

The Embedding, by Ian Watson

Xemahoa section

"... I may as well write to you as to anyone else—at least you will appreciate the uniqueness of this particular tribe. They call themselves Xemahoa, but they may not be around to call themselves anything for very much longer, in spite of the incredible last stand of their tribal shaman, their *Bruxo*—a last stand not conducted with bows and poison arrows and blowpipes however! They have so little idea of the enormity of what they are up against; what pawns (oh less than pawns!) they are in their own jungle home to the Big Players! Their Bruxo's attempts to deal with the coming disaster in his own cultural terms truly have a pathetic grandeur about them. And oh what a zany similarity to Roussel's poem too! What an amazing similarity to the mindsanctuary that our French dilettante built for himself. This is what astonishes me. When I am not livid with rage, I toy with the idea of somehow translating *Nouvelles Impressions d'Afrique* into Xemahoa B.

"I say Xemahoa B, since apparently there's a two-tier language situation operating here—and in Xemahoa B, if in any language on this vicious globe, Roussel's poem might at last be made comprehensible.

'... Their Bruxo is practising with amazing skill that deep embedding of language—that Rousselian embedding which we talked about so long ago in Africa as the most freakish of possibilities.

'To do this, he makes use of some psychedelic drug. I haven't yet pinned down the origin of it. Every night he chants the complex myths of the tribe—and the structure of these myths is reflected directly in the structure of the embedded language, which the drug enables him to understand.

'This embedded speech keeps the soul of the tribe, their myths, secret. But it also permits the Xemahoa to participate in their myth life as a direct experience during the dance chant. The daily vernacular (Xemahoa A) passes through an extremely sophisticated receding process, which breaks down the linear features of normal language and returns the Xemahoa people to the space-time unity which we other human beings have blinded ourselves to. For our languages all set a barrier—a great filter—up for us between Reality and our Idea of Reality.

'In some ways Xemahoa B is the truest language I have ever come across. In other respects, of course—

for all practical purposes of daily life—it directs crippling blows at our straightforward logical vision of the world. It is a lunatic language, like Roussel's, only worse. The unaided mind has no hope of holding on to it.

But in their hallucinations these Indians have found the vital elixir of understanding!'

'... The old Bruxo snorts this drug through a cane tube into his bleeding, rotting nostrils—and he aims for no less than a total statement of Reality uttered in the eternal present of the drug trance. And by achieving a total statement of reality, to be able to control and manipulate that reality. The age-old dream of the wizard!

'Soon, he will hold a giant embedded statement of all the coded myths of the tribe in his present consciousness. Day by day, in the drug dance, he adds more material to this statement of a totality of meaning—all the while maintaining his awareness of past days and past material as

something ever-present by means of the maka-i drug—despite the terrible overload on brain and body.

'Soon, he may achieve total consciousness of Being. Soon, the total scheme underlying symbolic thought may be clear to him.

'If this is true? That would be incredible indeed. In such a place! Such a "primitive" backwater! 'Incredible—and damnable. For just as this occurs, the genius-fly is about to be drowned, poxed out, poisoned—on that orange fly-strip of a dam! If only some of its poison might fall into the gluttonous feast of the exploiters . . .

'I take the opportunity of sending this cry of rage out by way of a halfcaste who is passing through. He should reach that bloody dam in about a week, and get the letter posted. He's cagey about why he's making the journey. Maybe he's found some diamonds—who knows? After all, this mess is supposed to contain El Dorado!

'I at least suspect I've found my own El Dorado of the human mind here—at the moment it is due to be swept away.

'They embed the Amazon in a sea you can see from the Moon—and drown the human mind in the process. 'To yourself and Eileen, my useless love. —Pierre Darriand.'

Later:

A cautious, inbred people, these Xemahoa. Had it not been for Kayapi mediating between us, I don't know how I would have got anywhere.

A useful man, Kayapi—but one thing he certainly isn't is 'my faithful Kayapi' or 'my man Friday' as that priest Pomar seemed to think. The secret of his devotion is presumably the tape recorder. I guess he follows me round and answers my questions mainly because of the machine. In its own crude way it apes the drugged speech of the Bruxo that Chris Sole would have called 'embedded speech'. By leaping back and forth along the tapespool it transmutes what I call Xemahoa A into Xemahoa B—or something like it. If I didn't have longlife batteries in the machine and it was running down and wheezing to a halt, my faithful Kayapi might be off soon enough.

Day by day I learn more about this remarkable doomed people. When I wrote that letter to England in rage and anguish, I knew so little of the true situation here!

Each day there are more clues as to the nature of this unique language, Xemahoa B. Only a drugtranced Bruxo can fully articulate it. Only a drug-tranced people dancing through the firelight can grasp the gist of it.

Their myths are coded in this language and left in safekeeping with the Bruxo. The Deep Speech and the Drug-Dance free these myths as living realities for all the people in a great euphoric act of tribal celebration—to such a degree that they are all firmly convinced that the flood is only a detail in the fulfilment of their own myth cycle, and that the Bruxo, and the child embedded in the woman's womb in the taboo hut, will in some as yet inexplicable way be the Answer.

Kayapi is pretty well convinced that the Bruxo has the answer too.

"Why are you staying here despite the water?"

He shrugs. He spits moisture at the flooded soil with a show of bravado—or indifference.

"See, I wet it some more. I give water to the already-wet. Shall I piss on it? That is how much I care for this water."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I've heard Bruxo's words, haven't you heard them? You keep them in that box. Don't you think them in your head?"

"I haven't joined the Drug-Dance. Maybe that's why I don't think them yet. Could I join it? Could I take the drug?"

"I don't know. You have to talk Xemahoa, and be Xemahoa. Otherwise it is a flight of birds bursting out of your brain, flying to all four directions, getting lost, never finding their way back."

We are still talking Portuguese, Kayapi and me. (Alone amongst the Xemahoa—because of his bastard birth— Kayapi has been outside, has travelled and speaks a foreign language.)

Nevertheless, more and more Xemahoa words and phrases are creeping into our conversation. But I didn't understand. Kayapi wandered off, shaking his head at my stupidity, leaving me as bewildered as before. He paddled his feet. I played back some Xemahoa speech, the A and the B varieties—the daily vernacular and the knotty embeddings of the drug speech in which the myths are told—myths which they trust, as Man has always hoped throughout history, will somehow reconcile the irreconcilable realities around them.

Xemahoa, uniquely among Indian tribal languages, has a rich vocabulary for numbers. They are the names of things that contain these numbers in some way or other: for instance a certain macaw's wing contains so many feathers in it. A different bird has a different number of feathers. Or perhaps I should say, so many feathers that the Xemahoa themselves consider significant. They hunt these birds for food, and feathers for decoration for the Drug Dance, so that this feather-number system strikes a special chord in their lives. Not in mine, alas.

"Sorry, Kayapi. I'm a stupid foreigner. Not a Xemahoa like you. I have to learn."

"Then I tell you a story, Pee-air. You listen and learn."

So I listened, and recorded Kayapi's story.

"Do you know how Man is made, Pee-air? He is made of a hollow log and a hollow stone joined together. Some say a round gourd but I think a hollow stone. Now the hollow log is lying on the soil one day when along come two snakes. One is a man snake. The other is a woman snake. The woman snake wants to live inside the log, but she can see no way into it. The ends are closed up. There are no branch holes in it. She is unhappy. She asks the man snake how she can get inside. He thinks he knows the way. He runs away and brings his friend the woodpecker, asks him to tap with his beak at the log to try to make a hole. But the wood is so hard, it hurts the woodpecker's mouth. The woman snake is still unhappy. So again the man snake runs away and brings another friend. A small bird named kai-kai. Kai-kai is lighter than a feather and sings a very deep long song, although he is so small. He sings the way the Bruxo chants, round and round, deep and deep. The snake likes kai-kai because when kai-kai sings, the snake understands how to curl round and round himself. You are listening to me, Pee-air? I am telling you."

"I'm listening Kayapi. My box is listening. I don't understand everything yet—but I will."

But Kayapi got bored with my not understanding and put the rest of the story off to another day.

A note on the Xemahoa language.

The form of the future tense is peculiar. I'm still not sure it is a true future tense. More like an emphatic present containing the seeds of futurity—a 'mood' peculiar to Xemahoa. They add the word 'yi', meaning literally 'now', on to the present verb, or else 'yi-yi', 'now-now'. Kayapi explained the difference to me by saying the present tense of the verb 'to eat' while holding his hand to his mouth and moving his lips. Then he held his hand further away from his mouth and pursed his lips and said the eat-verb with 'yi' added on. Finally he thrust his hand as far away as it

would go and made a tight face like a man sucking a lemon and said the eat-verb followed by 'yiyi'.

I interpret these three versions of the verb as 'now', 'the immediate future', and 'the far future'—but they are all treated as aspects of the present tense by the Xemahoa.

Odd that the weight of 'now' upon the present should distance the present into the future. Yet I begin to suspect that this is an essential feature of this remarkable language. If Xemahoa B—the drug speech—is as deeply self-embedded as my recordings lead me to suspect, then an utterance 'now' is already pregnant with the future completion of the utterance. It aims to abolish the spread-out through time of a statement—which inevitably occurs since it takes time to utter a statement (by which time conditions have changed and the statement may no longer be quite so true).

Another note on the Xemahoa language.

In fact the measuring of time is more subtle than I thought. They are able to use the same bird-feather words that count numbers to measure time past and time future. However, the 'numbers' of time are not fixed units. Instead they apparently modulate according to the context of reference. The same numbers can thus measure and quantify the stages in the development of the human foetus from conception through to birth, as in another context can measure and quantify the stages of a man's whole life.

Confusing enough for a poor foreigner like me! Yet it's an admirably sophisticated and flexible—if highly culture-specific—instrument. The qualifiers 'yi' and 'yi-yi' play an important part in this.

Thus the compound word 'kai-kai-yi' signifies 'x' quanta of whatever it is (of stages of pregnancy, of the ages of Man, of sections of a ritual) forward along the time-line; while, equally useful and ingenious, the term 'yi-kai-kai' signifies 'x' quanta from the present back along the time-line towards the past—back along that embedding stream of words that bears life along.

Kayapi picked up his story at the point where he dropped it a couple of days ago.

"Are you listening, Pee-air? Kai-kai sings a funny song. He tries to make the log laugh. Because he knows the woodpecker will never succeed in breaking a hole through the log by means of violence. His song is funny because it goes round-and-round and in-and-in. Because it sings the same shape of song as the shape of the snake when he curls himself round himself.

"Yet even this song does not make the log laugh. The log keeps his mouth shut tight. Then kaikai has an idea. Remember, he is so light. His claws are not like the woodpecker's heavy claws.

Kai-kai's claws tickle the log . . ."

I didn't recognize the word for 'tickle'. Kayapi demonstrated by tickling me in the ribs.

He tickled me cleverly—the way kai-kai must have tickled the log, in the story. He was trying to make me laugh. But I remembered about Profane Gaiety and kept a straight face. He smiled approvingly.

"So kai-kai tickles the log, till the log laughs. In the moment the log opens his mouth to laugh, the woman snake jumps in through the log's mouth. She coils round and round inside, before the log has time to spit her out.

"That, Pee-air," he proclaimed, smacking his belly with the flat of his hand, "is how we men come to have entrails. But woman still has a little of the hollow of the log inside her—that's where her baby finds the space to coil up in . . ."

"I'm hungry, Pee-air," he grinned. "My belly has a hole in it . . ."

He wandered off to get some dried fish—piraracu— which he gnawed on.

Today Kayapi finished the story.

"That is how entrails came to be, Pee-air. However the man snake wants somewhere for himself also. He moves on till he comes to this stone."

"Which some say is a gourd?"

Kayapi grinned.

"Yes, Pee-air, but I think it is a hollow stone. It keeps its mouth tight shut. It has seen what happened to the log. So the man snake wonders. Then he goes away and asks his friend the woodpecker to bite a hole in the stone. But this hurts the woodpecker's mouth more than the log hurt him. He goes right away. So the snake asks his friend kai-kai to tickle the stone, but the stone cannot feel what the log could feel. Kai-kai is too small and light. So the man snake goes and asks his friend the pigeon ('a-pai-i') to come and help him. A-pai-i treads on the stone, to tickle it, but the stone holds its mouth shut tight. So the man snake thinks again. He moves in front of the stone where the stone can see him. And there he ties himself in a knot."

Kayapi's fingers knotted themselves together, in a mime.

"When the stone sees the man snake tie himself in a knot, it forgets itself. It opens its mouth and laughs. And when it is laughing and its tongue is busy with Profane Gaiety and there are no words to guard its mouth, the man snake unties himself and leaps in quickly through the open mouth and ties himself in a big knot before the stone can spit him out. A big knot tied many times. That is how we get brains in our heads."

So this myth of the stone and the snake was their explanation for the origin of their embedded language.

Later:

Our own Western talk of time is all wrong. All out of shape. We have no direct experience of time. No direct perception of it. But for the Xemahoa mind time exists as a direct experience. And time shifts according to the infinitely-variable resistance of the proposition. Time can be conceived directly, in terms of the things around them in the jungle. The tail feathers of a macaw. The wing feathers of the kai-kai. It is while wearing such feathers that they dance time to the chant of the Bruxo!

Another thing that Kayapi's story tells me—these supposed 'savages' understand that thinking takes place in the head, inside the brain—and while this may seem a pretty obvious idea to us, let's not forget that the Ancient Greeks with their Aristotles and their Platos had no such idea.

The brain was just a pile of useless mush, for them.

The day after he takes the hallucinogenic drug Makai for the first time:

Pierre stared for hours into the dull green chaos of the forest that periodically came aflame with birds and butterflies and blooms.

There was chaos there, to a foreigner's eyes—but there was no chaos in his mind.

There was a dawn of understanding.

Or rather, it was a *memory* of the dawn of understanding—which he struggled to hold on to.

His nostrils itched with the memory of maka-i, as though they'd been bitten raw by pium flies.

The day seemed endlessly, timelessly, long, like a long track rising over bleak, lonely mountains from the valley of the previous night, which a mist drifted up from now, to veil—yet without there being any clear line of demarcation between the two zones. He must have emerged

from the experience at some particular time, he reasoned. Yet the boundary wasn't definable. The greater could not be bounded by the lesser. The perception of last night could not be imprisoned in terms of today's perception, when it was a vaster, more devastating mode of perception. Thus its bounds could not be set. How could a two-dimensional being who had been able to experience three dimensions set up a frontier post anywhere in his flat territory—and say beyond this point lies the Other? For the Other would be everywhere—and nowhere, to him. And as for clock-time, Pierre had let his watch run down and wore it only as a bracelet now. Time seemed like a useless ornament—a distraction. The sense of time he'd possessed the night before hadn't been time by the calendar or time by the clock. It hadn't been historic time, but a sense of the spatio-temporal unity out of which space and time are normally separated into an illusory contrast with one another.

In this three-dimensional flatland of ours, words flow forward and only hang fire of their meaning so pitifully short a time, while memories flow hindwards with such a pitifully feeble capacity to hold themselves in full present awareness. Our illusion of the present is like a single dot on a graph we can never get to see the whole of. It is a pingpong ball dancing on a jet of water, unaware of the jet. The jagged inkdrop of a thought recorded by the electroencephalograph pen.

Last night he had understood Roussel's poem easily, effortlessly, and entirely. He held its embeddings in the forefront of his head. Held and held and continued to hold, while subprogramme after subprogramme started in, deferred to the next subprogramme, and subdeferred again—and everything fitted together. Visual images of the embedded poem flowed within one another, all held together in a wheeling zodiac that spun round the deepest selfembedded axis in his mind.

Yet there had been terrible danger. He still sweated at the thought of it.

He had tamed the poem—and therefore the experience —only because he knew it so well already in its separate parts. Just as the Xemahoa already knew the separate elements of their coded myths, from childhood.

Throughout the Xemahoa chant-song, that many-part fugue of the Xemahoa B language, he felt his mind was splitting, flying apart, fluttering to pieces. He had feared the birds were all flying out of his head and near to losing their way in endless jungle.

It was Kayapi who netted his birds and herded them together. Kayapi saw what was happening to him and dragged him by the hand to the tape recorder, switched the poem on.

Kayapi knew the track of his lost flock of words.

Undoubtedly some measurable biochemical change took place within the brain—in its ability to process information, to hold vastly greater amounts before the attention than usual. Might it not even be possible that maka-i actually did convey power over Nature—power to intervene and change the world? For what was nature, what was the whole physical world, except information chemically and physically coded—and he who held access to the information symbols in their totality held direct access to reality, held the magician's legendary powers in his grasp. Even this did not seem totally impossible to Pierre, in the aftermath of his experience—though Logic and Reason fought against this fantastic dream.

"When you meet maka-i," Kayapi whispered, "you are TWO men, three men, many men. Your mind is great with words. You speak the full language of man."

"I got your letter, Pierre. We've come to do something about it."

(But don't say what!)

Pierre cried out some words in the same singsong way as the Indians.

Chester caught hold of his arm and shook him roughly.

"Hey Man, we got to talk to you. Snap out of it."

Pierre stared down at the hand restraining him, flicked at the black fingers with his free hand and said something that sounded more lucid but was still Xemahoa.

"For heaven's sake speak English or French. We can't understand you."

Pierre began to talk in French; but the syntax was hopelessly mixed up.

"I can't make head or tail of it," Tom Zwingler sighed. "It's like he's free-associating."

"The sentence structure is all broken up, that's true, but maybe he's trying to translate what the Indians are chant-ing—"

The End.

(?)