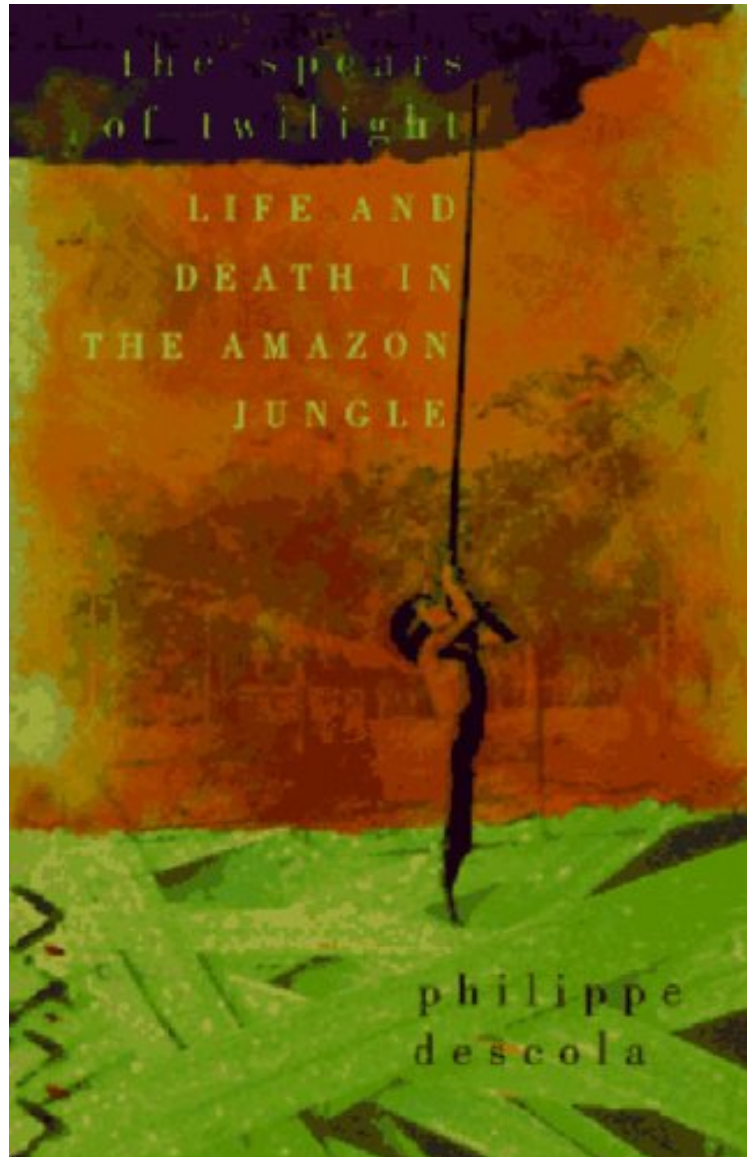


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## The Spears of Twilight: Life and Death in the Amazon Jungle

*Philippe Descola*

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**Philippe Descola : The Spears of Twilight: Life and Death in the Amazon Jungle** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Spears of Twilight: Life and Death in the Amazon Jungle:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A Literary Essay Worthy of Tristes Tropiques By Etienne RPThe myth of the noble savage finds favor among philosophers and social scientists. Mankind in the state of nature is untainted by corrupting civilization; men and women belonging to primitive tribes live happily in peaceful hedonism;

they have limited material needs and plenty of leisure; they are free to satisfy their drive for pleasure or for self-expression without submitting to society's dictates. They are spontaneous as opposed to conceited; they are extrovert and free from our psychological barriers; they practice gift giving and reciprocity in an oral culture that values honor, pride and generosity. But think again. Who are the people that narratives about the noble savage are supposed to describe? How do we know for sure they fit into our descriptions? Are they not fictions invented by conquerors, explorers and writers with only limited access to the culture, language and living conditions of the people they briefly encountered? Would prolonged immersion into a real community of so-called savages reveal other aspects of their lives that were overlooked by amateur descriptions? These are precisely the questions that anthropology is set to answer, with its fieldwork methods and conceptual apparatus that make it qualify as science. Philippe Descola's description of the Jivaro turns all our assumptions on their head. They are ascetic in their desires and skeptics in their beliefs, taking little for granted except the rules and formalities they follow in all their endeavors. They are moral subjects fighting against all deadly sins: lust (each man claims exclusive property over his wives), gluttony (they follow a strict diet and often endure ritual fasting), wrath (they contain their anger and eat their revenge cold) and sloth (they are constantly on the move and busy fighting against each other). They are masters of protocol and attach paramount importance to decorum. They are social agents who are well aware of private property (each spouse in the household cooks her own meals, keeps her own pack of dogs and cultivates her own garden). They recite silent prayers (called *anent*) and deadly curses, but they keep their recitations to themselves and are not known to cultivate collective myths or legends about their past. In fact, they have little knowledge over their forebears, and are unable to recall ancestors beyond two generations. They face death in battle without flinching, but are unsure about what might happen after death. Descola's presentation of the Jivaro Achuar tribe flies in the face of generally accepted notions, and forces us to reconsider our preconceived ideas. These stern Indians don't enter into our ready-made categories. In a way, they are closer to our mentalities than their life conditions would let us suppose. Their individualism and contractualism make them at times appear as rational utilitarians. This is a far cry from the figure of the good savage, the primitive hedonist painted by romantic travelers in search of salvation. The Achuar are difficult to impress or to cajole: they are not interested by trinkets or by ornaments, and slightly despise the foreign observer who struggles to follow them on forest trails and who has only one wife as a partner. According to Descola, the Achuar are not noticeable for their exotic customs. He devotes only a few pages to the rite and techniques of *tsantsa* or head-shrinking, and these pages are dense with clinical details and structural interpretations. Otherwise the Achuar are like the big moron living next door who always spoils your fun and throws garbage around. You don't really want to mess with them, and you would prefer to have as little contact with them as proximity would allow. For anthropologists, indigenous people and primitive tribes are people without history. The Achuar certainly fit that description. It is not that their history is beyond the reach of the passing ethnographer, or that it takes the form of the myth or ancestors' wisdom as opposed to chronicles or narratives. These people really are without history. They don't know the names of their great-grandparents or ancestry. They cannot recollect events or remember deeds beyond the generation of their parents. They bury their dead on the sly and leave their tomb to oblivion, never to mention their names again. There is no oral history, no figure devoted to remind younger generations of the laws of the elders, no real tradition or custom beyond the mere repetition of everyday practice. Likewise, they don't have a territory: they only name rivers, and don't have names for the places and areas in which they dwell. They live in small communities or households scattered over vast expanses of land. Their living space is delineated by the forest tracks of individual hunters. They come from nowhere, and do not share a collective destiny. Even their myths stay silent on the creation of humanity and on the origin of their tribe. Their most sacred beliefs take the form of the *anent*, which are kinds of secret curses or mute prayers that are only recited in private and never disclosed to outsiders. The absence of history manifests itself from the start of the anthropologist's journey. In an introductory chapter filled with details and dark irony, Descola describes the frontier towns on the border of the forest, some of them dating back to the time of the Spanish conquest, as urban grafts plagued with amnesia. The most ancient towns have lost the memory of their origins; and the newly founded ones have no memory to share. The frontiersmen know nothing of the forest, and circulate wild legends about the wandering tribes that they have never met. The only persons to come in contact with the Jivaro do so for religious reasons: they want to convert them to Christianity and to bring them to the reach of civilization. American Evangelicals and the Catholic order of the Salesians compete for the Indians' soul. In true French fashion, Descola holds only scorn for the Evangelical Protestants: they are young men and women coming straight from Texas and imbued with prejudices and certitudes. They, too, are debilitated by amnesia, and live in an eschatological time in which conversion of the last lost souls will precipitate the Second Coming. The real keepers of time are the Salesians: in particular, they have chronicled in great detail the custom of the *tsantsa*, which has made the Jivaro enter popular culture as head-shrinkers. In this bleak present, the anthropologist patiently collects nuggets from the past. He reviews the old stories and legends that the West has peddled about the Achuar since the first chronicles of the Conquista, and which are kept alive as zombie narratives in pulp literature that can be found on the book stalls of frontier towns. But remains of the past can also be found among the Achuar. One still finds in some households rifles that were in use in Europe during the First World War and that have found their way to Indian campments to perpetuate their ancient

custom of war-making. Some old Spanish words have also entered Achuar vocabulary and now pass as native words. Mythological figures such as Jurijri, the protector of peccary pigs, is portrayed as a helmeted soldier with leather boots and a sword a clear representation of the Spanish conquistador dating back from first contacts between the old world and the new. Many cultural traits and material artifacts that characterize Achuar daily life are recent additions that took place after the time of the conquest and until modern times. The dog, the only domestic animal known to the Achuar, is not a native from the but still features in every household. Modern medicines are used to fight foreign diseases and they are preferred to traditional remedies. To live in peace, but also because their quest for food requires dispersion, the Achuar live far away from each other. Households are usually separated by a half-days walk or more. By limiting contacts with their kin and relatives, they decrease the risk of conflict, which generally turns badly when it arises even between close relatives. Similarly, war-making and fights are made at a distance. The shotgun has replaced the sarbacane, but never would an Achuar engage in hand-to-hand fight or exchange blows in a melee. Keeping their distance is also something Achuar achieve in their ritual exchanges and inter-group conversations. A strict protocol both contains and manifests violence by having men shout heavily scripted tirades as a substitute to actual fight. Even alone, when taking a lonely bath in the river, the Jivaro warrior boasts of his strength and manliness to keep the spirits away. Distance allows enemies to defer their vengeance or prepare for eventual aggression. Vendetta or tumash is affected by both geographical distance and by the time elapsed since the original crime was committed. Warring parties can thus check the accuracy of facts, distinguish them from false rumors, and gather support to their cause by concluding alliances or rallying family relatives. This way the Achuar prevent total war and extermination, which would otherwise be the logical solution of the war of all against all. Given the suspicious nature of the Achuar, it is no wonder that relations between the sexes are also characterized by distance, mistrust and jealousy. A good husband has to add many spouses to his household, but he must also satisfy them sexually and make sure they don't elope with other men. A guest brought to the house of his host must never cross the invisible threshold that separates the space devoted to women. He is supposed not to look at the women who regale him with big bowls of manioc beer until he cannot see clear. Adultery is punishable by death, which doesn't prevent some women to succumb to the charms of other men. Complex rites and beliefs surround the gardens cultivated only by women. The same applies to the tools and weapons used by men for hunting. As an example, charms and amulets taken from fish are used to catch birds and mammals; and magical tools taken from animals from the forest are used for fishing. In this logic of magical thinking, an artifact always stands for something else, but not for anything. Air and water, sky and earth, the visible and the invisible, the mobile and the inert are the parameters of a system of dual oppositions that give order and meaning to the world. Of course, this system of structural relations is only accessible to the anthropologists a result of a patient reconstructions. The Indians themselves do not have access to the logic of their own thinking. Philippe Descola is the proud heir of Claude Lvi-Strauss, his thesis supervisor, and he succeeded him as chair of anthropology at the Collge de France. He is also the author of an oeuvre that has become a standard reference in the field of environmental social sciences. His focus on the environment and on the relation between humans and non-humans transcends the traditional dualism between nature and society and offers new ways to think about mankind's place in the world. *The Spears of Twilight* is not a scholarly essay or an intellectual treatise: it is the authors version of Lvi-Strauss *Tristes Tropiques*, published in the same collection and with similar literary ambitions. It is a fine example of the second book of the ethnographer: in the French tradition, the anthropologists first report from the field comes in the form of a scholarly monograph, the second as a literary essay. By elevating anthropology to the status of a literary genre, French intellectuals like Lvi-Strauss and Descola give special status to the discipline and enlarge its readership well beyond the circle of professional social scientists. Readers will be richly rewarded by their passing acquaintance with the Achuar. 6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Knowing your neighbours By Stephen A. Haines Descola's sojourn in the Upper jungles reminds us of a sad truth: how much of our neighbours on this planet do we know or understand? Descola readily admits how poorly prepared he was for the study of the Achuar. Yet he was quickly disabused of any idea that this group of the "Jivaro" constituted a "simple native" community. His account shows the complexity of life they endure. Family relationships entwine political situations and Achuar society is sustained by a fine balance among many forces. Not the least of these are the roles played by every plant and animal in the surrounding forest. Each Achuar individual carries immense knowledge of his or her surroundings and performs daily activities within carefully prescribed limits. Living in an Ecuadorian forest is no more complex than dwelling in a "civilized" city in Descola's view. It's simply a matter of learning how. Descola quickly settled in as guest of a family - unravelling the roots of interaction among its members took longer. Men's and women's lives follow preset roles, however the balance of power between genders, he shows us, must be constantly adjusted to changing circumstances. Marriages and separations are frequent, sometimes leading to long-standing vendettas, complicated by the relationships of the participants which are as twisted as the forest vines. Vendetta, it seems, is far more consequential in the lives of the Achuar than long-term traditions. The stereotypical "tradition bound" native is nonexistent here. Family and personal relationships also preclude the development of our familiar hierarchical society. No community leaders rise to particular prominence since family status has priority. These conditions, Descola points out, obviate the existence of political hierarchies, so dear to Western society. Life among the Achuar is filled with rituals, from the morning cup of

"wayus" through various rites of passage to, possibly, the achievement of "juunt," or "Great Man" status. Anthropology is rife with tales of powerful shamans who guide the behaviour of awed villagers. Descola sweeps away this image, noting that shamans among the Achuar may be exiled or deposed, perhaps even killed if their powers prove futile, misleading or faulty. To be effective, the juunt must prove his abilities as a healer - a sorcerer will be rejected. Although the position of juunt takes years of effort to achieve, the role may be lost overnight. On the other hand, they are resourceful and caring - they make house calls. Sometimes at great distance, leading them to temporarily profess conversion to Christianity long enough to hitch a ride on the missionary's aircraft to the patient. Descola's narrative is nearly a daily journal of his own learning and efforts. Although his wife Anne Christine accompanied him, she flits but wraith-like through these pages, nearly obscured by Descola's own revelations. Yet it's clear she provided information on the women's lives that might have endangered Descola had he attempted to garner it. Given the intricate structure of Achuar life, Descola may be forgiven this omission of detail. Janet Lloyd's translation isn't lively, but the events and ideas Descola relates keep the reader's interest throughout the book. He manages to both dismiss faulty myths about South American peoples and impart a wealth of new information. Dreams, for example, considered random in the West, may actually be "created" among the Achuar depending on circumstances and needs. Dreams drive behaviour and vice versa. Descola sees Achuar dreaming as an extension of conscious thought - an assertion deserving intense study. This is but one example of what keeps this book interesting and valuable. 12 of 15 people found the following review helpful. absolutely outstanding -- deserves more than 5 stars By Elizabeth Jill Hirti I don't usually read nonfiction, primarily because the writing styles do not appeal to me (dry, dry, dry). but this book is wonderfully written; Descola made a conscious decision to write well and wittily and he succeeds. if you love traveling to unfamiliar worlds and are fascinated by different cultures, this book will capture your imagination and stay with you for years to come.

*The Spears of Twilight* is the extraordinary story of three years among the legendary Jivaro Indians of South America by Philippe Descola, a student of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Isolated in the jungle of the Upper Amazon on the border of Ecuador and Peru, the Achuar are a tribe of Jivaros whose reputation for headhunting has kept them safe for centuries from incursions by whites. *The Spears of Twilight* is the story of Descola's years among them and a tribute to their resistance. Chronicling his growing intellectual and emotional intimacy with the Achuar, Descola leads the reader through the joys and sorrows of their daily life: the drama of their remarkable belligerence, the poetry of their magical songs, and the excitement of their mystic encounters with the spirits of ancestors. *The Spears of Twilight* is also a fascinating narrative of Descola's gradual comprehension of the Achuar's consciousness; through the book a sophisticated and unusual cosmology emerges that deeply undermines our own understanding of time, religion, nature, and society.

.com A trained ethnographer, you go tramping through the rain forest jungle in search of an isolated tribe. They welcome you, and you find that they live with an idealistic individualism and freedom only dreamed of by the staunchest Libertarian or Anarchist. They live in harmony with nature among the animated spirits of plants, streams, and prey. They also murder their friends, fear their neighbors, and cheat on their spouses. Philippe Descola transcribes the complex story of this people thoughtful, piquant prose reminiscent of the best in French literature. From Publishers Weekly The Jivaro Indians of ian Ecuador have earned a somewhat sinister reputation among travelers and anthropologists because of their custom, only recently abandoned, of shrinking the decapitated heads of enemies. Descola, an anthropology professor in Paris, spent three years living among a Jivaro tribe, and this engrossing, minutely detailed chronicle of daily life gets past exotic stereotypes to delineate a band of individualists oscillating between gentle anarchy and factional solidarity. Obsessed with bloody vendettas against neighbors or relatives, the tribal group nonetheless reverentially communicates with a world of spirits, plants and animals, with the wandering souls of both the living and the dead. Descola explores Jivaro shamanism, dream interpretation, polygamy, marital violence against wives and the Jivaros' loose-knit, fluid cosmology, which makes no effort to impose coherence on the world. Sprinkled with Jivaro songs, chants, myths and the author's line drawings, this lyrically precise exploration of a people's lifestyle and consciousness is a work of enchantment. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Descola (anthropology, Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris) recounts his three-year doctoral fieldwork in the 1970s among the Achuar Jivaro of Ecuadorian ia. This excellent translation of his dissertation presents the English-speaking reader with one of the few firsthand ethnological accounts of the famed head-shrinking tribe. Similar works (e.g., Michael J. Harner's *The Jivaro: People of the Sacred Waterfalls*, 1972; focus chiefly on the tribe's sensationalistic aspects. Other major books on the topic have not yet been translated into English. Descola's detailed account of the Achuar Jivaro is important because of the current controversy over the development of the ian region and its impact on native peoples. Descola is a gifted storyteller; his book reads like an adventure tale told around a campfire. Highly recommended for academic and large public libraries. [Bibliography and index not seen.] Cynthia D. Bertelsen, Virginia Polytechnic Institute Lib., Blacksburg. - Cynthia D. Bertelsen, Virginia

