

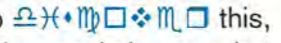
The era of exploring the world is over

Davor 

The past ten years of my life have been spent searching for an absolute wilderness, a forgotten Paradise, a place beyond the known. On the journey through these places, I have encountered people whose thoughts, needs and values were so different from mine, which were formed in Croatia on the streets of Zagreb. I described the normalities of these far away societies in my book, *Džungla* ("Jungle"). It's about a Banggattung clan of Korowai people. I visited their members during my expedition to West Papua, which was the final destination after a three-year-long exploration of the mostly unmapped jungle territories of Guatemala, the Amazon River, Papua New Guinea, Tahiti and the Philippines.

The clans of the Korowai people live in a hunter-gatherer society and build their houses in trees. On special occasions they practise cannibalism. While southern Korowai clans have had contact with Western civilisation, northern Korowai clans are more isolated. My goal was to come close to the clan which had remained completely isolated from any influence of the outside world: the Banggattung clan. After a long walking trek to their hidden territory, they let me live with them for a few weeks. What follows is the epilogue from *Džungla*.

The Korowai are a strictly territorial people. They link their identity to tree-houses and a small plot of land that is theirs alone. This plot provides them with everything they need for a pleasant and rich life. By endlessly repeating actions established long ago by their ancestors, at the time of mythical beginnings, the Korowai have lived in the same way throughout the entire history of their people. This is how they obliterate time and live in a constant present. When white men came and built the very first villages, for the first time the Korowai got a chance to lead their lives elsewhere. As often happens in such cases, they also encountered many problems and obstacles. My Banggattung friend Janian may remain in his tree-house until the day he dies, but his children will move

to the nearby village sooner or later. They are interested in the new, the other, in what is beyond reach. Just like the rest of this planet's population, they have every right to  this, as well as a free hand to decide for themselves and choose what to do with it.

The same issues, in one way or the other, concern all of us who travel, seek new things and wonder about them. I have seen many adventure films and read many adventure tales in which people, much braver, stronger and more skilful than I am, set out to the vast areas of terra incognita, to the highest peaks, across the greatest seas...

I was particularly shocked by a story I was following while writing this book. After many successful endeavours, Andrew McAuley, a famous Australian climber and kayaker, decided in 2007 to become the first man to row the 1600-kilometre stretch of the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand, one of the most dangerous seas in the world. He attached a camera to his kayak to record everything. After just a few hours rowing, having left his wife children and friends waving goodbye, he had a complete mental breakdown. He kept rowing, crying and wondering why he was doing this. His inability to find the answer drove him to despair. Every day he broke the immense waves and kept asking himself the same question, without finding the answer. For a month, he managed to resist every danger the Tasman threw at him but eventually, just 30 kilometres off the coast of New Zealand, the sea engulfed him...

All of us from time to time break under the weight of a question we cannot answer. But the answer to this question, which many travellers and adventurers ask themselves, is in fact very simple: "Because we want to be heroes." This is no longer "trendy". Gods and heroes are dead, and we refuse to admit that. But yes, this is the answer. We want to be heroes. We want to find answers to the questions determining our destiny. We want to give a sense to the life we lead and of the world we were thrown into. Blaise Pascal said he admired people who don't go crazy and don't give in to despair once they realise they were thrown into this world without knowing who threw them in, why, and what they ought to do. Those who do not ask these questions reconcile themselves to their fate. Those who do confront their fate.

In the past four years, on seven expeditions through various jungles, I searched for perfect wilderness. Simply, the remnants

of the Garden of Eden. I could say that I finally found it with the Banggabung. I witnessed that they are still today "completely" immersed in their archaic world-view. Quite possibly there is no other tribe on the planet more deeply rooted in the mythical time of the archetypal paradise.

However, a more thorough and honest analysis leads to a conclusion that even the most authentic "primitive" native does not fully reside in this mythical "timeless time", because he cannot bear suffering. Once I asked Janian if he remembered the day of the solar eclipse. He said that he was a boy and that he remembered. "What did you do then, how did it make you feel?" I asked. He was terrified and he cried, and his father shot darts at the sun. They were convinced it was the end of the world. Out of misery and helplessness, some people tried to run away from their tree-houses so fast that they fell to the ground and died.

In a mythical time, in an archetypal paradise, in complete wilderness, there is no chain of cause and effect that could lead to suffering. A doe runs away from a jaguar, using all of its strength. But when the jaguar gets hold of it, it surrenders. It faces its fate and reconciles itself to it. By not knowing and not acknowledging the sudden illness and death of a young person but attributing the cause to *khakhua*¹ or other forest spirits, the Korowai do not accept suffering. The rituals that take them back to the time of their ancestors represent their longing for a paradise, their refusal to come to terms with the world surrounding them. By shooting darts at the eclipsed sun, they demonstrated their refusal to accept their destiny. In doing all this, they are, just like us, people who long ago descended from the Garden of Eden.

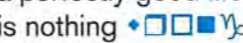
I had to admit that a primitive man has never lived in paradise. The myth of the noble savage is an illusion that exists only in travel guides. The paradise I sought and wrote about exists only as a category. If it ever existed on earth, there is no return. Even if there could be, this choice would not be right. We have to stop looking back and longing to return, but rather always keep moving on.

The final night in my tree-house I had a strange dream. The voice sounded divine, paternal, a deep male voice telling me, "Whenever you jump, my friend, you are bound to fall. This seems inevitable.

¹*khakuha* are the evil spirits who are able to possess a man and force him to kill a specific victim by using invisible arrows of black magic.

Inescapable. Every cell in your body is moved by this universal force. You are not bound to fall. You are bound to fly. But you will fall again and again until you think that the ground dragging you down is your home, that this ground is safe and good. You will realise that you are not a bird, you are not built to fly and you will think you are made to live on the ground. But on the ground you will never be complete. That is why, without knowing why, you will nevertheless keep rising and jumping again. Because every cell in your body knows that it will not fulfil its purpose and will not be complete until you fly. That is why you are here, my friend. You have always known that. To kill this dragon that keeps you on the ground and fly."

I'm not saying this was an epiphany, it was probably just a result of my thoughts, a fruit of my unconscious mind. But still, if we stop perceiving God as something exclusively "external", the whole world and every moment in life become an epiphany.

Boundaries shift and move. People sacrifice their lives to move the boundaries a little further. Even the furthest lines of the reach of our power still limit us. Boundaries should be obliterated, not moved. The era of exploring the world is over. There is no distant terra incognita. On the other hand, within us, there are a million unanswered questions, an infinite vastness of the unknown. We don't have to embark on this journey ever. We can spend a perfectly good life with both feet firmly on the ground. There is nothing  with it. Just as the Korowai deserve a metal axe because it is more efficient than a stone axe, and a plastic necklace because it is prettier than dog's teeth, all other people in the world deserve what they believe they need in order to live in prosperity. All the people in the world deserve a beautiful and carefree life away from all suffering.

But still, it would be good if somewhere someone heard a voice and set out on a heroic quest. Of any kind. Crossed the threshold of the unknown, overcame all obstacles, enjoyed the help of magnificent assistants, deserved prosperity, brought it to the world and inspired it to revival. We are all invited. It is only a matter of *who* will answer the call. And fly...

This essay is an edited version of a chapter from Davor Rostuhar's book *Džungla* ("Jungle"), published in 2009 by Algoritam (Zagreb). We thank Davor Rostuhar for giving his permission to republish this excerpt here.