

Ayahuasca comes to the city!

¡La ayahuasca llega a la ciudad!

A ayahuasca chega na cidade!

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Reflection article

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Abstract

Ayahuasca has spread from indigenous Amazonia to the industrialized world, in the form of ceremonies catering to Westerners, a corpus of academic studies and personal accounts and depictions of it in novels and films. Considering that its original users were zealous about revealing it to outsiders and their traditional cultures were being eroded by the mainstream's society's colonization, its very survival is a paradox, in that the native *ayahuasqueros* have been both the victims and beneficiaries of its globalization. Thus, this essay traces the dissemination of yajé (the Colombian name for ayahuasca) from the standpoint of the author, an early participant in the rituals which began to be held in Bogotá by a handful of *taitas* (indigenous healers) in the early 1990's, whose number has since increased to at least fifty who regularly work in that and other Colombian cities. Then a set of closely related aspects are discussed: the disruptive socio-economic changes in the heartlands of yajé, like the Putumayo (especially the cocaine boom), which have impelled the traditional healers to seek new "markets" for their medicine; other focal points for its expansion; the clash between different healers about the ethics of providing their services to White men; the parallel establishment of ayahuasca "churches" in Brazil (with branches in Europe) which

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owe little to the indigenous tradition; the development of an “ayahuasca tourism” in Peru; and the legal status of the medicine in North America and Western Europe.

Keywords: Banisteriopsis caapi; chamanism; indigenous medicine; Putumayo; cities.

Resumen

La ayahuasca se ha extendido desde la Amazonía indígena hasta el mundo industrializado, en forma de ceremonias para los occidentales, un corpus de estudios académicos y relatos personales, representaciones de ella en novelas y películas. Teniendo en cuenta que sus usuarios originales estaban celosos de revelarlo a los extraños y que sus culturas tradicionales estaban siendo erosionadas por la colonización de la sociedad dominante, su supervivencia misma es una paradoja, ya que los ayahuasqueros nativos han sido víctimas y beneficiarios de su globalización. Así, este ensayo rastrea la difusión del yagé (nombre colombiano de la ayahuasca) desde el punto de vista del autor, uno de los primeros participantes en los rituales que comenzaron a realizarse en Bogotá por un puñado de taitas (curanderos indígenas) a principios de la década de 1990, cuyo número ha aumentado desde entonces a por lo menos cincuenta que trabajan regularmente en esa y otras ciudades colombianas. Se analizan un conjunto de aspectos íntimamente relacionados: los cambios socioeconómicos disruptivos las áreas de uso tradicional del yagé, como el Putumayo (especialmente por el auge de la cocaína), que ha impulsado a los curanderos tradicionales a buscar nuevos “mercados” para su medicina; otros focos para su expansión; el choque entre diferentes curanderos sobre la ética de prestar sus servicios a los “hombres blancos”; el establecimiento paralelo de “iglesias” de ayahuasca en Brasil (con sucursales en Europa) que deben poco a la tradición indígena; el desarrollo de un “turismo de ayahuasca” en el Perú; y el estado legal de la medicina en América del Norte y Europa Occidental.

Palabras clave: yagé; chamanismo; medicina indígena; Putumayo; ciudades

Resumo

A ayahuasca se espalhou da Amazônia indígena para o mundo industrializado, na forma de cerimônias para ocidentais, um corpus de estudos acadêmicos e relatos pessoais, representações dela em romances e filmes. Considerando que seus usuários originais tinham receio de revelá-la a estranhos e que suas culturas tradicionais estavam sendo dizimadas pela colonização da sociedade dominante, a sua própria sobrevivência é um paradoxo, pois os ayahuasqueros nativos foram vítimas e beneficiários de sua globalização. Assim, este ensaio traça a difusão do yagé (nome colombiano da ayahuasca) do ponto de vista do autor, um dos primeiros participantes dos rituais que começaram a ser realizados em Bogotá por um punhado de taitas (curandeiros indígenas) no início da década de 1990, cujo número desde então aumentou para pelo menos cinquenta que trabalham regularmente nessa e em outras cidades colombianas. Analisa-se um conjunto de aspectos intimamente relacionados: as mudanças socioeconômicas disruptivas nas áreas de uso tradicional do yagé, como o Putumayo (especialmente pela ascensão da cocaína), que levou os curandeiros a buscarem novos “mercados” para sua medicina; outros focos para sua expansão; o embate entre diferentes curandeiros sobre a ética de prestar seus serviços aos “homens brancos”; o estabelecimento paralelo de “igrejas” de ayahuasca no Brasil (com filiais na Europa) que pouco devem à tradição indígena; o desenvolvimento de um “turismo da ayahuasca” no Peru; e o status legal da medicina na América do Norte e na Europa Ocidental.

Palavras-chave: Ayahuasca; xamanismo; medicina indígena; Putumayo; cidades

“How, when Competitors like these contend,
Can surly Virtue hope to fix a Friend?”

London, a poem. Samuel Johnson

I have never posed as an authority on ayahuasca (or yagé, as it is known in Colombia), but, as witness and participant, I do claim a certain expertise on what I’d call its urban school¹ in Colombia, specifically Bogotá, and the

purpose of this essay is to explain how and why a then little-known ritual practiced by remote and apparently endangered indigenous communities reached the capital of one Latin American country in the early 1990's and later spread to the industrialized world (Caiuby Labate *et al.*, 2017).

By now, ayahuasca's penetration of Western society is such that there is a large body of printed and online information about its botanical, ritualistic, healing and esoteric aspects (Entheonation, 2021), including a book of mine, *Yajé: the New Purgatory* (J. Weiskopf, 2004). But while there is no need to repeat what is already well known, when I look back on the manner in which ayahuasca has spread to the urban societies of the West, I am more and more astonished by the story.

Spruce's first botanical description of *caapi*² in the 1850's wasn't published (in detail) until 1908, then virtually ignored until Schultes (1988) followed it up in the 1940's and though they were followed by other specialists – like Reichel-Dolmatoff (1969), an anthropologist, and Claudio Naranjo (2014), a psychiatrist, – right up to the mid-1980's (as I calculate), any non-indigenous knowledge of it continued to be limited to a handful of academics, government officials in the frontiers and mestizo colonizers who lived alongside native communities. By that time, moreover, the survival of yajé seemed doubtful. Such communities had always been secretive about their most sacred ritual, and their traditions were being threatened by the invasion of their territories by land-hungry emigrants from other regions, aggravated by the growing of coca and the incursion of guerrilla and paramilitary armies.

At any rate, it was in the mid-eighties that I first heard of it, from my ex-wife, a veritable explorer of the Amazon whose life is now narrated in our daughter's film, *Amazona* (C. Weiskopf, 2016), so, around 1990, I traveled to the community in the lower Putumayo where she had drunk yajé with the Siona healer, the late Taita Pacho, one of the first *médicos tradicionales* willing to share his knowledge with outsiders, partly because yajé itself charged him with the mission of spreading its wisdom to our troubled world and partly because he was a tolerant, widely-traveled and extroverted man who loved mixing with people of all conditions.

In the following years, thanks to the *universitarios* (educated urban drinkers) he'd initiated in the jungle, he was invited to Bogotá several times to give talks on yajé and also run sessions there, but that was very occasional, as were those of other healers, and it was hard for someone like me – with no academic or professional qualifications – to get access to those ceremonies, which were generally organized by a set of anthropologists who wanted to protect ayahuasca from “contamination” by the common herd, a snobbishness I hated at the time, though, looking at its subsequent vulgarization, I acknowledge their good intentions.

After that, the quarrel intensified between the “purists”, on the one hand, who believe that no one but a traditional healer should preside over a ceremony, the access of non-Indians should be restricted and only qualified specialists have the right to investigate indigenous shamanism (forgetting that the West’s discovery of indigenous plants of power owed much to “crazy poets” like Ginsberg, Burroughs and Artaud). And, on the other, the “disseminationists”, who believe that ayahuasca is the only means to awaken all races to the false values of our modern world.

It was evident during the inaugural yajé session of a sort of trades union of the traditional *taitas* of Colombia, when certain conflicts arose which throw much light on the subsequent expansion of ayahuasca. It was a controversial venture from the start, because, in any “primitive” society, a shaman yields to no higher human authority than himself, be it his rivals in a competitive (and sometimes paranoid) milieu or White men, who (out of idealism or naiveté) believe that acting like a Western doctor, who offers his expertise to all and charges a fair price for it, will lead to the prostitution of a sacred medicine.

It is only fair to point out that the UMIYAC (2021), the Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de la Amazonia Colombiana –UMIYAC (the Union of Indigenous Doctors of Yajé of the Colombian Amazon), which has consolidated itself since its founding about two decades ago, upholds the ideal of cultural autonomy, gives its indigenous members a leading role and has become an important international forum and pressure group for their cultures.

Nevertheless, it has failed to win the undivided loyalty of the *taitas* of Colombia. For some, its principles restrict their professional and spiritual independence. Others are wary of the participation of rival ethnic groups or after being victimized by our society for many years, have lost hope in any joint political effort to better their situation. If we add to that the informality of life in the jungle and a deep-rooted indigenous suspicion of the motives of White men, however well meaning, it is clear that the notion of a “closed shop” was never going to work.

While all of the healers I know *are* alarmed by the misuse of ayahuasca and many do welcome external support, even those who live in isolated places are not the simple sons of the soil many ingenuous *blancos* think they are. Just like us, their motives are mixed and, in their own rustic way, they are just as immersed in “civilization” as we are.

In the heartland of traditional practices, the coca-growing boom was a transcendental influence³. It put places that were formerly inaccessible by road or plane, or where a telephone or postal service was a rarity, in touch with the rest of Colombia and led to an unprecedented wave of mestizo colonizers who both eroded the native cultures and introduced them to (and, to a certain extent, led them to profit from) the modern world.

Nevertheless, the multi-faceted violence which has scourged those regions was inherent in the very same innovations which made life more comfortable for many of its inhabitants. That, the view of some serious studies (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2016), may be questioned. What cannot be doubted is that, proportional to their numbers (less than 1% of the population of Colombia), the indigenous people of those and other frontier regions have been the biggest victims of the massacres, forced displacement, recruitment of minors by subversive armies and selective murder of the political and spiritual leaders of rural communities which have marked the country's decades-long civil conflict. But, considering that such murders have often been caused by those communities' resistance to an alien war and some of them grow coca (to sell to traffickers, not for ritual use) or join the subversive armies, they are far from passive victims.

All of this has exerted a double pressure on the healers: one negative, to escape from a hellish situation and the other positive, to exploit the urban market for ayahuasca in order to support their families and also defend their society by forging alliances with their White followers who work in the field of human rights or help them to win grants for botanical gardens, the conservation of their language and so forth.

Nevertheless, the healer I'd call the pioneer of yajé in Bogotá, don Antonio, was from the Valley of Sibundoy, in the mountains of the Putumayo, close to the city of Pasto and the Pan-American highway, and generally immune from the violence of the narco-war. Many members of the Bogotá school do not realize that Pasto, not their city, was the real bridgehead for the urbanization of yajé in Colombia, insofar as it is the halfway point between the rest of the county and the jungles of the Putumayo, with a centuries-long tradition of exchanges of raw materials, foodstuffs and crafts works which, in turn, led to a certain degree of cultural exchange with the indigenous communities of what is known as the *bajo Putumayo*, that is, the lowlands of that Department.

Furthermore, Taita Antonio illustrates the falseness of a double myth about Colombia's indigenous societies, namely, that (a) they are all the same, whereas many regard other ethnic groups to be as much foreigners as White men and b) part of that sameness lies in the fact that they all live off the land and never venture beyond their ancestral territory.

His ethnic group, the Ingas (descended from the northernmost branch of the Incas), have worked as traveling herbalists for centuries and you can find still their stalls in and around many marketplaces in Colombian cities. By the time I met him, don Antonio had roamed round Central America and lived in Venezuela for many years and thanks to his shrewd business sense, built one of the biggest houses in the Valley of Sibundoy. He thus had the required know-how to take ayahuasca to Bogotá, aided by three sons (one now a famous painter) who were studying at the Universidad Nacional in the city.

The scholarships they were awarded are an example of the recent official redress of the wrongs done to the indigenous people for five hundred years, enshrined in the country's new Constitution (1991) and responsible for the legalization of their traditional practices, including ayahuasca, and a new generation of Indians, educated and at home in the mainstream society, who likewise have helped to legitimize such medicines.

Antonio may not have been the only healer in Bogotá at that time but he was certainly the most charismatic. Bluff, worldly-wise and somewhat autocratic, as he was, his broadmindedness attracted a core of devoted followers who drank with him every weekend (students, doctors, psychologists, artists, musicians and so forth), complemented by occasional drinkers of less sophisticated classes, so that sessions of thirty or forty people crowded into a modest apartment were not unusual.

Partly for that reason, Antonio's ceremonies were too intense to sustain for more than a few years. Another was the advent of competitors, a copycat phenomenon characteristic of Colombia. To start with, his rivals were only a handful; perhaps half a dozen I personally knew or had heard of. In the past decade, so many healers have followed them that it is hard to keep track of them. With the proviso that I am speaking of the five or six years before the pandemic temporarily halted many of these urban sessions, I estimate that there was hardly a weekend in Bogotá (or the countryside close to it), when around fifteen different *taitas* weren't presiding over their respective sessions. There may have been more, because disorganization is an important feature of the urban school both there and in other cities. With one foot in the jungle and the other in town and subject to the caprices of each, the healers cannot do much forward planning and depend on their followers to provide a site, so that news of a ceremony tends to be last-minute and spread word-of-mouth (lately complemented by social networks). Scaled down to their smaller populations, the same has been true of other cities, like Cali and Medellín.

I stress that the term "urban" refers as much to the participants in the ceremonies as the places where they are held, which vary from crummy inner-city apartments to splendid country estates on the outskirts of such cities. They also occasionally take place the eco-lodges which have recently been founded on the Caribbean coast and mostly cater to foreign tourists.

Those lodges are probably a presage of the next stage in the ayahuasca business in Colombia, following Peru: the establishment of ayahuasca retreats on permanent sites in its jungles or equivalent landscapes. In fact, a few have already opened in and around Leticia, which lies on the Amazon river route between Iquitos and Manaus that is also popular with such tourists. Nevertheless, that trend is still incipient.

Ricardo Díaz, who, through his website⁴, has been the chronicler of Colombian yajé (urban and rural) since 2001, roughly estimates a total of fifty healers in the Bogotá school, though some only visited the city occasionally and interestingly, not all of them have been indigenous, since one aspect of the diffusion of ayahuasca has been the growing number of mestizos from the frontiers who learn the basics from the *taitas* and then set up their own shop, one or another educated “White” person from the cities and conventional physicians who employ natural remedies.

I must now explain the motivations of the buyers. At first sight (and pardon the cliché) it has to do with the contemporary angst of living in a godless universe which leads to the longing to “return to Nature” or an adulation of primitive societies. But, since none of that was particularly novel in the 1990’s, why then and not before?

It can even be argued that the urban assimilation of yajé was merely the latest stage of a fascination with faith-healing that has been a notable characteristic of the country’s culture for centuries and, as some studies show (Pinzón, 1988), were responsible for ceremonies in its cities long before then, though, in contrast with the urban school I refer to, they were sporadic, ignored by the academy or media and limited to the lower classes. They merged into a broader phenomenon of *brujería* – white (and black) magic, fortune telling, the summoning of spirit forces, etc. – found in many parts of Latin America to this very day. The Ingas of the upper Putumayo played a pioneering role in this market after they emigrated from their homeland to avoid being drafted to fight in the frontier war between Colombia and Peru in the mid-1930’s. A few decades later, a similar trend was seen when indigenous *ayahuasqueros* began to hold ceremonies in the small provincial cities within reach of their jungle settlements in the Putumayo and Caquetá, Mocoa being a good example (Cline, 2013; Taussig, 1991)⁵.

Due to a mysterious convergence of political, economic, demographic, technological and cultural changes in Colombia – mysterious because they’d been evolving for many years – the urbanization of ayahuasca reached a tipping point in the 1990’s. Despite the clannish nature of the abovementioned core of educated and sophisticated drinkers, ordinary people (for example, housewives, office workers, small businessmen) also turn up, though more for reasons of health than a journey to the stars. While the origins of the urban school were based on personal contacts among the “enlightened few”, its subsequent popularity owes much to the mass media (and the internet now), so that millions of Colombia have at least heard of it and are already receptive to natural medicine. Indeed, their abandonment of a centuries-long belief that the practitioners of indigenous medicine were evil sorcerers may be the most remarkable change of all.

Just as Pasto has as much of a claim to being the pioneer of the urban school in Colombia as Bogotá, Peru may have anticipated Colombia. First, it

has long attracted many more foreign tourists than Colombia, some of whom came across ayahuasca when they went to its jungle provinces, and told their friends about the medicine when they returned to Europe or the United States. Second, as in Colombia, there were exchange visits between educated persons in Quito and the indigenous shamans in those places.

As an example, I cite the following from a book by Carlos Suárez (2020), a Spanish ethnographic investigator, now based in Leticia, who, after hearing about the ceremonies there from another person in Spain, first drank the remedy with a Shipibo shaman who lives near Pucallpa.

A previous visitor to that community was a doctor from Lima, who, in the words of its shaman: “took me to do a ceremony in the capital with fifteen doctors on the same night. When it was over, all of the doctors called me “*maestro*” and thanked me”.

However, based on a few trips to Iquitos (where I drank the remedy and talked to ayahuasca entrepreneurs, healers and similar interested parties) and information about other areas from knowledgeable foreigners, my admittedly superficial impression is that Peru is a warning to Colombia of what happens when a society, encouraged by its government, turns its exotic cultures into a sector of the economy. The shamans in Iquitos, Pucallpa and similar centers of the medicine are often mestizos who no longer speak the language of their indigenous ancestors, practice their customs or live in ethnic communities, so they only have a vague notion of the cultural roots of ayahuasca and/or follow the traditions in a mechanical way. Many only cater to tourists (sometimes as the employees of the foreign owners of ayahuasca lodges). I also imagine that the resentment caused by the commercialization of their sacred medicine has reached authentic indigenous healers in remoter parts of the Peruvian jungle. I may be wrong, but where sociology fails, I rely on intuition and, for now, the swarm of cigar-store Indians who hawk ayahuasca to naive gringos in the Plaza de Armas of Iquitos tells me all I need to know.

From my experience of Santo Daime, Brazil is a case apart, starting with its origins. To quote my own review of a book on the country’s ayahuasca groups (J. Weiskopf, 2006):

In contrast to Colombia and Peru, where the diffusion of ayahuasca to urban or tourist contexts has been done by healers (be they Indian or mestizo) who roughly follow the indigenous tradition, the Brazilian churches grew out of the *caboclo* population of itinerant Blacks or Creoles, many of them *nordestinos* from the eroded lands of the country’s northeast, who began to penetrate the jungle frontiers with Peru and Bolivia in the early 20th century, mainly working as rubber-gathers. There, they picked up a knowledge of the plants and preparations from the Indians of the neighboring countries and then, in the isolation of remote jungle communities where orthodox Christian

influences were not particularly strong, evolved their own autonomous, semi-Catholic version of ayahuasca. Indeed, for a good part of the 20th century such churches (which is what they call themselves) were lost in the ocean of evangelical cults that exist in Brazil, and it was only a few decades ago that they began to attract the interest of hippies, urban intellectuals and the like. Its higher profile provoked charges that ayahuasca was a drug and led to a serious study by the Brazilian government, some of whose officials drank ayahuasca themselves, which resulted in its legalization. In this respect Brazil is a lot more enlightened than most of the developed countries” (J. Weiskopf, 2006).

Since then, Santo Daime, the largest church, has established centers on the outskirts of many big cities in Brazil and expanded to certain countries in Western Europe. Since its ceremonies are much more frequent there, it is probable that more European *ayahuasqueros* owe their knowledge of the medicine to Daime rather than the Colombian and Peruvian shamans who only go there occasionally. However, some of those Daime churches have had a troubled existence, due to the prohibitionist attitude of the authorities in Europe. When they are not banned outright, the medicine they import from Brazil is confiscated and, in a few cases, their leaders have been imprisoned.

This raises the complicated question of the legality of ayahuasca. Peru seems to be the only country in the world where ayahuasca is definitively legal. So far as I know, Santo Daime and its sister churches are legal in Brazil. In Colombia, the ceremonies are in a gray area. According to its new Constitution, the indigenous communities enjoy the right to carry on with their traditional cultural practices, including, one supposes, ayahuasca. But while it is not clear whether that extends to others who heal with or drink the remedy, its use has been tolerated for decades and, since its governments face much more serious problems, that is unlikely to change.

In Europe, that tolerance varies from country to country (and, in some, virtually from month to month). Combining the accounts I have heard from contacts in Europe or Colombians who travel there with the “legal status map” on the website (ICEERS, 2022) of the International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research & Service (ICEERS), an international NGO devoted to “integrating the traditional use of substances declared to be illicit as therapeutic tools in society”, governmental ayahuasca policies in Europe seem to lie along a spectrum ranging from strict prohibition (England and France) to prohibition with uneven enforcement (Germany) to different (and inconsistent) degrees of tolerance (Denmark, Holland, Spain, Italy) to de facto legality (Portugal).

As “inconsistent” indicates, the salient characteristic is an utter confusion on the part of their respective judicial, legislative and police authorities, given the clash between a deep-rooted prohibition of “narcotics” or “drugs” on the

grounds of public health, on the one hand, and, on the other, the campaigns of a growing number of distinguished scientists, academics, intellectuals, lawyers and religious leaders who point to the medical and spiritual benefits of traditional shamanic medicines, with the help of creditable international NGOs like the ICEERS.

Cutting through the contradictions, however, it is clear that Holland, which has long been the country with the most enlightened drug policies, is the center of ayahuasca practices in Europe. To quote the website, “Despite the illegality of ayahuasca in the Netherlands, there are many groups using the brew throughout the country, including Santo Daime churches, a small new group from the União do Vegetal (UDV), and a myriad of therapeutic groups, shamanic and neo-shamanic practitioners. In fact, the Netherlands is one of the main ayahuasca hubs in Europe, perhaps due to its liberal drug laws” (ICEERS, 2022).

The United States is the most drastic in the industrialized world, and classifies ayahuasca as a hard drug. But it also allows you to buy the plants on the internet and grow them in your greenhouse (so long as you don’t cook them!) and, according to the same map, “Two syncretic [Brazilian] Christian churches have been granted exemptions to legally use it based on religious freedom: The União do Vegetal (UDV) and the Santo Daime” (ICEERS, 2022).

But free-lance *ayahuasqueros* shouldn’t misinterpret that, as shown by the trials of an indigenous healer from the valley of Sibundoy, in the Putumayo, who (doubtlessly misinformed) went to the United States in the naïve hope of holding sessions in that country and was then arrested: but he was fortunately released after an international protest.

Canada, for its part, follows the general pattern of Europe: a general prohibition, some religious exemptions and campaigns to legalize its use. Among the countries to which ayahuasca has reached there are a few exotic outliers, like Israel (where, despite prohibition, there is a lively underground ayahuasca movement, reports the ICEER), Australia (in the hippy enclave in the tropical province of Darwin) and even Thailand, according to an online advert for a rural ayahuasca retreat there.

As with other illicit substances, the result of prohibition is their clandestine use. Anyone who is in the know can find places to try ayahuasca in the countries where it is prohibited, but doing so is hazardous and the price they pay for the privilege is outrageous.

The influence of Daime has also spilt over to Argentina, which offers a relatively easy access to Brazil. There are also sessions run by itinerant mestizo shamans from Peru.

As I was at first, a disciple of the *taitas* will be wary of the Christian orientation of Santo Daime, but when you look into the depths, you find a

mixture of indigenous, Afro-Brazilian and Kardec spiritist influences, among others, in line with Daime's formal title of the "Eclectic Church of the Flowing Light" and characteristic, in turn, of the syncretism of Brazilian culture.

Another stumbling block for me had to do with the organization of their rituals. In Colombia, you are allowed to spend the whole night in your hammock or interact with other patients, so long as you do not disturb their trips. By contrast, the Daime ceremonies are regimented, following a strict protocol of dress, placement and singing hymns in unison (with accompanying dances).

However, when I became more familiar with their hymns (both the music and verses), I enjoyed some sublime experiences and gradually understood that instead of imposing a single view of God, they invite you to drink from a common well of religious beliefs and interpret that inspiring force anyway you like, so that, for example, the Virgin Mary is another emanation of Iemanjá, the African goddess of the sea, who may likewise be Pachamama, the indigenous Mother Nature.

Though not free of doctrinal disputes, I sense that Daime has leapt right over the quarrel about the popularization of yajé in Colombia and come up with a use of it that is "authentic" in its way without being "traditional" or imposing rules about who merits the privilege (in contrast with another Brazilian ayahuasca church, the União do Vegetal, which is more selective and, some say, too elitist).

To better explain that, I would make a distinction between the tradition of ayahuasca and its *source*. Since the former has been moribund for a long time, clinging to it is not only futile but fosters a nostalgia about a golden age of ayahuasca that never was which led a Colombian doctor who helped found the abovementioned "Union of Indigenous Yajeceros of the Colombian Amazon" to make the dubious claim that "he who is familiar with the true value of indigenous yajé would never wish to experience it in another context". On the contrary, I'd claim that familiarity with indigenous yajé enables you to appreciate the value of other schools.

As a myth which the *taitas* sustain themselves on, "purity" may be legitimate but they themselves admit that it was also an age when shamanistic sorcery was a weapon in inter-tribal rivalries and, in turn, may have served as a check on the amalgamation of settlements which would have exhausted their natural resources. Taussig also notes that a belief in "evil spirits" may have enabled those societies to explain and resign themselves to a cruel environment.

Times change and I strongly believe that ayahuasca must change with them if it is to have the timeless and universal validity we non-native drinkers attribute to it. When I say a school of ayahuasca is authentic, I mean that it is *vital*. Any culture that touches us (of ayahuasca or anything else) is always

evolving, without losing the immutable spirit that animates it. You only have to compare those sterile folklore programs on Welsh TV with the shoddiness of modern Wales to understand how useless it is to preserve the shell of moribund traditions and lose the kernel. Now, the “indigenist” drinker may sneer at Daime for drawing on a jumble of incongruous or diluted influences, but, taken as a whole, they make their practices *vigorous* and close to the essence of ayahuasca.

To further justify my belief that those who learn from the *taitas* are in a privileged position, I’d add another term, “founders”, to denote that they descend from the originators of the whole thing more closely than anyone else.

First, in a geographical sense, insofar as the overwhelming majority of the healers in the urban school of Colombia come from a region – the lower basins of the rivers Putumayo and Caquetá – which has been recognized as a crucial nucleus of indigenous ayahuasca ever since the first missionaries penetrated the jungles in early colonial times. Despite the harm done by mestizo colonization and the narcotics trade which has accelerated it, the rainforests there are still robust enough to support what I’d call the infrastructure of the rituals: the plants, firewood to cook them with and subtler elements like tranquil sites for the ceremonies and the proximity of the real and invisible creatures who activate their power.

Next, in the sense of community. Once again, to puncture illusions about the noble savage, I am speaking comparatively when I note that many of the healers of the urban school live in indigenous reserves, which (on paper at least) are self-governing and enjoy the right to an autonomous culture. The truth is that even remote ones are vulnerable to external pressures nowadays, ranging from subversives to missionaries to petroleum companies (one of which is now threatening a large area of virgin forest in the community of Taita Pacho), and the mixture of different ethnic groups in some (along with the presence of mestizos) makes the ideal of conserving their ethnic identity questionable. In reserves which are more accessible, the supposed antidote, the budding eco-tourism industry, will probably turn them into lifeless museums.

The “traditional authorities” (or elders of the tribe) are generally fighting a losing battle against the abandonment of their customs by the younger generation, who are increasingly seduced by our consumer society and uninterested in (if not ashamed of) of their grandparents’ beliefs, languages, and rituals.

They nevertheless serve as sanctuaries for practices that might otherwise die out. Instead of the acculturation of the younger Indians, an optimist would put the stress on the small but very committed circle of apprentices the same healers are forming in their communities. They also give the urban followers of the *taitas* an opportunity for a “higher education” in shamanism. Even in

the most violent period of the narco-war, when such places were dangerous for outsiders, some *universitarios* who'd become friendly with the healers in Bogotá would visit their jungle homes to do ayahuasca at the "source" (their word, not mine). These excursions, which are much more frequent in the milder political climate of today, have brought about an exchange of knowledge that transcends the ceremonies the urban drinkers participate in, for whom they amount to a guided tour of a very foreign country, and, by extension, it nourishes the vitality of their school.

Finally, there is *transmission*, both in the ordinary sense of passing knowledge from one generation to the next and the esoteric one of an anointment of sacred powers. I doubt Taita Pachó's boast that he was "*el último sabedor*", the last of the high priests of yajé, and the Capuchin boarding school he attended shows that the Putumayo wasn't unspoiled when he was growing up, but it was an age when conveniences which are now common in the jungle, like metal roof tiles, outboard engines and even manufactured salt, were, if not unknown, then startling and costly novelties; the Indians still spoke their languages (which were prohibited in the missionary schools); and the ceremonies more or less followed the traditional forms, so it can be assumed that he wasn't exaggerating much when he said that *his* maestro and father-in-law, Taita Arsenio, was a formidable figure of the old school: a wizard, healer and councilor whose word was law in their community.

While some of the sons Pachó trained now preside over sessions, they themselves acknowledge that he was the last link in a long chain irretrievably ruptured by modern times. But that he was weaker than the previous ones counts much less, I believe, than the chance we *universitarios* had to get a faint grasp of that lineage. When I think about that, the resuscitation of yajé (however bastardized) seems even more astonishing, because if the birth of the urban school had happened a little later, its followers would have been deprived of that admittedly remote connection with the founders. While not unique and unsurpassable, drinking yajé in the jungle with Pachó *was* a special experience for his urban disciples.

That leads to the question of whether there are regions where indigenous ayahuasca is still "unspoiled". The preponderance of healers from Caquetá-Putumayo in the urban school shouldn't mislead us into thinking that it is the only or most instructive nucleus in Colombia. There are a number of regions, like the one around Leticia, where indigenous societies with no particular history of yajé have absorbed it from other groups and combine it with their own sacred plants, especially coca. Moreover, since the jungles of Colombia are vast, its customs varied and parts of it still little known, it is difficult to make a precise inventory of the rituals there or determine how traditional they are and not just in the Amazon: the study of uses of the ayahuasca plant by Afro-Colombian communities in the Chocó (the Pacific rainforest) and indigenous ones in the Llanos (Eastern Prairies) is still incipient⁶.

However, generalizing from an account I heard from a National Parks official, one of the very few White men to attend them there, the region of the Alto Río Negro, near the juncture of the Amazon and Orinoco, may be one of the last remnants of the ones reported by the earliest ethnographers in that they are limited to members of the community, require a previous “diet” (abstention from sex and rich foods) and the participants, in body paint, engage in collective dances and chants.

A possibility in Brazil is even more intriguing. If you look at a large-scale map of the Brazilian Amazon and trace a line a little northwest from the headquarters of Santo Daime in Mapiá past a colony it recently founded along the river Juruá, you find yourself at the antechamber of an area of 10 million hectares of virgin jungle, with the largest number of uncontacted tribes in the world – the “Terra Indígena Vale do Javari” – which is still practically a blank spot on the *mapis mundi* and also inhabited by isolated (though not undiscovered) groups who practice ayahuasca.

From what I surmise, however, any expedition to the Shangri-La of ayahuasca will probably end in failure. As a general rule, I’d state that the expeditionary will encounter an irresolvable either/or paradox: a) the less spoiled a wilderness, the more lawless it is, but, even in places that *are* secure: b) the less acculturated the ethnic group, the more it keeps its sacred plants secret, substantiated by many explorers who stumbled across ayahuasca in the good old days.

While they are more shielded by their remoteness, the communities in the Alto Río Negro face threats similar to ones in the Putumayo or other frontiers, in their case, illegal gold mining, missions and a growing influence of the money economy, while in the Vale do Javari traffickers, contrabandists and outlaws take advantage of a blank spot on the map. In addition, the Brazilian authorities prohibit access to that reserve except to very few Westerners (missionaries, above all) and they, in turn, face the danger of tribes who, at best, are hostile and, in some cases, violent, but the same FUNAI is unable to control the penetration of its border with Peru by illegal logging.

Final Reflections

As a beneficiary of the opening up of ayahuasca, I can hardly complain that the urban school is a very distant and watered-down version of the original, but that doesn’t stop me from having serious reservations of where it is going today. As with the massification of any market, as a product becomes cheaper and more available, its quality suffers.

The setting isn’t such a problem, because, as I have said, the ceremonies of the Bogotá school have often taken place in the Alpine countryside surrounding

the city and sometimes in hotter places which offer a fair simulacrum of the jungle. On the other hand, more and more people participate in them and it is difficult for a single *taita* to harmonize the immaterial currents which the medicine awakens in 60 or 80 drinkers, let alone properly heal those who are physically or emotionally ill. The result is that those ceremonies are usually managed like an assembly-line in which the seated participants are arranged in rows and the *taita*, wielding his feather-fan and with the aid of assistants, cleanses them with his chants and conjurations, on the run, as it were.

I grant that, as with Daime, the presence of so many people sometimes raises a potent energy which enriches the experience but my feeling is that it is offset by a lack of the intimacy you encounter when you drink in the jungle home of a *taita* with his family and a few neighbors. The closer you are to the maestro and his culture, the more you will learn.

As in any expanding market, the urban school likewise attracts healers who are inexperienced, unqualified or only in it for the money. There are some who serve the brew, chant a little and then go to sleep for the rest of the night and others, dressed like the first in the best ceremonial gear, who only go through the motions of the ritual without communicating with the spirits of the plants. The worst perhaps are those who attribute a patient's illness or depression to an evil spell wrought by an envious neighbor or business rival and then charge extra for lifting it.

Nor can the ethical *taitas* be blamed for making concessions to our mistaken notions about ayahuasca, since they do it in the name of the higher good of enlightening people of all nations and in any case, cannot practice their profession without yielding a little to the whims of their patients and hosts, which take two opposite forms: a tendency to impose their Christian beliefs or their New Age ones.

Looking back, I believe that the internationalization of the urban school of Colombia was inevitable from the start, given the growing fascination with ayahuasca in the industrialized world; Bogota's position as a capital city and major transport hub with around ten million inhabitants; and the instant spread of information by the internet, all accelerated in recent years by the easing of Colombia's civil conflict and the consequent boom in foreign tourism (the backpacker, not beach resort, kind).

As one example, a young, adventurous guy or gal from Israel or Denmark hears about yajé on the Bogotá hostel grapevine, goes to a session, probably expecting a novel "drug", is overwhelmed by the experience of a sacred medicine and returns to his homeland as an evangelist of ayahuasca. Another link is forged by the members of international environmental and human rights NGO's, who arrive in Colombia on some mission or another and, since they are well-informed and already have the contacts, also find their way to

a session, usually in the jungle. You might say that the backpackers create the demand in Europe and the NGO officials take care of the invitation, visa, airfare and housing for the *taita* and, usually, a small escort of his sons and indigenous leaders.

Once again, the number of *taitas* who work in Europe has considerably grown in recent decades. I personally know of at least half a dozen, one of whom also held ceremonies in Japan, but as I noted above, there are so many newcomers nowadays, there must be more that I haven't heard of. In addition, some have also been invited to Mexico, Central America and Chile for international reunions of indigenous medicine men and non-indigenous persons have attended some of their ceremonies there. Finally, the wise woman who directs the natural medicine clinic in Mapiá was likewise invited to a (non-ceremonial) gathering of lady shamans from all over the world presided over by the Dalai Lama!

The first visit I heard of took place in 2002, when Taita D__ held a few sessions in Germany, along with his father-in-law, Taita Q__, a contemporary and colleague of Pacho and maybe more legendary in the urban school because he frequently ran sessions in and around Bogotá and was the perfect picture of the awesome shaman. The visit arose from the sponsorship of a project for his ethnic group by an international NGO, with field work in their community in the Putumayo and an office in Bogotá run by a man from a different ethnic group who came from a small city in the Putumayo, didn't speak any indigenous language and had only started drinking the remedy a few years before.

Some time after that, I saw a photo of him on a website, along with Taita Q__ and Taita D__ all in ceremonial dress, at a session in Germany, with the caption "The Jaguar Men come to Berlin"!

I do not mean to be critical: instead, my point is that the further ayahuasca moves away from its origins, the more distorted the ideals and motives of the healers, patients, propagandists, entrepreneurs, and bureaucrats who are involved in it become: not necessarily in the sense of corrupted but confused.

One common custom of the urban school is that when dawn breaks, we followers reverently gather at the feet of the *taita* who, no longer healer, assumes the role of sage as he speaks about the higher realms of existence, the co-dependence of Man and Nature and the follies of a "civilization" which is destroying the planet and hollowing out our souls. But when you get really close to a *taita* and are alone with him, you learn that he is as trapped in that civilization as we are and possibly even more bewildered by what's going on, because you are more familiar with this sad world and as an educated, privileged person, presumably more knowledgeable about it. So, you end up in this half-tragic, half-farcical situation where each expects the other to give him the miraculous solution.

With the blessing of our maestros, we of the urban school still share the conviction that of all the paths we have followed in order to find an islet of peace in an ocean of misrule, ayahuasca has proved the most efficacious, without excluding disciplines, like meditation or yoga, which we tried in the past or still practice as a complement.

However, I don't want to convert people to ayahuasca in the manner of the *ayahuasqueros* who assert that to save the world we first have to save our individual selves and ayahuasca alone has the power to raise human awareness above the selfish materialism of a consumerist society. Or be the proselytizer I myself was when my book on yajé was the subject of a review in the defunct *Shaman's Drum* magazine, which shrewdly pointed out that the same claims were made for LSD in the sixties and never amounted to anything.

Remembering how much I owe to the shock therapy ayahuasca effects when it reduces me to a jelly in the hands of a stern force from the beyond, the fantasy of a global panacea appeals to me, best expressed, I think, by Agustin Rivas, a renowned Peruvian healer who has proposed a world summit ceremony attended by all of the kleptocrats, militarists and fanatics who are responsible for the mess we are in.

Nevertheless, ayahuasca is capricious. If, as is widely acknowledged, its unique power to heal us has to do with the infinite resistance of our egos to the truth of ourselves and other therapies, which only touch our thoughts or emotions, are limited compared to one which drives that truth home by scourging our flesh and is thus irresistible, then in theory, it should awaken the latent or repressed spirituality in all of us. But it will only awaken it when the drinker is, to a certain extent, already awake to it himself.

Doubts and all, I remain a staunch advocate of the medicine of the *taitas*, because it safeguards my health and reconciles me to the ultimate truth inscribed on the portals of many a cemetery in Colombia – “the vanities of the world end here”. Despite the wishful thinking of many Westerners who drink it, a growing body of scientific research has confirmed its exceptional capacity to heal.

Glossary

Ayahuasquero: Practitioner of ayahuasca

Blancos: White men

Funai: Fundação Nacional do Índio (The National Indian Foundation) is a Brazilian governmental agency for the protection of its indigenous societies.

Guerrillero: soldier of a guerrilla army

Médico tradicional: (literally, traditional doctor) a traditional indigenous healer.

Taita: (literally, dad). Term or title in Colombia for an indigenous maestro of yajé.

Yajecero: Practitioner of yajé.

Notes

¹ By “school”, I do not mean a shared set of beliefs or practices. Instead, it is simply a shorthand for the general setting and atmosphere of the ceremonies, the kind of persons who attend them, and, to a certain extent, their aims or expectations.

² *Banisteriopsis caapi*, the botanical name for the jungle vine which is one of the components of the shamanic brew. Both the vine and the brew are known as ayahuasca.

³ The spread of the money economy in the Putumayo by the coca boom accelerated a trend which began with the exploitation of animal skins and tropical hardwoods in the first half of the 20th century and was continued by a multinational petroleum company which began drilling for oil there in the 1950’s. Nevertheless, the effect was much more profound than that of the previous booms (Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2015).

⁴ <https://www.visionchamanica.com>

⁵ “It’s obvious in my shamanism book [...] that I so esteem the experiences I had from the mid-1970s to the late-1990s with a particular shaman in the Putumayo, whom I really grew to adore as a person [...] I think I lucked out too, because starting in the 1990s maybe, certainly picking up speed in the 2000s, the yagé [...] shamanism had become so awfully commodified and tourist-ified and so forth. . There’s a [...] book about these recent developments [...] by Jimmy Weiskopf. I was in another epoch, I think, in which those forces certainly were present, but they took a very mild and I think much more innocent form. So my book is really of an epoch that’s unrepeatable” (Cline, 2013).

⁶ I base my remark on ayahuasca in the Chocó on a) my own research for my book on yajé, cited above, and b) Information provided by Antonio Bianchi, a medical doctor and investigator from Italy, who made several fruitless trips to the region in search of authentic indigenous ceremonies. Antonio Bianchi; Italian Society for the Study of States of Consciousness, Via Sommariva 537131, Verona - Italy.

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