

# A writer writes on Amazonian plant medicines

*Un escritor escribe sobre las plantas medicinales amazónicas*

*Um escritor escreve sobre as plantas medicinais amazônicas*

Jimmy Weiskopf

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## Artículo de reflexión

**Editor:** Edgar Bolívar-Urueta

**Received:** November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. **Returned for revision:** March 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021. **Accepted:** March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021

**How to cite:** Weiskopf, Jimmy. (2021). A writer writes on Amazonian plant medicines. *Mundo Amazónico*, 12(2), 123-135. <http://doi.org/10.15446/ma.v12n2.91777>

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## Abstract

The use certain writers make of “substances”, like coffee, tobacco, or alcohol, to inspire themselves is an intriguing subject. Does dependence on such stimulants necessarily harm a writer’s judgment and ruin him in the end? Is it valid to condemn it as “addiction” when it is he or she who writes the book, not the bourbon or marijuana and what counts is its quality, not the writer’s character? Jimmy Weiskopf extends these concerns to three indigenous plant medicines of the Amazon with which he has tried to unleash his creativity –ayahuasca, mambe and ambil. Also basing himself on academic and indigenous accounts of their properties, he discusses their very different effects and comes to the unsurprising conclusion that there are no shortcuts to composing a decent novel or essay. Such plants may aid a writer, but they must be used with much restraint and especially, a respect for their familiars or “spirits”, which, in the indigenous view, are what animate an otherwise mute vegetal matter. In short, they are no replacement for talent, persistence, and hard work.

*Keywords:* ayahuasca; mambe; ambil; plant medicines; creativity

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**Jimmy Weiskopf** was born in New York, educated at Columbia College and Cambridge University, England. He has lived in Colombia for the past forty years and is a naturalized Colombian citizen. He works as a journalist and translator and is the author of *Yajé: the New Purgatory*, the definitive book about ayahuasca practices in Colombia and winner of a Latino Book Award, and *Ayahuasca Weaving Destinies*, a fictional account of his initiation in ayahuasca at a time when the Putumayo was plagued by the production of cocaine and a war between guerrilla and paramilitary armies. [jimmy\\_weiskopf@hotmail.com](mailto:jimmy_weiskopf@hotmail.com)

### Resumen

El uso que ciertos escritores hacen de “sustancias” como el café, el tabaco o el alcohol, para inspirarse es un tema intrigante. ¿La dependencia de tales estimulantes perjudica necesariamente el juicio de un escritor y finalmente lo arruina? ¿Es válido condenarlo como “adicción” cuando es él o ella quien escribe el libro, no el bourbon o la marihuana, y lo que cuenta es su calidad, no el carácter del escritor? Jimmy Weiskopf extiende estas inquietudes a tres plantas medicinales autóctonas de la Amazonía con las que ha intentado dar rienda suelta a su creatividad –ayahuasca, mambe y ambil. También se basa en relatos académicos e indígenas sobre sus propiedades, analiza sus muy diferentes efectos y llega a la conclusión nada sorprendente de que no existen atajos para componer una novela o un ensayo decente. Tales plantas pueden ayudar a un escritor, pero deben usarse con mucha moderación y, especialmente, con respeto por sus parientes o “espíritus”, que, desde el punto de vista indígena, son los que animan una materia vegetal por lo demás muda. En resumen, no reemplazan el talento, la perseverancia y el trabajo duro.

*Palabras clave:* ayahuasca; mambe; ambil; plantas medicinales; creatividad

### Resumo

O uso que certos escritores fazem de “substâncias”, como o café, o tabaco ou o álcool, para se inspirar é um assunto intrigante. A dependência de tais estimulantes, necessariamente, prejudica o julgamento do escritor e o arruina? É válido condená-lo ao “vício”, quando é ele quem escreve o livro, não o Bourbon ou a maconha, e o que conta é a sua qualidade, não o caráter do escritor? Jimmy Weiskopf estende essas preocupações a três plantas/produtos medicinais indígenas da Amazônia, com as quais tem procurado liberar sua criatividade – ayahuasca, coca/mambe e tabaco/ambil. Também, baseando-se em relatos acadêmicos e indígenas de suas propriedades, ele discute seus diferentes efeitos e chega à conclusão nada surpreendente de que não há atalhos para escrever um romance ou ensaio decente. Essas plantas/produtos podem ajudar um escritor, mas devem ser usadas com muita moderação e, especialmente, com respeito pelos seus parentes ou “espíritos”, que, na visão indígena, são o que animam uma matéria vegetal por demais muda. Resumindo, eles não substituem o talento, a persistência e o trabalho árduo.

*Palavras-chave:* ayahuasca; patú; ambil; plantas medicinais; criatividade

**T**his inquiry into the use of certain Amazonian plant medicines as an aid to creativity arises from one writer’s long experience of three of them: *mambe*, *ambil* and to a lesser extent, ayahuasca. It is written strictly from the point of view of an outsider to the indigenous societies which have traditionally used these substances. His aim is to learn what he can from their beliefs, but free himself from the constraints of their mentality. Even if he wished to swallow their beliefs whole, it would be impossible, due to the constraints of his own culture.

Nevertheless, it is not really concerned with a writer’s use or abuse of “substances”: alcohol, coffee and cigarettes are the usual ones. Rather, I would like to take the question to a supra-psychological level and delve into the properties of the abovementioned plants in the sense of their capacity to unlock the words of a writer, with the obvious proviso that the substance won’t make a writer stand out unless he also has the required faith, talent, perseverance and not least, the objectivity to distinguish between true inspiration and stoned raving.

Or to put it another way, what interests me much more than the danger that dependence on such stimulants will harm a writer’s ability to judge the quality of his work (and, to take De Quincey or F. Scott Fitzgerald) ruin him

in the end is, as it were, the mechanism of stimulation itself, abstracting the stimulated subject on the understanding that it is he (usually) or she who writes the book in the end, not the Bourbon or weed. Yet if the substance merely activates the genie which is already latent in the writer, then why does it work for some and destroy others? Perhaps the problem with the psychological focus is that it ignores the interaction between the genie in the person (call it his or her Muse) and the genie in certain sacred indigenous plants.

Having abstracted the personal, I must put it in again because, for better or worse, my subjective experiences of the three plants are the raw material for the reflections in this essay.

I start with the one my work has least depended on, ayahuasca. Known as yajé in Colombia, it is a psychotropic drink made from a jungle vine and complementary plants (mainly, a shrub known as chagropanga). It has been traditionally been used, both as a curative and magical substance, by a variety of indigenous communities in the Amazon basin. By means of the visions which it brings, it allows the native healers to divine and exorcise the hidden causes of illness, which are attributed to interventions by the spirit world. Above all, ayahuasca is a strong purgative which provokes attacks of vomiting and diarrhea, accompanied by nausea, asphyxiation, cold sweats and so forth. However, this cleansing of the drinker's physical or emotional impurities has a positive purpose: it serves to remove obstacles which prevent us from taking advantage of a visionary capacity which, it appears, is innate in human beings.

In addition, ayahuasca awakens a drinker's latent creativity. There are many testimonies to how it may inspire a person to paint, dance, write and, especially, make music. This was strongly impressed on me when I spent a time in the jungle headquarters of the Santo Daime ayahuasca church of Brazil, whose hymns, which they "receive" in the trance, are so electrifying that, at times, a verse seemed to leap out of the page and scorch me with remorse for my sins.

In my view, that pipeline to the godhead is less useful to writing. Music is a more sensual art, so it doesn't matter when your conscious mind yields to the "drunkenness" of ayahuasca; that rupture of logic touches a deeper level of the psyche.

That is not say that I have not received ideas for stories or the shaping of a text or loose phrases which encapsulate the sense of the tale. But, like streaks of lightning, they illumine for a split-second before vanishing into the ether and it is very difficult to retain them, at least with the same vividness.

Nevertheless, these inputs from the beyond still have a certain utility. There is sometimes a spillage into the writer's waking mind that may catalyze features

of his story that would otherwise remain dormant: words or structures or rhythms. And, as is well known, ayahuasca sharpens the drinker's perceptions. It awakens his or her latent sense of what is true or real or appropriate and if the writer exerts his willpower at a time when he is tired and dazed by the medicine, that may enrich his work. But to resort to the clichéd and usually misapplied metaphor of the Heisenberg principle, as soon as the writer ---this one at least -- uses a pen to "trap" the words in his head, they usually move to a position beyond his reach, a realm of vagueness, incoherence or delusion.

I have especially noticed this in that pleasant post-dawn state when, having been drastically purged, I am bathed in a supernal light which instills the natural world --plants, creatures, mountains -- with a breathtaking intensity and if I can withdraw from the lively conversations with my companions, retire to my bedroom and close my eyes, I hear what appears to be a voice from the beyond dictate whole passages, page after page, of stories or poems or essays. Knowing, however, that I am no state to write them down, I try to exert my memory but later, when I recover, I find that that voice has faded, leaving me the same fallible mortal I was before.

Of the three substances, ayahuasca best exemplifies the rule that the more intense the stimulus, the more likely the medicine is to drive me into a sort of mental frenzy which confuses, frightens and depletes the rationality which any writing worth reading requires. Passion is all very well, but detachment is no less important!

If someone were to ask me what I have learned from thirty years of drinking ayahuasca, I would say that one of the most important lessons is: beware of what I call the danger of "inflation". In simple terms, it refers to the way that the ego, with all of its ambitions to be successful, famous, wealthy, etc., infiltrates the messages from whatever the divine force is which governs the medicine, the ones which, in theory, are meant to instruct, chide, illumine and reform the sinners we all are. The result is a kind of megalomania, where all that I dream of doing or being is, or is about to be, realized, in the plain sense that it is already real, though of course it isn't: I am just imagining it. And not only the proverbial "Great American Novel": it happens on all levels, and mostly on the trivial one of waking up earlier or making more money with this or that foolish scheme. As the great sage Krishnamurti reminds us, "I can only really look at a tree when there is no observer, that is, when the fragmentary process of thought doesn't come into being".

Naturally, that blockage occurs all the time in our lives; what distinguishes the exaltation of ayahuasca perhaps is that it intensifies the dilemma, almost perversely, we might say, because it does give you glimpses of a higher and more transcendental reality but only to determine whether you are worthy of it, a test which almost everyone fails.

Furthermore, and by its very definition as a sacred plant, the insights you do gain from it are a forbidden knowledge, to be used with much delicacy and tact. This caution is a fundamental teaching of its indigenous masters. Thus, the challenge any creative writer faces with ayahuasca is akin to that of Orpheus, who descends to the underworld of death to bring his wife, Eurydice, back to the land of the living, but fails when he disobeys Hades' warning never to look back at her as they ascend. If he is daring, it is all very well for a writer to plunge into that maelstrom of words but after he has dredged up what he needs, he must never look back, lest the treasure melt into the mists of the otherworld. And the more ambitious the seeker, the more dangerous the enterprise: think of all the great poets who went mad or killed themselves.

Ayahuasca is simply too overwhelming to serve a writer as a regular stimulant or aid or crutch. The *taitas* (the name for the indigenous healers in Colombia) are the only ones who can drink ayahuasca two or three times a week, all year round, without losing their composure. Hence, I have turned to two other plant guides which are gentler but just as demanding in their way. They have no more worked miracles for my writing than ayahuasca, but at the very least, they have often loosened a writer's block.

The first is *mambe*, a powdery substance made from toasted coca leaves mixed with the ash of the burnt leaves of the *yarumo* tree. It is prepared by pounding the two heaps of the thus rendered leaves. You hollow a plexus-high log into a mortar and carve a heavy pestle from a hardwood; flex muscles, inhale, lift and . . . ram, ram, ram! In theory, the natural lime in the *yarumo* ash liberates the alkaloids in the coca leaves, but this reduction, *ad nauseam*, also contributes to the magic of *mambe*. As you grind, you sift the powdered leaves through a fine-grained cloth wrapped round a stick, then when the powder reaches a certain fineness, you repeat.

From what I've seen in the somewhat acculturated context of Leticia and its surroundings, the *preparation* of *mambe* is largely exempt from the ritualistic prescriptions found in ayahuasca. No blessings, no isolation from kids, dogs or women, impossible when it takes place in an extended family *maloca*. On the other hand, the ingestion of *mambe* (and *ambil*) at night by members of a family or community does follow certain rules, like a correct posture or letting each person speak in turn without interrupting. There are also rules for the harvesting of the plants. In any case, such protocols are only an outward gesture of an inward respect. The atmosphere of such gatherings is serious but not at all solemn.

When slowly absorbed through the mucus lining of the mouth – not swallowed – *mambe* produces wakefulness, a slight numbness in the gums and a damping of appetite. In contrast with ayahuasca, the effect of *mambe* is meditative, without the unsettling and sometimes violent confrontation with other worlds of the former.

*Mambe* sometimes triggers the same spate of apparently coherent words and phrases which arrive in ayahuasca, but insofar as it awakens, it is easier for the writer to retain them than in the exhaustion of the post-session phase of the ayahuasca experience. But not all that much, because of *mambe*'s opposite effect of over-excitation, aggravated by a swollen head. Nevertheless, I have turned a few of its dictations into comprehensible, though very brief, tales, rants, proverbs and doggerel verse.

The nutty/sweet *mambe* is complemented by the second, a bitter, black tobacco paste known as *ambil*, which also contains vegetal salts (usually from the ash of a burnt palm). The mystery of *ambil* begins with its preparation. While that of ayahuasca is essentially cooking and that of *mambe*, mechanical, the fabrication of *ambil* is alchemy. After reducing a broth of tobacco leaves and adding some manioc starch, you continue to boil down the liquid, and at the last moment, just when it threatens to evaporate, it agglutinates to your surprise. Likewise, when you reduce the water strained through a heap of vegetal (usually palm) ash and are just on the point of carbonizing it, the liquid crystallizes into the very active ingredient of the salt which is added to the tobacco paste. This uncertainty about the ends stands as a test of your faith in *ambil*.

Like its properties, the character of *ambil* is bitter and black. Whereas too much *mambe* may make your thoughts race, it won't overpower you like an overdose of *ambil*, which may not be that much. As your first puff of a cigarette confirms, tobacco per se may cause nausea, a sore throat, severe coughing, stomach cramps, tachycardia and fainting fits, and *ambil* is a very concentrated form of it. *Ambil* sharpens one's concentration and heightens the subtle "high" you get from *mambe*. The effects and taste of *ambil* are stronger than those of *mambe*, as I learned to my cost on several occasions when I took too big a dose and felt the same fire in the guts of an intense ayahuasca purge, with the attendant dizziness, nausea, loose bowels and panic.

While it is possible to ingest the two components of ayahuasca, the medicine, separately, it is rarely done on the other hand, it is not that unusual for a person to use either *mambe* or *ambil* on its own. In my own case, I used *mambe* for a number of years, with cigarettes rather than *ambil* as the complement, but there was something about its mental excitation which forced me to chain smoke and I eventually resorted to the orthodox method with *ambil*. But while that may have helped my lungs, coca in any form is a strong stimulant and it still failed to blunt side effects like insomnia (sometimes followed by nightmares), hangovers and ghastly purple patches, only perceived in the cold light of day, that sometimes led me to delete hours of work. At the moment, thanks to the quarantine, I am abstaining from *mambe*. It is not that it has interrupted my supplies: rather, as for many others, the pandemic has forced me to reflect on my questionable habits, so for now, I solely rely on *ambil* as an aid to writing.

My only justification for mentioning these personal details is that having gone through the abovementioned stages of use, I believe I have a feel for the difference between the two substances.

Nevertheless, since I, the writer who employs them, is, so to speak, both an observer of and participant in their effects, a strictly objective or semi-academic account of the two may not fully convey their perplexing characters, so I resort to the following observations. Many are cast in the form of epigrams because a series of pithy observations which are not apparently connected or sequential is appropriate to the nature of such plants. Nor is it arbitrary. At times, the teachings of the *mambe* sage take a baffling turn to random association. Since the ostensible purpose of his instruction is to focus, focus, focus on the topic at hand, that may seem odd, until you recall that, in general, indigenous thought does not follow our Western chains of reasoning.

## Mambe

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### Qualities

*Mambe* is coca but it is not cocaine.

It is a powder softer than talc.

It is the vivid green color of chlorophyll.

The longer the time spent in pounding and sifting, the better the result, but beyond the bio-mechanics of the thing, it is a reward for the steadfastness of the *mambeador*.

### Cost Benefit

Two, even three, hours may be required to prepare an amount that may be consumed the very same night by a family-sized group of *mambeadores*.

Add the prior harvesting of the leaves in the *chagra* –not too green, not too sear; not too high or low on the bush – and you have the puzzle which perplexes anthropologists about a subsistence economy where the effort invested does not seem to justify the yield. With so much daily labor gone to *mambe*, what's left to grow, hunt or fish?

This encapsulates the mystery of *mambe* as a *spiritual* food. Coca –however it is prepared or consumed – is an energy-booster, so, in theory, what is lost in time is gained in the augmented vigor needed to sustain an almost literal hand-to-mouth economy.

In this instance, nevertheless, the power of *mambe* has less to do with brute force than know-how. When the amateur handyman observes the skilled professional, he will see that his dexterity really consists of knowing what to do before it is done, so the professional gets down to the job at once, without pondering what tools are needed, where to begin and what comes next.

What *mambe* furnishes the indigenous farmer/builder/fisherman with is an efficiency of means, driven by *clear thought*, so the time lost in preparing *mambe* is compensated for by the time gained by not dithering.

## Clear Thought

To transfer that exalted right thought to the realm of conduct is not so straightforward. After all, *Red Bull* might make you more effective at chopping wood, but it is doubtful that it will illumine you.

By contrast, *mambe* enables you to propitiate and draw strength from the spirits of the forest: a communion with the plant that goes far beyond being physically energized.

The heightening of one's mental and physical powers merge, for example, on a walk through the jungle. It is as though your legs acquire eyes of their own which allow you to effortlessly navigate slippery tree trunks or knee-deep muds, while your senses of sight, hearing, smell and touch attune you to the fleeting silhouettes of monkeys, spikes of a palm, centipedes, etc. In this oneness with the medium, you *glide* along the literal and metaphorical paths of your life.

By contrast with ayahuasca, however, *mambe* does not take you on a journey to the otherworld's of monsters, fairies, angels and so forth. It may open a channel to the hidden realms, but this is more suggestive than direct.

Primarily, *mambe* is for immersion in the here-and-now. It turns on a powerful light in the psyche which clarifies both the external world and the inner one of the minds. It manifests thoughts otherwise confused or dulled by custom, worry or distraction. The green of a leaf is no longer the mental expectation that it should be green, it is instilled with its actual, hitherto ignored radiance.

## Cautions

Such blessings only arrive if there is right *intention*, and as with *mambe*, so with ayahuasca. For some drinkers of the latter, it is little more than a recreational drug. They manage to weather the same purge which reduces me to a jelly (as it should if you are truly to learn from the experience), get high, mouth stuff about communing with Nature, but, inwardly, they never progress.



*Mambe* is now treading the same imperiled path: from a secret to a revelation, to a therapy, to ...a business, losing most of its magic along the way. For many of the adventurous urban tourists who visit Leticia nowadays (Colombian as well as foreign) *mambe* is no more than a novel and cheap stone. And each who misconstrues it is conveying the news to a dozen friends in the cities they come from. The stuff is even touted to the newly arrived by the drivers of moto-taxis.

While wrong conduct is the use of *mambe* as a party drug, it won't do to moralize about "right conduct": in the indigenous Amazon offering *mambe* to anyone who visits your *maloca* is a gesture of hospitality. There is a subtle balance between purposefulness and disinterestedness, between concentrating on the answers to the questions you ask of the plant and opening yourself up to its randomness.

Thus, even with the best intentions, the writer for whom it is a secret weapon may be led astray, because it heightens the contradiction he faces when he agonizes over the *bon mot*: clarity and precision versus that which is fiery, original and bursting with life.

When *mambe* is his muse, his thoughts no longer tend to hit a wall or circle round themselves. The words he seeks stand tall in his mind. Their confusing skitter-scatter settles. He believes he has found solid; sound means to articulate his ideas and apply them to his themes.

But after pen is put to paper and time allowed to decant what is read, the perspective often changes. It is the paradox of ayahuasca, but in a more prosaic form. Ayahuasca *does* make you aware of an immaterial dimension of existence which may lead you along the Buddhist Eightfold Path, but only if you *already* have the capacity to be aware of it.

Injunctions like "discipline" or "reverence" can only be honored from an *a priori* respect for the sacredness of *mambe*.

Does *mambe* do the writing or do I? Insofar as a mute vegetal material cannot think, it is only a catalyst, the intellectual property rights remain mine. Insofar as I cannot express myself so well or fully without it, *mambe* remains the master.

Mastery involves a contest of wills which, ultimately, in the case of writing with *mambe*, is a contest with myself. While it may be that the plant powers me, it is my handling (or mishandling) of that combustible which counts.

Separated from its subject, the effect of *mambe* is only a charge or jolt to the senses which your mind can channel this way or that. The writer should avoid the temptation of resting on the sensations it brings – alertness,

animation, the awakening of dormant words –lest the charge dissipate into a valueless intoxication.

The maestros of *mambe* urge you to mentally set a purpose for the illumination it brings beforehand – it might be anything from solving a domestic problem to visualizing a picture you want to draw. Don't waste the high in escaping from boredom or depression.

A parallel rule is to avoid taking inspiration too far. Any nibble at wisdom exalts you, but you should be wary of hurrying for more or more when you don't have the capacity to assimilate it.

## Rejoinders

Yet for every rule there is an objection and more so for the writer, who necessarily surrenders to his muse, who, when she is approached with *mambe*, animates an otherwise indifferent plant.

This spirit is a voice or presence which manifests itself in your own thoughts, as a prompter, instead of a stern magistrate or aggressive extra-terrestrial invader like that of ayahuasca. It nudges, rather than admonishes.

And thus, what seems like a short-cut to the mastery of his craft turns into a very long way round. *Mambe* shows him the code book but does not reveal how arduous the decipherment of its messages will be, to the point where the writer will question the worth of the whole enterprise.

Ayahuasca, in the honeymoon stage, promises to be a miraculous shortcut to the self-knowledge you can only attain in meditation after endless years of aching knees before blank walls and meanwhile, little confidence that it will deliver on its promises. After its initial thrust of self-knowledge, however, ayahuasca often wanes into repetitive nights of “breakthroughs” which don't really solve the problems of your daytime life and shake your faith that its physical and mental tortures will redeem you if you endure.

When self-knowledge is the goal, you never know which practice is the hare, and which, the tortoise.

The writer must welcome the words *mambe* sends, even when they embarrass him. Otherwise, there would be no point in calling on its help. If, like ore that is dug up, they are of little value until they are refined, he should recall that without ore, there will be no gold. Only by welcoming them will he understand that all art of value arises from a frenzied mind (whereto after that is another matter).

*Mambe* triggers velocity, its pleasure becomes the driving force and it should be guided but not resisted. Let writers heed the counsel of Alexander Pope:

’Tis more to guide than spur the Muse’s speed;  
Restrain his fury, than provoke his speed;  
The winged courser, like a generous horse,  
Shows most true mettle when you check his course.

If he is to believe in himself at all, the writer needs to see the words in his head manifested on the page.

What one maestro said of ayahuasca is true of *mambe* as well: its spirit is that of a wild creature who approaches you with stealth and only speaks after you show it that you are no threat. Your haste will alarm the beast. No writer is going to master *mambe* overnight. It will take years and if he doesn’t learn from his mistakes, never!

## Ambil

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*Ambil* is raw food for the brain, *mambe* is the smooth, effortless pleasure of sweet chocolate.

*Mambe* is release from habitual thought, *ambil* is the handmaiden of focus.

The current crusade against tobacco ignores the fact that, first, it has been praised as an aid to concentration and short-term memory by a number of outstanding writers, beginning with Guillermo Cabrera Infante; second, the tobacco that was smoked, chewed, licked or snuffed was by far the most widely extended sacred medicine in the pre-Columbian Americas (practically from Alaska to Patagonia); and, third, in the form of *ambil*, its admixture of vegetal salt is full of health-giving minerals.

According to the indigenous maestros I have spoken to, *ambil* is the premier source of their power to heal and guide their followers, while *mambe* is only the food, or “sustenance”, which maintains that power.

Some even claim that the *mambe* is spiritless, but that would contradict their belief that, like ayahuasca, the medicine (which combines the hard stalks of a vine with the leaves of a bush), its magic is the result of its marriage to another plant: in this case, tobacco. You can hardly credit the inborn talents of a child to the father alone. And why not an *ambileadero* instead of a *mambeadero*?

In my experience, *mambe* does have a spirit and its voice is unmistakable. *Mambe* unlocks the words guarded who knows where in my mind and patterns them. *Ambil* awakens that part of my thought, but leaves the rest to me. It is also a stimulant, but a voiceless one.

To *mambear* by day in a *maloca* or any other social occasion brings about a lively and fruitful conversation. Using *mambe* by day makes you too drunk to *write*. Its genie shuns sunlight.

*Ambil*, by day and alone, does not dictate the words as *mambe* does. Instead, it augments the writer's alertness, concentration and memory.

The above is relative. There are factors (one's personality, metabolism, conditioning) which give you an *affinity* with some plants, but not others. Ghastly as the tortures of ayahuasca were at first, I immediately felt an affinity with it which has encouraged me to keep drinking the medicine for thirty years.

I feel a strong connection with *mambe* as well but the contract between us is different. I put *mambe* to a purpose, whereas when ayahuasca enlightens me, it does so with a purpose of its own. *Ambil* is the bitterness of trying to express what you think in words. No wonder that writers are so neurotic.

## Commentaries

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Even in the watered-down circumstances of today, the indigenous societies still understand that the benefits you receive from the three substances are directly proportional to your involvement in growing the plants and processing the raw materials into the respective preparation. A *mambeadero* often begins with the healer's declaration that "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".

*Mambe* and *ambil* are not regarded as a merchandise you buy in a pharmacy, as "medicines" are for us, but a commodity is exactly what they have become for the *blancos* ["White men"] who use them, to the point in Leticia, for example, where the urban demand for *mambe* is such that its many indigenous inhabitants who do not have enough land to grow their own coca can no longer easily obtain it from a neighbor (free or for a token price) and there are even thefts of coca leaves from the *chagras* of those who do grow their own.

The Murui, one of the most numerous communities who employ *mambe* and *ambil* in the Colombian Amazon, do not have a theocratic vision of an autocratic law-giver who is perpetually surveilling, guiding and chastising us. Thus, morality arises from *praxis* or the human trial-and-error which is codified in the oral traditions of the Murui. That being so, while the writer may energize himself with *mambe* or *ambil*, he is essentially on his own when he channels that force into creation.

Once again, however, due to the subtlety of Murui thought, we of the West must be cautious about interpreting the above in either/or terms of an ethereal versus a down-to-earth approach to life. As our own esoteric traditions recognize, the Word, in the sense of that which names things, has a power of its own, both for good and evil.

I didn't understand the profundity of that until, in an ayahuasca session, a storm of cursing from a companion infiltrated my trip with frightful apparitions and nauseating colors.

Respect for the Word is not the characteristic wordiness of our culture, with its mania for explaining our problems to ourselves (and worse, to others). Rather, it is the understanding that we are the servants of the Word, which will only serve us in turn if we employ it in a purposeful manner, with the right thought and right intention that lead to right action.

Nevertheless, to moralize about the "sacredness" of the Word would likewise be to succumb to our guilt-ridden Judeo-Christian view of the world and thus distort theirs. Insofar as the Murui [also known as the Uitoto] have a church, it is their ceremonial dance and any sermon comes from the two plants which animate the ceremony. To quote the same authority: "If one were to ask a Uitoto indigenous person about the meaning of the word *rafue*, the answer would probably be *'baile'*, because . . . in a relatively short time people can witness how everything begins with the pure word."

## Conclusions

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You cannot "trap" the meaning of life with words. For a few, nevertheless, it rankles, especially writers because words are all we have, so we might define any literature that's worth reading as a willful defiance of the limitations of language.

The entangled wills of the writer and his substances are often a source of conflict. But, along with many in the West, I am the kind of writer who is always fighting against himself, his society and existence in general and I believe that it is out of that struggle that a literature worth reading may be born (if the writer is any good). Precisely because magical plants disorient me so much, they offer a valuable insight into the perverse magic of words.