

Article

The Spiritual Dimension of Yage Shamanism in Colombia

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Abstract: This article offers an intercultural interpretation of the sense of the sacred in the practice of yage shamanism in Colombia. This practice is based on the ritual use of a plant medicine which for centuries has been the basis of the medical, spiritual and cultural systems of indigenous peoples of the Amazon piedmont in Colombia, Ecuador and Perú. Since the 1990s, this practice has expanded to urban areas of Colombia and other countries. After a short introduction, I develop my interpretation of yage shamanism in three stages: first, I explore some narratives of the origin of yage, showing how it is lived and understood as a source of knowledge and the foundational element of indigenous cultures. Second, I attempt a phenomenological analysis of yage shamanic experience, presenting it as a form of spiritual experience. Finally, I briefly address the issue of whether or not this form of experience is valid.

Keywords: ayahuasca shamanism; healing; interpretation; indigenous religions; indigenous knowledge; religious experience; visionary experience; intercultural hermeneutics

1. Introduction

More than twenty years ago I started a dialogue with some traditional indigenous healers from the Andean-Amazonian Piedmont of Colombia, which has been the tacit and permanent drive of my philosophical search up to the present. What does entering into dialogue mean? How is it possible to understand the other and, more importantly, *to understand something with the other*? What should be the results of this dialogical understanding and how should it be conducted? These are central questions for intercultural hermeneutics. In other works, I have tried to clarify the epistemological problems involved in it (e.g., Gómez 2012). In this paper, I will attempt to apply the philosophical principles of intercultural hermeneutics into an interpretation of the ways in which the sense of the sacred is experienced and understood in traditional Amazon medicine.

This practice is based on the ritual use of a plant medicine denominated *yage* (i.e., *ayahuasca*, the vine of the soul or of the dead, in Quechua), which is the foundation of the indigenous cultures of the Andean-Amazonian Piedmont of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. The brew is prepared with two plants, the *yage* vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the *chagropanga* leaves (*Diplopterys cabrerana*), which are considered a “gift from God with which we learn our wisdom, get to know all medicinal plants [. . .] and heal many illnesses” (Cf. UMIYAC Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de la Amazonía Colombiana, p. 15). An enormous amount of literature has emerged during the last two decades dealing with different aspects and contexts of the ritual and therapeutic uses of *yage*. However, the religious and spiritual dimension of this practice needs to be more carefully explored and understood *from within*.

The expression “from within” may seem a truism in contemporary social science and religious studies. On the contrary, there are challenges and problems that are far from being satisfactorily overcome and solved. Primarily, when it comes to the study of traditional ways of knowing, there is the problem of truth. How do we handle the truth-claims constitutive of other knowledge practices? A common strategy is to bracket all truth and validity claims and focus on the social and cultural

contexts in which they are “produced”. For example, this may mean to uncover their function and political implications, or the way in which they serve certain interests within a group, or the manner in which identities are constructed around them, and so on. All of these are of course important issues in the social studies of knowing practices, but to leave aside the problem of validity and truth, which cannot not be reduced to or explained away by appealing to social functions, actually implies a misreading of a knowing practice right from the beginning.

When someone asserts to know something, she raises a claim to the truth of what she is saying. If an interpreter starts from the presupposition that that is only a way of speaking that shows “what is real for her community”, or a way in which “they construct reality”, then the interpretation has already renounced an appropriate understanding of what the other is saying. This kind of analysis has become a paradigmatic presupposition in many contemporary schools of the social sciences. “From within” means an attempt to reconstruct the universes of meanings, the inner rules and functions of a practice and form of life, and the ways in which they historically emerged, which accepts that that is how “they live and see the world”, but suspends the issue of how things “really are” or what “exists” (Cf. Smart 1996, p. 9; Shweder 1989, p. 118). This perspective claims to be the appropriate way of dealing not only with the truths of others, but also with one’s own truth, because all truth is a social construction and there is no way to know how things “really are”.

Beyond its philosophical difficulties (e.g., Elder-Vass 2013; Gómez 2017), this extended position is particularly problematic when it comes to the study of knowing practices. The bracketing of truth and the supposed pluralistic attitude it allows, are based on the tacit affirmation of the interpreter’s background understanding of reality. Only by *seeing* the other’s knowing practices *from* the perspective of the interpreter’s theoretical presuppositions about language, culture, knowledge and reality, it is possible to take these practices as ways of constructing reality, organizing society, or fulfilling whatever social function. Thus, the interpreter’s presuppositions are given epistemological priority as if they were neutral and self-evident. In fact, they are ontological commitments that remain unquestioned because they work as the metaphysic presuppositions of the researcher (Collingwood 2014, p. 21ff).

To take the other seriously, on the contrary, means to accept being interpellated by her truth claims, her forms of experience and her way of being in the world. *Interpellation* is the central concept and experience of intercultural hermeneutics, which is a form of philosophical analysis and exploration. It begins with a change of attitude: beyond trying to understand the *other* (her beliefs, culture and context), an intercultural interpreter aims at understanding something *with the other*. In this common endeavour, the conflict between background presuppositions and truth claims is made evident in a way that demands resolution. We should look for a “new unity for the concept of intelligibility, having certain relation to our old one and perhaps requiring a considerable realignment of our categories.” (Winch 1964, p. 317)

Intercultural dialogue is the model and method of this hermeneutic endeavour. It is based on an extended, deep mutual learning process and sharing of life with the other, “who is a source of self-understanding, and also of understanding, not necessarily reducible to my own.” (Panikkar 1999, p. 34) For that reason, the partner in dialogue is never a research subject or an “informant” about her culture, her problems or her forms of life. Rather, she is a companion in the search for a deeper understanding of something that concerns and motivates the participants, which requires the sharing of the perspectives and resources of all to be creatively approximated. Interviews and sermons are not forms of dialogue. Dialogue invites processes of self-interrogation and transformation of that which was previously taken for granted by all participants, and leads towards a collaborative and mutual enlargement of horizons. Intercultural understanding is a creative process that does not aim to *represent* the other, but to reach a richer, better understanding “on the things themselves.” (Gadamer 2004, p. 292)

In this paper, I present and explore the results of my long dialogue with some Taitas (as the indigenous yage healers are commonly called in Colombia), regarding the sacredness of yage. I am going to refer to a particular configuration of yage practice that has emerged since the 1990s in

Colombia, when indigenous Taitas started to visit urban areas and people from the cities started to visit indigenous communities, searching for their medicine. This configuration is itself an intercultural reconstruction of previous shamanic traditions, which, of course, has implied the reinterpretation of the practice and the incorporation of different elements and notions coming from the religious and cultural elements available in a growing “globalized” society.¹

The dynamics, mechanisms and tensions of this intercultural process of reconfiguration of the practice deserve a careful treatment, which I cannot undertake here. However, I will note some important characteristics of the context of which I am writing, so that my analysis can be situated and better understood. In the last three decades, yage indigenous medicine went from being either completely unknown, or considered a primitive, superstitious practice of ignorant, uncivilized natives by people in urban areas, to being respected, even though it has sometimes been misunderstood as a sort of miraculous spiritual secret kept for centuries by indigenous peoples. This transformation responds to many social and cultural processes, such as the constitutional reforms that took place during the 1990s in many Latin American countries, which granted civil rights to indigenous peoples, endorsed multiculturalism and supported the defence and promotion of indigenous worldviews and forms of life (Assies et al. 2000). Likewise, the emerging environmentalist discourses and movements found a symbol and an inspiration for their struggle in the image of the “wise native” (Ulloa 2004). Contributing also to opening the space for the appropriation of yage (and other indigenous practices) in urban cultures and society in general is the spread of New Age ways, which reinterpreted and integrated “the wisdom” of different cultures into the dynamics of capitalist, individualist worldviews.

On the side of indigenous communities, in many of which the practice was almost extinguished, young people have been motivated to learn and keep the ritual use of yage because of the possibility of earning an income derived from the practice in cities and towns, but also because of the desire to gain the recognition and respect proper of the dignity of the Taita (Cf. Langdom 2016). Moreover, non-indigenous apprentices and practitioners, often in close contact with their indigenous masters, are nowadays commonly found. In some urban settings, yage sessions tend to be relatively homogenous in terms of the background of the non-indigenous participants (e.g., university students, professors, artists and intellectuals); however, in many others, as those in which I have worked, people from the most diverse social and cultural origins are found. This includes farmers, informal workers, politicians, police officers, former members of illegal organizations, health professionals and their patients, students, mothers with their drug-addicted or troubled children, and priests, representing all ages and wealth groups, even in a single session.

Since 1997, I have been a disciple and friend of Taita Luis Antonio Portilla. His narratives and teachings are the main source of my interpretation for this article. His life is a testimony and experiment of intercultural dialogue and spiritual search. He was born in 1946 in a village in the Department of Nariño, in southern Colombia, to parents of the *Awa* indigenous people. When he was a toddler, they moved down the mountain range to the rain forest in what today is the Putumayo region, looking for better places for artisanal gold mining. At the age of 8, Luis ran away from home because his father mistreated him, and he earned his living as a boy doing all sorts of things. As an adolescent, his first yage master was the renowned Taita Querubin Yocuro, from the *Siona* people in the Orito River area. As was the custom, after he received all the *pinta* (the knowledge) from this master, he continued his learning process with Taita Ricardo Piaguaje, from the *Coreguaje* people, a healer well established among the *Siona*.

Not belonging to a family of Taitas, he constantly moved from one place to another in the Putumayo, combining healing with informal commerce. For 9 years, after the age of 40, he served as a traditional doctor at the *Cabildo Inga* in the town of Mocoa, and was one of the first Taitas who started

¹ For a description of this new emerging context of yage “neo-shamanism” in Colombia, see (Caicedo-Fernández 2015). For the study of the uses and reconfiguration of yage shamanism beyond Colombia and the Amazon, see (Labate and Cavnar 2014; Labate et al. 2016).

visiting Colombian cities in the early 1990s. Due to internal conflicts within the organization, he left *Cabildo Inga* and participated in the foundation of *Cabildo los Pastos*, also in Mocoa, together with Taita Bolívar Cáliz and other leaders. Invited by a group of non-indigenous, Colombian medical doctors and psychologists, he established his *Maloca* (yage house) in Guarne, Antioquia, around 2000. Our dialogue has taken place in different places, including his current home in Guarne and many different locations to which I have had the fortune to accompany him.

2. Yage as the Origin of Culture

Let us start our intercultural exploration of the sense of the sacredness of yage with some important narratives about the origin of these plants. The following narrative has been repeatedly told to me by Taita Luis Portilla:

In those times, indigenous people used to kneel and pray to the lakes. White people saw them and said: “What an ignorant people, worshipping a lake!” They, however, did not adore the lake, but God who was in the lake, giving messages to them.

In those times, many indigenous people worshiped the sun. White people said: “What a brute people, adoring the sun.” It was not, however, the sun whom they worshiped, but God who through the sun gave them messages.

Seeing this, God said: “How is it possible that white people has someone to evangelize them, but indigenous people do not?” For that reason, he sent an angel to look for the good-hearted *cacique* [the chief of a clan]. He said to the angel: “Deliver him this little piece of vine and these leaves with which they will know good and evil.” When the angel arrived, people knelt down because they knew that something very good was coming to them. But the angel said: “Do not kneel, I am not the Father, but a messenger. He sends you this beautiful gift with which you will know good and evil and will heal many grave illnesses.” The angel handed the vine and the leaves to the good-hearted *cacique* and took him for a walk in the forest. Wherever he looked he saw how the yage vine and the *chagropanga* vine grew, until the forest around was crowded with many of these sacred plants.

Then the *cacique* was filled with love and joy and started to drink the medicine. The more he drank the more he was able to see and learn. When he drank and a storm came with winds and thunders, he said: “This one will be called Thunder yage.” Then he planted a piece of that vine and when it grew it had different leaves, brown on the back and green on the front side. When he drank and saw everything made of gold, he said: “This one will be called Gold yage.” Another day he drank and saw the heavens: “This will be called Heaven yage.” When he drank and saw himself all covered with feathers like a parrot, he said: “This one will be Parrot yage.” When he saw fishes: “This will be Fish yage.” When he saw wild pigs: “This will be called Pig yage.” These two are used for fishing and hunting. And when he became a tiger, he said: “This is Tiger yage.”

This is why there are many varieties of yage, each one with its own use. The *cacique* multiplied them little by little. When the time came to give back his body to the earth, his body did not rot like all corpses. Rather it transformed into white *chaquiras* [the colourful beads used for necklaces and bracelets]. This is why we make *chaquiras* bracelets. When they are properly consecrated, they protect you against sorceresses and all evil forces. So pure was that *cacique*. He was the founder of indigenous wisdom, which has continued since those days.²

² Here I combine elements from different versions heard between 2015 and 2018. A shorter version of the myth, narrated by Taita Luis Portilla in an encounter we had at the Museum of Modern Art of Medellín in August of 2016, can be found in this link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=peVQIIMpLS0&t=5s>.

A living myth is never a fixed, entirely codified narrative. There are nuances and new elements that appear each time it is told. Variations depend on the context in which the story is communicated, as much as on the particular communicative intention, as on the state of mind and emotions of the teller. This is why orality is the element in which a living myth moves, grows and is transmitted. In my written version, I have tried to integrate as many elements as possible from the different versions that I have heard. In turn, I am retelling the story for the purposes of its intercultural interpretation. Only after many years of friendship did Taita Luis start to tell me this myth, and always during or after yage sessions at his home in Guarne. Initially, I thought it was his own creation, partly because I had never heard it. He normally tells the same narratives for a period of time and then replaces them by others. The variety of his repertory, which includes incredibly funny experiences and deep sayings and tales disconcerting due to their simplicity, has never stopped to marvel me. His usual state of mind is very active and creative, prompt to invent jokes and word games.

Additionally, I thought the above myth was his own because it is common to find that each Taita tells unique stories, even if they belong to the same community. This is so due to the very creative force of the yage visionary experience, which, according to a close friend of Taita Luis, Taita Bolívar Cáliz: “allows us to know, to see and to listen to the true reality, to what was, what is and what will be. This medicine goes back to the past, is in the present and walks towards the future”.³ Accordingly, the visionary experience can be found at the birth of myth. Nonetheless, I once asked Taita Luis about the origin of the story, and he answered that it had been told to him by his teachers, Taita Querubín Yocuro and his father Patricio Yocuro, renowned masters from the *Siona* People of the Orito river.

Like most myths, this one begins with a reference to “those times”, the *in illo tempore*, well investigated since the classic work of Mircea Eliade (1963). Interestingly, those primordial moments of the origin in this case are situated in a historical period in which indigenous peoples were already in contact with “white people”. Normally, the expression “white people” is used in the Putumayo region to designate all non-indigenous people, including peasants, mestizos, people from the cities or foreigners, even if they are not “white”. Certainly, yage has been used for hundreds of years in the Amazon, and many different ritual and cultural practices associated with it were already there when different types of colonizers came. Therefore, how can then the myth refer to the primordial time in which the sacred plants were given to indigenous peoples? What is *primordial* in this reference to an already colonial moment?

One way to answer these questions is to point out that the narrative is *purely* a colonial one, insofar as some of its constitutive elements and symbols belong to the world brought by the colonizers. By means of this imposition of symbols, indigenous knowledge would have been controlled, neutralized and domesticated (Cf. Mignolo 2005, p. 11ff). It is indeed a “Christianized” narrative with an angel and a direct reference to God, the Father. Thus, this myth would have lost the power to tell about what is *originally* indigenous: it would be already an acculturated expression, or worse, a device in the “invention” of the new identity of the colonized. However, this kind of answer misses something fundamental. Indeed, all narratives are historical and incorporate heterogeneous elements that reflect the complex cultural contexts in which they arise and are transmitted. Precisely because of this, the primordial character of “those times”, in which the sacred plants were given, can be grasped in this myth. It is primordial not because it is historically a first moment, but because it was *then* that the most significant and positive difference between indigenous peoples (of the Putumayo cultural area) and “the others” was established. It was from this moment on that indigenous knowledge systems, religiosities and medical practices had begun as the legitimate, unique and worthy traits of their identity and form of being in the world. It is the foundational event: not a reference to a historical point in the past, but an experience of the origins of culture.

³ Personal conversation, Mocoa, Putumayo, July 2018.

Indeed, this event does not occur in a void. They already prayed to the lakes and to the sun, and it was God who was there. The way in which they communicated with the divine was, however, not complete. God talked to them through the lakes and the sun, but not directly. In another version, Taita Luis used the expression: “God saw the need of indigenous peoples” and he always remarked that “they did not have anyone to *evangelize* them”. The use of the word “evangelize” is important. Clearly, part of what the whites have done in the Amazon was evangelizing the indigenous peoples. As is well known, this implies a close link to one of the most brutal and devastating colonization processes in human history: cultural and physical extermination of entire groups; the enslaving of the survivors for extractives economies, from rubber to mining; the forced recruitment in different illegal armed groups; the constant expropriation of their territories; and, in general, the sociocultural exclusion and marginalization of indigenous forms of life. Moreover, this was accompanied by Catholic missionaries, and then, since the 1950’s, Protestant evangelicals. “Evangelization” has attempted to make indigenous peoples leave behind their religious practices and beliefs, to abandon and deeply transform their cultures, and demonize the ritual use of yage (even until today). Why, then, is the word *evangelization* used in the myth and what does it mean?

The word indicates that it was not the white missionaries who taught the indigenous peoples about God, or brought them healing and salvation, but God himself did this through the sacred plants. Missionaries ridiculed indigenous ways of worshiping nature, like praying to the lakes and the sun, degrading the people as “ignorant” and “brute”. Only when they received and started using yage did they move to a higher epistemic level: they could thus know good and evil, and heal grave illnesses. This movement from one level to another, this transformation, is only possible by the gifts of God, which are the sacred plants destined to be the teachers of indigenous peoples. “Yage is our book, our Bible. One can study it their whole life and die without having finished the first page.” Many years ago, Taita Luis used these words to describe his medicine.

The basic understanding of yage as a divine gift is emphasized in the myth by the reference to the good-hearted *cacique* to whom an angel is sent and who was “the founder of indigenous wisdom”. Wisdom has to be earned and deserved and it is central to the learning process of Taitas. Normally, this process implies long periods of celibacy, strict diets, and drinking a lot of yage so as to go both to the “heavens and the hells” (Cf. Jütte 2016, p. 167ff; Robinson 1996, p. 165; Payaguaje 1994, p. 57ff). Not everyone is able to endure all the rigors and trials of the learning process, which involves suffering, anxiety and facing fears in order to heal one’s own mind, body and spirit, which in turn enables the new Taita to cure the illnesses of others. Hence, as a divine gift, yage is meant for people able to meet the highest spiritual demands, while its power and strength remains a constant mystery.

Similarly, the reference to the good-hearted *cacique* emphasizes the idea of a fundamental epistemic, spiritual and cultural development brought about by yage. Indigenous people were not only in “need of someone to evangelized” them, but they were also prepared for that revelatory moment: they had been in contact with God through their rituals of worshiping sacred places such as the lakes, and, most importantly, they had spiritual leaders that were able to receive and multiply the divine gift. Indeed, yage was multiplied and diversified by the good-hearted *cacique*, first during his walk in the forest with the angel, and then by means of his own experiences with the plants that generated their different botanical varieties and cultural uses. Consequently, the practices associated with yage represent the most profound and authentic form of being in the world of these peoples. These practices make them what they are, and they safeguard their cultural survival (Cf. Robinson 1996, p. 227). In the *Life Plan of the Cofán People*, yage is described as: “A spiritual element that gives cohesion to our cultural life. Its ceremonial use helps us to formulate a model of life for our future generations” (Zio-A’i 2004, p. 64). This shows that the practice of yage is one of the central elements in the permanent struggle of the indigenous peoples of this region to keep and continually reconstruct their cultural identity, providing the basis for their social organization and forms of relationships with other people, nature and the spiritual dimension. Additionally, it is the basis of their knowledge system, and a key way of adapting to new situations by envisioning creative strategies and courses of action.

A second, beautiful myth presents, in a more radical way, the foundational transformation that yage makes possible. This story belongs to the Inga people, and here I present a short version:

In primal times the earth was in darkness. It was already inhabited by all its creatures, including human beings, but the humans lacked intelligence and wandered blindly searching for food. Doing this, a man ran into the yage vine. He broke it into two halves and gave a woman a share. Then she had her first period. When they ate it, they watched, amazed, how the remaining part grew and climbed to the sky. They saw the yage vine penetrating an immense flower that became the sun after being fertilized. Little by little shapes started to be recognized in the darkness and their profiles began to shine brightly. From the sun, the children of the sun came down, each one playing a different melody with their flutes and drums, and each song became a different colour. When they reached the ground, they spread light and colour to all beings. And when the world was enlightened, from all that symphony of colours and music, human intellect emerged, thus creating intelligence and language.⁴

Unlike Taita Luis' narration, for the Inga people, the use of yage is not only the mobilizing force for cultural progress, which enabled them to reach a deeper level of understanding of the divine and to create their own medical system; it is also a cosmological force in the configuration of the world and the fundamental factor in the process of becoming human (Cf. [Winkelman 2010](#), p. 250). The fact that these two processes cannot be separated is one of the most profound meanings of the myth. Human beings took part, through the accidental consumption of yage, in the creation of the world as it is today, a world of distinguishable shapes, harmonic sounds and beautiful colours. A meaningful world emerged with the participation of human beings, enlightened by yage. What would the world be like for beings whose intelligence and language had not yet arisen? There is only meaning, colour, beauty and harmony for beings able to grasp and enjoy them, or rather, they only emerge together with human consciousness. Thus, as human intelligence and language arose, yage gave intelligibility to the world, which, without this interaction between human beings and the sacred plants, would be a dark, purely instinctive realm in which all beings would already exist, but they would lack their distinguishable shapes, colours and names. According to the myth, only after discovering yage the sun of human consciousness was born. From this sun, the spiritual people, the children of the sun, came down to earth musically spreading the colours, that is, the visible traits and graspable characteristic of each being. These spiritual beings or "yage people" are an extended element in yage narratives. They are told to teach the drinkers and initiate them in the art of healing and seeing,

What kind of knowledge is that given by yage? This is a fundamental question for intercultural hermeneutics. As seen in their myths and practices up to today, drinking the medicine is how knowledge can be achieved. "The more one drinks the more one learns and sees". Knowledge is acquired through the visions, which are given by the medicine. "This is the mirror of consciousness, the mirror of truth, the medicine of the spirit", is a frequent sentence used by Taita Luis to introduce the medicine to his new "patients". It is the medicine itself that is able to show and teach. For this reason, it is not necessary or possible to form a doctrine, or to write a book to transmit shamanic knowledge. The learning process to become a traditional healer, a Taita, consists basically of drinking yage for a very long period of time, and adhering to the restrictions (*cuidos*), such as celibacy and a very restrictive diet, necessary for taking care of the body during this demanding process, as well as for developing the necessary attitudes such as self-control, courage and humility. The primary role of the master shaman is to consecrate the medicine by means of his chanting and prayers, so that the disciple can *see by himself* the visions (*pintas*) of the medicine. Therefore, learning is not that much a process of transmission of information, although this happens to a small degree, but of gaining experience in

⁴ *Ambiúasca samai*, Inga Myth, version by Benjamin Jacanamijoy ([Rocha 2010](#), p. 117).

the spiritual dimension through the opening provided by the use of the medicine and thus receiving instructions from yage itself.

In the sequence of Taita Luis' myth, the good-hearted *cacique* starts to see different aspects and elements of reality: climate phenomena like storms, the celestial realms of the heavens or different kinds of animals. Interestingly, the different visions experienced by using the single variety of yage brought by the angel gave origin to the multiple varieties that are known up to today. The divine gift is not static. Rather, in producing the most fundamental spiritual transformation, it evolves and diversifies together with human consciousness and culture. For this reason, it is not possible to synthesize and dominate traditional indigenous medicine in a single doctrine or under a common institutional organization. Yage wisdom is a source of newness and diversity, rather than of homogeneity.

A common element in the narrative of important shamans, those who reach the highest levels of wisdom and power, is the ability to bring items, such as new medicinal plants or musical instruments from other "dimensions" or "worlds" to this realm of reality. Two biographies of the very famous *Secoya* "yage-drinker" (*yage uncuquë*), Fernando Payaguaje, (who died in his town on the Aguarico River in Ecuador in 1994, after decades of not being able to practice his science any more due to the prohibition and eradication campaign carried out by the evangelical missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (the Wycliffe Bible Translators)), tells different episodes of his shamanic journeys from where he brought different items. They include a flute made of a bird's bone that people in the ceremony were able to hear and see, a variety of yage, and some varieties of the sacred *nuni* root (the Colombian *chonduro*), used in *Secoya* funerary ceremonies (Payaguaje 1994; Cipolletti and Payaguaje 2008). Taita Luis Portilla also told me once that his master's father, the famous Taita Patricio Yocuro from the *Sionas*, once brought a rooster, which was as colourful and beautiful as there could be found on the earth. The excrements of this magical rooster were "*chaquiras*" (those colourful beads into which the body of the good-hearted *cacique* turned after death). After a couple of days, the rooster just disappeared.

There is also a progression of knowledge in the visionary experience that implies gradually visiting the different realms of reality and learning to use the power of the sacred plants for the diverse purposes and needs of human survival (Cf. Payaguaje 1994, p. 72ff). For example, Fish yage and Pig yage are used to "call" the animals and ask permission to their "owners" (*los dueños*) for hunting them. This is one of the most extended elements in traditional yage narratives: the night before going to fish or hunt, the Taita drinks yage to see where the animals are and to talk to the spirits who lead and protect them. They tell him exactly where to go and how many animals the hunters are permitted to catch. In this way, the balance of the forest is protected and conserved. Yage visions do not only show what exists in the world, the varieties of beings and the different cosmic realms, but also teach human beings how to use plants and minerals and what sort of relationships should be established with other creatures. An extraordinary common motive in shamanic narratives that actually expresses a basic epistemological principle of Amazonian traditional medicine, is that plants can provide knowledge of plants, and yage can teach people about the whole of reality. This is why yage is regarded as the highest plant and the wisest teacher. The following testimony, recorded by Germán Zuluaga, speaks with absolute clarity:

Yage is the mother of all medicinal plants. The spirit of yage looks after all medicines of the forest. And those who drink for learning, if they endure the process, are shown all the medicinal plants and their uses like in a movie. There comes a moment in which [yage] shows one something like a book in which all that is written. Because we do not learn like you, by reading books, but through yage itself.⁵

⁵ Testimony of "don Roberto", recorded in 1984 by Zuluaga (1994, p. 68).

The two last varieties of yage that are mentioned in the myth, Parrot yage and Tiger yage, are related to another fundamental motive in yage narratives: the transformation of the shaman into certain animals (Cf. Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978, p. 113). Traditionally, this experience is considered to be the sign of having reached the highest level of wisdom. Nevertheless, the practice has been gradually lost, because—some say—it is not possible any more to reach the level of knowledge of the elders (*los antiguos*), and also because it has been discouraged by the wisest themselves. The transformation into animals, particularly into a jaguar, was a common strategy to fight against enemies and to eat them, and once someone tasted human blood, it became a terrible and uncontrollable habit (cf. Payaguaje 1994, p. 93ff). This is another example of the dynamic and self-correcting tendency in the practice of yage shamanism.

I have attempted to listen to and interpret these myths. Now I will explore the phenomenology of yage visionary experience to continue with the goal of this paper to offer an intercultural interpretation of the sense of the sacred in contemporary yage shamanism in Colombia.

3. Yage Experience as a Spiritual Experience

Healing and knowledge are the indissoluble, central elements of yage experience and practice. “*Pinta y cura*” (vision and healing) are probably the two Spanish words most commonly heard in yage chants and invocations. Indeed, there is an indispensable relation between achieving deep understanding of oneself, reality and the divine, through yage visions, and being healed. These are the main aims of yage practice today for healer and patient. Other traditional uses of yage such as divination, deliberation, conflict resolution and equilibrium in the community and the environment are important aspects, but subordinate to vision and healing.⁶

Let us enter into the visionary experience of yage, focusing on the core link between healing and knowing. I start with a statement by Taita Luis:

Yage is an inner encounter with oneself. It is there that you know the spiritual dimension. There, it occurs an inner connection between heaven and earth. It is there that you learn how to live and what life is. This life is not for living it, but for knowing how to live it. When we learn to live, then we meet the Father himself, and we begin to discover what lies inside us. When your consciousness awakens, it is as if you leave a dream. We are always asleep and for that reason we have no faith. When we wake up, we realize that we must deeply respect the spiritual dimension.

When I was learning, I finally got to know who the devil is and who is God. Afterwards, I became respectful of the spiritual dimension and began to educate myself. I thought: “Truly I was blind”. When we heal the spirit, we heal everything else. Consequently, we decide not to wish evil on anyone, because otherwise we destroy ourselves without realising it.⁷

The first thing to notice is the reference to yage as a place. “It is there” that the “inner encounter with oneself” and the discovery of the “spiritual dimension” occur. “It is there” where one learns to live. Clearly, yage is the name of the vine, of the brew made of this vine and the *chagro* leaves, as well as of the spirit of the plant, which is considered to be a master spirit. Here, however, the word is used to refer to the inner space of the vision that is opened by all the other referents of the word (the plant, the brew and the spirit). In modern western terms, this inner space would be identified with a mental state, a shamanic trance, or a psychological state, i.e., that of a modified state of consciousness (cf. Harvey 2017, p. 140 ff). This is not completely alien to the way in which Taita Luis refers to yage. Expressions

⁶ The same can be said of shamanic combats, which, insofar as witchcraft is considered one of the main causes of illness, is part of the vision–healing dynamic.

⁷ Personal conversation, Guarne, Antioquia, May 2018.

such as “*chuma*” (drunkenness)⁸ are typically used. However, what matters is what happens in that state, or rather, that it is *through the state* that one can enter into the spiritual realm, which is not a merely psychological state, but the deepest realm of reality. A common question asked by Taita Luis to his patients after taking the medicine is “Where you able to get in?” (*¿Si pudo entrar?*).

The first trait of yage experience appears: the sense of entering into the spiritual dimension of reality, which is always present, but yage makes visible. In other words, the visionary experience is not a hallucinatory experience, constituted by illusory, false mental constructions, but the opening and disclosing of the fundamental realm where all visible phenomena are grounded. In this sense, yage visionary state is not understood and lived as a merely subjective state.

Here is an important difference in regard to the sense of the self of urban, Western-educated participants. The modern sense of the self is characteristically defined by its inwardness, which is taken to be a purely psychological, mental and individual disposition. Charles Taylor suggested the term “buffered self” to account for this way of experiencing oneself. Opposite of “buffered self” is the “porous self”, which for Taylor is the central element of pre-modern and pre-secular societies (particularly European medieval societies). The modern self is not open to the influences of meaningful forces and non-human wills (for example, forest spirits, angels or relics), but lives in a world in which human minds are the only sources of meaning (Taylor 2007, pp. 37–41, 539ff). This self is protected, self-enclosed, self-sufficient and self-controlling. Everything that this self experiences as meaningful, or more precisely, everything that it experiences as its own interiority (its feelings, thoughts, mental processes, dreams), needs to be understood as having been produced by the self; that is, as a purely psychological process, which may have physical causes (brain processes) or historical causes (past traumas and other experiences), but that necessarily constitutes the realm of subjectivity, clearly separated and discernible from the “external”, “objective” world.

In this sense, the psychologization of yage experience is a hindrance for adequately understanding it and a cultural phenomenon that requires further investigation. More precisely, it is the spontaneous way in which modern individuals interpret what happens to them during “trance”; but, interestingly, this sense of the self is gradually transformed by constant participation in yage sessions. Indeed, conversion experiences and testimonies are widely found in yage urban circles. However, these conversions, more than to a particular religious tradition, are normally described as an opening to spiritual realities and forces that affect people who move from buffered-selves to porous-selves.

Contrary to modern subjectivity, the interiority to which Taita Luis refers is that of the very objective world which can be explored, known and interacted with *in a vision*, eyes closed. “The whole universe is within us.” He frequently uses this sentence to account for the possibility of knowing the world without moving. In this way, the dichotomies inner-outer, internal-external, constitutive of modern subjectivity, are overcome. In Taita Luis’ saying, he means that the inner space is where one “encounters oneself”, “knows the spiritual dimension” and “learns to live”, because “There, it occurs an inner connection between heaven and earth”. This “there” is an integrative indexical, because it denotes all the referents of the word yage: the vine, which is sometimes described as the “umbilical cord that connects the earth with the heavens”; the brew, which itself integrates the masculine force of the yage vine and the feminine force of the *chagro* leaves; the yage spirit, which can take one’s spirit to the divine; and the inner space of the spiritual realm opened by all the others, in which one realises the interconnection and interdependence of the visible and the invisible.

The integrative force of yage also connects the three motives of the saying: knowing oneself, discovering the spiritual dimension and learning how to live well. Achieving one end cannot be done without the others. This is why Taita Luis said: “When we learn to live, then we meet the Father himself, and we begin to discover what lies inside us”. The order of the terms can be here

⁸ Interestingly, the word “*chuma*” seems to come from the name of another sacred plant, the San Pedro cactus used in los Andes, which is known as *Huachuma* in Peru and *Achuma* in Bolivia. Thus, it would originally designate the state generated by shamanic plants and not the “secular drunkenness” produced by alcoholic drinks. (Schultes and Hofmann 2000, p. 168).

interchanged. As in great mystical traditions, the lack of this knowledge is best expressed with the dream and blindness metaphors. Seeing reality in the inner space of yage is to wake up, to open the eyes, to “awake your consciousness”. At that decisive moment, faith and respect before the divine arise as permanent dispositions. It is not possible to have faith, and a respectful disposition towards the divine, without having had an experience of the divine that is accompanied by spiritual awareness. Faith is thus not a belief in unseen things, or in what others say, but the result of the direct realization of the divine.

The notion of “respect” is fundamental in the practice of yage. *“El yage es de respeto”*. The meaning of this simple Spanish sentence, central for the Taitas, is very hard to appreciate. “Yage deserves respect”; “Yage is something of respect”, are direct translations. The sentence is used many times as a warning for practitioners that feel overconfident about the medicine, who think that they are able to control or dominate it, or believe they have reached the spiritual level of an expert. Given that yage is a divine force, it is also a “mysterious” force, and it can “punish” pride by lowering even an experienced Taita by means of sickness, mental confusion and hard visions during a session. Yage comes from the forest, has grown unseen, is full of force, and it cannot be dominated or domesticated. The sentence is also used to express awe and wonder for the divine presence and the deeds witnessed by the Taita. For example, in the healing of a patient Taita Luis said:

Healing is a mystery so sacred that even the Taita does not understand it. Through the healings I have performed, I have become aware that it is not the Taita who heals. It is God who enters through the medicine to heal the sick.

(...) We are only mediators. We pray internally for the healing of the patient. Sometimes I think: “How can this be possible? A surgery?” because this medicine is so simple, that one only drinks it and is healed.⁹

In the last sentences of his saying, Taita Luis indicates another two fundamental elements of the yage spiritual experience. First, spiritual awareness and knowledge develop gradually, and they imply a learning process. “This is like at primary school. One begins slowly, then learns the vocals, the letters, and then is able to write”.¹⁰ This progressive element of the visionary experience was already present in the myth that I interpreted before. It is not an experience that is static, complete or once and for all. Rather, it is a learning process through which one grows in understanding, knowledge and faith. The Taita explains how he went from being spiritually blind to slowly discovering “who the devil is” and “who God is”. Good and evil, as in the myth, are discovered through yage and this knowledge is absorbed personally. Insofar as spirits have personal characteristics, they are a “who” and not a “what”.

The second final element of the saying has to do with the definitive moment of integration. Healing oneself and healing others are simultaneous exercises of knowing oneself, discovering the spiritual dimension and learning how to live, especially in the case of those who drink yage to become Taitas. This is so because “all illnesses are spiritual”, as I have heard Taita Luis express many times. For that reason, “When we heal the spirit, we heal everything else.” This is the core of the visionary spiritual learning of yage. The following narrative of a regular participant at Taita Luis’s sessions is a good example of the interconnection between vision and healing in the practice of yage:

I needed to be healed, so I prayed: “I need to have a good relationship with my mother”. Then I literally entered into a womb and started to understand my own gestation process

⁹ Personal conversation, Mocoa, Putumayo, July 2018. The “surgery” to which he refers here is that of one of his patients who consulted him due to a heart disease. According to his narration, the patient had the experience, in his visions, of been taken to a sort of operating room.

¹⁰ Taita Luis Portilla. Personal conversation, Guarne, July 2017.

from conception to birth. I understood all the emotions that my mother felt; all her anger towards my father; and all those circumstances around my conception. And I started to heal all that pain and asked my mom for forgiveness, in case that I had done something wrong or came in the wrong moment. She told me, “I also forgive you my son, do not worry”. From that moment on we have had a wonderful relationship. The experience of this session was decisive.¹¹

An analysis of this experience helps us see the healing power and function of yage visions. First, the vision came as a response to a request of being healed of a particular problem in life. The Taitas frequently recommended that their participants arrive with an initial intention before they partake in a yage session. The art of the practice of vision requires learning how to concentrate, to ask and to interact in the inner spiritual realm. It is not being a passive spectator. Yage practice is a form of spiritual work, rather than a recreational, effortless experience. Precisely in the spiritual work within the visions arise understanding and healing. In this testimony, the central exercise was that of asking for and giving forgiveness, having received a new understanding of the situation and a better grasp of the emotions of his mother. Second, this understanding is gained through the re-actualization of the moments from conception to birth, but interestingly, the focus is not on the feelings of the foetus, but on the perspective of the mother, which the participant empathically and compassionately grasps. This decentring is what makes the exercise of forgiveness and healing possible. As the testimony indicates at the end, healing must go beyond the visionary experience and the “subject” in order to be real. This is a central aspect of yage practice, to which I will come back in the following section. Healing needs to be seen and have clear, pragmatic results: the full recovery from illnesses; successful personal transformations; changes of bad habits and patterns; and the reconstruction of family relationships as well as spiritual growth and maturation.

This transformative and reconstructive effect of the visionary-healing experience of yage is also indicated in the closing remark of Taita Luis’ statement. After healing the spirit, all the rest is healed. He adds, “Consequently, we decide not to wish evil on anyone, because otherwise we destroy ourselves without realising it.” A life oriented towards the good is the culmination of the healing process.

4. The Problem of the Validity of Yage Spiritual Experience

The reader may reasonably question whether an experience “induced by a substance” should be considered spiritually authentic or legitimate (cf. e.g., [Zaehner 1961](#)). Outside of popular atheist positions, this analysis is for those who already accept that there are legitimate religious experiences and do not simply reject all of them as illusions or delusions. The issue of validity is important for an intercultural interpretation of the sacredness of yage. In this last section, I would like to briefly explore it.

I begin with a question: should the fact that yage visionary experiences are *produced* by the use of a brew, (which *affects brain functioning* in ways that are still being scientifically investigated, (e.g., [Winkelman 2010](#), p. 26ff; [Timmermann 2014](#), p. 97; [Palhano-Fontes et al. 2018](#); [Frecka et al. 2016](#))), count against the claim that it is a *valid* form of knowledge and spiritual experience? I have encountered this question repeatedly. The logic of the criticism is this: the validity of the experience is problematical insofar as it has been *produced by an external agent, a substance that affects the brain*, and it is not and experience granted directly by supernatural factors or as the result of spiritual practices and technics. Is this correct?

From the perspective of intercultural hermeneutics, this criticism comes from a biased way of questioning the authenticity of experience, which has meaning only within a particular background understanding of the world, that of modern subjectivity and materialistic presuppositions. Indeed,

¹¹ Personal conversation, Guarne, Antioquia, March 2018.

even if the objection may accept that there are valid religious experiences, (for example, those granted by the grace of God, which would not be *induced* by external factors), its core is the same as that of the naturalistic, reductionist arguments. These arguments assume that certain forms of experience that are considered either normative (e.g., in terms of moral values and principles), or deeply significant (e.g., love and beauty) *are in reality only* the effect, expression or epiphenomenon of a lower level of reality, which is the only *really real*. I will not repeat here the insurmountable problems faced by reductionism (see Nagel 2012; Clouser 2013, p. 185ff). Rather, I will interculturally analyse the presuppositions of the argument.

Every spiritual tradition and way of knowing develops criteria to evaluate the authenticity of their revelatory, enlightenment or mystical experiences. The practice of yage is not an exception. How can you know whether a vision is truthful, veridical or even truth-revealing? How can you differentiate between a vision and a hallucination? (Cf. Harvey 2017, p. 143; Shanon 2010). These questions emerge naturally among yage practitioners. They attempt to discern whether they are being fooled by evil spirits, their own feelings and interpretations or even by yage itself. Some ethnographies report Taitas warning that “yage can deceive” in order to test people (Robinson 1996, p. 156; Taussig 1991, p. 455; Jütte 2016, p. 180). Here, the important point is that visionary experience is never passive or automatic but must be learnt and exercised. It is a spiritual practice that requires training, keeping restrictions, being guided by a master and developing certain moral values. Visions do not simply happen to everyone when they drink the medicine. When they do happen, they provide *scenarios for learning and exercising* the healing of illnesses, the way to interact with certain spiritual beings and forces, and the way to live.

Developing the ability to see *accurately* is a fundamental component of the learning process of a Taita. In the practice of yage, I have found four criteria that establish whether someone has mastered the art of seeing.

The first is a plain and direct confirmation criterion, which can be formulated with the simple question “Did it work?” (Cf. Harvey 2017, p. 140). If a traditional healer diagnoses a person and claims to heal her, and that person really recovers, then the visioning and healing powers of the Taita are considered legitimate. A principle constantly repeated by Taita Luis Portilla is, “A true Taita is recognized by his deeds, never by the use of traditional ornaments or the performance of rituals”. According to him, this is the way to identify fake indigenous healers and charlatans. Moreover, among yage practitioners, this has taken the form of a tacit social norm: “We cannot consider ourselves as indigenous doctors until the Taita allows us and *the community acknowledges us due to the results of our work*” (UMIYAC Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de la Amazonía Colombiana, p. 21, my emphasis).

The second criterion is intersubjective corroboration. It can be seen at work at an important moment of initiation related to a collective practice of evaluation. During a yage session, disciples are asked to heal patients in the presence of a master Taita, who checks the accuracy of their ability to diagnose the patients and heal them. These sessions may imply the presence of many Taitas and their students, that come from different communities, or they may occur in private settings like at the master’s yage house. Besides these evaluative sessions, it is common to find advanced practitioners sharing their visions and sometimes testing what they see against each other’s visions. Indeed, this may lead to conflicts of interpretation and subsequent social repercussions. This is a very interesting topic for intercultural investigation that I cannot develop here.

Third, there is a kind of pragmatic criterion, which has to do with the power of visions to enlighten and transforms people’s lives. Unlike hallucinations, visions provide new and deeper understandings of one’s life, relationships, personal history, place in the world and similar matters. These new understandings often lead towards personal transformation and growth. There is a fundamental conviction that yage is a medicine, since health is not, as I explained above, a purely physical state, but also involves psychologic, emotional, mental, spiritual and social welfare. Consequently, insofar

as a visionary experience brings about these transformations in personal, daily lives, their validity is confirmed.

A final criterion is related to the way in which visions are treated. The art of seeing is referred to in Spanish as “concentration” (*concentración*) and “research” (*investigación*). It requires the Taita disciple a long time to learn to see and direct the trance state towards inquiring about specific issues. Concentration requires the ability to focus the mind on a question or object that a person wants to know, as well as to discern the immediate experience in order to avoid being either fooled by negative forces, or by one’s own mental projections. In the toolbox of the Taita, there are prayers to confirm the validity of the visions. Furthermore, it is recommended that the visions are double checked, that is, to repeat the “concentration” a couple of times to determine if coherent visionary results are obtained. As a matter of fact, many years ago I asked Taita Luis how I could be sure if what yage showed me was not simply an invention of my mind. His answer summarizes how the visionary experience is a spiritual practice that is always being perfected: “First you have to know yourself. Never judge anything without first having known yourself”.

The inner epistemological criteria of yage knowing practice deserve a careful investigation. My aim here is only to present these four criteria in order to show that the issue of the validity of visions is part of the yage practice. Nonetheless, the problem of validity is not formulated in terms of a suspicion raised by the causal link between “the substance” and the brain processes. Rather, the epistemic and spiritual validity of visions is related to the ability or inability of the Taita, who is in the process of mastering the practice of seeing. The danger is not knowing oneself, being deceived by fears, fantasies, feelings or negative spiritual entities.

What does all this discussion show us regarding the conflict of background presuppositions that intercultural hermeneutics should disclose, in order to propitiate interpellation?

To begin with, there is no concept in the Western, modern worldview that can be used to appropriately describe yage. A quick association with psychedelic drugs is almost automatically made, linking it as a “substance” that affects brain functioning and alters consciousness. Yage, however, as I pointed out before, is an integrative term for the plant, the brew, the spirit of the plant and the visionary state. Therefore, the causal connection between yage and the visionary experience is complex. The fact that visions and the visionary state do not occur every time that someone takes the medicine is significant. “It has to be deserved”, “one has to be ready”, “yage knows”, “yage is mysterious”—are common expressions to account for the fact that someone does not “enter” into the trance state all the time. Virtues such as patience, endurance, constancy and humility are required, and are the main learning points “when you cannot enter”. In other words, there is no direct causal link between taking the brew and having a spiritual experience.

Second, as I pointed out in the section dedicated to the interpretation of the narratives of the origin of yage, there is progression and development in knowledge. This entails both learning to heal and to see. The apprentice gradually visits different realms and places and receives all the “*pintas*” (the visions) of his master. The learning process is very long and demanding, and different levels of wisdom and power are recognized among specialists. In Taita Luis’ words: “To become a Taita one has to walk a very long path. First, you have to heal your own spirit, only then can you heal the spirits of others. You have to go through many trials and combats. You have to keep celibacy and be very careful about what you eat.”¹² All in all, drinking the brew is part of a complex discipline, as challenging and arduous as most of the spiritual practices of other spiritual traditions. It would never occur to anyone in this tradition that yage is a sort of spiritual shortcut.

A final, fundamental point that takes away the doubt about the legitimacy of a “plant-induced” spiritual experience is related to the ontology of yage. From my interpretation of the myths and the phenomenology of yage experiences in two earlier sections of this paper, it is clear that yage

¹² Taita Luis Portilla. Personal conversation, Guarne, July 2017.

is not understood simply as a “substance” producing merely physical effects. This understanding arises within a mechanistic and materialistic view of reality. On the contrary, yage has a spirit. It has person-like characteristics such as will, intelligence and agency. For this reason, one learns to relate to it in a personal manner, somewhat like an I–thou relationship. The fundamental attitudes in the relationship with a sacred plant are asking it permission, giving it thanks, learning to listen to its voice, respecting it, following its teachings and getting to know its different personality traits.

Even though yage is one of the most sacred plants, a gift from God, “the mother of all medicinal plants”—as mentioned before—it is neither the only sacred plant, nor the only one with a spirit. Every plant and animal do, they “are people too” (Harvey 2017, p. 97ff). Human interpersonal relationships are the basic model of relationship that extends to the whole world.

A final word of emphasis is that yage needs to be activated and directed by means of the ritual practices of the Taita. It is not the plants by themselves, but the way in which they are spiritually oriented that can produce vision and healing. Indeed, sacred plants can be used either for restoring health and harmony or for harming people. This depends on the intention and inner disposition of the Taita, who can thus take either the direction of a healer or a witch. According to Taita Bolívar Cáliz:

Yage is a plant that can be used both for good or evil. Bad people, those who think wrongly, they use the medicine for doing evil, and those who think rightly use it for the good. The plant allows both things, but the person who uses such a valuable plant for doing evil is a sad, pitiless and unfortunate individual.¹³

This brief exploration of the background presuppositions of the question regarding the spiritual validity of the yage experience shows some fundamental differences between two horizons of understanding of reality. It is on the level of tacit ontological commitments that intercultural hermeneutics works. Its task is not simply to identify and describe differences or to correct misunderstandings. It should make interpellation between heterogeneous conceptions of reality possible, as well as track ways in which they can be creatively transformed and enlarged. This requires philosophical exploration and personal commitment. The very sacredness of yage, whose traits have been explored in this paper, challenges a materialistic, disenchanted view of reality, as well as the modern buffered self. This challenge is based on a knowing and healing practice that makes the latter metaphysical views appear limited and inadequate. The wisdom of the Taitas, for a long time marginalized and neglected, has this transformative power.

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¹³ Personal conversation, Mocoa, Putumayo, July 2018.

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