mixture of *coca* leaves, minced to a fine powder, and ashes of leaves of *yarumo*, a plant that activates and empowers the energetic and nutritional properties of the *coca* leaf [italics added]” (Embrace of the Serpent Press Kit 2015). *Coca*, another sacred plant, contains the “ability to alleviate hunger and fatigue” and has “spiritual properties”. The same plant would later be used for making cocaine, but unlike cocaine which consists of heavily refined and concentrated extracts of the *coca* leaves, *mambe* is used for medicinal purposes. Ironically, while Karamakate has forgotten how to make *mambe* with the *coca* leaves, Evan has the knowledge of how to make it. One sees that the epistemology of plants and their recipes has shifted towards the Western expeditioner, due to the fact that Evan can rely on preceding acquired information of the region such as the diary of Koch-Grünberg which he is carrying upon his arrival. But this shift of knowledge has also uprooted an important connotation, namely, that these sacred plants are a means to come in contact with higher deities. Indeed, this becomes clear in the fact that Evan mentions to Karamakate that “*caapi* is not strong enough” for him. The reduction of *caapi* for pure psychological pleasures stands in sharp contrast with the original intentions of using these plants.

Similarly, one sees Evan smoking cigarettes throughout the film, which also shows that tobacco, once a “sacred plant” (Guillén 2016), now has become reduced to mere individual pleasure and mass-usage. One can thus argue that the shift of botanical knowledge from the Amazon people towards the West, embodied here in the American Evan, has simultaneously caused a desacralization of the plants and trees as their related stories of the divine gifts and pathway to divine communication have been carefully detached by Western scientists as sheer nonsense. What is left is a plant that only serves scientific and academic purposes that has opened the gate not only to individual consumerism but also to mass-production by capitalist exploitation. When Karamakate is laying on his makeshift bed that evening, we hear him sobbing, asking to himself: “how could I forget the gifts that the gods gave to us? I have even forgotten how to make *mambe*. What have I become?” Here one sees the epiphany of the emotional disruption that unfolds in the heart of Karamakate. His inability to know and handle the sacred plants and trees are a feeling of spiritual disconnection with the gods, making him feel all the more lost and empty.

In contrast, Evan just stares with little empathy towards Karamakate and his story of divine gifts. In fact, Evan knows how to uphold a facade towards Karamakate as he already foreknows which vocabulary to use in order to gain Karamakate’s trust and respect. As the two come to meet, Evan mentions that he has come to investigate whether the stories of the *yakruna* plant are true and that this investigation serves “botanical purposes”. Karamakate, who has not met a white man before with deep interest in local plants and trees, replies that Evan’s “devotion to plants is the most reasonable thing” he has ever

heard from a white man. Unlike the initial distrust for Theo who sought *yakruna* for his own healing, Karamakate immediately trusts Evan's story. However, Karamakate is also a man of his own limitations, as his distrust for Theo was too harsh while his trust for Evan is too naïve. Indeed, Theo, despite his illness, had also helped the local tribes and they similarly appreciated his presence. Evan, instead, has not come to show ethnological interest. While he comes to investigate psychedelic plants, his hidden purpose to search *yakruna* is because the "sacred plant" of *yakruna* grows on the rubber tree.

Throughout the film, one comes to see the ecological and humanitarian devastations of the rubber industry, "one of the darkest chapters in Colombian history" (Guillén 2016). As Guerra mentions, the rubber industry had boomed by the end of the 19th century making Manaus in Brazil one of the wealthiest cities in the world. But this wealth had been acquired through "slavery and decimation of hundreds of indigenous cultures, and hundreds of thousands of people. It was so brutal that it's a story that remains hidden". When the horrors of the rubber industry came to the public limelight, the industry gradually declined by the 1930s, but the damage had already been done. While Theo arrives in the midst of it all, Evan arrives when the industry started to decline. However, since the Americans were at war during the Second World War, they were in desperate need for rubber since Japan had acquired a lot of rubber across Southeast Asia (Jenkins 2016; cf. Rivera 2018). Thus, Evan uses the quest for *yakruna* as a means to investigate what was left of rubber trees. But since Karamakate has forgotten the way and is only left with distant memories, Evan has to find the way himself on the basis of the information at his disposal: the book of Theo, the drawings of Karamakate, cartography and his compass. Clearly, the devastation of various sacred plants and trees by capitalist industries has impacted old Karamakate as if, with the destruction of the environment, Karamakate simultaneously loses the capacity to be in contact with the oneiric and divine reality.

That the destruction of the rubber trees and their humanitarian impact leave a traumatic mark to young Karamakate is clear when he, together with Theo and Manduca, at one point arrive at a part of the jungle where the land is 'decorated' with crosses, signifying a mass grave, and where one sees small bowls hanging on the rubber trees to collect the latex inside them. In a matter of seconds, a mutilated local man runs towards them and when he sees that all the bowls have been spilled on the ground by Manduca, he becomes desperate and begs the three of them to kill him. While Manduca gets a shotgun, which he had kept hidden from Karamakate and which was probably carried by Theo, to relieve the man out of his suffering, they ultimately cannot come to the point of killing him. This whole scenery makes Karamakate extremely angry as he projects it on Theo: "Whites can't be trusted [. . .] Is this your knowledge? Shotguns? All your science only leads to this, violence, death". Theo responds that Karamakate is wrong, but he continues: "What else are you stealing? Coca? Quina? Rubber? That's why you want to steal *yakruna*? What else are you going to turn into death?" While Theo is not part of the rubber exploitation, his ethnic background becomes a target for Karamakate to project his anger on. Karamakate, a victim of the rubber industry and a witness to the destruction of sacred plants and trees and the mutilation of locals, cannot comprehend the knowledge that white people bring. Western epistemology, so much hailed in the Western tradition, is simply an epistemology of death and destruction for young Karamakate. In the name of scientific and ethnological knowledge, people are being mutilated, ecology is destroyed and desacralized, and the oneiric reality with deities is being damaged. For Karamakate, it is only but logical that someone like Theo is suffering a deadly disease.

But that Karamakate goes too far in simplifying and generalizing Theo to the category of white men who only come to destroy, is clear in Manduca's response. Manduca immediately defends Theo and exclaims that Theo has done more for the locals than Karamakate himself. Unwilling to accept this reproach, he diminishes Manduca to a *canbocio*, a derogative term "given to 'acculturated' natives who work for the whites" (*Embrace of the Serpent Press Kit* 2015); a sort of mixed breed between white and indigenous people. For Karamakate, Manduca, wearing Western clothes, has started to speak and think like

white people; something which Karamakate despises. This time, Theo defends Manduca by mentioning that the latter has done more for the people than Karamakate who is living a solitary life. That Manduca is also a victim of the whole rubber industry is clear, as he bears the torture-marks on his back. In fact, he was once part of a rubber plantation, but Theo had set him free. It is clear from Manduca's reaction towards the mass-collection of latex that he also goes through pain. But unlike Karamakate, Manduca acts the more nuanced character, since he accompanied Theo and has got to know the white man's epistemology and habits. He can nuance the white men, since he is able to make a distinction between the scientific purposes of Theo, who happens to be in the middle of the booming rubber industry, and those Westerners who have come to exploit the local habitat. He sees potential in Theo, which young Karamakate fails to see. Indeed, in a later scene, Karamakate again asks Manduca why he is helping Theo after all the things white men have done to him. For Karamakate, Manduca has become the slave of Theo. Manduca angrily rejects this accusation: "I ain't no slave. I am with him [Theo], because we need him. He can teach the whites".

Clearly, Manduca looks further ahead than Karamakate, since he fears that when local people do not learn to differentiate between 'good' and 'bad' scientists, soon they will perish and their knowledge and way of thinking will perish with them. But for Karamakate, focused on all the things Theo is doing wrong, Theo cannot learn if he does not respect the jungle. Again, Manduca nuances by mentioning that Theo is afraid, yet he can still learn; "Theo is a hero for his people, since they listen to his stories. If we can't get the whites to learn, it will be the end of us. The end of everything". Here lies perhaps the tragic paradox at the core of the film: while Western people came to 'invade' the habitat of local people like Manduca and Karamakate with their scientific, mechanical, capitalist and missionary motifs, they are the same people who can enable the survival of local people including their knowledge, beliefs, stories, rituals and practices. The art of storytelling forms an important factor in this: Theo is one of the very few who documents back to home and his university all the knowledge he has gathered about the region and their people. Without Theo's story, there would be no story, hence no information about the Amazonian people back in Europe. Manduca is convinced that if Theo, despite his own limitations of learning, would bring his story to the West, it would lead the white people to learn at least 'something' about them, which, in turn, might save the local people from death. But as one would like to hope along with Manduca, it is clear that stories can easily be misused for 'malicious' intentions.

Indeed, despite the fact that Evan is carrying Theo's 'story' with him three decades later, he is actually using that information for his own secretive purposes, namely, to seek and find rubber trees. The information about the sacred plants and trees have actually been reduced to plants and trees that serve botanical, consumerist and, later on, pharmaceutical purposes. At the same time, Theo's story has also inspired someone like Guerra to direct this film. And one might even argue that, despite the fact that Theo's story inspired Evan to conduct his 'secret' mission to find rubber trees, it was Theo's story that led Evan to meet Karamakate and ultimately transform both of them in the final scene of the film. In the final scene, when Karamakate and Evan reach the *Cerros de Mavecure*, three breathtaking hills that are locally known as "the workshop of the gods", they go up the hill and discover "the last *yakruna* plant in the world". When asked how he knows that, Karamakate responds that he destroyed all the others and that this particular one "is our last hope, my gift for you". The willingness of Karamakate to gift the *yakruna* plant to Evan in the form of a medicinal preparation is because he has become aware of the fact that there is no one left anymore from his own Cohiuano tribe to teach. Manduca's forewarning three decades ago now has a more tangible feel for Karamakate. In order for him to keep the story or "the song" of his tribe alive, he needs, for the first time, to transfer his knowledge to an outsider like Evan. But at that same moment, Evan reveals his true intentions as he responds that he is not interested in the powdered mixture of *yakruna*, but that he has come to seek "high-purity rubber" which he wants to take back to wartime United States. That is why he seeks to preserve the *yakruna* instead. Karamakate asks in anger: "Did you lie to me

again? You want to make weapons with *yakruna*? You want to turn it into death?" In a moment of distress, Evan takes out his knife to which Karamakate responds: "Do it then! I am not scared! It is my duty to die, but *yakruna* dies with me!" At that moment, Evan lets go. Karamakate, determined to make the *yakruna* medicine mixed with *caapi* nonetheless, continues in the preparation.

The willingness of old Karamakate to share the *yakruna* plant with Evan, despite the latter's intentions, stands in shrill contrast with his younger self. When young Karamakate is about to arrive at a place in the jungle where *yakruna* grows, he sees the destruction of the trees. *Yakruna* is the last resort for Theo according to Karamakate, as Theo's body has become dirty for not respecting some of the prohibitions. Even the "sun's semen" is now only poison for Theo. In splendor, young Karamakate walks up like a warrior in decorated clothing made of bird-feathers. The fact that, for the first time, Karamakate is walking ahead of Manduca and Theo in full splendor shows his determination and the climax of Theo's story. Once Karamakate reaches the village, one sees that the place is controlled by native people who act as a protector of the area with shotguns. Karamakate, clearly not scared of the shotguns, just walks ahead and then enters in a hut where he finds a bunch of tribal men high and drunk with Western clothes. One of the men comes forward and asks Karamakate "to take a toast of *yakruna*", as they are toasting "to the end of the world". Ironically, his words speak what is actually taking place right in front of them.

The way the sacred plant is now being used does symbolize the beginning of the end for the local tribes in terms of becoming disconnected with their origin, their deities, the sacrality of the natural elements, the environment and their knowledge in general. Karamakate sees how the men have boiled the *yakruna* plant. In anger, he leaves the hut and witnesses a rubber tree empty of *yakruna* vines and, next to it, small trees flourishing. Angrily he mentions that *yakruna* is not meant to be cultivated. When the Colombians are about to arrive at the place, people start running away towards the river to escape. At that moment, Karamakate lights a piece of wood on fire while walking towards the *yakruna* plants. His last words to Theo are crystal-clear: "this is *yakruna*, the greatest knowledge of what my people once were. I won't let you take it away. Never". Theo can only look in agony and disbelief as the plants are lit on fire before he can utilize one to cure him of his disease.

Clearly, the desacralization of *yakruna* reaches its pinnacle in its cultivation for individual, consumerist purposes. What was once a pathway to the deeper mysteries of the cosmos, has now become mundane and irrelevant in mass-consumption. The knowledge of how to use *yakruna* and for what purposes is decaying with the rubber industry and with the local people who now have become uprooted from their own epistemology. This decaying knowledge leads Karamakate in his mission to destroy all the *yakruna*; for him, it is better that the knowledge of *yakruna* dies with him than that the knowledge gets distorted for morally evil intentions. The repercussions of Karamakate's decision are almost a 'twitched' reminder to the Eden story: 'they shall no longer eat from the *yakruna* plant, since they use their knowledge for evil intentions.' Here, Karamakate plays the guardian of *yakruna*, just like the two angelic figures guarded the entrance towards Eden. Full communion with the deities is no longer possible.

This explains why Karamakate destroyed all the *yakruna* right at the moment he meets Evan, and that he is determined that *yakruna* will die with him towards the end of the film. But unlike with Theo's story, Karamakate does not destroy the last *yakruna* plant despite Evan's hidden motifs, but instead decides to pass on the true knowledge of *yakruna* to Evan. In this way, old Karamakate has come to the wisdom that the knowledge of the deities are not bound to ethnocentrism, but can instead be shared with other ethnicities. Despite the misuse of *yakruna* by the wrong intentions of both whites and non-whites alike, *yakruna* can also act as a means to transformation for the betterment of the individual who partakes in it.³ The power of the story of *yakruna* is ultimately beyond Karamakate's control and has the capacity by itself to teach other people. Indeed, after Evan's trip, he wakes up as a

renewed man who walks into the jungle and who, in a final scene when butterflies circle around him, has learned “to listen not only with his ears”.⁴

2.3. The Use of Animals

The circling of butterflies around Evan in the final shot of the film has a strong implication, since animals, in any form, play an important role in communicating various messages within Amazonian epistemology. The butterflies around Evan imply that he has become one with his environment and has taken up the role of *payé* after his state of ecstasy by *yakruna*. Karamakate, who is nowhere to be seen after Evan wakes up, has reached his final goal and destination in becoming one with the larger cosmos. The passing on of his knowledge to Evan, and Evan’s subsequent contact with the serpent, transforms Karamakate’s life towards a state of enlightenment. Rather than depicting him as a dying man, the camera shows young Karamakate opening his eyes and mouth through which cosmic light shine. This is a powerful depiction since it shows that old Karamakate has transformed his past younger self, and that his life has now come to a full circle where he can give his mind and body to life hereafter. Now, Evan is the one who can continue “the song” of the Cohiuano tribe, because he was able to meet and embrace the serpent.

As was already made clear, the serpent is the deity which became embodied in the form of the river. While one can no longer see this primordial serpent in its physical form, it is possible to see the serpent through a state of ecstasy in the oneiric world (cf. [Goldman 2004](#), p. 36).⁵ Through the use of *yakruna* mixed with *caapi* [*medora caapi*], one gets in contact with the giant snake. As Karamakate mentions to Evan before the latter’s ecstatic trip:

“It [the mixture] will take you to see her [the serpent]. She is enormous, fearsome. But you must not fear it. You must let her embrace you. Her embrace will take you to ancient places, where life does not exist, not even its embryo”.

Before he starts drinking the brew, Evan is asked to take off his shirt. We see Karamakate smearing *medora caapi* on Evan’s back, “the most powerful of all. It existed before creation, before the snake descended”. This mixture, the one which supersedes all other sacred mixtures, is applied in the form of various small circles on the body of Evan. While the film does not mention anything explicitly, closer inspection seems to imply the similarity of the pattern of a jaguar on Evan’s body. Indeed, the jaguar, considered the most powerful animal in the Amazon (next to the anaconda), often symbolizes power and confidence but also aggressivity. While the serpent symbolizes deity and the beginning of life, the jaguar symbolizes a human. While these two animals rarely fight in nature, there are moments that the two meet and where one can kill the other. This is beautifully depicted in the preceding story of Theo, where, after Karamakate has burnt the *yakruna* in front of Theo, we see Manduca and Theo struggle towards the canoe and escape the scenery. In a next shot, there is a close-up of a jaguar on the hunt who, at one moment, comes eye to eye with a snake. While the two give warning signs, ultimately the jaguar kills the snake. The exact interpretation might be difficult to grasp and be open to various opinions, but in an interview, Brionne Davies (Evan) explains that the jaguar is Theo’s archetype. Rather than ‘embracing’ and trusting the serpent, the jaguar snaps and eats it ([Stein 2016](#)). In contrast, Evan, painted with a jaguar pattern, is ready to embrace the serpent and see the hidden mysteries of the universe and the environment around him.

However, prior to Karamakate burning the *yakruna*, he shouts to Theo: “You are the one with the mandate! You are the snake!” This realization is preceded by a vision in a previous scene, when young Karamakate invites Theo to drink a mixture of *caapi* in order to “talk to master Caapi” (showing the deity behind the sacred plant). During that process, when Theo has gone into a trance in which he is only reciting that he does not want to die, Karamakate sees a falling star. He exclaims, “Waítoma”, probably another deity.⁶ The next day, Theo, who was unable to communicate with master Caapi, asks Karamakate what he saw. The latter responds that Caapi had showed him the jaguar, and that Waítoma had transformed into a boa when it hit the ground. This boa has the mission to kill Theo. Asked whether this boa symbolizes Theo’s deadly disease, Karamakate responds “no, it

is something else". As for the jaguar, he asked Karamakate to protect Theo.⁷ Since *caapi* has no longer any effect, Theo sees his last hope in *yakruna*, but Karamakate is doubtful since Theo is unable to listen. Next to the fact that the ability to talk to gods through sacred plants is not applicable to all, it becomes clear that the jaguar and the boa are animal embodiments of higher deities. Their particular embodiment show certain warning signs, which, even for Karamakate, an experienced *payé*, are difficult to interpret. Things become more complicated when Theo, in the scene that follows, writes to his wife back in Germany that he has come to understand the vision he had of a jaguar when he was lying next to her. He continues to mention that, despite his efforts, he remains completely immune to the effect of *caapi*. He sees it as his failure, and he fears he might die in the jungle.

But when Karamakate realizes that Theo is the snake, he exclaims that he had misread the signs. Thus, it would seem that Theo is both the jaguar and the snake, if we add Brionne Davies' interpretation. Rather than that the boa symbolizes Theo's disease, it symbolizes Theo himself. Theo has to protect himself against his own self, since his spirit has become imbalanced. The conjoining of the jaguar and the serpent, two powerful animals that should not come in each other's way, symbolize an imbalance of the natural, human world and the oneiric, divine world, which is exactly what is going on in the socio-political landscape of the Amazon. Theo, who fails to obey and implement the *payé* laws and rituals throughout the journey, has become victim of this imbalance in his own body, and it seems that his human side overpowers the oneiric side. This ultimately leads his human self to kill his oneiric-self in the symbolic scene of the jaguar snapping the serpent, which ultimately results in his own death. Karamakate, who becomes aware of this danger, seeks to keep the serpent separate from the jaguar, and the only way to do so, is to keep *yakruna*, the pathway towards the oneiric reality, from the hands of people who have forgotten how to maintain the proper balance.⁸ The vision of a jaguar which Theo had back home might also show that the jaguar overpowers him as his totem animal, which, in turn, leads him to not only failing to understand master Caapi and to listen to *yakruna*, but also to the inability to transform himself in the knowledge of the oneiric reality which Karamakate repeatedly points out. The climax of Theo's inability to respect the serpent happens when he, at a moment of delirium, jumps into the river and starts hunting for fish. Karamakate, who already mentioned before that fish is not to be eaten before rainfall, scolds Theo that he does not have the permission to fish. Theo responds: "Permission from whom? Yours?! The Lord of the fish? Because of your ridiculous prohibitions, I am ill". Even Manduca cannot stop Theo at this point, as Theo mentions that "[t]he river is full of fish! We cannot possibly end them!" In his madness, Theo picks and eats a raw fish.

From this point onwards, a bond of trust has been broken between Karamakate and Theo, and this scene shows that Theo, despite having good will, ultimately cannot overcome his own epistemology and vision of the world. As the saying goes, in anger, the real truth comes out. Here, one sees that Theo does not wish to fully immerse himself in the local rituals, practices, and stories. He does not want to respect the prohibitions which Karamakate has implemented for his own good. Theo runs into the river, the embodiment of the descended anaconda, and his jaguar-self overpowers the rules of the river-serpent while it is the river-serpent who gives life. In fact, it was clear from the very beginning that, in their search for *yakruna*, Theo had to take into consideration various prohibitions in order to heal: no eating of fish or meat until the rain begins, no cutting of trees, asking permission from the Master of animals, no cutting of buds and no intercourse with a woman until the new moon. Rather than taking these prohibitions seriously as it comes from a *payé* whose people have lived for thousands of years in the region, Theo's outsider mentality, one which is influenced by an arrogance of modern-day scientific thinking, does not seek to cooperate.

Evan, on the contrary, who on the surface seems not to care much about the local rituals, practices and stories, is willing to believe and to learn from his mistakes. When he drinks from the *yakruna* mixture, Karamakate's face appears in close-up and tells Evan that he has to "[g]ive them [the deities] more than what they ask for. Given them a song.

Tell them everything you see, everything you feel. Come back a whole man". After having said that, he blows the medicinal powder on Evan's face and mentions: "you are Cohiuano". Unlike Theo, Evan is ready to embrace the serpent. Despite his hidden motif, Evan does respect and obey the laws of Karamakate and maintains a balance with the jungle, the river and thus the serpent. His ignorance of the oneiric reality is not one out of deliberation, but more out of disinterest. However, this disinterest will soon become transformed when Evan is about to see the hidden truths. In fact, he becomes a Cohiuano, making him the offspring of Karamakate and the whole extinguished tribe. And because of him embracing the serpent in the oneiric reality and giving the deities more than what they ask for, his knowledge of the world has been transformed, seeing everything in a new light, including the sacrality of animals, trees, plants and rivers. Evan's transformation is the pathway towards Karamakate's salvation, showing that the two need each other despite their differing contexts and epistemologies. Karamakate and Evan succeed where Karamakate and Theo failed.

Interestingly, prior to Evan's arrival at the beginning of the film, there is a camera-shot of a serpent giving birth while a tribal chant is playing in the background. After this scene, one of the newborn serpents swims towards old Karamakate who is busy carving images on the rocks. While Karamakate does not notice the serpent, he stops carving and starts looking towards the river. As was the case with Theo, one sees Evan appear on the horizon. In retrospect, this scene seems highly symbolic and a sign to what Evan will become towards the end of the film. Just like the river, the embodiment of the serpent, provides life and created human beings according to Amazon storytelling, the serpent here gives birth to a new snake which in and by itself can symbolize the birth-giving of Evan, the future Cohiuano, who is arriving on the scenery. The full implementation is only realized towards the end of the film.

Unlike the serpent, another animal is portrayed with Theo's arrival. Most of the existing reviews have noted that young Karamakate decides to take care of Theo and find *yakruna* after Theo mentions that some of Cohiuano people are still alive. While this might be partially the case, it is striking that they miss the important symbolism of the tapir prior to Karamakate's decision. Indeed, like other animals in the Amazon jungle, the tapir plays an important role in communication. After young Karamakate goes to the river upon Theo's arrival, he sees a tapir on the other side of the river which suddenly plunges into the river. This leads him to promptly return to Theo and start making the "sun's semen" for Theo. While it is difficult to know the exact interpretation of the tapir for Karamakate's tribe, it has been pointed out that the tapir has "anomalous qualities". In addition to its overactive sexual qualities, it can also be a "powerful ally, a swift but clumsy runner, and a graceful dancer". While these qualities are often attributed to fathers-in-law, they are also attributed to foreigners (Urton 1985, p. 298). The tapir is seen as a "cunning, yet slow-witted brute". When they are scared, they plunge into water (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985, p. 111). While the tapir is considered to be "repugnant", it is also a "clean animal". In this respect, "the tapir becomes an exemplar of problematic human relations" (Urton 1985, p. 299).

These qualities of the tapir fit the character of Theo. As a foreigner, he is scared to die in the jungle of his disease. Moreover, he is a graceful dancer, as he is seen dancing a traditional German dance in front of another tribe later on in the film. Karamakate, who sees the tapir, is also aware of the problematic relationship between himself and Theo due to the fact that he envisions Theo as one of the white people who has come to destroy the local people and the sacred plants and trees. But by seeing the tapir dive into the water, he interprets the sign to help Theo. This motif of a tapir is clearly a very important sign of communication, which shows that the animal plays an important role in the epistemology of Karamakate. His ability to understand the animal signs in general has strong implications, and one cannot overlook the motif of the tapir as one of the main reasons for Karamakate to offer help to Theo.

2.4. A Capuchin Missionary in the Middle of the Amazon

One of the striking moments in the film directly related to the issue of the Catholic missionary movement is portrayed in the parallel scenes of young and old Karamakate's arrival at the Capuchin mission of San Antonio de Padua in Vaupés. While the scenes speak clearly for themselves, a few notations have to be made. When Theo, Manduca and Karamakate arrive at the spot, one reads *temosos de dios* [litt. 'those who fear God'] on a wooden board. Idyllic as it sounds, children in white clothes run towards them. But their identity crisis becomes immediately clear when one kid scolds the other for using his local name Manhekanalienípe. Instead, he has to use his Spanish Christian name Jerimiah. Their unwillingness to listen to their own native tongue is clear, when they refuse to answer Karamakate's question of the priest's whereabouts. Only when Theo asks the same in Spanish, they lead the three forwards. While they move forward, various punishment methods are depicted in the outside garden while the Capuchin monk is teaching the hymn 'O come all ye faithful' to the children in the background. Rather than welcoming the three strangers, the Capuchin monk promptly stops the singing, scatters the children, gets a shotgun and asks the three to leave immediately. His disrespect for the local Amazonian people is clear when he mentions to Karamakate that *lingua del demonio* [litt. 'demonic languages'] ought not to be spoken. Only when both Karamakate and Theo start quoting from the Bible and from Thomas of Aquinas in the Spanish language does the monk become convinced to give in. This particular scene clearly shows the sheer ignorance on behalf of the Capuchin monk by living in his own theological and linguistic bubble. The fact that the evangelization of locals was left by a "monopoly of religious orders" (Becerra 2021, p. 3)⁹ has opened the door for abuse of power, feelings of superiority and paranoia.

That the Capuchin monk does not respect anything of the local prohibitions is obvious when they are all served fish for dinner before rainfall. A negligence of local prohibitions simultaneously implies a negligence of local stories and epistemologies correlated to these prohibitions. Indeed, Goldman mentions that according to some local traditions, human beings originated from the river, slowly developing from the anaconda towards a fish, and then finally, from the embodiment of a fish towards a human-like being. However, in this development, certain fish were destined to remain fish as in their animal form. This, in turn, caused a dichotomy and antagonism between humans (who emerged from fish and the anaconda) and fish, especially since humans also consume fish. Such separation between humans and fish is not complete, thus, there is "a ritual relationship" in that fish are not merely seen "as daily food, but also as neighboring beings, who are addressed, who are visited by shamans who see them dancing and singing in their houses, and who are in numerous ways a presence" (Goldman 2004, p. 46). In fact, "all foods are potentially dangerous and are, therefore, not be eaten at inappropriate times" (Goldman 2004, p. 144). The danger lies in that food can allow "malevolent forces to enter into the body", including and especially fish (given their animosity to humans) (Goldman 2004, pp. 144–45). In contrast, fish merely serve to saturate the daily hunger within the Capuchin missionary and fish have no spiritual properties whatsoever. For the Capuchin monk, fish are merely consumer items, which, once blessed, can be eaten without remorse. The lack of respecting prohibitions lies in the fact that, for him, such prohibitions no longer serve any purpose in light of Christ's resurrection, and since there is no correlation between fish and men within Biblical creation story, they are seen as inferior and emotionless.

While the monk might not be aware of his own shortcomings and his one-sided view on reality, the arrogance in which he justifies his mission and his behavior towards locals comes clearly to the fore within the film. Rather than investing himself with local traditions and attempting to learn and respect the native stories and prohibitions, the monk has implemented his own epistemic truth claims without feeling the need to change or adapt them. Just like the monk is convinced that he can abundantly use fish from the river, he is simultaneously convinced that he can abundantly 'fish men' (as in Jesus' call to Peter and Andrew of making them fishers of men). Contrary to Manduca's accusation, the monk is convinced that he does not "steal boys", but only implements a "sacred" mission by saving

orphans from the rubber war against “ignorance” and “cannibalism”. The lack of reflecting on his own indoctrinated viewpoints shows that the monk has not learned to communicate and engage in dialogue with locals like Manduca and Karamakate to understand their point of view.

Outside, one reads a sign of the Colombian President Rafael Reyes (1849–1921): “In recognition of the courage of the Colombian rubber pioneers who brought civilization to the land of cannibal savages and showed them the path of God and His Holy Church”. That this whole justification for missionary is clearly one-sided and repulsive is clear, and it only brings further animosity and disrespect for the local tribes. Karamakate, in his anger, takes a group of children aside and tells them that “whites are crazy”, because “they eat their god” (the reference to Communion). This incident shows that the missionaries were unable to communicate their message to people like Karamakate, and that accusations of cannibalism rain from both sides. Karamakate then shows the children a plant called *chiricaspi*, “a gift that our *karipulakena* ancestors received from the gods”. As the story goes, they received “the sun’s semen when Yeba, the sun’s daughter, rubbed his penis and grounded the semen to dust”. He then teaches them how to boil the leaves as a cure against any disease.

At this point, one also gets to know that Karamakate himself was picked up by the priests, but refused to surrender and fought his way out of their control. He points out that the priests do not respect any food prohibition, and that the children should never forget who they are. They should not let their song fade away. The way how the missionaries treat the dignity of the locals, their language, stories, knowledge and wisdom only leads to repulsion and rebellion on some locals like Karamakate, which, in a way, is a natural reaction. The climax of this mistreatment comes to the fore when, that night, Manduca witnesses the flogging of a little child by the monk who, by now, believes that the devil has been brought in the community. This torturous scenery prompts Manduca to strike down the priest and in turn to run away. In their hurry, Manduca, Theo and Karamakate leave behind a group of children. The dualistic worldview of the Capuchin monk between sacred–profane, divine–demonic, us–them, developed–savage (and the list can go on) clearly serves his own self-interest and is a reminder of the colonial hangover that also influenced the way certain missionaries operated.

When Evan and Karamakate arrive three decades later, the place has gone further out of control. The missionary is now run by a self-proclaimed Colombian messiah, and it has become a cultic place, where (self-)tortures have only increased. Ironically, the place is now called Eden and one sees a human body on a crucifix with the signature *caboclo* over his head. This symbolically shows that the two cultures have become crucified. In a simplified manner, Evan and Karamakate are believed to be Balthazar and Melchior. While Evan mentions that he seeks sacred plants, the messiah responds that he is the only sacred thing in the jungle. His response shows the strong dichotomy between the local and the missionary: for the first, every part of the jungle is sacred, while for the latter, everything else should be reduced to nothingness in light of the sacred Christ (similar to the Capuchin monk’s vision). Yet even Christ has become ridiculed due to the fact that there is a self-proclaimed Christ sitting there. That night, Evan exclaims that the whole place has become madness, to which Karamakate responds: “they have now become the worst of the two worlds”. Indeed, in the next scene, the messiah twists the Latin eucharistic prayer ‘*grátias agens benedíxit, accípíte et bíbite ex eo omnes: hic est enim calix. Mei ságuinis sed aetétérni*’ to himself. Karamakate, who is asked to bless the ‘*calix*’, puts crushed leaves in the brew; and while the messiah and the people start drinking it, they all start running and dancing around like mad people. Ultimately, the messiah asks the community to eat him alive, as he considers himself to be the body of God. While Evan believes Karamakate had poisoned the drink, the latter promptly replies that he gave them something “to think better”. He calls them Makús, not born from the anaconda; “they are less than human”.

Unlike Evan, Karamakate realizes that nothing more can help the people out of their madness. Being led by their own twisted interpretations of whatever was left by the

Capuchin missionary, they no longer live in harmony with the local environment and are only engaging in beliefs in practices that are self-destructive. Their identity has completely become uprooted, and since they are bound to the jungle, they only degrade their own humanity. In this way, Karamakate provides a relief of suffering. What these two scenes clearly show is that lack of communication, lack of immersing in indigenous languages and social structures (including their beliefs, prohibitions, rituals, and so forth), forced conversions and self-justified ‘grand’ missions all serve to bring devastating consequences not only for the local people, their social structures and their environment, but also to those bodies and institutions from outside that permitted such actions. What is then left is indeed ‘madness’.

2.5. *Chullachaki, Memory and the Notion of Time*

Theo and Evan carry boxes with them throughout the film. When asked to throw them away in the river by Karamakate, both refuse to do so as the boxes contain material that are dear to them. Theo’s boxes are full of samples, artefacts, preserved butterflies, archaeological material, pictures and a diary. As an ethnologist, these materials act as a physical memory of what Theo discovered along the way, and serve the purpose to document back in Germany. Having exposed them to Karamakate, he also hands over a picture of Karamakate which Theo had taken with his camera. When Theo wants to take the picture back, Karamakate refuses to do so. Theo explains that it is merely an image, not Karamakate himself. The following dialogue unfolds:

“‘Like a *chullachaki*?’

‘A what?’

‘A *chullachaki*. We all have one. He looks like you, but he is empty, hollow.’

‘This is a memory. A moment that passed.’

‘A *chullachaki* has no memories. It only drifts around in the world, empty, like a ghost, lost in time without time.’”

While Karamakate ultimately agrees for Theo to show his *chullachaki* to the people back in Germany, there is a clear difference in the way both men understand the way memory works. For Theo, the picture and, with it, all the collected information are a means to gain knowledge and a memorization of a moment in time. For Karamakate, such ‘objects of knowledge’ do not serve any memory purposes, since the spiritual and physical embodiment are both disconnected. This makes a picture of Karamakate like a *chullachaki*, empty and lost in time; it serves no real purposes because, in time, the so-called memory of the person on the picture becomes a distorted memory that signifies nothing from what it originally meant. This becomes again clear when Evan shows a picture of Theo with an Amazonian child, to which Karamakate responds: “that is not him, that is his *chullachaki* [. . .] his *cullachaki*, it just looks like him”. But then Karamakate adds that “it happened to us both. We both turned into *chullachaki*’s”.

While Theo has turned into a *chullachaki* through the picture, Karamakate has also turned into a *chullachaki* because of his inability to remember. Clearly, the act of remembering lies in the ability to listen (in the broad sense of the word) to his immediate surrounding and its oneiric presence. When Evan meets Karamakate at the beginning, the latter feels like “a *chullachaki*”, “empty”, because all the “rocks, trees, animals” went silent. Karamakate’s solitude and his quest of destroying all the *yakruna*, has left repercussions on him as he has forgotten how to communicate with his environment and how to use sacred plants and trees. His inability to remember makes him into a *chullachaki*, despite the fact that he is still there physically. Only when he goes along the way with Evan, he slowly starts to remember. But even while his memories are returning, he still lacks the clarity to know what they mean. Yet, he is hopeful, as he exclaims at a later stage: “maybe I am not a *chullachaki* anymore?” After the scenery with the self-proclaimed messiah, he again mentions that he feels like a *chullachaki* but that he is also starting to remember: “I’m starting to remember, the knowledge I was to convey to my people. But then the rubber

barons and the Colombians came. And I was left alone. I need to remember. I need to continue the song of the Cohiuano”.

The arrival of the Colombians and the rubber barons has destroyed Karamakate’s memory and knowledge how to continue the song of his tribe. But he needs Evan to lead him the way to *yakruna* in order to remember. This dependency shows the important role of Evan as the person to rejuvenate the memory of Karamakate. Unlike Theo, who was unwilling to throw his boxes away in the water, Evan does listen despite one box. Asked what it is in the box, he shows an elpee. The classical music, talking of God’s creation of the world, brings back the memories of home to Evan. Karamakate who seems to like the music, probably because it tells the ‘song’ of Evan’s ‘tribe’, rebukes Evan in that he only listens to what he wants to listen to while refusing to see the larger picture (i.e., he only listens to the memories of his ancestors, but not the memory of the creation of the world). When later on, the two come to clash on the “workshop of the gods”, Karamakate exclaims that Evan will be a *chullachaki* forever. This makes Evan silent, probably because he feels empty at that very moment when he was about to kill Karamakate. But this moment of realization of being a *chullachaki* leads Evan to be introduced to the *yakruna* mystery, which, in turn, will lead him to embrace the serpent.

When Evan is about to drink, he mentions that he does not deserve it since he tried to kill Karamakate, to which the latter replies: “I killed you too, before, in time without time, yesterday, 40 years, maybe 100, or a million years ago. But you came back. I wasn’t meant to teach my people. I was meant to teach you”. At this very moment, one realizes that Karamakate saw Theo in the person of Evan, since he sees himself responsible for killing Theo. As Guerra explains, for the Amazonian people, Schultes was the same man as Koch-Grünberg. It is “a single story being told through the lives of two men; a single soul inhabiting the lives of two men” (Guillén 2016). In finding the last *yakruna* plant, Karamakate’s memories have returned and he sees it as his duty to continue the song with Evan where he and Theo failed in the past. At this very moment of remembering, Karamakate has understood that he had to teach the white man, something which Manduca had forewarned three decades ago. Evan, the continuation of Theo, will continue the song of the Cohiuano, while the restoration of Karamakate being a *chullachaki* into a whole person again, can lead Karamakate to leave behind this world for the oneiric world.

3. Conclusions

The story of *Embrace of the Serpent* deals with a lot existential issues. As was discussed in this article, there is a clear difference between how Theo and Evan envision the environment around them and how *payé* Karamakate envisions it. This very dichotomy is already implied in the title of the film: while the serpent has become a symbol of evil and rebellion to God in the West, it is a symbol of life, rebirth and wisdom for the Amazonian people. The inability of outsiders Theo and Evan to fully align with the epistemology, rituals, stories and practices of Karamakate leads to the necessary tensions and ultimately results in Theo’s death. At the same time, Karamakate’s path towards ‘salvation’ lies in his dependency on the outsider to continue the song of his tribe. His solitude and mission to keep the knowledge of *yakruna* from outsiders, has slowly blurred his knowledge and memories on how to deal with his immediate environment as well as his contact with the oneiric reality, thus making him into a *chullachaki*. Only through Evan, the continuation of Theo, is Karamakate able to not only transform himself, but also ‘the white person’ in general embodied in the character of Evan. Nevertheless, that the arrival of industrious capitalism, mass-consumption, technologization and the Catholic missionary movement has left clear repercussions not only on an ecological and socio-political level, but also on a religious one, is beyond any doubt. Indeed, as was made clear, a one-sided, desacralized view on reality that sees Earth with its various forms of life as inferior to humankind’s power and domination, by which the river, trees, plants, and animals (and even other people) can be used as mere tools to self-justified missions and aims, only leads to a further decay of ecological and human dignity.

The religious elements discussed in this article show the way in which natural phenomena are understood and are closely related to the way stories and narratives are told to people. In a Western epistemology of the 20th century, influenced by a long-standing Christian tradition (in its various forms) and a rising scientific and secularized worldview, natural phenomena like the river, trees, plants and animals may have been initiated by God's hand (if one still believes in God's creation story) but they do not carry any sacred connotation whatsoever as God is either reduced outside the realm of Earth (and the empirical) or is non-existent. Even the Capuchin missionary does not escape this secularizing tendency to envision everything 'earthly' as mundane and profane in light of the Gospel or Christ (and perhaps the Church); the only sacred element left on Earth. The desire to educate locals 'intellectually', whether in the form of Catholic education or in the form of various technological tools and artefacts, simultaneously leads to the reduction of the oneiric and the imaginative (including memory and storytelling) to the reasonable, which, in turn, has its own limitations.

In contrast, in the epistemology of Amazonian people, here embodied in Karamakate, natural phenomena are not only initiated by a divine creation, but they maintain their divinity due to the fact that they remain dependent on the divine force that embodies (or even better: empowers) them. These phenomena are not to be reduced or identified with the divine force, but they do carry a sacred connotation in that one deals directly with the divinities empowering them. The river is not only a place of transportation and fish to consume, but it is the primordial place out of which human beings were formed and in which the anaconda and fish continue to live and communicate with the Amazonians. Human beings are mutually dependent on the river and ought to listen carefully to the river and its inhabitants. Plants and trees, and their hallucinogenic vines, are not only a means to heal illnesses, but they are also a pathway to come in contact with various divinities and reach physical and mental solutions (indeed, even reach a full transformation). Animals are not mere thoughtless beings, but they are a means of communication, either symbolically by their acts and presence, or by means of the divinity empowering them. Epistemic knowledge is not merely the result of rational calculations and equations, or empirical observation and testing, or the accumulation of various artefacts; rather, it is interdependent on stories, imagination, memory and, above all, the perfect balance with all the sacred elements around the person. While it might take a *payé* like Karamakate to come to such deep understanding (indeed, it is not for every other person), it is definitely an epistemology that characterizes and influences Amazonian people in general. Needless to say, these differences in epistemologies as to what is religious and what is not have clear repercussions on the way values, sacrality, and life beyond death are understood.

Despite the hopeful ending of overcoming such dichotomies, the tragedy of Karamakate's story can be summarized in his own words when he looks over the river:

"To become a warrior, every Cohiuano man must leave everything behind and go into the jungle, guided only by his dreams. In that journey, he has to discover, in solitude and silence, who he really is. He has to become a vagabond of dreams. Some get lost and never come back. But those that do, are ready to face whatever may come. Where are they? Where are the chants that mothers used to sing to their babies? Where are the stories of the elders, the whispers of love, the chronicles of battle? Where have they gone?"

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ *Embrace of the Serpent Press Kit* (2015) has made a glossary of some of the terms involved in the film. Here, *yakruna* is described as a “Hallucinogen vine, epiphyte of the rubber tree. The sap of trees on which it grows is of higher purity”. While *yakruna* is a fictional plant, the real plant that it refers to is *ayahuasca* or *yagé* (Guillén 2016; cf. Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975, pp. 134–35).
- ² “Spiritual guide and religious leader of Amazonian communities, keeper of ancestral tradition, scientist and medicine man expert in plants” (*Embrace of the Serpent Press Kit* 2015). As Irving Goldman mentions, *payé* means “thunderer” as he seeks to be in contact with the Thunder God (see Goldman 2004, p. 301; for more upon the legendary origins of the first *payé* and how a *payé* is formed, see pp. 300–44). I have deliberately left out the term ‘shaman’ to describe Karamakate, since the term in and by itself has recently and rightfully come under critique by anthropologists and historians alike (cf. Kehoe 2000; Rydving 2011; Kollmar-Paulenz 2012). In this respect, it is more appropriate to use the local term for what Karamakate describes himself to be.
- ³ This could be similar to the Catholic idea that for some, partaking in the Holy Communion with wrong intentions can lead to worsen a person’s condition, while for others, it works as a means for healing.
- ⁴ Recently, Merlin Sheldrake has written a very interesting article regarding the historic Richard Evan Schultes and, what Sheldrake calls, his “enigma” of differentiating between various vines needed to make the ayahuasca beverage. While not directly related to the interpretation of Evan in the film, it is worthwhile to read the cinematic Schultes against the backdrop of the historic Schultes (see Sheldrake 2020).
- ⁵ While one might, in Western terms, differentiate between a vision, hallucination or a dream, the same distinction cannot be applied to how Karamakate understands the ‘getting in touch’ with the divine realm. Therefore, I speak of oneiric reality since Karamakate time again uses the term ‘dream’, and this reality intertwines with the natural reality.
- ⁶ After a long search, I was unable to figure out who or what Waítoma [also Watoma in other filmscripts] is. The implications, however, for this article are minor.
- ⁷ As Severiano Silva wrote to Irving Goldman, “there are two classes of animals, those that are natural and those that are supernatural. Only the *payé* can see the supernatural animal in his dreams and visions. [. . .] Some, to be sure, are the enemies of people, as for example, the jaguar” (Goldman 2004, p. 171).
- ⁸ This interpretation is of course open for debate. It should be noted that the jaguar represents the “spirit being” of a *payé*, necessary to transform the latter into a Thunderer. It also “represents the malevolence of violent death”. However, the *payé*, along with “cosmological forces”, is considered to be the one who should be able to tame the jaguar nature. While some suggest a *payé* can transform into a jaguar (which would then seem to imply that the scenery in the film depicts Karamakate, as a jaguar, killing Theo, as a snake - which would then contradict Brionne Davies’ explanation), others have noted that some men can unwittingly become jaguars by taking a “shamanic snuff” which would make them in turn dangerous (Goldman 2004, p. 330). If we take Brionne Davies’ interpretation as truthful, one could argue that Theo had become a jaguar (albeit an untamed jaguar), by taking up shamanic proportions while he was not ready and unwilling to do so. In this respect, he kills his own self (the anaconda-part) which implies that he violently kills himself, especially given the fact that the “Anaconda is involved in metaphoric death as a phase in a return to beginning” (Goldman 2004, p. 330).
- ⁹ As Gabriel Cabrera Becerra has pointed out, there were various Roman-Catholic religious orders at work in the Vaupés region (later on, Protestant missionaries would join). The Capuchins, next to other orders such as the Salesians, received a monopoly in their missionary aims due to the fact that the relationship between state and church in Colombia was later established (Becerra 2021, p. 3). According to Becerra, the Capuchins had a brief presence in this region between 1850–1852 (Becerra 2021, p. 4), so perhaps the film alludes that some Capuchin monks (in fact, only one) were still there at the time of Theo’s arrival. Unfortunately, Becerra does not elaborate in detail on the relationship between these religious orders and the native Amazonians.

References

- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Becerra, Gabriel Cabrera. 2021. Las relaciones entre misioneros en la zona fronteriza del Vaupés colombo-brasileño (1914–1982). *Fransiscanum* 175: 1–25.
- Bergahn, Daniela. 2017. Encounters with Cultural Difference: Cosmopolitanism and Exoticism in *Tanna* (Martin Butler and Bentley Dean, 2015) and *Embrace of the Serpent* (Ciro Guerra, 2015). *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 14: 16–40.
- Cavanaugh, William T. 2009. *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Chang, Justin. 2015. Film Review: Embrace of the Serpent. *Variety*. June 2. Available online: <https://variety.com/2015/film/festivals/film-review-the-embrace-of-the-serpent-1201510916/> (accessed on 25 April 2021).
2015. *Embrace of the Serpent* Press Kit. Available online: <http://press.peccapics.co.uk/Theatrical/Embrace%20Of%20The%20Serpent/Embrace%20of%20the%20Serpent%20Press%20Notes.pdf> (accessed on 1 March 2021).
- Goldman, Irving. 2004. *Cubeo Hehénewa Religious Thought: Metaphysics of a Northwestern Amazonian People*. Edited by Peter J. Wilson. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Guillén, Michael. 2016. Embrace of the Serpent: An Interview with Ciro Guerra. *Cineaste*. XLI (2). Available online: <https://www.cineaste.com/spring2016/embrace-of-the-serpent-ciro-guerra> (accessed on 16 March 2021).
- Hugh-Jones, Christine. 1988. *From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in Northwest Amazonia*. Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jenkins, Mark. 2016. The Strange and Intoxicating ‘Embrace of the Serpent’. *NPR*. February 18. Available online: <https://www.npr.org/2016/02/18/467071774/the-strange-and-intoxicating-embrace-of-the-serpent> (accessed on 2 April 2021).
- Kehoe, Alice Beck. 2000. *Shamans and Religion: An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*. New York: Waveland Press.
- Kiang, Jessica. 2015. Cannes Review: ‘Embrace Of The Serpent’ Is A Soulful, Strange And Stunning Discovery. *IndieWire*. May 17. Available online: <https://www.indiewire.com/2015/05/cannes-review-embrace-of-the-serpent-is-a-soulful-strange-and-stunning-discovery-263927/> (accessed on 22 April 2021).
- Koch-Grünberg, Theodor. 1921. *Zwei Jahre bei den Indianern Nordwest-Brasiliens*. Stuttgart: Strecker und Schröder Verlag.
- Kollmar-Paulenz, Karenina. 2012. The Invention of ‘Shamanism’ in 18th Century Mongolian Elite Discourse. *Rocznik Orientalistyczny* LXV: 90–106.
- McCutcheon, Russell T. 1997. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mintzer, Jordan. 2015. ‘Embrace of the Serpent’ (‘El abrazo de la serpiente’): Cannes Review. *Hollywood Reporter*. May 15. Available online: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/embrace-serpent-el-abrazo-de-795876/> (accessed on 15 March 2021).
- Mutis, Ana María. 2018. El abrazo de la serpiente o la re-escritura del Amazonas dentro de una ética ecológica y poscolonial. *Hispanic Research Journal* 19: 29–40. [CrossRef]
- Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo. 1971. *Amazonian Cosmos*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo. 1975. *The Shaman and the Jaguar: A Study of Narcotic Drugs among the Indians of Colombia*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo. 1985. Tapir Avoidance in the Colombian Northwest Amazon. In *Animal Myths and Metaphors in South America*. Edited by Gary Urton. Utah: Utah University Press, pp. 107–44.
- Rivera, Mauricio. 2018. The Embrace of the Serpent and the Dark Legacy of the Rubber Holocaust. *Senses of Cinema*. June, 87. Available online: <https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2018/feature-articles/the-embrace-of-the-serpent-and-the-dark-legacy-of-the-rubber-holocaust/> (accessed on 20 April 2021).
- Roe, Peter R. 1982. *The Cosmic Zygote: Cosmology in the Amazon Basin*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Rydving, Hakan. 2011. Le chamanisme aujourd’hui: Constructions et deconstructions d’une illusion scientifique. *Études Mongoles et Siberiennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines* 42: 1–15. [CrossRef]
- Schilbrack, Kevin. 2013. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Schultes, Richard Evans, and Albert Hofmann. 1979. *Plants of the Gods: Origins of Hallucinogenic Use*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Schultes, Richard Evans, and Robert F. Raffauf. 1992. *Vine of the Soul: Medicine Men, Their Plants and Rituals in the Colombian Amazonia*. Oracle: Synergetic Press.
- Schultes, Richard Evans. 1988. *Where the Gods Reign: Plants and Peoples of the Colombian Amazon*. Oracle: Synergetic Press.
- Sheldrake, Merlin. 2020. The ‘Enigma’ of Richard Schultes, Amazonian Hallucinogenic Plants, and the Limits of Ethnobotany. *Social Studies of Science* 50: 345–76. [CrossRef]
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1982. *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Stein, Sophia. 2016. *Embrace of the Serpent*—A Tale of Metamorphosis. *Cultural Weekly*. February 26. Available online: <https://www.culturalweekly.com/embrace-serpent-tale-metamorphosis/> (accessed on 20 April 2021).
- Tewksbury, Drew. 2016. Amazonian Trip: ‘Embrace of the Serpent’, Colombia’s First Oscar-Nominated Film. *KCet*. February 26. Available online: <https://www.kcet.org/shows/artbound/amazonian-trip-embrace-of-the-serpent-colombias-first-oscar-nominated-film> (accessed on 17 March 2021).
- Urton, Gary. 1985. Animal Metaphors and the Life Cycles in an Andean Community. In *Animal Myths and Metaphors in South America*. Edited by Gary Urton. Utah: Utah University Press, pp. 251–84.