The Ghosts of Eldorado

by Geoffrey Clarfield (June 2015)

We Spaniards know a sickness of the heart that only gold can cure.
— Hernan Cortes, Spanish Conqueror of the Aztecs, 1485-1547

Once Again to the Tropics

I had to go to Guyana. Not just the beautiful and untouched coast. No, the highland jungle with its clear rivers and waterfalls and native Indian tribes, what are now called indigenous peoples. I was responsible for, but not in charge of, an expedition of Canadian medical volunteers who once a year, get medical donations and donate their time to providing these Indian and other communities, with a roving field hospital, first rate diagnosis, immediate treatment where possible, and referrals where truly feasible. Not sustainable, but sustaining, which in my moral opinion works better and is more honest.

Think of it as an annual check up with follow through, for those who are too far away to get it, and who could not afford it in the first place. But before I went, I had to go to the gear store. I was going to the headwaters of the Amazon and there were things to buy. Welcome to the complex world of international development.

And so I went to the MEC, Toronto's own Mountain Equipment Co-op. When I looked at their merchandise it looked like all of Toronto under the age of forty were involved in some outdoor activity. They even had a wall where you could rock climb while deciding what kind of gear you wanted to buy. It reminded me of an adult version of those indoor play areas that they now have in family restaurants and international airports, like the Leggo room in Copenhagen.

The young man showed me many kinds of rain gear, all designed to keep you as warm as possible. I said, "Listen, I am going to a place where I need a simple pancho to keep me from warm rain, do you have anything like that?" He became uneasy, given the fact that this was the MEC coop. There were pictures of Nepal and the Rocky Mountains all over the place, and a wooden canoe, prominently displayed, that you could win in a lottery. There were guidebooks and handbooks and everything a hiker could ever need.

He seemed perturbed that he could not find a simple, lightweight pancho. He said, "If you do not mind waiting, we usually get them in the spring." I said, "I am going to the Amazon for two weeks. I leave tomorrow. Where can I get a simple pancho?" Disappointed at the loss of a

sale of a nice one hundred dollar raincoat, he stared off into space and with a look of resignation on his face said, “Canadian Tire.” Twenty minutes later I was at the Canadian Tire store. I found a perfect lightweight blue pancho. It cost five dollars. Realizing I may need back up in the jungle I also purchased a cheap umbrella.

I arrived at the Toronto airport and our project office manager was there. We managed to get our bags in order and we were processed without difficulty. All the narcotics that we were taking with us had been cleared, here in Toronto and ahead of us with the airport and national authorities in Guyana. I knew I was supposed to say a few words as I was the newly hired Executive Director of the organization responsible for the project but it made no difference. I was one of the first to board and as I turned to the volunteer that was processing us, she curtly told me to move on. So, I went to the gate and I was the first one there. Eventually everyone arrived and I said I would speak to them on behalf of the Board of Directors some other time.

“Making a Difference”

I had not quite gathered what to say and then I realized that I had never been where I was going, so it was wiser to get there and then say something on the basis of new experience. Not all developing countries are equally underdeveloped. They are all underdevloped in historically unique ways. We, as members of a medical NGO, had life and death on our minds. As humanitarians we knew the stats about mortality in the development world and we, in our own small way were going to push back, “make a difference” as the largely liberal world of the NGOs likes to put it. But I at least, was not yet aware that what we would discover was something much older than us, nothing less than the search of Eldorado, the kingdom of gold that had driven the conquistadores, who after finding the gold of the Aztecs and Incas believed that more gold lay inland. They were right.

Allow me to jump forward and pass the flight, and the stop at Trinidad airport and the sight of us sleeping on mattresses in the corner of an empty restaurant, the humidity of the airport at Georgetown, our warm reception by the Lions Club, our national partners, the project manager’s legitimate and triumphant stories about overcoming endless bureaucracy to clear our goods, getting everyone up the next morning, negotiating with our most senior project doctor about last minute negotiations with other Canadian medical teams in competition with us for scarce CIDA funds, or the volunteer asking if he could go down the block on foot to change money in Georgetown, and walk back alone with a pocketful of cash, after he had just been mugged a few days ago for less.

No, it would be better to describe what I saw in the small plane from the cockpit. Five minutes from the coast, no, two minutes from the coast, as far as the eye can see there is green tropical lowland forest. Does anyone live there anymore? I doubt it. But I was told that the interior is filled with rivers and I saw many of those as I flew above. I was told they are filled with alligator, anaconda and leopard or, as we call the darker sub species, Jaguar.

Half way through the one-hour flight we over flew an immense escarpment, the kind Conan Doyle described in his Lost World novels but instead of dinosaurs, we flew into a one air strip village and arrived in Kamarang, a small village on a river in the highlands. We had spread the team and our baggage over three flights, so by the time the senior doctor and project manager had arrived in Kamarang, we had also arrived with a cannister of precious liquid nitrogen in our plane for collecting medical specimens. This was a major safety hazard and the pilot had not been keen to bring it on board.

Nevertheless the senior doctor had imposed this life threatening risk upon all of us in the place for like many an expatriate before him, clearly he felt that the rules of the West could be broken, if one was being altruistic enough in a developing country. His flippant line upon boarding the plane was, “I do not mind dying if it blows up.” I should have stopped the flight then and there, but I was new to Guyana and my Africa chops had yet to kick in. I should have trusted my professional instincts and blown the whistle on him, then and there. I sincerely regret that I did not do this. People have died for a lot less.

Just before we descended towards Kamarang I saw a mesa like mountain and hills, and mountains that seemed a few thousand feet higher than we were. This was my first time in the Amazon, or at least on its edge. I had always imagined it as immensely flat, unbearably hot, and too humid to breathe.

In Kamarang

We had arrived in the cool of the afternoon. Kamarang is on a promontory and you look down into the river. The water in the late afternoon is gray and slate like, the foliage on either edge of the water could look like a slightly more luxuriant form of the green that encloses rivers in Ontario’s Algonquin Park, but the possibility of this being a temperate environment was broken by the sight of an Amerindian paddling a distinctively long canoe, that could only be found in the Amazon.

Within a few hours of our arrival our team was in the hospital, organizing the clinic, and seeing patients, while medical staff and volunteers set up camp. I took the time to reorganize my bag for I had not had a minute to myself for the last ten days to do so, and then sat with

an elderly Canadian doctor who had started this annual rite many years ago. He told me his life story and I told him mine. As he was 85 and I was 52; his story was the longer of the two.

As the goal of our mission was to visit a series of isolated Indian villages here in the highlands and then visit some of the Creole villages along rivers in the lowlands, I spent much time with our partners among the Guyanese Lions.

Let me start with the most mysterious of our network, who I will call Brian. Brian is a fifty three year old Guyanese who is an Amazonian Indian. He has facial features that remind one of an Incan gold mask, and he speaks in a guarded and deferential style that I suspect may characterize the tribes of the interior, as if they have been successfully hiding some deep cultural secret from the white man, ever since the Portuguese and Spanish conquistadors opened up the interior centuries before.

He is a boat captain and makes his living driving boats up and down the river. In a few hours he will skipper a skiff where more than twenty of us, with all our bags, will travel upriver to the village called Waramadong. He tells me that he started off as a boat hand as a young man and then, slowly, over time, became a captain. He says that the most important thing to know about the river is whether an obstacle is a piece of floating wood or, a rock under the water. So much depends on these kinds of distinctions. He mentioned nothing about charts or maps, so I suspect this kind of knowledge passes from skipper to protégé.

Brian is a Christian. He is a Seventh day Adventist and was quite responsive when one of our doctors explained that as we share a common Sabbath day, we would try and not travel on the coming Saturday. As we later walked down the airstrip together, he said he also mentioned in passing that he dealt in gold and diamonds on the side. I felt like Samuel Clemens.

He obviously loves the water and told me of a training session that he got from a Dutch logging company. He proudly explained that he had learnt the technical names for more than one hundred trees found in the Amazon region. He told me that all the Indians in the area now lived near the airstrip, and their farms were within walking distance. He talked about “now” and “before.” Before was when the Indians lived in homesteads in the bush. Now, is the present and he seemed uncomfortable when I asked if any of the Indians still follow the “old ways.” There was an ever so slight change in his mood when he responded. I suspect that when the first Spanish and Portuguese missionaries came here so many centuries ago, they encountered the same reticence to discuss the sacred.

One of his sons is crippled and epileptic. No doubt this is the result of a childhood illness.

And he says he and his wife have to treat him like a child. He still lives with them and they care for him. There are no institutes in the jungle for children that we used to call retarded. It is probably better to be cared for by close kin. Perhaps, the old ways are not as dead as Monty would like me to think.

The chief administrator of Kamarang is a young 25 year old Amazonian beauty. She could easily pass as a Vietnamese fashion model. She said the mountains are beautiful when the air is clear, but she has not traveled into the interior. She said it is dangerous, and that there are tigers everywhere. She says the captains of each of the nine villages under her jurisdiction know all the jungle routes. I know from my reading that the Jaguar is a central symbol of Amerindian Indians and linked to their shamanistic practices. I suppose that an indicator of progress here, is when an Amerindian administrator starts to fear what her ancestors considered sacred is just another animal. Perhaps this is a sign of progress for her as well.

Jack is another key member of the Lions, a year or two younger than I. He is Afro Guyanese and he looks a good ten years younger than I do. He was born in Bartica near the coast. His father died when he was a boy. His mom managed to send him off to a paramilitary high school where he learnt welding

He worked as a welder on road projects and for mining companies. He explained that even independent miners use advanced dredging and sluicing equipment, in their search for the gold and diamonds that are found in the wild interior. Eventually, he managed to set up his own metal shop in Bartica where he does contract work for builders and various companies, including a whole range of mining outfits. He is an active member of the Lions Club and has been instrumental in helping our organizaton bring in its medical team each year. He seems happy with his lot in life.

Auntie is half Indian and half Afro Guyanan. She is our cook and will be with us every day. She speaks some Akawai, English and Portuguese. She carries a Brazilian passport and noticed that in Brazil you could see miles and miles of open countryside. Most of Guyana is thick rain forest and at best, you can see a few hundred feet on either side of you. She used to cook for oil companies on either side of the Guyanese border. She told me that in Brazil and Venezuela, the oil companies split their profits with the government, usually fifty fifty.

After one of the many elections, the Guyanese government at the time decided to ask for a sixty forty split, in the government’s favor. Within a few months one large company had crossed the river to Venezuela with all its equipment with a new fifty fifty agreement.

Borders separate governments, but they do give much leverage to independent companies. Like the Jews of the middle ages, when they are thrown out by one oppressive regime, they can always find a country that values their skills and that is willing to tolerate them.

Today is Wednesday, I am in the middle of the clinic at Waramadong. The French Canadian lab technician, Mary and her assistant Anastasia are busy taking samples. We are in a wooden plank building with a roof, but with no barriers between rooms so we can hear the patients being processed through the front door and, we can see the young school girls in their white shirts and yellow jumpers, playing on the dead tractor equipment through the slats.

The Village Downriver

Last night we arrived late. We formed a snake line up the stairs and hauled up our entire load of luggage. We put it in two buildings, set up tents, ate, bathed and went to bed. We were asleep by midnight and up again the next day at seven. Everyone had taken sleeping pills, except me. And so, I dozed off to the snores of medical staff that reminded me of the mooing of camels in the deserts of Northern Kenya.

What was supposed to be a two-hour boat ride turned into more than a four-hour trip. We were more than twenty five people, with our Guyanan associates and our reticent Akawai captain Jack. He had neglected to tell us that the boat motor was only working on one cylinder. We assumed that our boat, The River Spirit, and carved from one tree, was slow because of people and lots of weight. We were wrong. It was that we were driving with a motor that was on its last legs.

And so we had lots of time to see the rainforest, for the motor broke down periodically leaving us floating on the river. It looked like one of the scenes from *Apocalypse Now*, the one that was cut from the original and put back into the director’s cut, where the soldiers meet up with an isolated French rubber plantation. The hero (Charlie Sheen) spends a night with a beautiful, petite French woman. It is one of the best scenes in the film and I pity the French actors whose careers would have been made had it not been cut from the film in the first place.

Bu this was not a film. On either side of us were green trees that rose two or more hundred feet above the water, with dense forest moving inland as far as the eye could see. Occasionally, we could hear howler monkeys and every little while, black winged birds flew low over the water. The water was clear, yet rust to dark brown in places as it emerged from the overgrown riverbanks.

We had started our journey with a few children beside us in their white and blue school uniforms, paddling their bark canoe, an inch above the water, but soon we lost sight of them and were alone on the river. There were a number of twists and turns where there were large fallen trees that disturbed the surface and rocks near rock faced sides of the river, that quickly turned back into forest. There was silence everywhere, except for the chug of the motor, when it was working. During the last two hours of the trip, the sun had gone down and we were alone on the rift in the dark. We who were at the front of the boat shined our flashlights on either side of the river and ahead, so that Jack could navigate in the dark. There was no moon. We were entirely alone in the jungle.

The next morning when I awoke, I grabbed my coffee and positioned myself underneath one of the buildings, most of which are built on stilts. I take a long time to wake up and I watched with admiration the mostly type A morning people, who are part of our team. These are doctors and nurses who are used to rising early and going to sleep early the night before. I remember lying in my tent the night before, my brain working wildly while one by one, they all started snoring again. This time I had stuffed some toilet paper in my ears and eventually managed to fall asleep.

Life in Olden Times

This morning I walked out with Jack and Eli, an Amerindian about thirty years old, father of six children, three boys and three girls. As we walked through the village he told me that the last polygamist with two wives had just died a couple of years ago. He said that he did not know why he had had two wives, “Maybe it was their manner of charm,” he said.

He told us that just more than fifty years ago, each village was at war with the other. He explained that in those days if you ventured down river into another village, they would dump your boat and drown you on the spot. Or, they would kill you with bow and arrow. He said that now, that is all over, since the Adventists came from America in the fifties and sixties and converted everyone to Christianity. He said that the violence stopped when they had become Christians. He said people still kill each other during drunken brawls, but that it is personal and individual. The violence is no longer collective.

Making a false etymology he told me “You know Geoffrey that is why our village was called Waramadong because there was once so much fighting.”

As we walked into the village we could see Mount PiPi n the distance. It is a mesa like mountain about five thousand feet above the level of Waramadong. We passed by Eli’s homestead. One modern building was made of planks and this is where they sleep at night. The other was

thatched and open. His mother was relaxing in a traditional Indian hammock.

She spoke only Akawai. Elliot explained that the older generation had not learned English. In the morning, school girls told us that they understood Akawai, but no longer spoke it. They could understand it, but they chose to speak English. One of the girls had a Hardy Boys book under her arm, which she said she was enjoying immensely. I vaguely remember that the Hardy Boys dreamed of adventure, and I could easily imagine them coming to the Amazon. They had, but in a more literary fashion than one would imagine.

Eli explained that not so long ago the elders did not know the value of gold and diamonds. In the past, they would pick up nuggets from the ground and collect them in their houses as curiosities. They had no idea of the market value of gold and diamonds. It all began to change a few decades ago. For one man it was when he was hunting with a friend. They had arrowed some wild pig and were cleaning the carcass in the river when one of them spotted a line of gold in the sand. Somehow, he managed to extract it and take it to traders across the border in Venezuela and received money for it. The local gold rush had begun.

The day before one of our Canadian doctors told us that he had Guyanese colleagues in Toronto who sponsored dredge mining, some of which we saw on our river trip the night before. The now expatriate Guyanese noticed that whenever they came to Guyana they found more gold. Whenever they were gone less was found. Supply and demand.

Eli used to cook. He got a job with a Canadian mining outfit that was digging for gold and diamonds on top of Mount PiPi. I thought that the name must be Indian, but he said it stood for Percival Pitt a British miner who started the claim there in colonial times. From Waramadong to the mountain is a day to three by foot.

Airborn and River Bandits

He said the Canadians really liked to eat and that they ate and ate and ate and were quite fat. One day, when the local staff had come back from the mountain to provision themselves, the Canadians were in Georgetown. It seems that the camp was empty. As there was no gold or diamonds in the camp, the Canadians naively assumed there was nothing to lose.

With precise timing, bandits from over the border brought in helicopters and cranes and flew all of the equipment over to Colombia. The Canadian operation folded, but somehow the Venezuelan authorities captured and prosecuted the lot. They got thirty years in jail and started their sentences two years ago.

A month before the heist, mysterious traders showed up in Waramadong with a bag full of American cash. They bought up whatever gold and diamonds local traders had for sale and asked them in detail where they had got it. So, many of them had somehow managed to get gold and diamonds from out of the Canadians sight. The mystery men disappeared and were probably in league with the helicopter heist people, a tale better than any Hardy Boys adventure.

We sat on the wooden benches in front of the village soccer pitch and looked across the river at Waramadong Mountain, another high ridge with an even higher escarpment above it. I noticed that every household had a dog. I asked why? He said, “hunting.” Eli explained that most grown men in the village had shot guns and every day that they went to their fields, or for a hike in the forest they took it with them. They hunted forest rats, tapirs, deer and anything else that they could eat. He said his brother had bagged a tapir just a few weeks ago. He said they could weigh up to three or even four hundred pounds and that the meat was edible.

He pointed up to the escarpment and said that there were many tigers in the mountains. Hundreds he said “in a set” using the Creole expression for a group or a herd. He said, “when you go into the savannah you will sometimes see a swathe of grass for hundreds of yards many feet wide and hundreds of tigers go through in a herd.” I said, “I do not think that tigers run in herds.” He answered me, “There they do.”

I had read in the Guyanese papers about increasing banditry in the inland rivers and Eli confirmed this with a story about the area around Bartica, where gold and diamonds were sent down river. Apparently, a bunch of river thieves interrupted a shipment on the river and made off with 15 million Guyanese dollars worth of gold and diamonds.

Elected councilors and elected captains and assistant captains run village life. Elections in the village of Waramadong will be held next week. There is a big soccer pitch, a large wooden church and the soccer pitch doubles for cricket. The cooperative store sells pasta, tomato sauce, and bananas. The store did not appear well stocked, there were no customers and it just might be a hangover from the earlier days of failed socialism.

We had come to the end of the village boundary. Eli said “a younger set is now running the village.” They now have a place to watch videos. He likes Kung Fu films but could not tell me why. He did not think Jackie Chan was funny and wondered whether the martial arts in the films were real. He said the women like soap operas, “reallife,” he called them. At the village end he said people used to live miles into the bush right up to PiPi mountain, but these days they now congregate near the river. They still have their farms out there and he has an acre and a half. He said there are now large areas of land outside the village boundaries that used to

have homesteads, but they now stand empty.

“Most of us live near the church, the clinic and the river. In the old days we would kill our neighbours. Now there is no need.”

Kako Village or “Self Discipline Brings Success”

We arrived at Kako in the afternoon. Very few villagers were there to welcome us. We carried most of our luggage, snake like, up the stairs and then established camp in one empty building and the clinic in the clinic. Staff began work by two in the afternoon.

After dinner in the evening a child was brought by boat from across the river. He had fallen into a pot of boiling water and was covered in serious burns. One of our senior nurses had burn experience and the team rallied to her and the child’s support. He survived the night, and was medically evacuated by boat to Kamarang, and from there by air to the burn unit at Georgetown hospital, which had been set up by a doctor from Scarborough, Ontario.

The next morning the project manager took me aside and somewhat hesitantly ran by me the following idea, “Geoffrey I was thinking that it is the very fact that we have so much and they have so little and that we were born into it and they were born into their poverty that gives value to our humanitarian efforts here.” I reassured her and told her that that is the essence of what we are doing, but it does not stop there. I hoped to engage her in a future discussion on the nature of public health and working here.

That is to say given a corrupt regime and a government that allowed notorious Jonestown massacres to happen, what should one do and how should one go about it? Perhaps I thought it was time to open up this project to some sort of debate. There is never enough of that when it comes to rural development. Almost all needs are unfulfilled and legitimate, especially health and so humanitarians seem to be in a rush to save the world, all the time.

This morning I volunteered at the local primary school. It is a large one story building on stilts, made of planks and painted white. I was ushered in by the head mistress, an Amerindian with the unlikely name of Marian Smith. She began the assembly with the children, hands on their hearts reciting the Guyana national pledge. I then taught them to sing Canadian children’s singer Rafi’s, *Riding on That New River Train,* an old Anglo American folk song. Then, three groups of students sang the following songs, *Rowing Cross the Burmese River, See the Brown Boy Cutting Cane* and *Working in the Fields*, finished off with *One Little Two Little Three Little Indians*. Shades of the British Empire.

The head teacher then delivered her sermon. It was called “Self Discipline Brings Success.” She told a story of a young boy who stole the key to his father’s car, took it for a joy ride and it was destroyed. He was then sent to an Adventist camp for forty days and there found a girl who found favor in his eyes. He took her to a hotel outside of the camp and when they were sleeping together the police discovered them. He was sentenced to three years in prison for his behaviour. But in prison he found God and he wrote his mother telling her that he had found God and was now a different man. “So children you must understand, rebelliousness is sickness and if you rebel you are sick… But God loves you and parents and teachers may punish you. That is because they want you to stay on the right path. If you stray, you will be on the right path, like the boy in that story. So you see self discipline brings success. If you follow the rules and stay disciplined unlike that boy you will be successful.” The teacher then dismissed the class after a prayer and singing of the national anthem.

We sat on the verandah of this white painted schoolhouse. All the children and the teachers were Amerindians. They have all the features of Amerindians, what was once called an “oriental” appearance. The children were dressed in green and white uniforms. The boys in shirts and shorts and the girls in blouses and jumpers. They had been fidgeting throughout the sermon and they were relieved when it was over. The women who delivered it did so in high-pitched voice. She was not cynical and appeared to believe every word she had said. It was the kind of thing that you read about in a Naipaul travel book.

The buildings here in Guyana are almost all constructed on stilts but the windows are all designed as if they are from a northern climate. They are usually tall and narrow. In tropical countries, with their own architectural tradition, windows and openings are wide with curtains or blinds to let the sun in or out, as the weather changes. Here the windows all seem to follow one design, as does the curriculum, the uniform, and the stilts of the building. It is as if a 19th century British Imperial mould had been set in stone here and despite the creolization of politics and economics, in rural Amazonian Guyana, you can imagine the former British and the later white Protestant North American Seventh Day Adventist missionaries, telling the local Indians that there is only one path to salvation. As the teacher pointed out, if you are rebellious you are sick, a possible local reinterpretation of indigenous Indian beliefs where illness is a punishment for violation the social order.

Marian took me out onto the balcony to say goodbye. She told me that her leg had been hurting for some time, years actually, and that no doctor had managed to help her yet. I asked her to come to the clinic. She refused and I tried to convince here to walk over with me. I told her that we had some of the best doctors in Toronto with us. Surely they could at least give her

an adequate diagnosis. She did not raise her voice, but looked me fully in the face, without any emotion that I could notice, and said once more that she would not go. As I walked passed the houses I wondered whether she was harboring the memory of some rebellious action, which in her mind had brought her this discomfort.

In the Heart of Eldorado

As I am sitting in this building, and typing my notes the radio room, which is also called the library and the captains office, there are four pieces of paper in front of me from an article on Gold consumption, basically who's who in gold consumption, (India!) who makes a living, gold hoards versus hard work, global gold, the Midas curse, Western Shoshone, opening the earths, veins. Obviously, there are issues about gold on people's mind here.

Yesterday, one of our Lions partners told me about a young man 35 years old in Bartica. He was the foreman of a mining operation. One day, two robbers came into his office and shot him in cold blood. They grabbed a fair amount of gold and ran off into the bush. The workers had really liked their foreman and chased after the robbers. They found them and literally strung them up like hunted animals and delivered them to the police. The case dragged on an on. It is most likely that because of the fear of witnesses, they got off scot-free, ready to rob and murder again.

He mentioned that the new director was equally liked. One day he got on his motorcycle, rode home from work, hit a bump flipped in the air and died after rolling cross the road, his neck broken. He stopped for a moment and said to me, "These were young men, doing fine, but there is little justice in the manner of their dying."

Friday morning the founder of our trip, let us call him Dr. Al, was not feeling well. Although the project director and I had already alerted Toronto that Al was not well, he had been soldiering on. Friday morning he told our senior doctor that he was not well at all and that the night before he had had explosive diarrhea. That was the same night that we received the emergency of the child that fell into a pot of boiling water and had third degree burns.

Within a short time it was clear that Al was having heart problems. It took a couple of hours for our staff to make sure that our team did the right thing which was to medically evacuate him to Georgetown. It was not a moment too soon, since we later heard that he was still in serious condition once he was at St Josephs in Georgetown. Luckily, the Lions made sure a private plane went to Kamarang and the burnt baby went too.

We left Kako and our boat broke down but since we were all happy about Al getting out we

laughed in the rain until Jack fixed the motor. We arrived in the village of Juwala in the afternoon, set up our camp under the stilts of the hospital and one of our Orthodox Jewish nurses did the blessing of the wine and matsah. I felt the ghost of those Moroccan Jews who traded in this area during in the 19th century, and the early Sephardim who sojourned among these Carib Indians so many centuries ago as they were escaping the Spanish Inquisition.

Hallelujah!

The next morning we walked into the center of the village and visited the Hallelujah Church. It is a big-planked building with a conventional roof. There was a line of men and women, about ten in all with a small girl, holding hands and dancing slowly in circle, a few steps forward, one foot crossing the other and a step back. They were singing a slow dirge, no more than four notes in ambitus. There was an echo of old Amazonian traditional music in the chant and it went on for more than an hour. Later, we heard that it could go on for many many hours.

We then met the SIL missionaries, an American couple in their late thirties and forties who are translating the *New Testament* into Akawayo. As we walked along the path the wife told me, almost in a conspiratorial style that in the 18th century one of the Amazonian Shamans across the border in Brazil, gained some knowledge of Christianity. Apparently, he had a vision of the creator and a direct communication from him. The creator told him that the Indians need no longer worship animals such as the jaguar, nor rocks or water, but only the creator himself.

She said that he had another vision that allowed people to dance so that they would not fall into either trance or exhaustion and that throughout their worship they should chant Hallelujah. It was also predicted that some time in the future, people with white skin would arrive carrying a black book and that they should be obeyed. Because of this, the SIL people said that when the Anglicans and the Seventh Day Adventists arrived about eighty years ago, to preach the gospel to the Akawayo, they were well received.

The SIL people told us of a British anthropologist who had studied the Akawayo and did a PHD on their acephalous authority, order without rulers in the tradition of British social anthropologist, Meyer Fortes. He said the Akawayo were now vestigially matrilocal, that is the son when marrying, goes to live in the wife’s village. They said the Akawayo were keen farmers and that now each village was denominationally marked out. At Kamurang they are Adventists and materially oriented. Other villages missionized by the Anglicans are more laid back. The missionaires told me that they are aware of their animal tales where animals talk to each other and, a creation story about two brothers who at the beginning of the time populated the world with Akawayo.

They know that among the Akawayo there are still Shamans who use tobacco to blow on people and solve their problems. Despite the outward show of Christianity they said they are still consulted and mentioned a local Anglican pastor who consulted one when his son was very ill.

Under the British this region that is Area Seven was Indian and administered land. With the coming of independence it became government land, on lease to the Indians. This allowed gold prospectors of all kinds, including Brazilians and Venezuelans, to enter the area. Among the Akawayo most of them have gone and the Akawayo themselves are doing dredge gold mining.

We met two young men in the village who do that sort of thing. One had enough money to send his two children to a private school in Georgetown. His friend said that during a bad year they can make upwards of twenty thousand Canadian dollars. The missionaries said that the Indians are now lobbying the government to give them back their land. As it is rich in resources that could mean that these Indians, although a mere 7 per cent of the population, could one day become very rich. At the same time it is clear why Venezuela claims that two thirds of Guyana belong to it by right. The two countries have almost gone to war over this claim during the last few years.

The Last of the Caribs

The Akawayo Indians are Carib Indians. They used to live on all the islands of the Caribbean. They were the natives who welcomed Columbus and the Spaniards in the fifteen hundreds and who were then cruelly enslaved and decimated. As the Spaniards established plantations, the island Indians were enslaved and died out within a generation. They were egalitarian peoples like the Akawayo and could not survive the cruelty of the Conquistadors.

Only here in the isolation of the rainforest, on the edge of the Amazon, did the Caribs survive. In the twentieth century they have converted to Christianity. When they convert they adopt names like Stephen or Juanita. Then when their children are baptized they become William Stephen or Juanita Williams. After forty thousand years, the Indians survive, but slowly they are taking on the names of the Conquistadors, Spanish Portuguese and British.

Sunday March 6 was a day of transformation. We awoke at five in the morning and we spent three hours on the boat to Kamarang. At Kamarang we hauled our equipment to the airport. Once again I wondered how it was that after Dr. Al had been here for twenty years, and we had been here for eight, we were still hauling our own bags to clinics where we were giving out tons of medicine and free treatment.

My guess is that the ideal among the Akawayo is egalitarian sharing. If, for whatever reason,

we had come among them to live, no matter for how short a time, and we had and have so much, in THEIR eyes we are obliged to share to insure an egalitarian outcome, which in their opinion is the only way to go. Our western ethnocentric understanding might be that we who have so much and are sacrificing so much to help deserve and demand participation. At this point it is my understanding that we have not really sat for the requisite time period with the Akawayo and other stakeholders to determine what are their rights and obligations. We got on the plane, flew back to the coast, arrived in Bartica and settled into the hotel. We met the Lions and succumbed to the extra layer of humidity and heat.

In the Lowlands

The next day we took a river boat and went to Agatash, a Creole community on the beach just south of Bartica on the river. As the project manager pointed out to me it is a bit depressing. Not much is happening, there seems to be much poverty.

I went for a walkabout with Frank. He is a sixty-eight year journalist. He interviewed me at the Ogle airport. As we prepared for the boat ride this morning I went to the administrator and he said, “Ah yes Mr. Clarfield I saw you on TV last night.” I thought, this guy must have a great sense of humor but then I realized what had happened. Francis had put my clip in his weekly broadcast and it had been seen locally.

Frank and I walked along the beach of Agatesh. The road was made of sand and he told me how the road was supposed to be paved. He explained that the problems with Guyana was and is that the World Bank will give 150 million, and 50 million will go to the government as a kick back. Then a bogus picture of a one-layer asphalt road will be given to the donors, and the process repeats itself. If you are a local journalist you can get blown away, that is killed, for blowing the whistle and he told me a story of just one case that he said could be seen in the papers last week.

He told me of how he had once been arrested but managed to put in one call, which triggered calls all the way up and down the system so that he could be released. He demanded a written apology and got one. When I asked him how he had survived, he said that when the government does do something right, he writes about it. He said, “you guys have to go home and blow the whistle because CIDA and the multilaterals are conned down here on a regular basis.”

He did lament that the first ruler of Guyana had turned into a dictator and that he managed to play the West off against the East during the Cold War until his death in 1983. In those days he said “we were all comrades” referring to the Marxist rhetoric that characterized third world countries before the end of the Cold War. He said that one of the few ways he knew

whether a minister had or had not been corrupt was, if after his term he found him fixing his own vehicle when it broke down. If he was corrupt, he argued, “He would have had a chauffeur and a fancy new car.” But in the end he said it is all about patrons and clients. That is what government is all about here.

As far as Caribbean unity is concerned he said that at the beginning of independence ten countries were considering uniting around the Caribbean basin, but Trinidad pulled out so ten minus the one in ten is zero. He said, “Visualize it!”

As a journalists he follows various cases of injustice such as the death of a man from police beating. The case is ten years old and he saw the autopsy, “You know Geoffrey when you see an autopsy once in your life you remember everything and this I remember. He died from beating, a truncheon repeatedly in the stomach.” Over time it became clear that the cause of death was the desire of a police officer for the wife of the dead man.

On a lighter note he said that Calypso was the language of sex and politics, and that it had great political power. Calypso prevented the privatization of the beaches of Barbados and a number of other issues. He lamented that few people realize that the Mighty Sparrow himself, although a Trinidadian, got his start as a young man in Guyana.

I sat at the clinic in the lowlands with the Lions. They explained to me that there is little work here after someone graduates from high school. If you are married and have kids you soon realize that even on a government salary, you can’t make it, so off you go to the interior to join the gold rush. On the gold dredges life is a drudge. There is recurrent malaria and other diseases, risk of attack from river bandits, isolation and no guarantee of profit. Even when some men make money, not all give it to their wives and children. They take up with other women and when they get home and find out that their wife has taken up with another man that can take care of her, then they leave. So even the gold rush contributes to the matrifocal family so characteristic of the Caribbean.

In a Haunted Land

I had a cold and I stayed in the hotel, went to the Internet café, and met with the project manager and the Lions. Then I had a long meeting with one of the senior nurses about the project. In the afternoon two local nurses told me about the grave yard in the hospital area, and why one should knock on an outhouse so the ghost does not pull you in. They added that Amerindians can turn themselves into animals rocks or water to avoid danger, whereas Africans can turn themselves into a ball of fire to suck your blood.

Near Itaballi they believe that there is a white woman on a horse who visits young men at night, that there are mermaids around and why African men are rough lovers and do not treat their women right. One of the nurses had no idea what the local Hindus believe. But then the other nurse said that when a particular hotel is empty and she is working downstairs, there are days when she has heard ghosts walking upstairs. Once her father followed the ghost of a woman into an outhouse near the hospital and the ghost never came out.

The two of them sincerely asked me if we had ghosts in Canada. I said no, but our Canadian project manager said yes, that her mother believed that her dead sister who died young, intervened at key points in life. I think ghosts are a function of the Neolithic when we started burying our dead in our homesteads rather than letting the animals of the bush take them as was the case when all humans were hunter gatherers.

We had come to Guyana to do good and good we had done. We had worked with a local NGO, diagnozed hundreds of people, spread our pharmaceuticals and expertise around the Indian, Afro Caribbean and Hindu peoples of Guyana. Without condescension, we had showed them what it means to get the kind of an annual check up and immediate treatment that Canadians take for granted. In the language of charities and NGOs, “I think we made a difference.” Perhaps it was because we did not believe in ghosts and were not coming there to preach the Gospel.

But there are other ghosts that still haunt Guyana. Lust for gold still rules the country. It was brought from Spain, long ago, by conquistadores like Cortes. Their spirits are everywhere you go in this enchanted forest covered land, causing people to lie, cheat and kill for a substance that Amerindians once treated as a sacred thing, a gift from the Gods. Dr. Al’s “sickness of the heart ” that he suffered while treating Amerindians in a mobile clinic, was as different from that of Hernan Cortes as darkness is from light.

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