

Shamans and Shamanisms:

Reflections on Anthropological Dilemmas of Modernity

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This paper was inspired by an invitation to participate in a seminar with an enigmatic title, “Shamanic Dilemmas of Modernity.” When I sat down to write my presentation, I was forced to ask myself: are the shamans perplexed by modernity, or is it we, the anthropologists, who are perplexed by the plurality of shamanisms that are manifested today? Since my initiation in U.S. anthropology over forty years ago, the multiplicity of voices speaking about or claiming to be shamans has increased to such an extent that one could question the conceptual usefulness of the terms “shaman” and “shamanism” in the face of the process of globalization.

This certainly was not the case in the 1960’s, when studies of shamanism, a focus of anthropological curiosity since the beginning of the discipline, were experiencing a new boom. I remember the commotion and heightened interest in the topic at the American Anthropological Association Meeting of 1968. Everyone was talking about Carlos Castaneda’s first book (1968), which had just been published. The symposium on Hallucinogens and Shamanism was packed, where Michael Harner argued that late medieval and Renaissance witchcraft was not a fiction but a reality linked to shamanic flights caused by psychotropic ointments applied to vaginal tissues via broom handles (Harner 1973)². Following Eliade’s classical definition and the cultural historical school of Boas, shamanism and shamans were easily identified. Originating in Siberia, this archaic religion diffused throughout the native cultures of the arctic circle as well as those of the New World.³

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2 I was so impressed by his talk that I cannot remember who the other participants were.

3 I participated in various international symposia in the 1980’s, in which the essential criteria identi-

I shared this notion of shamanism as a cultural-historical phenomenon with clear boundaries that has persisted and changed over time. Heavily influenced by Geertz's notion of culture as a symbolic system, I emphasized the collective aspect of shamanism as a cosmological system in which shamans play specific roles, depending upon the cultural and historical context (Langdon 1991a, b). Anthropology's task was to document the varieties of shamanism in their particular cultural and historical settings, and I edited two books on shamanism with the objective of presenting the dynamics of shamanism in different ethnographic contexts (Langdon 1992, 1996). In one, Brunelli (1996) argues for a situation where there is shamanism without shamans (Brunelli 1996), emphasizing the persistence of collective visions without practicing shamans.

A focus on the shaman, and not shamanism, has also long been a part of anthropological interest. Early discussions included debates as to their mental stability, and some argued that they manifest psychotic personalities in cultural contexts where their deviance is developed as a positive role. Today the shaman is more generally treated as a possessor of special powers that make him a unique mediator between different worlds (Carneiro da Cunha 1998). An extreme form of the individual shaman is found in the new age discourse that unites the shaman as possessor of unusual powers with universal primal spirituality and altered states of conscious (Hamayon 2001). In all parts of the world shamanic workshops are conducted, training people to become shamans through the practice of altered states of consciousness. These new shamans reflect the modern ideology of individualism (Dumont 1986), in contrast to Mauss's notion of person that has been revived in discussions of Amazonian constructions of the body (Seeger, et. al. 1987; Langdon 1995).

In the same way that New Agers appropriate shamanic practices, native shamans show themselves equally able to appropriate a variety of different cultural traditions, including those of biomedicine (Greene 1998; Dobkin del Rios 1992; Luna and Amaringo 1991), and shamans intermingle with hegemonic images of native magical powers to become part of the network of hybrid healing and sorcery alternatives outside Indian communities (Joralemon 1986; Pinzón and Ramírez 1992; Taussig 1987; Vidal 2002; Vidal and Whitehead

fying shamans were discussed and cults of African origin were excluded because they lacked the necessary historical contact and because their ecstatic experiences were characterized by spirit possession rather than by shamanic flight.

2002). Some are sufficiently modern to navigate in the globalized neo-shamanic circles (Joralemon 1990; Joralemon and Sharon 1993).

My purpose here is not to elaborate upon the traditional/modern dichotomy of shamans or to develop a single paradigm capable of embracing the plurality of shamanisms and shamans. Reflecting on my almost 40 years of studying shamanism and the new-age shamanic movement, I argue that an adequate understanding of shamanism, like other social phenomenon, must abandon the concept that culture is a holistic unity with clear boundaries and space. Also, our monographs must drop the monophonic authorial voice, in favor of portraying the multiplicity of shamanic phenomena, where there is less unity, more fragmentation and no clear boundaries (Gupta and Ferguson 2001: 5). This, in fact, has already been successfully done for the region where I did my fieldwork, the Putumayo region of southern Colombia. Michael Taussig (1988) describes brilliantly magical and shamanic practices and hegemonic images of the Indians. His artful use of intertextuality places his book as perhaps the first truly postmodern ethnography. He quotes from my work in a few places, describing my doctoral dissertation as an “ideal typical” account of Siona cosmology (1988: 263).

Thirty-four years have passed since I finished my doctoral research among the Siona. I have visited them four times since then, in 1980, in 1985 and two times in 1992. When I left in 1974, the Siona were lamenting the absence of a true master shaman (*cacique curaca*) who could protect them and maintain their general well-being and health. Since then there has been a resurgence of Siona practicing shamanic rituals. Reflecting upon the emergence of these Siona shamans who have been visible on the regional and national scene since the late 1980's, I shall dialogue with my roots in U.S. anthropology and the changes in focus and theories that we have been forced to make with the unfolding of history. The study of shamanism is extremely fruitful for revealing the inadequacies and limitations of anthropology (and those of the anthropologists) and confirms that it is not a predictive science but an intellectual field that has been forced to change in the face of modernity⁴.

My decision to study the Siona Indians of the Amazonian jungle for my doctoral research was the result of a short field experience with the highland

4 I am using modernity in its broadest sense to include the historical movements that have brought about radical global changes in the last forty years. An excellent example of the changing discourse is found in Geertz's two discussions about religion in 1966 and 2000.

Sibundoy *curacas*, the regional name taken from the Quechua language that is used to designate the ritual healers that we call shamans. Upon arriving in Colombia and before initiating my fieldwork in the Sibundoy Valley, I came upon the *curacas* in a market in the Cauca Valley, where they were selling a number of medicinal herbs and exotic jungle products, such as the tapir's hoof and other objects renowned for their power in the Colombian popular medical system. Old *aguardiente* bottles filled with *yajé*,⁵ a hallucinogenic brew used throughout the Putumayo region in healing rituals, could be found among their wares. Dressed in their traditional striped *ruanas* and long heavy strands of beads, these trader shamans stood out in the local markets, and a Colombian friend informed me that they migrated from their valley in southern Colombia to the nation's major cities and that some traveled as far north as Venezuela.

During my time in the Valley, I visited several *curacas* and participated in their healing ceremonies, in which they cured Indians as well as non-Indian visitors who had come to the Valley for their services. They indicated to me that their source of *yajé* and shamanic training and knowledge came from the master shamans of the lowland Putumayo region, and I became aware of an ancient shamanic network operating since before the Conquest, one that originated in the jungles and carried the Amazonian shamanic practices and products to the Andean highlands (Langdon 1981). This network involved the trading of ritual knowledge and artifacts. Besides spending long periods of apprenticeship in the lowlands, the Sibundoy would bring back prepared mixtures of *yajé* as well as cuttings of the vine from which it is made, medicinal plants and ritual objects. Equally important in these journeys was the acquisition of ritual or shamanic knowledge, known as *pinta* or visions and associated with specific spirits and songs. The knowledge and capacity of a shaman to travel to different realms of the universe, the spirits he knows and the *pinta* he dominates are unique, based on his personal capacity and experiences of drinking with other shamans. In order to increase their power, shamans are always visiting others to learn their *pinta*. The region is characterized by a shamanic cosmology that shares common elements, but the ritual practices of the different ethnic groups are a result of the diversi-

5 *Yajé* is also widely cited as *yagé* and *ayahuasca*. Although I have used the orthography *yagé* in past publications, I am adopting Uribe's *yajé* version (Uribe 2002).

ty of traditions and knowledge (Langdon 1979a). Curious to study the lowland roots of Sibundoy shamanism, I briefly encountered Scott Robinson who was finishing his doctoral research with the Kofan in lowland Ecuador (Robinson 1996). He stimulated me to seek out the Siona, located on the Putumayo River where it divides Colombia from Ecuador, indicating that they appear westernized in their material culture, but that they still retain much shamanic knowledge.

The Siona, once a large and widespread group along the Putumayo River and its tributaries, had been reduced to some 250 people, half of them living on the small Indian reservation of Buenavista and the rest scattered along the river in small hamlets among the colonists who had begun to migrate to the area in increasingly larger numbers. Europeans had intermittently been in the region since the 17th century, but only in the early 20th century was a permanent mission successfully established in Puerto Asis, and the Siona then came into continuous contact with the larger society. This mission attempted to convert the Indians and forced their children into its *internado*, resulting in the spread of epidemics that reduced the Siona population by 75% in less than 25 years.

William Burroughs visited Puerto Asis in 1953, on his psychonautic trip in search of the *yajé* experience. The road from the highlands still had not reached Puerto Asis, and his letter to Alan Ginsberg describes it as typical river town, with a mud street along a river, a few shops, one cantina, a mission and one hotel (Burroughs and Ginsberg 1963). For Burroughs, the region was degenerate and dying, and he scorned the optimistic rumors that oil drilling was soon to be developed in the region. In fact, the road linking the port town to the highlands was soon finished, facilitating oil exploration and the migration of thousands of rural farmers pushed by lack of land in the highlands. The relatively abandoned jungle region took on important economic importance. By the time I arrived in 1970, this river town had about five thousand people and was a bustling commercial area. Population continued to increase, and in 1980 a local merchant told me that the municipality had sixty thousand inhabitants.

I boarded a large cargo canoe, such as that described by Burroughs in the 1950's, to make the 45-kilometer downstream trip to the Indian reservation. At the time, palm and wooden homes of colonist farmers were interspersed with forest along the banks of the river, and the Indian reservation, pointed

out by the passengers on the canoe, was indistinguishable from colonist settlements. I was dropped off at a “river dock” with mud steps leading up a high bank to the house of Alva Wheeler, a missionary with the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) who periodically worked with the community (Wheeler 1967, 1970) over a number of years. A group of Indians dressed in western clothing waited at the top of the bank, curious to see who was disembarking. I remembered Robinson’s counsel that, despite their clothing, residential patterns and capacity in Spanish, “they are Indians in their thinking.” Two years later Andrew Weil, a former student of Richard Schultes and author of *The Natural Mind* (1972), visited the reservation looking for shamans. He ignored my similar comments, judging that the Siona no longer had important botanical or shamanic knowledge, and left a few hours after arriving.

Sitting in Wheeler’s house among these “westernized” Siona, I was pleasantly surprised when a “real” Indian entered, dressed in the traditional tunic (*cusma*), scores of strands of small glass beads covering his neck and scarlet macaw feathers in his ears. To add to his authenticity, he wore a shaman’s jaguar canine necklace and had painted his face with delicate designs inspired by his visits to the invisible domains of the universe. A photo of Ricardo’s exotic attire can be found on the front cover of my book, *Portals of Power* (1992). My early reflections on the use of contemporary dress as a result of perceptions of changes in sources of power were published in 1979.

Ricardo, one of the few elders who continued to use traditional dress⁶, became my key collaborator during the next two and a half years. The son of a well known Siona shaman, Leonides, and brother of Arsenio, considered to be the last Siona master shaman, Ricardo spent hours narrating shamanic journeys, battles between Siona shamans and the Spanish missionaries and the demise of the Siona communities in the 20th century due to sorcery retaliations among the shamans (Langdon 1990). During those early years, I mastered the language sufficiently to record, translate and discuss over 100 narratives told to me by him and other elders who had been shamanic apprentices. Inspired by Geertz’s dense description and theory of religion as a cultural system, I saw these narratives, which were often told to interpret serious illness events, as playing a role analogous to ritual, that of pro-

6 Among the males in the community, his brother was the only other one to use the *cusma*, but he did not use ceremonial dress. A few older women used the traditional blouse introduced by missionaries, but the youth attempted to follow popular trends in dress (Langdon 1979b).

viding a “model of” and “model for” the Siona shamanic cosmology that perceives two sides of reality, the ordinary daily reality and the invisible one that lies behind what we normally see. The narratives played a role in organizing the praxis of the search for therapy in serious illness cases (Langdon 2001). In addition, those that focused specifically upon shamanic visits to other realms in the universe helped me to characterize the uniqueness of the Siona cosmological system and their ritual experience (Langdon 1979a).

Despite the fact that Ricardo had extensive knowledge and experience in shamanic training and, like other elders, performed minor healing rituals, he had not attained the level of master shaman. When his brother Arsenio died in the 1960's, the community expected Ricardo to take his place. However, Ricardo did not have the visionary experience that would have enabled him to assume leadership when he drank *yajé* with his peers after Arsenio's death. He told me that he saw nothing but darkness. Because of repeated sorcery attacks by other shamans during his life, his powers were damaged, leaving him unable to fulfill the role of *cacique-curaca*, the master shaman's leadership role in which he guides the community in *yajé* rituals and mediates with the animal masters and other invisible beings for successful crops and hunting, for protection from sorcery attacks and for curing.

During my stay with the Siona until 1974, the situation was one of shamanism without shamans. The Siona had no shamans leading the *yajé* rituals, and all lamented the loss of their protective mediation with the beings of the invisible side of reality. In their absence, serious illnesses and death continued to be attributed to the actions of sorcery practices and the invisible *wati*. When necessary, they sought out shamans from other groups to perform healing rituals. Early in my fieldwork, Salvador Moreno, a mestizo shaman, was summoned to find a lost child in the forest. I was not invited to this *yajé* ritual, which proved unsuccessful. Salvador said that the spirits had taken the child too far into the realm of the *wati* to be able to bring him back. Ricardo, who participated in the ritual, told me that he only saw darkness and his ears were filled with the loud buzzing of insects. He accused Salvador of bewitching him. Ricardo's family also blamed the death of a six year old girl shortly thereafter on Salvador.

Ricardo, however, is not the subject of this narrative. He was the center of my doctoral dissertation and I have analyzed certain aspects of his shamanic career and our relationship in other works (Langdon 1999, 2002, 2004).

Here I wish to reflect upon another Siona, Pacho (Francisco) Piaguaje, who was married to one of Arsenio's daughters by a second marriage. Her mother, the oldest living Siona at the time, lived with the couple. Pacho was aligned with a faction in the community that, in certain situations, opposed that associated with Ricardo. To locate him among anthropological works, he is a relative of Salvador Moreno, made famous by Michael Taussig (1987: 321). In fact, Taussig first journeyed to the Putumayo with me in 1972 after I had told him about the shamanic network of mestizo and Indian shamans between the Sibundoy Valley and the lowlands.

Pacho was about fifty at the time and, unlike Ricardo's generation--some twenty years older--had abandoned shamanic training while young, finding himself unable to maintain the necessary dietary and sexual restrictions. He enlisted with other Siona in the Navy during the Colombian-Peruvian conflict in the 1930's. He told me that he enjoyed the experience and that he drank shotgun powder with *aguardiente* to chase away his fears. At the time, the significance of such mixture escaped me as evidence of Amazonian construction of the body and substantiality.

Perhaps it was his experience in the Navy or simply his astuteness and adaptability that enabled him to establish frequent and profitable contact with non-Indians. In the 1970's he formed partnerships with colonists, in which he would plant rice seeds financed by his partner and divide the crop's profits with him. He also guided non-Indian sports hunters who stayed in his house while visiting the jungle lowlands. During the period that I knew him best, he was elected as *gobernador* (governor), a position created by the Colombian government for mediation between the Indian community and governmental programs. He received a salary for this position, increasing his acquisition of more industrialized goods as well as more travels outside the reservation. Ricardo and his kin accused him of drinking too much *aguardiente*, the Colombian cane liquor that was forbidden to Siona shamans. I listened to much gossip as to how he made a fool of himself while drunk in Puerto Asis and other misadventures because of his alcohol abuse.

Pacho, as his entire family, mastered Spanish particularly well, and half his children married non-Indians. I was a friend and *comadre* with one son and also a good friend of another, Felinto. In the 1960's, Felinto spent a few months in Bogotá as a youth and furnished valuable information to Manrique Casas, a Colombian linguist, and served as an important informant for

Maria Rosa and José Recasens, anthropologists also working at the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología (Mallol de Recasens 1963; Mallol de Recasens and Recasens 1964-5). Casas taught him to write the Siona language, and when he returned to Buenavista, he registered a number of narratives told to him in Siona by the elders and generously shared them with me during my fieldwork. Pacho's younger son, Pacheco, was the most educated of the brothers and became a schoolteacher. He also worked for Alva Wheeler in the mid-1980's, helping him translate and mimeograph parts of the Bible into Siona.

Pacho had an excellent sense of humor and was engaging during our frequent encounters. However, I treated his discussions of traditional shamanic knowledge lightly, in part because I was influenced by Ricardo's opinion that he drank too much and knew little about being a shaman. Once I repeated to Ricardo what he had told me about shamanic practices; Ricardo laughed and asked me who taught me such nonsense. I suspect that the other reason that I eliminated Pacho as a serious collaborator for my shamanic interests was my normative approach to the study of culture. I identified him as a "cultural broker," because of his activities with non-Indians. Although I knew and interacted with several merchants and colonists in the area and, in fact, it was the shamanic network involving Indians and *mestizos* that had led me to study the Siona, my anthropological gaze was shortsighted and almost virtually contained within the boundaries of the Indian reservation, with much less focus on the networks the Siona created outside of it and the relation between the local, regional and global forces. At that time, culture and space formed a unity to me.

Despite my views about Pacho's "acculturation," a surprising event happened in 1973, when Pacho organized a communal work group (*minga*) to clean the schoolyard. As usual, the women had prepared *chicha* and food. After the schoolyard had been cleaned, we were sitting on the veranda of the palm school drinking and eating. By this time Pacho was quite inebriated and he made a long speech in Spanish about the need to maintain old customs and the Siona language. At one point he praised me, saying that I was there learning about traditional practices and language that most were abandoning. When he finished his long monologue spoken entirely in Spanish, he broke down and cried. My interpretation at the time was that he was crying because he realized that he was the one pioneering the welcome of non-Indian language and practices.

Pacho's openness to and interaction with non-Indians, as well as his adaptability to non-Indian contexts, contrasted greatly with Ricardo's fear of non-Indians and their failure to observe certain hygienic practices linked with menstruation and childbirth. Perhaps this was because Pacho was spared the violence suffered by that of Ricardo's generation during the first 25 years of the 20th century, a violence that still figured vividly in the content of the dreams he told me.

For a shaman, menstrual blood is extremely dangerous, since its odor can lead spirits to destroy the shamanic substance that represents his knowledge and accumulates within his body. Menstruating Siona women should therefore practice seclusion. Both the father and mother of an unborn child should maintain a distance from shamans and practice a joint *couvade* until the child reaches four or five months. Early in my fieldwork, I was informed quite clearly by Ricardo's daughter-in-law that I should never offer Ricardo food nor visit his house when I was menstruating. However, such practices were being abandoned by some of the younger women. In 1980, when I made a return visit and Ricardo was again actively building his shamanic knowledge, a young pregnant woman entered his house. After she left, he expressed frustration that his renewed efforts to build shamanic power were in vain due to the increased presence of colonists on the reservation and the lack of respect for the shaman's body shown by the younger women in states of pollution. He felt his delicate shamanic substance to be endangered.

In contrast, Pacho expressed very different sentiments about non-Indians and their practices. He related to me a dramatic story about a serious stomach ailment that he had suffered some years earlier. After searching for a cure with shamans and other traditional healers for months, he sought out a colonist *curandera*, who cured him by spreading menstrual blood on his body. As he finished his narrative, he added, "believe it or not, but it worked." And in contrast to Ricardo, who feared the presence of and the food prepared by non-Indians, Pacho had no problems sharing food and lodging with outsiders nor traveling outside the community among non-Indians.

When I left the Siona community in 1974 to defend my doctoral dissertation, I foresaw the disappearance of the shamanic tradition, save the appearance of some sort of a millenarian leader who could lead a revival of their shamanic practices. I could not have been less wrong as to what and who revived shamanic practices in Buenavista. Nor could I have predicted the vast

changes in the Putumayo region resulting from the drug trade, the appearance of the guerrillas and paramilitaries that has led to a state of civil war as well as the rise of indigenous political movements that reflect the dynamics of ethnicity in the region.

When I returned for a month in 1980, it seemed as though my predictions were coming true. The Siona were more dependent upon commercial goods, and thus seemed economically poorer in comparison to the early 70's. Besides the normal gossip about neighbors, illness and sorcery attacks, new political topics were appearing. One was the visit of two CRIC members, who were on the reservation attempting to recruit participants for a national rally to be held in the Cauca region. Evidently five years earlier Ricardo, Pacho and two of his sons had attended a similar event. Ricardo remembered the cold weather in the Andes and angry shouting that frightened him. CRIC was a subject of many conversations during that trip, and I heard opinions about class conflicts, poverty and communism. My *comadre's* four year old son accused me of being rich, since I had three pairs of shoes.

Although Ramírez (2002) reports of a growing Indigenous movement in the Putumayo highlands in the 80's, the politics of ethnic identity was not a topic in my discussions with the Siona. The only mention of ethnic identity occurred with Pacheco, Pacho's son who was working for the missionary Wheeler. I visited him at Wheeler's house, which he was caring for in the long absence of its owner. Pacheco showed me the work he was doing and also showed me a flag he had painted. Wheeler had requested that he create a flag to symbolize the Siona tribe, and, "after thinking and thinking," Pacheco decided that Siona identity was best represented by shamanism. His flag contained various shamanic images – the ceramic challis used for drinking *yajé*, the anaconda that is "owner of the vine," the jaguar; and *yajé* leaves. Upon seeing this representation of Siona identity, I wondered what would be Wheeler's reaction since he had so often preached to the Siona that their spirits and shamanic practices were works of the Devil.

Other conversational topics during that trip were the growing cocaine traffic downstream and military violence in the region. Finally, I learned that Pacho and his brother, Luciano, had begun drinking *yajé*, the psychotropic tea that is the basis of shamanic rituals. Ricardo's family, somewhat cynically, told me that they had begun drinking it regularly and that anyone who wanted, could drink with them. Luciano had died recently before my arri-

val and his family listened attentively to the tapes of his narratives recorded during my doctoral fieldwork. Pacheco told me that Pacho was not currently drinking because his two his daughters-in-law living with him were pregnant. Both women were from colonist families.

I spent that month sleeping in Ricardo's house and exchanging dream narratives with him (Langdon 1999, 2004). Since he was in the middle of reviving his shamanic knowledge, many of his dreams represented his growing knowledge.

In 1985 I returned to Colombia again. In Bogotá I met Juan Vieco and Margarita Chaves (1998), young anthropologists who had been studying the effects of colonization in the region since 1979. From them I learned that the Siona were now planting coca; Ricardo had moved downstream to be with his oldest daughter; Pacho was performing healing ceremonies, though mostly for non-Indians; and the drug traffic and violence evident in 1980 now marked life in the Putumayo, as much as it did in the rest of the country. When I arrived in Puerto Asis, Camacho, one of the local merchants who had years of interactions with many of my Siona friends and was *compadre* with some of them, told me that most of the Siona youths had become guerillas.

My journey to Buenavista confirmed many of the observations made by Juan and Margarita, although not Camacho's. I stayed in the house of my *compadres* for a week, noting that indeed the Siona were better off than in 1980. Pacho had led a campaign to obtain a gasoline generator, providing the houses near the school with electricity during part of the day. My *comadre* told me that they had been encouraged to plant and process cocaine by soldiers who invaded the reservation in pursuit of guerillas living in the region behind it.

I visited Pacho, who promised to serve me *yajé* the next time I visited. One of his daughters-in-law was pregnant again, so he was not drinking. He had been receiving a number of hunters from the highlands. I was shown pictures of an insurance agent from Medellin, outfitted with quite elegant camping gear. Ricardo's family continued to criticize Pacho for his heavy drinking and said that even his son Felinto was embarrassed by his behavior.

After a week, I made the day's journey downstream with two of Ricardo's grandsons to visit him and his wife in El Tablero, near Puerto Carmen. His daughter-in-law in Buenavista had told me that he was again performing curing rituals, and I was anxious to talk with him about his practices. Although

my three day visit with him and his daughter's family was extremely pleasant and I felt very welcome, Ricardo was particularly closed to any discussion about shamanism, a favorite topic for us in previous years. As usual, we gossiped; I was told stories of spirits attempting to capture his grandson's wife and of the recent growth of Pentecostal churches in the region. Military raids on coca fields and guerillas in the region were also topics. Ricardo explained that his son had hidden some guerillas in the past. The Siona tended to favor the guerillas, who taught them to plant coca and process cocaine. They were also viewed as less violent than the military.

On the way back to Buenavista, I was thoroughly searched in Puerto Carmen by a soldier who unpacked my backpack and squeezed my toothpaste tube to check for cocaine. Further up stream Ecuadorian soldiers stopped our boat, the "Apollo 2," and we were forced to disembark, leaving our baggage to be searched. One man with a box of contraband whiskey was detained from traveling further, and a woman claimed that a soldier stole her watch when searching through her purse. Needless to say, the passengers were angry, accusing the soldiers of stopping the boat with the sole purpose of robbery and saying that the guerrillas should kill them all.

I made two final short trips to the Putumayo in 1992. The first followed an oral literature conference in Pasto, a city located in the southern highlands of Colombia. There I drank *yajé* with a philosophy professor, who had also been drinking with Pacho, and a number of his students. A Sibundoy shaman, Taita Martin, led our ritual.⁷ After drinking a dose of *yajé*, he offered *aguardiente* as a chaser to the bitter *yajé*. He sang repetitiously in Spanish throughout the night, "*Buena gente, buena gente; buena pinta, buena pinta,*" to the rhythm of his leaf *pichanga*. I learned that the students had participated in a similar ritual with Pacho a few months earlier and had experienced the fearful, but traditional, Siona vision of coming eye to eye with the anaconda. Taita Martin accused the lowland shamans of providing "snake *yajé*," while his offered "heaven *yajé*" that induced more beautiful visions.

My visit to Buenavista was short and sad. The advancing oil exploration on the Ecuadorian side of the river and major ecological changes were evident; strange diseases were appearing among the children. Ricardo's daughter-in-law told me that his sudden death in 1986 was caused by sorce-

7 Guerrero (1991) has written about Taita Martin and his *yajé* ritual.

ry sent by the lowland Inganos in order to end his shamanic powers. Two of Ricardo's grandchildren had been picked up in the center of Puerto Asis and gunned down in cold blood by the military (or paramilitaries) in a field outside town. There was electricity in more of the houses. Instead of the quiet evenings of chatting and exchanging narratives, I watched television with my *compadres* and their children, which was being paid off in installments from the sale of cocaine. The favorite program was a Dracula soap opera from Bogotá. We sat on a rustic wooden bench to watch the program, and when there was interference in the reception, the oldest daughter would run outside to redirect the bamboo antenna according to our shouts from inside.

When I mentioned to my *compadres* that Pacho had been in Pasto administering *yajé*, my *comadre* gossiped about his antics in Buenavista. He did harm to a local colonist by mixing *yajé* and *aguardiente*, and had attracted a number of outsiders to stay with him. Among them, was an American woman. I was told that Pacho threatened to leave his wife for her, who in turn threatened to kill the woman. A "Dutch" couple also stayed with him. They were well received by the Siona, since they taught them how to make handicrafts, and the woman practiced acupuncture on some of the Siona. A young anthropology student from Bogotá also stayed with him for a period of time, but she did not interact with the rest of the community, so they hardly knew her. Finally, I understood her to mention a *gringo* journalist, who lived in a palm shack near Pacho's house for several months to drink *yajé* with him. He seemed a bit crazy to her.

My visit with Pacho confirmed his growing popularity as a shaman. He was in the midst of preparing *yajé* in order to perform a ritual that night. A Kofan shaman was with him. Pacho told me of his successful healing sessions with non-Indians and mentioned that a German had been there the previous week. He invited me to drink with him that night, but since I was leaving at dawn the next day I declined.

My last visit to Buenavista came in July that year after a week in Bogotá for an anthropological conference. While visiting the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología there, I encountered Pacho, who was accompanied by the young student and Jimmy Weiskopf, the *gringo* journalist whom my *comadre* had mentioned.⁸ Pacho was going to present a talk at the conference on me-

8 Weiskopf observes in his autobiography that he was not widely welcome nor understood by the Siona, who asked, in his words, "what is this *gringo* doing here?" (2005: 68).

dicinal plants and was also looking for funds to support a garden project that he wished to establish on six hectares of land in Buenavista. He invited me to drink *yajé* with him that night, but I was forced to decline again, since I was still preparing my paper to be presented the next day.

While in Bogotá, I interviewed Jimmy, the anthropology student and her professor, discovering more about their activities with Pacho. Jimmy, as it turned out, was not only the *gringo* journalist, but also the “Dutchman” who visited Pacho with his wife. He told me that he had separated from his wife and he later returned alone to stay in Pacho’s *yajé* house in his field. He described himself as a former hippy looking for a cure to his lung problems and searching for a guru.⁹ He found the guru in Pacho, and equated him to an angel. He assumed that Pacho had always been the shaman of the community and knew little about the Siona shamanic tradition. He told me that drug dealers participate in his Bogotá *yajé* sessions, and that he performs a kind of “therapy.” While at his apartment, Pacho called and asked me for a letter of recommendation for his medicinal plant project.

The student’s advisor told me that her young student had certain illusions about Pacho and had spent much time drinking *yajé* during her stay with the Siona. She had been sent to study birth-conception plants and had stimulated Pacho’s garden project, ignorant of the fact that it is not the shaman who is the plant specialist, but the females of the community.

Following the conference, I traveled to Buenavista, finding myself making the downstream journey with two guerrillas, who got off at the schoolhouse. I arrived at my *compadre*’s river port, but there was not the usual group to greet me. In the jungle silence, the Siona have keen ears and can hear boats coming from long distances that they watch as they pass. Once they see that a canoe is going to dock, they flock to the river to see who is arriving. This time there was no one, and when I climbed up the steep riverbank to the house, I discovered why. Electricity was now also available during the day for important occasions. The entire family and a few neighbors were watching a soccer game on television between Colombia and Egypt.

The few days spent there were filled with visits to all my old friends and gossip about those who had died or left the community. As usual, there we-

9 Although Jimmy Weiskopf (2005) attempts to mask Pacho’s identity in his autobiography of his *yajé* experiences, I have not chosen to work with fictitious names, since Pacho was a public figure who made no pretense to practice secretly.

re also plenty of sorcery accusations for the misfortunes that had occurred in my absence. I learned that Pacho's garden project was seen as a private endeavor motivated by his desire to become rich. The usual complaints about him drinking too much *aguardiente* were made, and a good part of the community did not recognize him as their master-shaman. Some were angry that he attracted so many non-Indians to the reservation.

I have not been able to return to the Putumayo. The violence and civil war in the region has worsened and my Colombian colleagues have advised me that it is too dangerous for foreigners. Some Colombians have continued to conduct fieldwork in the region under extremely difficult conditions. Most relevant to my narrative here is a book I received from Germán Zuluaga, entitled *Encuentro de Taitas en la Amazonia Colombiana* (UMIYAC 1999). The publication documents an encounter sponsored by the Ingano organization Tanda Chiridu Inganokuna and the non-governmental organization Amazon Conservation Team. One hundred and forty Indians, including forty *taitas* (the new name for *curacas* in the region¹⁰) gathered to form the Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de la Amazonía Colombiana – UMIYAC, dedicated to recovering shamanic tradition and the region's ecology.

Seven Indian groups participated in this encounter: Siona, Kofan, Ingano, Kamsá, Corregaje, Tatuyo (Vaupes) and Carijona. Pacho Piaguaje was elected a member of the Greater Council of UMIYAC, and appears in full shamanic dress in two of the book's photos. He is cited as "the greatest and most respected of the Siona taitas" (UMIYAC 1999: 135). Three other Siona, younger men whom I knew well, also have become *taitas* and participated in the meeting: Pacho's son Felinto, Pacho's nephew Hermógenes (son of Luciano), and Juan Yaiguaje, a Siona who married Arsenio's granddaughter and Ricardo's great-niece. I was surprised and pleased to see these men as *taitas*. In the 1970's, when I knew them best, there was no clue as to their future interests in shamanism.

Although I was not present at the event, looking through the publication, with its pictures, *taita* statements and Declaration of the Encounter of *Taitas*, it is evident that the Unión's ideology is an expression of Indian response to globalized visions of shamanism, conceived as a spiritual practi-

10 *Taita*, in the Siona language, means father and is generally applied to elders, with or without shamanic powers.

ce with special primordial knowledge that honors and preserves the environment. Encounters between shamans in Ricardo's time were permeated by mistrust of possible sorcery attacks and followed by accusations, such as those recorded by Jackson (1995). UMIYAC was formed through the spirit of collaboration intending to defend the Indians' right to practice traditional medicine. The "UMIYAC Declaration," elaborated at the meeting, condemns non-Indian healers who promote psychedelic tourism and the patenting of *yajé* and other Indian plants. Its code of ethics declares the group intends to regulate the authentic use of *yajé* and the true practitioners of Indian medicine, distinguishing them from charlatans. It also condemns alcohol abuse and the use of *aguardiente* during *yajé* rituals (UMIYAC 2005). The Union received a Maximum Environmental Distinction in 2001 from the Colombian President for its efforts to maintain and preserve the jungle's biodiversity (Colombia 2001). As Albert (2002), Carneiro da Cunha (1998) and Conklin (1997, 2002) have observed for Brazilian Indians, the intercultural dialogue with these Putumayo shamans reflects the environmental interests of international non-governmental organizations.

Pacho continued as an active shaman and a member of the Greater Council of UMIYAC until his death in early 2007. Although the Siona cosmology continues to play a role in the praxis of daily life when serious illnesses or strange accidents occur, Pacho's status as the "greatest and most respected Siona shaman" is more a reflection of modernity--or post-modernity if we wish to call it so--and forces that lie outside the collective processes of the native community. My limited fieldwork, sustained by observations of others who have passed through the area, is that few Siona drank *yajé* with him in the 1980's and 90's and he did not fill the traditional role of *cacique-curaca*. He did not undergo shamanic apprenticeship, which is a pathway to community recognition. He drank large amounts of the *aguardiente* traditionally prohibited for Siona shamans, although not all groups in the region viewed it as contrary to shamanic practices, particularly the lowland Inganos and Sibundoy *curacas*. The abandonment of seclusion practices for menstruating and pregnant women did not threaten his body, as it did for Ricardo. Yet experiences with him related by others and Weiskopf's autobiography convince me that he guided his participants in rituals to see the *pinta* characteristic of Siona shamanism.

Several historical and global factors combined to stimulate the renewal of

Siona shamanism: a Colombian popular culture that has sought shamanic cures for centuries, a global market for shamanism, and visits by various outsiders as part of the renewed interest in shamanism since the 1950's - the beatnik William Burroughs, the Harvard ethnobotanist Richard Schultes, the holistic new age doctor Andrew Weil, anthropologists, journalists, indigenous activists and psychedelic tourists. We could conclude that in the face of modernity, Pacho became a traditional shaman without necessarily a traditional community following. Reflecting on memories of my research over the years, I have tried to show that in part, this is due to Pacho as a unique individual.

This narrative is also meant to dialogue with theory and ethnographic writing beyond shamanism, since it forces us to consider larger contemporary issues in anthropology. My reflection on his life demonstrates my personal limitations and the obvious fragmentation of the ethnographic approach. It also shows the inadequacies of the normative approach to culture that was characteristic at the time of my first fieldwork and reflects the issues, dilemmas and changes in anthropology during the last 40 years. Today culture as a concept is seriously questioned for its analytic usefulness. While anthropologists try to avoid it, it has become an important concept for ethnic groups who defend it as essential to their identity (Warren and Jackson 2002). For us, it has become substituted by preoccupations such as *praxis*, subjectivity, power, identity, recreation of tradition and the dialogical emergence of culture in a globalized world.

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