

**Soldiers, Scientists and Sorcerers:
A History of Exploration (and Literature)
of Brazil's Rio Negro River**

**by Mark Aitchison
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Part I

"On Saturday, the eve of Holy Trinity...we saw the mouth of another great river on the left, which emptied into the one we were navigating. Its water was as black as ink, and for this reason we gave it the name of Rio Negro. 1"

On June 3, 1542, Brazil's Rio Negro river was given its name in passing by the Spanish Conquistador Francisco de Orellana as recorded by his chronicler, Friar Gaspar Carvajal. Orellana was in the process of "discovering" the Amazon river though what had brought him into the Amazon in the first place was an expedition led by his uncle Gonzallo Pizarro in search of the fabled forests of cinnamon, El Dorado and a half dozen other treasures said to be found in that green hell as the Amazon was then described. Brazil itself had only been discovered in the year 1500 and the Amazon river was a major entry point into the new world.

A history of exploration along the Rio Negro river is best presented by the scientists, soldiers and sorcerers (or priests) who ventured there. A fascinating collection of men have left accounts of their wanderings and discoveries upon this little known Amazon tributary, its largest in fact. Many of her early explorers were priests and slavers both with little real interest in the natural wonders of the river and even less concern for the well-being of her Indian inhabitants. Few of these earliest commercial expeditions have left us any valuable written record. But a handful of scientists and explorers after that have left a small treasure of books for us to enjoy, a record of their experiences on this mighty and mysterious river.

The Rio Negro river is 2,253 kilometers long². The mouth of this mighty river is 10 km across and lies just below the historic city of Manaus, Brazil, at what is called the "meeting of the waters", where the Rio Negro flows into the larger Amazon river. Traditionally it is here that the Negro river joins the Solimoes river (as it is known locally) and together form the Amazonas river. It is this part of the great river that was named after the legendary women warriors of Greek mythology whom Orellana claims to have encountered and fought against during his epic journey across South America. Inside the gilded Opera House of Manaus hangs a stage curtain painted by Crispin do Amaral in 1893 depicting the meeting of these two rivers and formation of the Amazonas, all guarded over by the goddess of water, Iara.

The birth of the Rio Negro river is much less celebrated than the flowering of her mouth. And for good reason. [In all my reading and research to date the only reference I have ever found to the discovery of the source of the Rio Negro river is in a book by Wade Davis about the famous Harvard University ethnobotanist, Richard Schultes. which refers to the English naturalist Richard Spruce having visited her headwaters and traveled past her source sometime between 1850 and 1855].

References to the source are vague and scattered. On contemporary maps the Rio Negro river, by name, begins in a northwestern corner of Brazil at one end of the Casiquiare canal which connects to Venezuela's Orinoco river. Yet her main channel comes from still farther into the Northwest Amazon, in Colombia in fact, where it is called the Guainia river. Her headwaters, perhaps the rivers Chamusiguemi and Tamon, appear to lie at about 2 degrees latitude north beneath an isolated 600 meter hill called Aracuri in the region of Popaia, a state in Colombia. Loro, Marinuma and Etipani are noted on maps as settlements near here. But so remote and

unknown is this part of Amazonia that the map may as well be stamped "TERRA INCOGNITA"³.

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In 1739 Lourenco Belfort, an Irish slaver, with father Aguillo Avogadri, an Italian Jesuit, searched the Upper Rio Negro for bodies and souls⁴. In 1744 the Portuguese slaver Xavier Mendes de Moraes reached the Casiquiare canal⁵. In 1754 the governor of Maranhao and Grao Para, Francisco Xavier de Mendoca Furtado, led an expedition to map out the limits of the Upper Rio Negro. A shortage of native paddlers cut their voyage short and it is unclear how far exactly they got⁶. In 1784, the first maps of the Upper Rio Negro river were drawn by Manoel de Gama Lobo d'Almeida and one depicts a curious appendage called the Thomon river that may form part of the Guainia⁷.

In 1799 the famous Prussian-German scientist, Alexander von Humboldt, confirmed the existence of the Casiquiare canal as a natural passageway between the Upper Orinoco river upon which he was traveling and the Upper Rio Negro river from where he was turned back by Portuguese soldiers who thought he was a spy⁸. His explorations of the rainforest, the "hylaea" as he called it, were the first by a scientist and are collected in his Personal Narrative of Travels, 1799-1804, published in 1814. A second important scientific exploration of the Amazon river itself was conducted by the Frenchman Charles Marie de la Condamine who was also the first scientist to travel the length of the Amazon river. Condamine traveled little on the Rio Negro however and his adventures and explorations are recorded in Journal de Voyage Fait por Ordre du Roi a l'Equator (1751).

The first substantial written account of a voyage up the Rio Negro river was written by the Portuguese doctor, Francisco Xavier Ribeiro Sampaio. His journey to the Upper Rio Negro, and the Vaupes and Icana tributaries, was published as Diario da Viagem a Capitania de Sao Jose do Rio Negro (1774). The first scientific exploration of the Rio Negro river was also written by a Portuguese scholar, the tragic figure Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, in Diario da Viagem Filosofica (1785).

Ferreira's expedition took him all over the Amazon and the wealth of anthropological and scientific information he gathered, as well as his collections of natural history specimens, was impressive. All were sent back to Portugal to be cataloged and presented in that kingdom's many museums and libraries. But luck was not on Ferreira's side. Shortly after his collections arrived in Portugal in 1808 the country was invaded by Napoleon's armies led by General Junot and his collections confiscated by the naturalist Geoffrey St. Hilaire of the Museum of Paris. Along with Ferreira's written research, over 417 specimens fell into Hilaire's hands⁹. To this day quite a number of Amazonian species first described by Ferreira unjustly bear Geoffrey St. Hilaire's name, the most famous being *Inia geoffrensis* (the pink river dolphin). Another is *Saguinus geoffroyi*, (Geoffroy's tamarin monkey).

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Contemporary Amazonian opinion holds in disfavor the modern day "discoverer" of the pink river dolphin, Jacques Yves Cousteau, one of the greatest explorers of all time who explored the Amazon basin in 1983. Perhaps a great injustice would be corrected if the pink river dolphin were renamed *Inia ferreirensis*.

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In death, as well as life, history was not kind to Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira and he

died in obscurity. Yet with the passage of time his work, if not his soul, has been recovered, recollected, and recognized. Impressive portions of his collections were presented worldwide in exhibitions during 1995 and 1996. His prints and journals were prepared and published by Brazil's National Library in 1990¹⁰.

With the creation of the state of Amazonas in 1850 and the discovery of rubber and other Amazon wonder products, most notably Quinine from the Chinchona tree used to combat malaria, a new era of prosperity and exploration began. Few however in the 19th century who would receive accolades were Portuguese, let alone Brazilians.

The stage is dotted with merchants and mercenaries from a half dozen foreign nations, principally England and Germany.

The English were led by Wickham, Spruce, Bates and Wallace. Henry Wickham is best remembered as the Englishman who "stole the rubber seeds" from Brazil¹¹. He traveled between the Orinoco and the Rio Negro rivers and wrote *Rough Notes on a Journey...*(1872). Richard Spruce, the third great Amazon naturalist after Wallace and Alfred Bates, helped transport seedlings of the Chinchona tree to London for the development of Quinine medicine. His Rio Negro travels led him far up her largest northern tributary, the Vaupes river, perhaps to her source on the river Guainia¹², and certainly beyond the Casiquiare canal to Mount Cunucunumo on the river Duida in Southern Venezuela¹³. His most famous work is entitled *Notes of a Botanist in the Amazon and Andes* (1851).

Henry Wallace traveled the length of the Rio Negro right to the Colombian border, and explored much of her greatest northern tributary, the Vaupes. His journey is recorded in *Travels on the Amazon and Rio Negro* (1851). After years studying and collecting in the Amazon he would curiously find fame and fortune in another tropical paradise, the Malay Peninsula (Indonesia), where he devised a theory of evolution at the very same moment in time as the evolutionist Charles Darwin, his hero. Darwin later insisted they publish their discoveries together.

Wallace also ventured far up the Rio Negro river though his travels in the area show he was more interested in confirming Humboldt's discovery of the Casiquiare canal than in pursuing the source of the river itself. Above the Casiquiare canal and the beginning of the Rio Negro by name Wallace ultimately reached the village of Maroa on what is known as the Guainia river. Maroa lies just below a small tributary of the Guainia called the Pimichin.

"About a mile above Maroa, we reached the entrance of the little river Pimichin, up which we were to ascend. At the very mouth was a rock filling up the channel, and we had great difficulty in passing.¹⁴"

And just like that, without a second thought of the opportunity which lay before him, Wallace turned away from being perhaps the first explorer, if any, to have reached the source of the largest tributary of the world's mightiest river. Wade Davis may have written that Richard Spruce did travel beyond these headwaters and past the source of the Guainia, but without reading Spruce's own account- which has proven to be the most elusive of books- we cannot offer Spruce's own account of the fact. Perhaps it is fitting then that we end this first chapter on the history of exploration of the Rio Negro with a bit of a mystery left to solve in the next chapter.

01 Pg. 204, *Discovery of the Amazon*, ed. Jose Toribio Medina, Dover Publications, New York, 1988

02 Grolier's CD Rom Dictionary

03 IBGE map, 2nd edition, 1982. Scale 1:1,000,000, Pico da Neblina, NA-19

04 Pg. 78, *Povos Indigenas do Alto e Medio Rio Negro*, eds. Aloisio Cabalzar and Carlos Alberto Ricardo, FOIRN Sao Gabriel da Cachoeira, and ISA Sao Paulo, 1998

05 *Ibid*, pp. 78.

06 *Ibid*, pp. 79.

07 *Ibid*, pp. 81.

08 Pg. 242, *Explorers of the Amazon*, by Anthony Smith, Viking Press, London, 1990.

09 Pg. 7, *Viagem Filosofica-Memorias*, by Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira, Conselho Federal de Cultura, Rio de Janeiro, 1972.

- 10 Memoria da Amazonia- Catalog from Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira exhibition, Lisbon, 1997.
11 Op cit, pg. 280, Explorers of the Amazon.
12 Pg. 377, One River, by Wade Davis, Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, New York, 1997.
13 Pg. 256, footnote # 47, Exploracao na Guiana Brasileira, by Hamilton Rice, trans. Lacyr Schettino, Editora Itatiaia, Belo Horizonte and Universidade de Sao Paulo, 1978.
14 Pg. 164, Travels on the Rio Negro, by Alfred Wallace, Haskell House, New York, 1969.

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Part II

The Brazilian writings of the British Naturalists, Alfred Wallace and Richard Spruce, in the middle of the 19th century mark the end of the classical period of Rio Negro history and exploration and the beginning of her modern period. Before the end of the nineteenth century three very different writers would come to represent opposing positions in an appreciation of Amazonian literature and culture. As a group these writers define a turning away from mere observation and cataloging to a process of definition and identity.

In 1850 the region known as the Captaincy of the Rio Negro became the new state of Amazonas, and Bento de Figueiredo de Tenreiro Aranha was named the first governor. His explorations of the Upper Rio Negro River and her tributaries revealed to the rest of the world what the Portuguese had long been doing behind closed doors in Amazonia. Obtaining Indian slave labor had originally been church sanctioned only. Now, under Tenreiro Aranha, it became open state policy. Tenreiro Aranha planned a huge public works project for his capital Manaus and he knew exactly where to find the cheap labor he needed; amongst the Indians of the Middle and Upper Rio Negro River. The second half of the century marked the beginnings of a systematic commercialization of forest products ("drogas do sertao" as they were called) such as Piassaba palm fiber, Brazil nuts and most important of all, rubber. The boom was on and Tenreiro Arana was leading the charge.

Tenreiro Arana was born in 1769 in the first capital of the region, Barcelos, located on the Middle Rio Negro River above its confluence with the Rio Branco River. Apart from his questionable role as a politician and his obvious familiarity with the region as a traveler he was also a poet and playwright. As such he is arguably the first Amazonian writer of note. "Works of the Amazonian Writer Bento de Figueiredo de Tenreiro Arana" was published in 1850 and although his writings are no longer in print, they are referred to as recently as the year 2000 in an article entitled, "A Poetics of the Waters" by Socorro Santiago in the Amazonian Literary Review .

In the 1880s an Italian admirer of all things Amazonian, Count Ermanno Stradelli, joined the explorer Joao Barbosa Rodrigues and traveled extensively on the Jauperi River and other tributaries of the Upper Rio Negro. Rodrigues created the first herbarium in Manaus- now lost- and later became director of the Rio de Janeiro Botanical Gardens. His works include "Rio Jaupery-Pacificacao das Chrichanas" (now known as the Waimiri-Atroari Indians) completed in 1885, and an early study of the potent drug, Curare.

Most of Stradelli's work, like that of the Portuguese naturalist Alexandre Rodrigues Ferreira a century before, has sadly been forgotten. Stradelli was the first ethnographer to collect and publish material about the legends and superstitions of many Upper Rio Negro indigenous groups. An article of his entitled "La Legenda del Jurupary e outras Lendas Amazonicas" was published by the Instituto Cultural Italo-Brasileiro (Sao Paulo) in 1964. And a biography of sorts called "Em

Memoria de Stradelli" by Luis de Camara Cascudo was published in 1967 and has recently been reissued.

Besides these three very different writers- Arana, Rodrigues and Stradelli- the closing decades of 19th century are not remembered for much great literature nor any great expeditions into Amazonia. Like the biblical flood the collective imagination of the region seemed all at once engulfed by an obsession for natural, liquid latex- rubber- of all things. At a time of terrific global industrialization and invention the vast Amazon rainforest was found to produce a product invaluable to the fortunes of every civilized nation on earth. Almost overnight the sleepy hamlet of Manaus became the market city for the global collection, trade and distribution of natural rubber. Fortunes were made and lost in a wild orgy of greed and exploitation. Voyagers no longer ventured into the interior in search of new frontiers. Armies of poor "Nordestinos" and Indians were conscripted as laborers to collect rubber for insatiable masters and mistresses in far off capitals such as London and Berlin.

The rubber boom period lasted from 1870 to 1910 and the forests and rivers of Amazonia were in the hands of the rubber barons. J.G. Araujo and Waldemar Scholz were two Manaus merchants who benefited hugely from the rubber trade. On the Upper Rio Negro and over into Colombia and Peru Julio Arana lorded over a vast empire of Indian slaves. This infamous rubber baron operated from the Putumayo River, a tributary of the Amazon River, which today forms the frontier between Peru and Colombia. Atrocities committed by this monster against the local Indians were finally exposed by the explorer and champion of British justice, Roger Casement , though not before possibly tens of thousands of people had been enslaved, tortured and murdered.

The 20th century opens with one of the most interesting Rio Negro expeditions of all; that of Doctor Carlos Chagas and a team from the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation of Rio de Janeiro in 1907. An early authority on malaria, Chagas is best known for the disease that bears his name, a deadly parasitical disease of the circulatory system. Chagas traveled to Amazonia in order to document the health of populations along the Rio Negro River between Manaus and Sao Gabriel. In 1995 a medical team recreated this voyage and were shocked to find that health conditions on the Upper Rio Negro had actually worsened since Chagas' time ...so much for the advancement of science and technology in this part of the world.

As the rubber boom waned the Amazon interior once again was opened to science and exploration. In 1924 the German ethnographer Theodor Koch Grunberg teamed up with none other than J.G. Araujo's personal filmmaker and the first cinematographer of Amazonia, Silvino Santos, on an expedition to map the upper reaches of the Rio Branco River. The expedition was led by the American explorer, Hamilton Rice whose various expeditions in the region spanned the years 1910 and 1928 and are recorded in numerous Royal Geographical and National Geographical Society articles .

Grunberg, Santos and Rice joined forces in an effort to find a link between an Upper Rio Branco tributary, the Uraricoera, and Venezuela's famous Orinoco River. The novelty of the expedition, however, lay less in its filmed documentation than its use of a hydroplane to explore the furthest reaches of the rivers visited. In Hamilton Rice's account of the expedition a shocking discovery is made when the reader comes across a photo of Koch Grunberg's funeral of all things .

Apparently the German died tragically and suddenly of malaria during the course of the expedition. In Rice's dry text his death is passed over like just another Amazon sunset though the loss of their friend and co-worker must indeed have been shocking and sad for the other expedition members. The farthest point reached by the expedition was the headwaters of the Uraricoera/Parime River which does not, it turns out, flow northwards into the Orinoco in any way, shape or form.

Another noteworthy incident during Rice's expedition was their encounter with a group of nomadic Indians known as the White Guaribas ("the white howler monkeys"). These Indians would later come to be known as the Yanomami. Today they are recognized as one of the last, and most threatened, traditional peoples of the world. Their Shangri-la lies within the mountain ranges and valleys of Brazil's northern border with Venezuela. Due to their determined resistance to the outside world it is hardly surprising that the controversial anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon called them "the fierce people" in a book of the same name.

In 1930 another book about the Yanomami- and the Upper Rio Negro- appeared. But rather than just another explorers journal it was a biographical account of life amongst the Yanomami written

by a woman who had been kidnapped and held captive by them for almost twenty years. Helena Velero's account is transcribed by the ethnologist and explorer Ettore Biocca and a more authentic description of life amongst the Yanomami has yet to be written .

Moving west across her northern headwaters and once again tantalizingly close to the source of the Rio Negro River lies what is still the least explored part of Amazonia. Of the few who have explored this area the most renowned is Richard Schultes, famed American ethnobotanist and Harvard biology professor. His Amazon fieldwork spanned nothing less than 40 productive years, most in search of the secrets behind such Indian drugs as curare and ayahuasca, but also in the service of the US government. His most determined mission was to collect seeds of the best rubber tree samples available for use in experimental American rubber plantations to be created in Panama, Colombia and Peru . Sadly these plantations were never realized and planters in the Far East today still hold monopoly over the world's rubber supply as they have done so since the end of Brazil's rubber boom almost 100 years ago.

Schultes' hero was, not surprisingly, the British naturalist Richard Spruce and it is fitting that these two are the only explorers who have ever approached anywhere near the headwaters of the Rio Negro River, known as the Guiana River in Colombia. And like Spruce before him Schultes also was quite blasé about the source of the Rio Negro; it simply never was the sole objective of his travels. Like Spruce Schultes was always in search of plants and if he ever did stand at the source of the Rio Negro River he was probably alone when he did so. It was up to Wade Davis, a contemporary ethnobotanist and author of a fascinating book about the life and work of Richard Schultes, to tell us within the space of 25 pages that both Schultes and Spruce had indeed traveled to the source of the Rio Negro River during their plant collecting trips. After describing the formation of the Rio Negro River in Brazil as a meeting of Colombia's Guiana and Venezuela's Casiquiare canal Davis locates the farthest source of this mighty river near a mountain called Monachi in an area settled today by the Kuripaku Indians .

Our account of the exploration of the Rio Negro River as seen through her writer-explorers ends with the impressive body of contemporary work, both artistic and literary , of the Chilean born painter and anthropologist, Roland Stevenson. While still a young man Stevenson came to Amazonia in search of adventure and soon found himself studying and researching the foundations of a number of Amazonian legends, most notably those of the Amazon women warriors and El Dorado. With four decades of fieldwork funded by the sale of his large figure paintings- depicting scenes both real and imagined in the history of Amazonia- Stevenson has uncovered controversial proofs of the real existence of groups of Amazonian women warriors, perhaps descendants of Inca women fleeing the rape and pillage of the Spanish conquest. He has also uncovered geological proof of the real existence of Lake Parime, the legendary home of El Dorado ("the golden one"), today a vast savanna at the edge of the richest gold producing mountains in the southern hemisphere.

The Rio Negro River remains today one of the world's least inhabited and least studied fluvial highways. The location of her headwaters deep in one of the farthest corners of the Amazon rainforest coupled with low fish populations and infertile soils have left most people uninterested in her exploration and settlement. And though the literary history of the river is not extensive it is, I think you'll agree, fascinating, informative and worthy of further study. It was a desire to know more about the river's history that led me to research the history of her exploration. And I was surprised how little had been written about the river, particularly her northwestern headwaters and the mountains which separate Brazil and Venezuela. Likewise I was delighted to consider how much still remained to be uncovered about her legends and mysteries. Detailed maps of her northern headwaters are rare. Traditional Indians still inhabit the botanically rich forests of these far flung tributaries. And mountains and lakes without name stretch across her northern and western boundaries. The world may be well mapped out now, and there remain few regions left to truly explore, but the Upper Rio Negro is one such place still to be traveled and discovered. In a world so sadly racing towards an uncertain future the Upper Rio Negro may be the closest thing to Eden we have left.

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02 Em Memoria de Stradelli, by Luis da Camara Cascudo, Government of the State of Amazonas, Manaus, 1967.

03 Pg. 313, Explorers of the Amazon, by Anthony Smith, Viking Press, London, 1990.

- 04 Pg. 22, Revistando a Amazonia, Casa de Oswaldo Cruz, Fiocruz (Rio de Janeiro, 1996)
05 Dos Anos entre los indios: viajes por el nordeste brasileno 1903-1905, by Theodor Koch Grunberg, Universidad Nacional, 2v., Santa Fe de Bogota, 1995.
06 National Geographic CD-ROM collection, 1924 disk.
07 Pg. 12, Exploracao na Guiana Brasileira, by Hamilton Rice, trans. Lacyr Schettino, Editora Itaitiaia, Sao Paulo, 1978.
08 Yanoama, by Ettore Biocca, Kodansha International, New York, 1996.
09 Where the Gods Reign, by Richard Schultes, Synergetic Press/World Wildlife Fund, London, 1988.
10 One River, by Wade Davis, Touchstone/Simon&Schuster, New York, 1997.
11 Uma Luz nos Misterios Amazonicas, by Roland Stevenson, Suframa, Manaus, 1994.

**From 1541 to the Mirror of the Moon
A History
Of Amazonia's Legendary Tribe of Women Warriors,
The Amazons**

**By
Mark Aitchison**

The sources are vague and scattered. The sightings and reports are far and few between. But like tales of Nessie, the legendary sea monster of Loch Ness, Scotland, stories of a tribe of Amazon women warriors living deep in the rainforests of South America persist to this day. There must be something to the rumors, right?

The first report of a peculiar tribe of women warriors inhabiting parts of South America's Amazon basin dates back to the beginnings of Amazonian exploration. In 1541 the Spanish conquistador Francisco de Orellana, one of Gonzallo Pizarro's most trusted lieutenants (at least initially!), became by accident the first Europeans to travel the Amazon River from the Andes to the Atlantic. His voyage was chronicled by a Franciscan friar named Gaspar Carvajal who formed part of Orellana's group¹.

Nowhere is the account more thought provoking or vivid- most of the time it's pretty tedious and repetitive- than when the would-be Spanish plunderers find themselves fighting hand to hand for their lives against a group of Indians who count a dozen splendid women warriors amongst their number. Carvajal names these women "Amazons", after the legendary Greek myth, and goes on to provide a fascinating account of their supposed existence in the new world. Subsequently the name Amazon came to replace that of Orellana as the name of the greatest river in the world². And from this, perhaps fictitious meeting, the legend of the Amazons has passed from generation to generation of Amazon adventurers and explorers to the present day.

As suggested though the source of the Amazon legend is not Amazonia. Greek mythology tells of a tribe of tall women warriors called the Amazons who lived in Scythia near the Black Sea. This is the source of Carvajal's coinage of the term, as it was for Columbus and other early European mariners exploring the New World. Greek mythology informs us that Penthesilea, Queen of the Amazons, was killed by Achilles during the siege of Troy.

Two sources of the term Amazon are found in the early Greek language. One word, A-mazon, had been translated to mean "without a breast"; the Amazons reputedly cut off their right breasts to facilitate the use of their bow and arrows. Oddly though there has never been found a single piece of Greek pottery depicting this peculiar practice of self-mutilation. A more plausible source is the Greek word Ama-zona which means "joined with a belt" and refers to an ancient tribe of African women warriors who fought in pairs, often joined by a belt. Today the term Amazon suggests what it did to the first explorers of the new world- an aggressive, all-powerful tribe of beautiful women warriors.

Throughout the ages the power of this particular Greek myth has persisted in the imagination of far-flung travelers. It reached its fruition during the Spanish Discovery of the New World and Conquest of the Americas. In a blood-thirsty rush for gold and other fabled treasures the conquistadors feasted on a steady diet of legend and fantasy. Besides El Dorado ("the Golden

One”) the most appetizing of these legends was that of the Amazons.

The legend- or longing- finally bore fruit when Orellana encountered a group of fighting women near the mouth of the Nhamunda river, a tributary of the Amazonas river 300 kilometers east of Brazil’s Rio Negro river. In the words of his chronicler, Friar Carvajal, Orellana did not doubt the identity of his foes. But were they a self-supporting tribe of Amazon women or part of a larger mixed culture? The Chilean painter and anthropologist, Roland Stevenson, believes there never was a unique tribe of women warriors though he also believes Orellana was no liar.

Stevenson has researched the legends of Amazonia for 25 years. His investigations suggest that several waves of women travelers known as the “Virgins of the Sun” entered the Amazon in the years following 1533. He believes the women encountered by Orellana were Incas whom the Conquistadors had driven from Peru at the height of the Conquest. Stevenson has uncovered a lost west-east highway upon which these women refugees supposedly traveled. The highway ultimately led to the fabled Lake Parime, an inland sea northwest of the Brazilian city of Boa Vista on the Venezuelan border. Because it had dried up 200 years before the first Europeans ever set foot in the New World³, this legendary lake was never discovered by the many expeditions that went in search of it and the golden city of Manoa said to lie upon her shores.

No concrete evidence of the Amazons as an independent society has ever been uncovered in the rainforests of Amazonia. Nor is any tribe of women Indians known to presently exist in the vast Amazon basin- Brazil alone is home to over 220 Indigenous tribes. This lack of physical evidence adds weight to Stevenson’s argument that the Amazons were a phenomena unique to a specific time and place, namely one June morning in 1541 by the mouth of the Nhamunda river. Still, Orellana is not the only visitor to tell of a tribe of women warriors living deep in the Amazon rainforest. Alexander von Humboldt, one of the first scientists to travel through tropical America, collected numerous stories of an independent society of Amazon women from isolated Indian tribes he encountered in the late 18th century⁴.

In Ecuador there exists an Indian tribe called the Yagua. To this day their peculiar war dress includes grass skirts and long blond grass wigs. Under the panic and tension of battle could naked Yagua men have been mistaken for breastless women warriors by Spanish soldiers? They may not have been as beautiful and tall as in legend but neither were the ocean sirens who seduced so many of Odysseus’s fellow sailors. And along the Vaupes River in northwestern Brazil Indian men continue to wear their hair long and braided, pluck their eyebrows, and keep themselves as clean shaven as possible in pursuit of some intrinsic ideal of human beauty.

Indians from these and other Amazon tribes could easily have been mistaken for Amazon women warriors, especially by a group of crazed and lustful Conquistadors bloated by a steady diet of the strange and fantastic since even before they reached the Americas with Columbus. It is undeniable that the Spaniards brought the Greek legend of the Amazons with them- Columbus himself wrote so- and it appears to have been used to explain away, describe and even justify something extraordinary which was encountered in the New World.

But for a moment let us push aside the legendary, the fantastic, and the ridiculous, and look just a little deeper into this fascinating story of the Amazons. As we search through the records and pry open some oddly dispersed sources some very interesting facts are revealed.

Roland Stevens, in his book *A Light on Amazonian Mysteries*, suggests that the Amazons (those encountered by Orellana anyway) formed part of a migratory wave of Andean women who had abandoned their men to be slaughtered at Cuzco and other Inca strongholds as the Conquest of the Incas reached its climax and were fleeing the rape, pillage and destruction of the Spanish. After traveling across the north of the Amazon these “Virgins of the Sun” dropped down into the Amazon basin and settled, most often mixing with other Indian groups who already inhabited these lands. Many of these Inca women were perhaps bearing bastard children of the Conquistadors in their arms and bellies. Direct links to this shameful wave of immigration may be seen today in the facial structure, and eye and skin coloring of Indians from the Yanomami, Tucano, Wai-wai and other tribes of the northern Amazon rainforest. Stevenson suggests that Inca women who descended Amazon tributaries such as the Vaupes, Negro, Branco, Nhamunda or Trombetas Rivers would eventually have appeared upon the Amazonas river itself accompanied by their spurned offspring. It must have been quite a shock for Orellana to face these wrathful girls of European descent in combat.

Stevenson’s further claim of an ancient highway running west to east across the Amazon also

has foundation. The highway was supposedly built by the Incas or an even earlier Amerindian society to collect gold from the mountains of Parime and transport it back to Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. Evidence uncovered by Stevenson includes remnants of stone guardrails or walls that recall Friar Carvajal's description of the walls of stone said to link one Amazon city to another. Roland Stevenson's work certainly casts new light on the mysterious legend of the Amazons. But it offers little conclusive proof, and is mostly hypothesis and conjecture. Can there be any truth behind Orellana's story of a tribe of beautiful women warriors inhabiting the Amazon basin? As an archaeologist in Alex Shoumatoff's book about the Amazons, *In Southern Light*, comments wryly, "who knows for sure- who's dug there?"⁵

Modern myth has it that an exclusive tribe of Indian women do still live somewhere deep in the Amazon rainforest. What if we were to use Friar Carvajal's chronicle as a sort of literary road map and begin a search for the Amazons on the Rio Nhamunda where Orellana claimed to have encountered them first...?

According to Shoumatoff the river was originally called the Conori which was the name of the queen of the Amazons according to local Indian superstition. An article dated April 17, 1994, from the Manaus daily newspaper, "A Critica", says that locals living near the river's mouth believe something supernatural is at work around a small lake called the "Mirror of the Moon" (Espelho da Lua). Residents swear they've heard women at night laughing and swimming in the lake. The women are said to be ghosts of the Amazons who once lived in the dark forest around the perimeter of this mysterious "Mirror of the Moon".

Do Indian women, or their ghosts, still venture forth from the forest to press-gang local men into service as love slaves as Orellana's legend says they did? No one near Nhamunda wants to say for sure, but strange things have been reported from this lake and all of it has to do with the Amazons.

If we put together all the pieces of the puzzle we have at hand- Carvajal and Medina's literary road maps, Shoumatoff's wandering up and down the Nhamunda, and Stevenson's archaeo/anthropological treks across the northern Amazon- our search is directed away from the Amazon river itself, "7 days north" as Carvajal guides us, and up into some very little explored rainforest straddling the Brazil/Guayana/Suriname borders.

Just above and west of this "terra incognita" lies the dry bottom of the legendary Lake Parime, true source of the legend of El Dorado, discovered by Roland Stevenson. It shouldn't surprise us that the mountains above Boa Vista are today the center of the richest gold strikes in the Americas. To the east of "terra incognita" lies a group of mountains known collectively as the Serra de Tumucumaque where huge deposits of jade stone have recently been discovered. Jade stone too, like gold, figures prominently in the legend of Amazons in the form of green "muriquitas" (amulets shaped like frogs) which were presented to the Amazon's lovers at the conclusion of their fabled love festivals.

Linking these two sources of gold and jade is a segment of Stevenson's highway of the "virgins of the sun", a system of Pre-Columbian roads which brought Inca women east and away from their Spanish persecutors and into the annals of history and legend. Could there be Amazons up there somewhere? Seven days north of the lake of the Mirror of the Moon? Somewhere in the mountains of Serra Tumucumaque or Serra Parime? Who knows? Who's been there? Who's dug there? But there's something up there, isn't there? You can feel it. In the air. On the water. Watching from the forest even. Something very mysterious is out there waiting to be discovered.

01 The Discovery of the Amazon, ed. Jose Toribio Medina, Dover Publications Inc., New York, 1988. Pg. 205.

02 A Brazilian expedition to the acknowledged source of the Amazon, a mountain spring in the Mismi mountains of the Peruvian Andes named after National Geographic photographer Loren Macintyre, claims that the Amazon River is more than 240 kilometers longer than the Nile River; from "Amazonas: O Parto das Aguas Magicas", by Paula Saldanha, *Manchete Magazine* (Brazil), April 1, 1995. Pg. 3.

03 Uma Luz Nos Misterios Amazonicos: A light on Amazonian Mysteries, by Roland Stevenson, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, 1994. Pg. 135.

04 Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Equinotical Regions of the New Continent, by Alexander von Humboldt, Penguin Books, London, 1995. Pg. 240-41.

05 *In Southern Light: Trekking Through Zaire and the Amazon*, by Alex Shoumatoff, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1986.