

Quarantine chronicle from Choachí: How to make salt from grass (while making smokeless tobacco)

Crónica de cuarentena desde Choachí: Cómo hacer sal de hierba (mientras se hace tabaco sin humo)

Crônica de quarentena desde Choachí: Como fazer sal a partir da grama (ao fazer tabaco sem fumaça)

Jimmy Weiskopf

Dossier: Reflexões e perspectivas sobre a pandemia de COVID-19

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Abstract

During the time of quarantine, writer and translator Jimmy Weiskopf used his spare time to make his own *ambil*, black tobacco paste, together with the vegetal salt that needs to be mixed with it, which is a custom of the Murui, an Amazonian group. He resorted to the published texts of an anthropologist friend and tell us the story of his experience. He concludes his account with a eulogy of vegetal salt as a proof of the ingenuity of humankind in difficult circumstances, which is as timely now as ever and as a corollary, the manner in which a combination of trial-and-error, intuition and a close observation of our natural surroundings can compensate for the gadgetry of experimental science.

Keywords: vegetable salt; Murui; quarantine

Resumen

Durante el tiempo de cuarentena, el escritor y traductor Jimmy Weiskopf utilizó su tiempo libre para elaborar su propio *ambil*, pasta de tabaco negro, junto con la sal vegetal que necesita mezclarse con ella, que es una costumbre de Murui, un grupo amazónico. Recurre a los textos publicados de un amigo antropólogo y nos cuenta la historia de su experiencia. Concluye este elogio de la sal vegetal como prueba del ingenio de la humanidad en circunstancias difíciles, tan oportuno ahora como

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siempre, y como corolario, la forma en que una combinación de prueba y error, intuición y una observación atenta de Nuestro entorno natural puede compensar los artilugios de la ciencia experimental.

Palabras clave: sal vegetal; Murui; cuarentena

Resumo

Durante o período de quarentena, o escritor e tradutor Jimmy Weiskopf usou seu tempo livre para elaborar seu próprio *ambil*, pasta de tabaco preto, juntamente com o sal vegetal que precisa ser misturado, o que é um costume dos Murui, um grupo da Amazônia. Ele recorre aos textos publicados de um amigo antropólogo e nos conta a história de sua experiência. Ele conclui esse elogio ao sal vegetal como prova da ingenuidade da humanidade em circunstâncias difíceis, tão oportunas agora como sempre e como corolário, a maneira pela qual uma combinação de tentativa e erro, intuição e uma observação atenta nosso ambiente natural pode compensar o engodo da ciência experimental.

Palavras chave: sal vegetal; Murui; quarentena

Did we hear you right? Sugar from a grass, which the eponymous cane is, *that* we can understand but . . . *salt*?

My confirmation that I could was the result of an experiment in preparing my own *ambil*, a bitter, black tobacco paste that is the complement of *mambe*, a vivid green powder, made from coca leaves, which is not chewed but slowly absorbed in the mouth. The two substances are employed as an aid to right thought, shamanic healing and community harmony in certain indigenous groups of the Colombian Amazon (preeminently, the Murui, formerly known as the Huitoto).

That experiment was a by-blow of the current quarantine. Some have taken advantage of enclosure to brush up on their guitars or finally waded through *War and Peace*. Though I, luckier than most, have been sequestered on a mountainous plot in the countryside near Bogotá, the suspension of all but essential services has affected me just the same, in that the source of the *ambil* I buy, a marketplace in downtown Bogotá which specializes in indigenous plant medicines and their associated paraphernalia (practical and ceremonial) was shuttered as well.

Mambe I had, but another twist to the lockdown (which I imagine others have felt too) has been a sort of moral stock-taking: in my case, of a writer's dependence on *mambe*. So, to inspire me, I replaced one plant magic with the other (*ambil*), until the latter ran out.

What to do? The solution was before me all the time, namely, my role as a copy-editor of the English version (Echeverri and Román-Jitdutjaano, 2013) of a study (Echeverri, Román and Román, 2001) of the vegetal salts which are the vital ingredient of *ambil*, done by a world-renowned expert on the societies of the Amazon, my friend, Professor Juan Álvaro Echeverri, of the Leticia branch of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

It is a true masterpiece which (a) covers every aspect of the subject, from anthropology to botany to mythology to biochemistry to home-cooking and

(b) finds a head-spinning concordance between the plant/animal/spirit avatars of each salt, the Murui's medicinal/shamanic use of it and its biochemical properties. That is to say, what might seem superstition to us is actually a rigorous science, expressed not in formulae but poetical metaphors.

To give a concrete example: some salts are so potent that the *ambil* they contain can only be licked by a shaman and when you compare the mythical reasons for that with the choice of the plants the salt comes from (and its preparations) and then with the concentrations of the minerals in that salt (zinc, manganese, iron, copper, among others), it fits in with Western medicine's knowledge of their effects on our organism.

In the course of polishing Juan Álvaro's text, I learned that while the salts which are mixed with tobacco in what might call the kosher *ambil* are mostly derived from the ash of the shoots or barks of jungle palms, almost any green plant has minerals and their soft parts are rich in salt, among which are grass stalks.

That tip remained latent until the situation I've just described. I had enough tobacco leaves on my plot for the one ingredient and tons of dry, green biomass for the other. Reducing the former to its essence was not that complicated, but it required a lot of patience. I threw about forty large, green, thoroughly washed leaves of tobacco into a pot of about 35 liters of water, lit a big fire of wood and spent about six hours reducing it to a half-liter or so of a clear, piss-colored liquid after filtering out the leaves. I could only take short breaks because I had to add wood to keep the flame high but also add water when it was about to boil over.

The next stage required a more controlled heat and was done on a gas cooker, adding manioc starch (*almidón de yuca*) to the liquid, which as it slowly evaporated, heightened my doubts about the results, until, at the last moment (and thanks to the starch), it thickened into a brown gloppy paste, roughly like treacle, which filled a small jam jar. It was so sticky, in fact, that a fair amount of it stuck to the spoon and sides of the jar when I transferred it to some smaller containers, pending the addition of the salt. The ideal texture is that of peanut butter but when I left it in the sun, it did become more firm.

That done, I moved onto the salt. My first attempt was somewhat unsatisfying. Grass I have but, this being the Andes, it is a semi-wild species, stubby and dispersed, and cutting and drying a sufficient amount would have taken days. Instead, I chose a creeper – its flower is a bright orange rosette – which is the botanical coronavirus of the region, capable of smothering nearly everything which grows on my plot if not periodically chopped and that isn't easy either, because the thread-like filaments which enable it to climb spread along the ground in thick cables which trap and trip you up as

you hack away with the machete. Also frustrating is that the many, many beans it yields look appetizing but (to my knowledge) are inedible.

By the same token, however, weeding them out left more than enough dry, salt-infused vegetal matter. So, back to the campfire, where I spent several hours reducing those stalks and leaves to ash, mixed, as should be obvious, with the ash of the wood, which was leavened with small chunks of charcoal that had to be separated out (by hand on this occasion).

The next step was to form what the indigenous fabricators call a “hammock”, here a t-shirt stretched between the four legs of a small, upturned table. I then placed the ash on the cloth and, slowly at first, poured a couple of cups of water on the drooping bulk of the ash. Now, as done in the jungle, the idea is the equivalent of the slow-drip paper coffee filter method, which (depending on the amount of ash) may take an hour to get a cupful or two of liquid. All that did was to moisten the ash into a viscous but impermeable mass. But as it was too late to turn back and book knowledge to hell, I poured on a good jugful and all once, the liquid seeped into the small plastic basin below.

Then came the tricky part, which had to be done with care on the low flame of a gas fire and equally threatened to result in the kind of charred residue at the bottom of the cooking pot you get when you leave your brown rice on the stove for too long (in this case, it was a smallish aluminum jug). And, again, at the very last moment, a miracle!: a brown viscous glop at the very bottom which, when tasted, was salty indeed! And left tiny flecks of true white salt sticking to the sides, too few to be of use, however.

At that point (the tobacco paste firmed, the salty glue cooled), you are supposed to mix the latter into the former. But, as I had learned both from Juan Álvaro’s study and indigenous friends in the Amazon, even the mildest salt may be harmful if you ingest too much of it. In addition, the small quantities of each substance did not tally with the larger ones described in his study, so it would have been useless to follow the conventional “recipes”.

Instead, I decided to advance little by little, adding a few grains of salt to a small spoonful of the tobacco paste and going on from there as I consumed the *ambil* over the next days. My conclusion: it was just about adequate: salty to a point but it still didn’t taste right. Now, by nature, *ambil* is bitter and this was too, but it was a kind of stale, moldy bitterness I did not relish much.

A digression is in order here. After several years of buying *ambil* over the counter, so to speak, I can distinguish the decent from the mediocre. The latter is literally nauseating and does not taste salty, which is no coincidence. Though I can’t give you the scientific reason for it, the salt (but not too much either) is what activates the genie in the tobacco and yields the desired effect: heightened concentration, clearer thought and sharper memory (like

tobacco in general, when it is not adulterated and/or abused). Further, the right amount of salt makes the bitterness not just tolerable but downright agreeable as well.

My *ambil* (the first attempt) thus put me in a dilemma: it wasn't quite up to par but having none would be far worse. Here, chance came to my aid. When my gardener cleared the vegetation that was blocking access to our water tank, he left a whole load of a tropical elephant grass known as *pasto imperial* (a forage for cattle widely grown in Colombia). It wasn't that I hadn't known it was there, but only when I saw the large, dry bundles of it on the ground did the fact that it would be ideal for my purposes register.

That was confirmed by the resulting ash, which was much finer and flakier than the ash from the abovementioned parasite (which had left a charcoal of its own, apart from the wood). This time, breaking the traditional rule that you shouldn't filter the ash (but remove it by hand), I strained it through the kind of square metal grid you use to remove the impurities from sand when mixing cement and with much less effort, its consistency was much better.

After pouring water on the ash, as before, I came to the nerve-wracking part: the reduction, which, as before, left a teaspoonful and a half of this gluey brown paste at the bottom of the aluminum jug. Now there was no doubt of its strong salty taste and after it dried out in sunlight, another miracle: the glop was transformed into gray granules of salt, the size of very small pebbles but easily crumbled into the grains you find in white salt. And when I mixed it with the tobacco paste, it was as though my *ambil* had been reborn.

True, it is still not up to the standard of the *echt ambil* I have licked in several thatched longhouses in the jungle around Leticia: it could be more compact and the bitter and salty taste better balanced. Nevertheless, it is flavorful and efficacious (as fuel for writing this chronicle, for example).

Having come to the end of the procedure, the reader may well ask, "what's this to me?" One might argue that vegetal salt is a marvel in medicinal terms, since it has a wide range of minerals which are vital to our health but it is not the only source of them and, as I said, if not used with care, it can be toxic, though if modern science were interested, we could easily remedy that. Would it help you to give up smoking? It did me, but most addicts to tobacco will find it too bitter, though, as a fantasy, I foresee the day when the fancy Vape stores will be replaced by purveyors of *ambil*.

Nor it is likely that the grave economic crisis unleashed by the current pandemic is going to force people who don't live on the seashore or a near a mine to make their own salt. Even if modern transport were to collapse, we could go back to the primitive trade routes which carried salt from the sea to places far inland in the Biblical era. In fact, there is a big salt mine in a

town about an hour from Bogotá (Zipaquirá) which has been continuously exploited since pre-Colombian times, when its salt bricks reached as far as the Aztecs.

Instead, I would rest my eulogy of vegetal salt on its proof of the ingenuity of humankind in difficult circumstances, which is as timely now as ever and as a corollary, the manner in which a combination of trial-and-error, intuition and a close observation of our natural surroundings can compensate for the gadgetry of experimental science. An outstanding example would be the premier plant medicine of the indigenous communities of the Colombian Amazon: ayahuasca (known as *yajé* here). As the legendary ethno-botanist Richard Schultes noted, ayahuasca results from the astonishing discovery (by pre-historical societies) that when you combine two and only two jungle plants (among a near-infinity of species there), you produce a shamanic remedy with unique medicinal and psychotropic effects. Nor does it matter if you doubt that it was a gift to those tribes from the spirits: any Westerner who takes it will tell you it works.

In the case of vegetal salt, the honor would be shared with other pre-literate cultures who lived beyond the reach of those ancient trade caravans, which *seems* to be confirmed by the fact that one of the few remnants of making salt from plants are found in native groups in two regions which are both tropical (and thus have an abundance of the raw material) and relatively far from the sea: the Colombian Amazon and a stretch of central and western Africa flanking the river Congo.

However, another, sea-girt Papua, New Guinea, is a warning not to leap to conclusions. In fact, recent archaeological investigations have shown that the pattern of trade was sometimes reversed and vegetal salts were exported from such places to the sea coasts, which would indicate, I believe, that their medicinal benefits counted more than their use as a food condiment, as does the fact that the Mayas of Yucatán also produced them.

The term “pre-literate” leads us to another facet of this ingenuity (and further questions the superiority of modern man). For the Murui and neighboring groups, making salt goes far beyond the kind of practical skills that are vital to survival in an agricultural economy, like knowing how and when to sow, harvest, process and conserve foodstuffs: an informal, hands-on knowledge that is handed down from parents to children over generations in an almost unconscious manner. As Juan Álvaro points out, “the interest in this substance does not only lie in its therapeutic potential or chemical properties . . . it has a central importance in their cosmogony, rituals and healing”.

And that cosmology is a huge, complex and elaborated body of overlapping myths, guides to right conduct, oral histories of the tribe and, especially, close observations of natural phenomena: a veritable encyclopedia which

obviously could never have been written down, much less circulated in manuscript or print. Instead, like the epics of Homer and the sagas of many primitive cultures, transmitting it was left to a handful of specialists, those whom anthropology calls the “singers of tales”.

Enter the Murui elder Óscar Román, the informant and co- (and key) author of Juan Álvaro, who taped more than 100 hours of his vast knowledge of the plants, myths and customs of his tribe, entirely oral but complemented by a wide reading of scientific manuals on botany, which had begun, decades before, when he was the guide for no less than the same Richard Evans Schultes.

While the traditions of the Huitotos are imperiled (like those of kindred groups all over the world), it won't do to romanticize him as the last of a millenary line of indigenous sages, first, because he is very much at home in our world, and second, because several of his sons (and others of the new Murui generation) are “returning to their roots” after a youthful stage of emulating the *blancos* and trying to recover traditions like the ritual use of *ambil* and coca. Nevertheless, given the erosion of the social and natural environment in which those substances and their uses flourished, it is doubtful we will ever see his like again.

Among the personal ironies of the current quarantine is that without even planning to (because the start of lockdown fortunately caught me on my country plot rather than city apartment), I've been forced back into the life I led, years ago, as a back-to-the-land hippy, first in Ireland, then in the countryside of Cundinamarca, though my economy depends far more on money than it did then and I now acknowledge that “growing your own food” has always been a hobby rather than a matter of survival. Nevertheless, the laborious task of preparing my own *ambil*, along with short stays in indigenous communities in the Putumayo and Amazon, have given me more insight into the praxis of self-sufficiency (as opposed to my former half-hearted adherence to an ideal then woolly at best).

Especially, the relative cost benefit of making versus buying my *ambil*. Considering the two days it has taken me to produce two small containers of the stuff, on the one hand, and the 80,000 pesos they would have cost me in the abovementioned marketplace, La Caravana in downtown Bogotá, where most of the stallholders are from the Ingano indigenous group – an amount I can earn from translating – my calling – in a morning (when there is work to be had, that is), pretending to be the master of my fate in that respect is ridiculous. Now, extend that to the indigenous producers of what I consume, deduct, say, half, for shipping the merchandise to Bogotá and the cut of the retailer, and you will have an idea of the plight of the indigenous economy in general.

I first became aware of it in the lower Putumayo at the height of the bonanza cocalera, where due to the low prices paid by wholesalers, the lack

of an infrastructure to conserve and transport perishable tropical foodstuffs, the inefficiency of crop substitution programs, among other factors, not least the inroads of guerrilla and paramilitary groups, growing coca was the only means of subsistence for many members of indigenous communities. However, since the traditional medicinal plant there is ayahuasca, the case is better illustrated by one of the homelands of *ambil* and *mambe*, Leticia and its environs. There, the problem has to do with the blancos' appropriation of lands for cattle-rearing, the advent of a money economy which revolves around tourism and the crowding of the indigenous inhabitants into narrow, ramshackle resguardos (many of them displaced from other parts of the jungle). One consequence is that the two plant preparations have become a commodity which is funneled into an urban marketplace designed for Western adulators of the indigenous and, lacking the money and/or the chagra, many of the indigenous persons in Leticia can neither grow the plants nor buy the finished product.

Still, that is only a minor example of the decline of the indigenous societies of Colombia. Is it any wonder that, as in the rest of the world, the poverty, overcrowding, poor hygienic conditions and limited access to public health services of semi-urbanized native peoples have made them especially vulnerable to the current pandemic? The other side of their exoticism is their exploitation, the perfect symbol of which was the untimely death of Antonio Bolívar, the cinematic prototype of the noble savage who featured in the film *The Embrace of the Serpent*.

Lamentable as all that is, there is still the question of the benefit which a privileged White man like myself receives from making salt from grass and smokeless tobacco from the leaves in his garden. Economically, little, as I have explained, so what about what might be called the spiritual kind. From my initiation into ayahuasca in the Putumayo 30 years ago, it has been clear that the enlightenment one receives from indigenous plant medicines is directly proportional to your participation in growing and preparing them. Though that is obviously beyond the means of 99% of us urban ayahuasqueros, it applies to the taitas themselves and one notices the difference between those who "own" their plants and those who buy the pre-packaged medicine from a middleman. Moreover, like Western doctors, the *medicos tradicionales* charge for their services, and ethically speaking, I see no great harm in paying someone to heal you (so long as they are skilled and act with good intentions).

To a certain extent, the same is true of *mambe*, with the difference that urban consumers can take it on their own and many debase it into a party drug.

By contrast, you can grow tobacco and grass anywhere in the country (or even a backyard in the city). Against that, however, the effects of *ambil* are not so transcendental as those of the other two, in my experience at least,

so I would have to be cautious about any claim that the *ambil* I make has heightened my sensibility or attuned me more to the spirit of that sacred plant, tobacco, than the *ambil* I buy (not only over the counter but also online). Nevertheless, I have noted one change which may be significant. Until the pandemic forced me to become a producer, I consumed store-bought *ambil* for years without any ill effects. Now, at the first lick of the remnants of the latter I still conserve, I suffer from nausea, asphyxiation and tachycardia. Of course, being less concentrated, mine is weaker but I suspect that the cash nexus (or its absence) also plays a role.

For the rest, a satisfaction akin to baking your own bread, marvel at the mysterious (and stressful) alchemy of converting what Taita Óscar calls “mute vegetal material” into an efficacious medicine and, a deeper, though still theoretical, understanding of what the master of a maloca means when he opens a mambeadero with the following words: “this is my *ambil*, this is my coca. They were obtained honestly. They weren’t stolen from anyone. This is my thought, represented by these substances and here I present it as it is, the word of the mambeadero, the word of commitment, in opposition to the everyday one that may lead to deceit”.

CODA: Since this article is essentially a cookbook, I have only touched lightly on the subtler spiritual/metaphysical aspects of *ambil*. Those I reserve for a future issue of *Mundo Amazónico*.

*The Spanish version of the study --*La sal de monte: un ensayo de “halofitogenografía” uitoto* – is available online at: <http://bdigital.unal.edu.co/3740/2882/lasaldemonte.pdf>

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