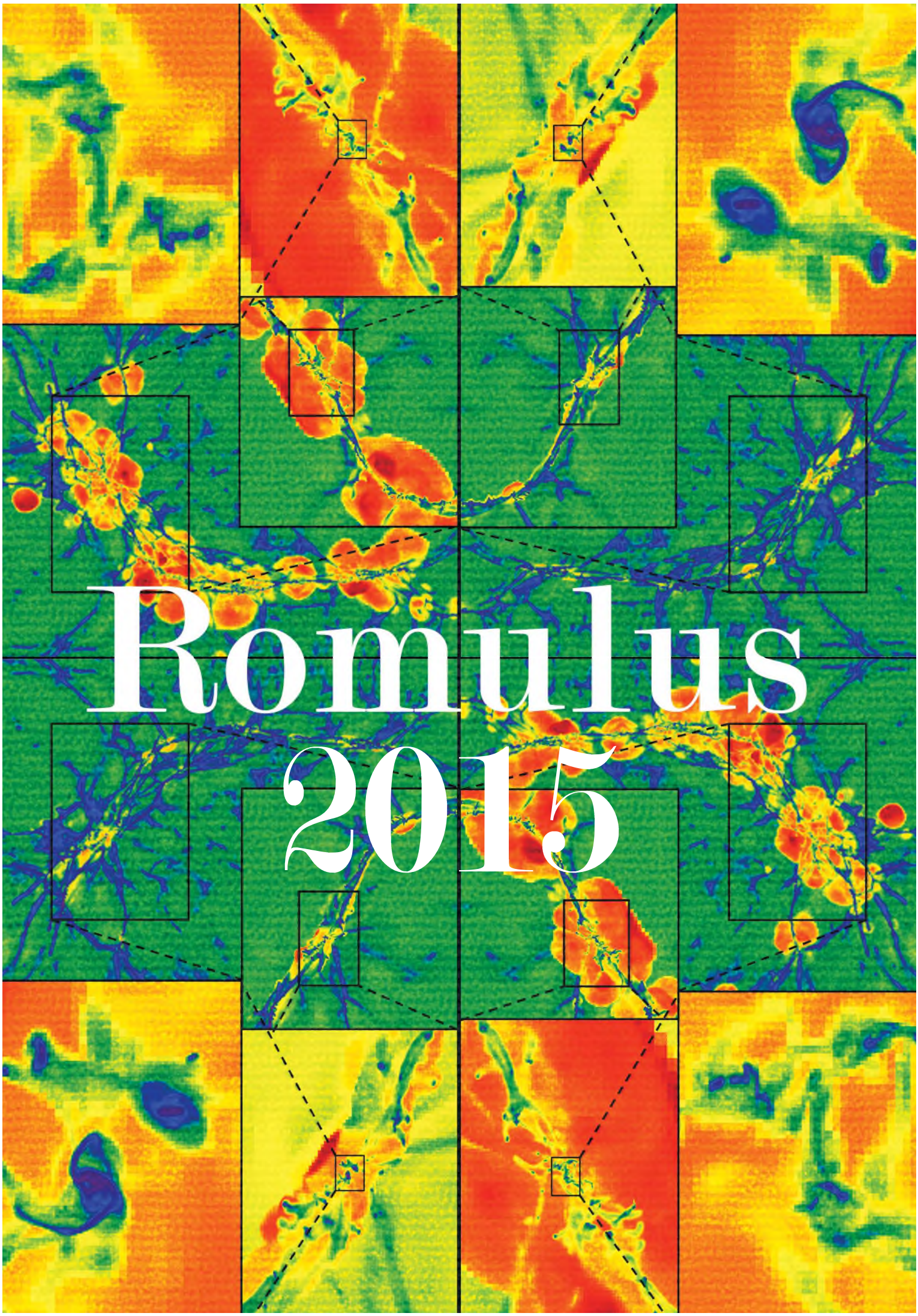


Romulus 2015

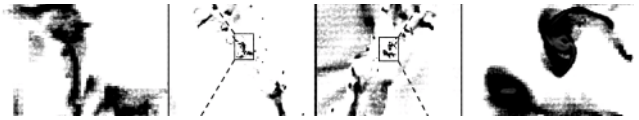
Unseen Spirits and the Pia'san's Eye

Lewis Daly

The Makushi people live in northern Amazonia on the border of Guyana and Brazil. Located in the crucible of an ancient rift valley, their homeland might be characterised as a seasonally-variable mosaic of savannah, rainforest, and wetland. From an elevated viewpoint, one observes a vast patchwork of innumerable shades of green intersected by a shimmering network of waterways. Here, the subsistence economy, based upon the complementary interaction of hunting, fishing, and horticulture, dominates the rhythm of everyday life.

Between 2012 and 2013, I spent a year living in Makushi communities conducting ethnographic fieldwork into the relationships between people and plants. What follows is an account of my experience of attending a shamanic 'beating leaf' ritual in June 2012. The Makushi shaman (*pia'san*) is the mediator of all things: part-oracle, part-healer, part-killer, he or she is able to harness the power of the ancestral forces of creation (*pia*) in order to travel through space and time communicating with and influencing the myriad beings that populate the cosmos. Unlike laypeople, the shaman has the capacity to perceive the unseen world.

Mythic history describes how the structure of the Makushi multiverse emerged from a highly transformational 'chaosmos' in which no bodily form was fixed and metamorphosis was the status quo. In this state of primordial disorder, humans, animals, and spirits ceaselessly transformed into and procreated with one another; bodily mutilation and death, never finite, were transitory and reversible states. In short, the seed of history in Makushi cosmology was chaos. The shaman is the specialist with the capacity to visit this primordial mythic world, which in some senses coexists with the present day, somewhat akin to a parallel universe. The energy of the embryonic cosmos continues to imbue the contemporary world, a world in which animals and plants can be people, and humans may transform into jaguars and anacondas.



Entropy is a chameleonic notion, but the general idea is that it increases with time, introducing disorder into a system. In Makushi cosmology, entropy moves in reverse: the world began in disorder, before the events of mythic-history gradually forged its structure. In the multi-layered cosmos, light energy (*a'ka*) and its mirror image dark energy (*ewaron*) are eternal presences that are continually recycled. The shaman has the ability to travel through space-time to harness these cosmic energies for productive or destructive ends in the present.

One week during the rainy season, a shaman was visiting my host community, Yupukari, to conduct a healing ritual. A village elder had been afflicted with a debilitating illness, which, it had been suggested, was diabetes-related. Unable to eat and hammock-bound, the woman's health had been deteriorating for a number of days. Suspecting she had been cursed by a mal-intentioned enemy, the family commissioned the shaman to conduct a series of rituals to divine the causality of the illness. In Makushi ethno-pathology, every illness or death has a prior spirit-causality; the role of the shaman is to unveil this causality and remove the pathogenic agent or lift the curse.

I was invited to attend the first session. It was a clear night, the black backdrop punctuated only by the canopy of stars. Upon arrival, I was ushered into the palm-thatched house. Ten or so people lined the walls of the room in anxious anticipation. The family, it seemed, did not mind having a curious anthropologist in attendance; perhaps they had grown accustomed to my strange ways. The ill woman's husband instructed me to turn off my camera and microphone, for the LEDs on the devices would interfere with the ritual performance. The shaman, he whispered, must work in complete darkness, lest the ritual will be ineffective. To the *pia'san*, the pitch-black ritual arena is a luminous maelstrom of spirit-activity. In his trance-like state, the hitherto invisible spirits that enter the room appear as incandescent presences. If a lay-person were to even glimpse these spirits, they would immediately die—hence the requirement for total darkness.

The shaman began to prepare his ritual paraphernalia in the corner of the room. He laid down twelve branches from the *sipî* tree (a species of neotropical incense tree) in a semi-circle around his wooden stool and placed a bowl of a black molasses-like substance and a bottle of clear alcohol infused with plants on the floor beside the stool. The black liquid, I was told, was tobacco juice. The shaman produced a pouch of black tobacco and a number of pre-rolled tobacco cigars. Lighting one, he blew the thick, intensely fragrant smoke over the leaf bundles on the floor. Next, he began to recite esoteric incantations while occasionally taking sips of the drinks and blowing the liquid over the leaf bundles. Taking the cup of tobacco juice, he tilted his head back and poured the thick black liquid into his nostrils. The narcotic effect of consuming tobacco in this fashion is overwhelming, and allows the shaman to enter a state of trance. Tobacco, the catalyst of shamanic ritual, is a 'light' substance associated with the forest and externality; as such, it allows the spirit to detach from the body and engage in soul-flight.

After a while, the shaman signalled to the family that he was ready to begin. The light bulb hanging from the palm-thatched ceiling was switched off. I recall being overwhelmed by the immediate, absolute blackness: a state of 'anti-luminosity', as if no photon of light inhabited the space. With vision now obsolete, my other senses became heightened. The *pia'san* started 'beating leaf', the primary ritual technique of the Makushi shaman. He began to shake the leaf bundles rhythmically, high in the air and back down again, occasionally hitting them against the mud floor with great force. The shaking of the leaves encourages his auxiliary spirits to descend from the cosmic plane to assist in the ritual diagnosis. Sat directly in front of the shaman, I could feel the movement of the leaves in front of my face. I remember feeling cold but not uncomfortably so. The chanting continued, interrupted only by periods of gargling and blowing. From time to time, broken leaves would hit me in the face, as the strong scent of macerated plant matter coagulated with the tobacco smoke in the room. The shaman's spirituous elixir was occasionally passed around; I took a swig and shuddered. Feeling as though I were entering a trance-like state, time became largely imperceptible.

Midway through the séance, the shaman began his ascent to the upper layer of the cosmos, a journey known as soul-flight. To achieve this end, he summons the spirit of an allied plant-being, the 'monkey ladder' liana, which forms a stairway to the celestial plane. The *pia'san*'s unconfined soul (*ekaton*) detaches from his physical body (*pun*), which remains in the room beating leaf and chanting in 'auto-pilot' mode. The sound of footsteps can be heard as his spirit ascends the ladder. As the shaman continues to beat leaf, the spirits of various plants and animals enter the shamanic theatre to assist. The hummingbird spirit, the shaman's 'angel', visits the terrestrial plane to sip from the calabash of tobacco juice laid out on the floor.

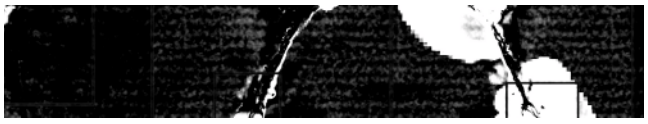
After a while, other voices entered the conversation: members of the woman's family started conversing with the spirits. In response, the voices of celestial beings could be heard, as channelled through the shaman. During soul-flight, the shaman travels through space and time, communicating with these spirit-beings, which include tree spirits, the masters of animals, and the souls of allied shamans, past and present. The shaman's ultimate goal, I was later told, is to located and commune with the spirit of the perpetrator of the curse, in order to ascertain how and why he, she, or it attacked the patient. Eventually the *pia'san*'s soul returns from its cosmic journey and re-enters his physical body through the skull, reanimating it with life-force.

After an indeterminate period of time, the chanting ceased and the atmosphere in the room seemed to shift. The ritual phase was over, and the single light bulb was switched on. My eyes took a while to adjust to the light. The first thing I noticed was a green ring of pulverised leaf matter radiating outwards across the floor from the stool. The men in the room started to drink what was left in the bottles, passing them between themselves as the shaman lit another cigar. Jokes were told, and a feeling of joviality replaced the tenseness of the ritual phase.

On the short walk home, under the falling constellation of *timî'kon* that marks the start of the rainy season, a few friends and I began to ruminate on what had happened. Much of the ritual was incomprehensible to me. The shaman, I was informed, had diagnosed the cause of the woman's sickness: an old man from a nearby village had cursed her using charm plants and incantations, targeting her throat so that she could not eat or drink. The following night the shaman would attempt to lift the curse and redirect it upon its perpetrator using *waawî* spirit darts.

What of entropy?

In the shamanic cosmos, time is cyclical and energy is endlessly recycled. Shamanic power is rooted in the capacity to harness the chaotic forces of creation to maintain order in the present. In this sense, the Makushi shaman might be considered a cosmic diplomat, controlling, tempering, and negotiating with the multifarious creative and destructive forces and beings that populate the multi-layered cosmos. Can entropy exist in a non-linear multiverse? Might not shamanism, in this frame, be considered reverse entropism?



On Entropy

John Duggan

When I agreed to write this essay I thought, naively, that I pretty much had the subject covered; that it was a concept I understood well and would translate readily and simply into a musical context. I saw entropy as an inevitable part of the cycle of existence, a decay or decline that is recognisable in the natural world and in all human endeavour. It can be seen in the rise and fall of kingdoms, empires and political movements. It is a vital component in the changing seasons where the fecundity of spring and the heat of summer turn into the falling leaves, the cooling air and fading light of autumn.

One image that appeals when I think about entropy is the tree that topples to the ground and begins to rot. This breakdown of matter becomes a feast for beetles and grubs who themselves are fodder for insects and animals further up the food chain. What's more, as the cellular structure of the tree breaks down it releases nutrients back into the soil, which feed the next generation of trees and other life on the forest floor. Death and decay are requisites for new life – an idea that seems to sit comfortably with Eastern thinking but is less easily assimilated in a Western society obsessed by youth and immortality. When we die we leave an imprint, however large or small. To some extent we live on in our children, our ideas, in the way we have touched the lives of others. But many things die with us: the form of our body dissipates, and the majority of our memories and our unique sensual experience of life disappear back into the pool of unconsciousness, which is one of the great mysteries of our existence.

One hundred years on from the outbreak of World War I many people in the UK are looking back and considering its impact on the 20th century and on our lives today. The war destroyed the lives of millions of people and precipitated the fall of the Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman and Hohenzollern empires as well as providing fertile ground for the rise of communism and fascism. The war was a significant factor in the decline of the British Empire and the rise of the US. One of the things I find fascinating is how memory and attitudes have changed over the ensuing 100 years, for instance in the way that General Haig went from a hero in the 1920s to a villain in the 1960s. Perhaps now we can see him as very much a man of his time who, unlike us a century later, did not have the benefit of hindsight.

My interest in World War I led to my final project with Sospiri, the choir I founded nearly ten years ago. The CD, called A Multitude of Voices, was released last November to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of war. The choir commissioned ten new works from some of the leading choral composers alive today. The aim was to give a broad view of the war and, to that end, we encouraged the composers to look beyond the poetical canon of Wilfred Owen et al. This resulted in settings of texts in German and French, as well as English. Women were well represented – Edith Cavell, Susan Owen, Helen Thomas and Charlotte Mew – and, perhaps most interesting of all, there were three settings of poems by Edward Thomas. Thomas never wrote any poetry directly about the war and, after he went to France in 1917, he wrote nothing at all. War, however, is a backdrop to many of his poems even though they ostensibly chart the reshaping of English landscape, or his meditations on life and death. In a sense his poetry, for all its subtle nostalgia, looks forward as much as it looks back and is a compelling example of art renewing itself in the humus of old ideas.

Musically speaking, the seismic shifts of the last century have played out against other man-made upheavals around the world. Alex Ross's wonderful book The Rest is Noise puts the music of the 20th century within the context of political and social change. It's a fascinating read, and I wish it had been available when I was an undergraduate because it's an immensely engaging piece of