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► To cite this version:

Maurizio Ali. How to Disappear Completely. Community Dynamics and Deindividuation in Neo-Shamanic Urban Practices. Shaman - Journal of the International Society for Academic Research on Shamanism, 2015, 23 (1-2), pp.17-52. hal-01201764

HAL Id: hal-01201764

<https://hal.science/hal-01201764>

Submitted on 6 Jan 2016

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How To Disappear Completely: Community Dynamics and Deindividuation in Neo-Shamanic Urban Practices in Colombia

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This essay reflects on some community dynamics underlying neo-shamanic practices, starting from a review of fieldnotes taken by the author in the course of an ethnographic experience conducted in an urban context, in Colombia. The observation of the social and ritual procedures played by neo-shamanic therapists in postcolonial contexts reveals how indigenous performance has had to transform itself to survive the cultural pressure imposed by the hegemonic rationalism of modern mechanisms of knowledge. Urban shamanism, as an emerging social phenomena, appears as a hybrid creation, synchronizing forms and contents of the traditional shamanic practice with the postmodern needs of disciples (and clients) looking for their psychosocial balance in a climate of growing deindividuation. If ethnobiological knowledge were the core skill of traditional shamanism, neo-shamans prefer to strengthen their social position thanks to the tools offered by the same modernity (such as the ICT) and to confirm their social role of mediators and therapists through the development of a syncretic paraphernalia and a community of faithful aficionados.

. . . Mauro is tall, long haired and he is always smiling. With a certain vanity, he avoided revealing his age, concealed by his youthful and sophisticated features. Maybe thirty, maybe forty years old. Mauro is Italian, but grew up in Colombia. Mauro is a shaman, yes, an Italian shaman . . .

First Steps on the Path of Ecstasy

This short essay is not aimed to describe the umpteenth ethnographic experience conducted with an hallucinogenic substance in a shamanic context. It is neither a study about ethnobiological topics nor a digression about shamanic tourism. This article, especially edited for the

Shaman's readers, contributes to the emerging discussion about neo-shamanism as a "counterculture" starting from a critical analysis of ethnographical data, seeking to describe the social context facilitating the empowerment of neo-shamanic therapists, to reflect about some community dynamics underlying their practices, and to understand the process of deindividuation (and the subsequent loss of individuality and sense of self) that accompany such a kind of ritualism.¹ To explain better the logical procedure used to reach certain conclusions, I used a phenomenological approach and a personalized narrative, to give the readers coming from different disciplines all the instruments and data needed to follow the complexity of a line of reasoning which has been developing throughout the course of a research that implied a radical turn in my anthropological approach to social phenomena.

Confessions of a Young Anthropologist

Ten years ago, I started this research knowing almost nothing about shamans, visions, ecstasy or entheogens. As an undergraduate student, I had the opportunity to speak on a few occasions with Professor Alfonso Di Nola ("the eminent satanologist," as some colleagues called him) and, as a child, I had followed Father Gabriele Amorth, a mediatised exorcist, performing the functions of altar boy in the parish of Saints Aquila and Priscilla, in Rome, where he used to officiate. Despite these precedents, all I knew about altered states of consciousness and the related sociocultural dynamics was limited to some extemporary reading without any scientific basis.

Everything began when, during my very first ethnographic field-work—with a Kuna community in San Blas archipelago, in Panama—I met Alex, a French singer who told me about his cocaine addiction and his plans to travel to the Amazon "in search of the sacred plant" that would free him from vice, and that would allow him to "find himself." Well, everything started right there. When I finished my research work in Panama, I moved to Colombia, and settled in Bogota. Holding a contract as a research associate at a prestigious local university (which,

¹ A first version of this article, more focused on the character of the neo-shaman and his personality, was originally published in Spanish under the title "Dejé el Chianti por el Yajé" (Ali 2011).

in Colombia, is the equivalent to something like a passport to access realities and contexts otherwise precluded to the common man), I began to ask my new Andean colleagues if they knew something about a certain "sacred plant" that freed one from all evils. The responses generally ranged from an alarmist "be careful with that stuff or you will die!" to a more (or less) progressive view "that is a stuff for underdeveloped indios." Others, told me stories about friends of friends who had turned crazy, or worse, who disappeared into thin air because of the evil generated by the shamans. Only after several weeks, and as a result of my naive insistence, someone decided to reveal me in a whisper the name of this "shamanic secret": the *yajé*.

With that emblematic attitude of the ethnocentric explorer, able to build exotic representations on unfathomable or incomprehensible phenomena, I considered to have found a valid research subject, sufficiently "mysterious" to proclaim the vain eureka typical of those who think they "discovered" what was previously unknown. It is a real defect polluting the anthropological reflection since the foundation of the discipline, acting as a parasite on the minds of many novice ethnographers (as I was): we are committed to "discover" tribes, languages, dialects, customs, traditions, social norms and structures (as in archeology someone has been sure to discover Machu Picchu or the *moai* of Easter Island). In fact, we do not discover anything and maybe we just make (more) visible what has already been there: but ten years ago I was not used to this kind of thinking. Let's face it: the ethnocentric gaze, added to the desire for "exotic" discoveries, seemed the most obvious approach for the young ethnographer I was. I remember the disappointment that accompanied me while, throwing a quick look at bibliographic databases, I realized that there was solid academic literature about *yajé* and that, in the end, this "shamanic secret" did not represent exactly a mystery. Thousand of researchers in Latin and North America, Europe, Asia and Oceania had already made extensive research on *yajé*, from different disciplines

(above all ethnology, ethnobiology and ethnomedicine)² but, actually, most of them share a common vision about the subject, treated basically as a shamanic and indigenous—not to say “wild”—topic.³ According to them, the *yajé* exists, though only in the jungle. I seemed to find myself in front of a kind of knowledge that, in Aristotelian terms, could be located between the esoteric and the exoteric domain.

The *yajé* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) or *ayahuasca*—as it is known among aficionadados in Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, as well as in the US and Europe—is a vine endemic to the Amazon rainforest. It was identified relatively recently and its first botanical classification was defined in 1852, by the British explorer Richard Spruce (Schultes and Hofmann 1979). The shamans of many indigenous communities of northern Amazon extract from its stem a decoction that is consumed by individuals or groups in the course of therapy sessions. The *Banisteriopsis caapi* excerpt has emetic and laxative properties and, if consumed alone, does not cause hallucinations or disturbances in consciousness. The Amazonian shamans cook it with a few leaves of *Psychotria viridis* or *Diplopterys cabrerana*, two plants known as the *chacrana*, with a high content of dimethyl-tryptamine (DMT), an active ingredient with hallucinogenic properties. *Banisteriopsis caapi* merely acts as an inhibitor of monoamine oxidase (MAOIs), allowing the body the proper absorption of tryptamines contained in *chacrana* leaves, leaving them to act at a neurophysiological level and, finally, to generate visions. In fact, the term *yajé* is currently used to refer to the compound obtained from the two plants. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975) stressed that the *yajé*, and the hallucinations that it is able to generate, would allow the shaman to experience that allegorical flight perceived as an expression of his superhuman powers. According to him, the shaman is, therefore, a superior being, although he needs *yajé* (or other entheogens) to “fly.”

² In December 2014, I used the keyword “yajé” for a combined search within the most relevant free databases used by academic scholars (Bielefeld SE, Chabot College, Docuticker, Jurn, ERIC, US Gov. Documents, Infomine, IntechOpen, JSTOR, LibGuides, DOAJ, OAJSE, OpenDoar, RefRepository, RefSeek, and Virtual LRC), obtaining more than 84,400 bibliographic references: articles in peer reviewed journals, chapters of books, books, Ph.D. dissertations and lectures presented at academic meetings. Using the keyword “ayahuasca” the results were almost 698,000 and with “Banisteriopsis caapi” (the scientific name of the plant) I found more than 35,600 scientific sources.

³ An outlook adopted, for indeed, by Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975; Furst 1976 or Fericgla 1997.

A review of the available sources on the subject shows that shamans and their “observers” are involuntarily dancing an awkward choreography since the time they came in contact, back in the fifteenth century. Although in the last fifty years a growing number of observers has been starting to take them seriously, it seems in fact that there is still a “force field” that makes us skeptical about shamans, these embodiments of exotic spirituality, conceptually difficult to digest for those who, like me, were formed under the auspices of the academic positivist rationalism.

As a result of this skeptical departure, I became easily a victim of the fascination for *yajé* as an “anthropological mystery.” Therefore, during five years, I found myself visiting homes of shamans and *tomadores*,⁴ herbal shops, temples of indigenous medicine, local markets, biological analysis laboratories, libraries and slums of Bogota. I collected data, stories and testimonies about the cult of *yajé* and, finally, I “discovered” the obvious: that *yajé* cults prosper (and not only in Colombia) because there are both a culture—an underground culture, perhaps—and a social structure serving as humus and giving sense to this kind of practices. During my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to participate in a series of *yajé* ceremonies with a group of fellows led by a shaman, an Italian shaman. This short article aims to share with *Shaman's* readers some observations gathered in the course of my ethnographic journey with them and the reflections generated by my personal analysis of their neo-shamanic community, treated as a local expression of a wider global phenomenon—almost a *fait social total*, to use Mauss' terms (1970)—which could be considered “mysterious” but that, on the contrary, has become an emerging practice in America, Europe, Asia and even Oceania. From this perspective, the rise of neo-shamanism demonstrates the process of hybridization involving the shamanic figure which, caught between tradition and progress, is transformed into a postmodern provider, able to offer his services as a master of ceremonies to a community of entheogen users composed by full members of the global village.

⁴ The literal translation from the Spanish, is consumers (or endusers): a definition that is certainly not neutral, due to the fact that is charged with a certain element of judgment (negative, in this case). Consequently, I preferred to use the term with which the participants at the shamanic sessions call themselves (and its synonyms *yajecero* or *ayahuasquero*).

A Journey Through the Transcendence on a Ramshackle Bus

It was Andrés Morales, a renowned Colombian psychologist, who gave me the right contact. Actually, he did even more: that I got invited to a session (*toma*) organized by some of its customers. I remember it was a Saturday, at noon, when I received his call: “There’s a special session, tonight: they want to know you.” So, without abiding by the ritual fasting that is supposed to precede the ingestion of the sacred plant (as described in the ethnological literature I mentioned above), I found myself taking one of those shabby and shaky buses, the *busetas*, which represent the Colombian folklore of public transport. A strange context to begin my ethnographic trip to the legendary “purgatory” of the Amazonian shamans: no dugout as in the memories of Wade Davis (1996), no hut in the jungle, as in the *yajé* correspondence exchanged between William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg (1963), the Beat Generation prophets, no traces of the mystical silence reported in Castaneda accounts (1968). Bogota, the megalopolis, ran behind the windows of the *buse* while the radio launched a very loud merengue, the driver argued with a passenger about football and Andrés, tired after a day of work, read the newspaper. I thought “the ‘others’ are waiting, they are waiting for me” and the anachronistic situation in which I was, it seemed almost a relief. The meeting with the shaman was not provided in a remote corner of the tropical forest, but in a comfortable house located in a small Andean village on the outskirts of Bogota: at more than 2,000 meters above sea level and with mountain weather. When we knocked on the door we were welcomed by Julio, who would become the host of my first contacts with the “vine of the soul.”⁵ After a few informal pleasantries, he asked us the 35,000 pesos (almost €10) required to take part to the ritual and he stated that the *toma* in which we were about to participate was “a special occasion, with few people, only the intimates.” We were ten: Andrés and me, Julio and his wife, Mauro—the shaman—accompanied by his wife, his daughter and his three assistants: Alfonso, Carlos and “El Pibe.”⁶

⁵ In Latin America *yajé* is also known as the *bejuco del alma* (vine of the soul).

⁶ Generic term of endearment, it can be translated as “the kid.”

The Ethnographer’s Notebook: Scattered Notes

January 26, 2006, 19:30. I’ve been here two hours. Mauro is preparing the room for the ceremony. Alfonso, Carlos and “El Pibe” are helping him. Julio talks to everyone and his topics of discussion range from the powers of *yajé* to reflections on existence. In their chat, the words most often pronounced are “energies” (declined in the plural form), “spirituality,” “mystical,” “holistic,” “soul,” “travel” and “find himself.” In this community, the undisputed leader of the group seems to be the supernatural.

20:00. Julio and the other men are wearing casual clothing: jeans, hiking boots and flannel shirts. Women seem to follow a certain dress code: long skirts and white shirts with flowers full of color. I am feeling as if I was in a faded photo taken from the family album, with a seventies touch like *déjà vu*. As I look around, I get the feeling that the protagonist of this session . . . is me: I was invited to be watched, observed and analyzed to assess whether I could be part of their community, and I could share the path of *yajé* with them. I feel like Susan Sontag’s anthropologist: uncomfortable and under control.⁷

20:15. Mauro came out of the room where we would officiate: the salon of Julio’s house. Julio asked him something, but he did not answer back. He came to me asking “*Paisà*,⁸ you are Italian, right?” A terrible blow to my mimetic desire to go unnoticed: I did not want to be seen as “the usual *gringo*,”⁹ the foreign tourist in Colombia longing for the trip with *yajé*. And yet . . . He called me “*Paisà*” . . . and that accent . . . yes, Mauro is Italian, he is as well, like me. An Italian shaman in Colombia?

21:00. Mauro invited me to sit with him by the fire. We talked a few minutes. He asked questions, I answered. Topics discussed: the performance of the Italian football team, the unequivocal value of Italian gastronomy, ending with a quick rumination on the vices and virtues of Italian cheeses. Then, he got up and went to the bathroom. There is some movement in the room. The atmosphere is transforming: Julio and the others are literally decking up, with a certain formality, rings, bracelets, anklets, necklaces, crowns of pearls and feathers. I recognize the drawings: they are stylized representations of the visions, the *pintas*, generated by *yajé*. Like the ones I saw on Richard Evans Schultes’ books and in the cases of the Museo del Oro.¹⁰

⁷ The reference is to the famous Sontag’s essay (1966) “The Anthropologist as Hero.”

⁸ A dialectal Italian expression meaning “fellow countryman; compatriot.”

⁹ A generic term used to refer to US tourists (often extended to travelers from Europe, Australia or Israel).

¹⁰ It is an important museum of Bogota, which contains the largest collection of Latin American pre-Columbian gold art.

Julio wears a necklace with shark teeth: “It is from India. I bought it on eBay,” he says, informing me as if he were responding to my curious eyes. Andrés and I maintain our “urban” uniform, which makes us feel even more uncomfortable and “different.” Who are the “others”: us or them?

22:00. The ceremony starts.

January 27, 2006, 07:00. On a *buseta*, way back. Last night, I did not sleep, but I get the feeling that I had just woken up. I do not remember exactly what happened during the previous hours. I drank several cups of *yajé*, I threw up, I had complex visions, I have resurfaced memories of past times. It seemed as if I was reconstructing, in a different order, the course of my life. A chaotic tour through the lightest and darkest moments of my mundane existence. I do not feel like writing anything more . . .

First Impressions of a Rationalist on the Ground

I must admit that, at the first reading of the notes taken during that night of postmodern shamanic initiation, I had the impression that I acted as an involuntary actor of a bizarre theatrical *piece*. As an undesirable and unavoidable side effect of the work on the ground, the way back generated nostalgia, critical opinions and cold reconstructions of the observed reality that could mislead and produce distorted generalizations: as an ethnographer, I learned the lesson after some years. The truth is that my hosts—the shaman and all this impromptu circle of *yajé* followers—seemed so artificial that, in a first moment, I simply archived the case as a farce. With the experience acquired over the years, I now understand how I did nothing but repeat the same impressions of the first Europeans who came into contact with shamans. Traditionally, the colonial discourse—it is worth remembering—had a highly negative opinion of the shamanic universe.

Indeed, since the fifteenth century, Western explorers traveling in search of unexplored lands, wherever they arrived, met people who claimed to communicate and interact with spirits and otherworldly beings, especially with therapeutic or divination aims. The documentary colonial legacy shows how the explorers (and the missionaries who accompanied them) chose to record these characters with the names that were given in the native languages, finding no equivalent in European languages: *page*, *angakkut*, *arendiouannens*, *piayé* or shamans (Narby and Huxley 2001). That did not prevent the European authors from charging the original language definition with a number of derogatory adjectives (clowns, acrobats, junk thaumaturgists and miracle-workers). In the second half of

the seventeenth century, the archpriest Petrovich Avvakum (1938: 16), who has provided the first ethnographic observation of a Siberian shaman, described him as “a vile magician who invokes the demons.”¹¹ Europeans, in their encounter with shamans, tended to view them as impostors who needed to be unmasked. And me, what was I doing?

The Shamanic Personality

Early anthropologists observed the shamans as if they were an “exotic” version of the mentally ill. They treated them as schizophrenics believing that the hallucinations they were suffering were real and tangible, persuaded to communicate with the spirits and experts in reproducing voices and languages which did not belong to them. So it was then that, along the decades, anthropologists limited their analysis of shamanic practices to a unique topic: the mental health of the shamans.¹² The discussion took a turn when Claude Lévi-Strauss, with his refined style, revolutionized the matter and concluded that the shamans had to be compared to psychoanalysts rather than to psychopaths. In fact, the father of modern anthropology signaled the existence of a contact point between the shamanic universe and the psychoanalytic field in a famous essay entitled “The Effectiveness of Symbols” (also known as “The Symbolic Efficacy” 1963).¹³ In his analysis, which refers to the transcript of a shamanic ses-

¹¹ Leader of the Old Believers conservative faction, archpriest Avvakum is also considered to be a pioneer of modern Russian literature. His colorful autobiography, written between 1672–3, is considered a masterpiece of seventeenth-century Russian literature. Numerous manuscript copies of the text circulated for nearly two centuries before its first printed edition in 1861.

¹² The famous Hungarian–French ethnopsychiatrist Georges Devereux adopted a Freudian position that might seem extreme: he considered shamans as “culturally dystonic,” “problematic social units” and, as the saints of the religious tradition, “social hecklers” (Devereux 1961; 1967). In retrospect, it is clear that the shamans suffer temporary “mental imbalance” and provisional alterations of consciousness (which must be considered in a “shamanic” perspective as the attainment of a more or less ephemeral state of ecstasy).

¹³ The original version of this essay, dedicated to Raymond de Saussure, was published with the same title twenty years before, in the prestigious *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* (1949, 135/1: 5–27). Given the lack of distribution the magazine suffered, Lévi-Strauss decided to update the text and make it appear as a chapter in his seminal volume *Structural Anthropology*.

sion with a Kuna indigenous community, in Panama,¹⁴ Lévi-Strauss established the difference between the practical symbolist (the shaman) and the structural therapist (the psychoanalyst), clearly distinguishing them by their respective *modus operandi*: the shaman speaks, the analyst listens. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss emphasized the role of enchantment and fascination acting in shamanic sessions to which he was referring. Indeed,

. . . the shaman does more than utter the incantation; he is its hero, for it is he who, at the head of a supernatural battalion of spirits, penetrates the endangered organs and frees the captive soul. In this way, like the psychoanalyst, becomes the object of transference and, through the representations induced in the patients mind, the real protagonist of the conflict which the latter experiences on the border between the physical world and the psychic world. (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 180)

Visions, Ecstasies and Shamanic Charisma

January 27, 2006, 6:00. I look at Mauro while I pack my bag. He sleeps, tired. I realize that throughout the night he has been “working,” leading us, driving us, guiding us. This Italian–Colombian Charon followed us on our journey and took care of our hallucinations, our visions, our imbalances. A real hero. However, I have not seen spirits, I did not perceived presences or, even less, witnessed any miracles. . . . I remember the nausea and phosphenes¹⁵ . . . But I had already read this somewhere else.

In structuralist terms, the *pinta* generated by *yajé*, *id est* the visions it produces, can be traced to physiological causes that stimulate the underlying cultural structures.¹⁶ Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, meanwhile, distinguished two types of visions:

¹⁴ The Mu-Igala, a medicine song collected and translated by Holmer and Hassen (1947).

¹⁵ The luminous images produced by the mechanical, electrical, magnetic or chemical stimulation of the retina.

¹⁶ Benny Shanon (2002) proposes a different approach—based on the cognitive psychology and on a purely phenomenological analysis of the altered state of consciousness generated by *yajé*—to understand what he consider, paraphrasing Aldous Huxley, the *Antipodes of the Mind*: the regions of our psyche that could be reached with the assumption of *ayahuasca*.

The first, with a neurophysiological basis, consists of luminous sensations that appear as flashes in the visual field, even if you are in total darkness. Generally, this involves lines and dots, stars and circles, namely geometric and non-figurative motifs technically defined as phosphenes. Since all of us, human beings, we have the same brain structure, consequently we all feel the same sensations, independent of the external lighting. Such phenomena are common under the stimulus of a hallucinogenic drug. . . . The second category of hallucinatory visions have a cultural—and not biological—basis since they consist of figurative images that the person projects depending on the accumulated experience, on a background of colors and movements caused by drugs. (2005: 47–50, translated by the author)

If the Reichel-Dolmatoff’s perspective emphasizes the inherent power of the hallucinatory substance (as a veritable engine of ecstasy), Mircea Eliade, the famous Romanian historian of religions, offers another interpretation, diametrically opposed, about the vehicle of ecstasy. According to him:

. . . narcotics are only a vulgar substitute for “pure” trance . . . The use of intoxicants is a recent innovation and marks the decline of shamanic techniques. Poisoning by narcotics serves to produce an imitation of that state that the shaman is no longer able to obtain by other means. (Eliade 1964: 401)

During decades, specialists have largely debated about this point and many have considered the use of the term “decline” as Eliade’s very personal perspective. The criticism focused mainly on his generalizations concerning the concept of narcotics¹⁷ and the fact that Eliade refused stubbornly to recognize the central role of hallucinogens in many forms of traditional—or rather, premodern—shamanism (Furst 1994).¹⁸

However, Eliade sensed the reason why the shaman would be converted into a such important figure in the second half of the twentieth century, at a time of dissatisfaction with traditional religions, which is

¹⁷ Nowadays the buzzword is “entheogens,” a neologism from Ancient Greek defining the substances able to “create a god within us.”

¹⁸ Actually, we must add that the anthropologist Peter Furst, who knew Eliade, reported that the Master, during the later stage of his life, confessed on more than one opportunity that “he had abandoned his preconceptions about the use of hallucinogenic plants as a form of degeneration of the shamanic techniques of ecstasy” (Furst 1994: 20).

demonstrated by his affirmation that shamanism is “the religious technique par excellence” and that “the shaman, and he alone, is the great master of ecstasy” (1964: 30). Eliade’s presage about the postmodern spiritual crisis would be confirmed by the advent of such a “return to the origins” that has materialized in the cults of rebirth: from the neo-Druidism to the neo-Satanism, passing through several *New Age* “-isms,” a plethora of newness that, after all, is nothing more than a reference to a legendary golden age in which religion rhymed with physical balance and mystical experience. In all these cases, the figure of the charismatic leader plays a key role not only as master of ceremonies and therapist, but especially as counselor and guide: a stable reference point, worthy of authority and gifted with special powers (the *energies* about which I spoke with my traveling companions) considered of otherworldly origin.

Prodromes of the Neo-Shamanic Culture

I believe that it may be interesting, at this point, to briefly reflect on the strong correlation existing between the development of the so-called counterculture and the democratization of practices related to the consumption of psychoactive substances. Despite the use of botanical preparations acting to modify the consciousness having been described long ago, it was only after the immediate second postwar period that writers, researchers and travelers began search for “another dimension”: something absolutely different from the experience obtained with the drugs already available on the European and American market—opium, morphine, cocaine or cannabis derivatives—generally associated to specific therapeutic functions (especially in the field of pain management) or to certain artistic circles.¹⁹ When the first Western psychonauts discovered the effects of entheogens such as the Mexican *peyote* (*Lophophora williamsii*), African *iboga* (*Tabernanthe iboga*) or Siberian *amanita* (*Amanita muscaria*), they realized that these plants could radically alter the human consciousness and the perception of the surrounding reality. It was a fundamental insight, demonstrating how these hallucinogens

¹⁹ In such a context, drugs fulfill an instrumental function aiming to obtain inspiration and drive the artistic creation, but also for more nihilist purposes, such the estrangement or, eventually, self-destruction.

were acting by the alteration of chemical and neurological structures and not as a mere result of a psychological suggestion: the hallucinatory experiences induced by the entheogens showed that these plants were causing similar effects both on local and “traditional” consumers and on Western and “modern” consumers (who theoretically were not subject to the influence of superstition). These observers, when invited to attend and participate in healing sessions, realized that they could experience feelings and visions similar to those described by shamans: the only difference lay in the fact that while shamans were preparing for rituals with resistance tests, fasting, sexual abstinence and meditation, European and American explorers showed in general a less mystical approach and a focus solely on drugs.²⁰ Therefore, for these early psychonauts the sacrificial dimension of such hallucinogenic rituals was limited at the strict time lapse corresponding with the consumption of the substance and at the emetic or laxative crisis that often accompany these experiences. Rereading these first observations on the ground, we realize how their solipsistic narrative tends to fall back merely on the author’s experience, on his personal trip and his sensations, devoting little attention to the figure of the shaman and to his powers.²¹

For this article, it is interesting to consider the case of Gordon Wasson, a wealthy American banker²² and enthusiastic mycologist. During a research trip to Mexico in 1955, he had the opportunity to participate in a ceremony that included the ingestion of mushrooms containing psilocybin (another hallucinogenic active ingredient), under the direction of the Mazatec shaman Maria Sabina. Two years later, in 1957, Wasson published an extensive report in *Life* magazine, in which he described his extracorporeal “shamanic flight.” In his article, Wasson writes that:

. . . the effect of the mushrooms is to bring about a fission of the spirit, a split in the person, a kind of schizophrenia, with the rational side continuing to reason and to observe the sensations that the other side is enjoying. The mind is attached as by an elastic cord to the vagrant senses. (Wasson 1957: 108)

²⁰ Acts of contrition prior to the ritual sessions were carefully avoided and dietary prescriptions regularly broken, cf. Wasson 1957.

²¹ The works of Furst (1976) and Narby and Huxley (2001) include numerous extracts from the original reports of the first Europeans psychonauts.

²² He was vice president of the investment bank J. P. Morgan & Co. Incorporated.

With Wasson's report—the first journalistic account of altered states of consciousness generated by an entheogen—*Life* magazine drew the attention of hundreds of thousands of readers to the details of a shamanic experience: a topic that, until then, had been reserved to academic literature and to a small, very small, circle of scholars. Obviously, a number of readers wanted to follow the example of Wasson, which caused considerable problems for the wise Maria Sabina. The first wave of “psychedelic tourism” in search of the legendary Mazatec shaman brought thousands of foreigners to the villages of southern Mexico, looking for *los niños* (the hallucinogenic mushrooms, literally, “the children”). As she told to her biographer:

. . . without doubt, Wasson and his friends were the first foreigners to come to our village looking for “los niños.” They did not suffer from any illness. The reason was that they ate them to find God. Before Wasson, nobody ate the mushrooms just to meet God. We eat them to heal sick people. (Estrada 2003: 8)

Although the term “shaman” is borrowed from the Evenki (Tungus) language, the first ethnographers considered that there was a common thread linking the forms and contents of both Asian and American native medicine (which is why, nowadays, the term “shaman” is commonly used with reference to the indigenous therapists of the American continent), distinct from the models, schema and mental frames typical of other colonial territories, such as Africa, and of course from the religious structures and beliefs widespread in the US and in Europe. In Italy, France or Britain, the cults of dissociation—especially between the nineteenth and twentieth century—became visible through the flowering interest in so-called mediums and spiritualists: professional communicators with the afterlife, paid to act as intermediaries between the world of the living and the spirits (the chthonic underworld). The European version of the dissociative cults—based on modern and positivist premises—did not refer to a cosmological system, nor to music or lights or other sensitive sources of experience. It was satisfied with its paraphernalia of amulets, magic mirrors and relics of dubious origin. Participants were generally confined to the role of mere “spectators” (Talamonti 2001). On the other side, the possession cults in Africa and America (and the syncretic variants appeared in the days of colonies and of the slave trade, as in the case of Voodoo, Vodou, Winti, Orisha, Obeah, Umbanda, Santería, and Candomblé) rely on a complex system of beliefs and on a ceremonial scheme allowing a high level of action to the participants (especially physical:

dance, trance, screaming, music, cf. de Heusch 1965; Walker 1972). Nevertheless, whether they are magicians, spiritualists, sorcerers, seers or shamans, the real stars of the ritual performance are always the actors and psychopomps,²³ therapists and heroes (or, at least, perceived as such), they are the lone protagonists of the mystical action.

Counterculture, Psychedelia and New Age Spirituality

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live
Exodus 22:18

If the Wasson experience contributed to popularizing the shamanic issue, it was only towards the end of the sixties, in correspondence with the student demonstrations of 1968, that the psychedelic counterculture began to take hold, especially in the United States (and more partially, in the United Kingdom and France). In the same period, a certain Carlos Castaneda appeared, a Peruvian anthropologist who claimed to have studied with a Yaqui shaman in Arizona and Mexico, converted into a “Sorcerer's Apprentice” (Castaneda 1968). Castaneda's works have generated a multitude of controversies about their scientific validity and, nowadays, are considered literary products rather than ethnographic monographs (Fikes 1993). Nevertheless, his books were translated into dozens of languages and obtained a remarkable publishing success during several decades, helping, as did Wasson, to make even more popular the shamanic issue. Castaneda called “wizard” (*brujo*) his Yaqui “Man of Knowledge,” with the intention of emphasizing his powers of divination (although this term generally defines those persons whose powers were gifted by otherworldly or demonic beings, also in Spanish). Indeed, Castaneda found that his master was more than a therapist (as in Lévi-Strauss' terms): he considered the wise Yaqui as a man of knowledge who wanted to gain power or rather, more accurately, a “power point.” It was exactly this search of a mystical “power point”—combined with the description of the shamanic techniques that

²³ The figure of Charon is not exclusive to the Greek tradition. The mythologies of many cultures refer to psychopomps: semi-human beings (or quasi-human or super-human, depending on the version) responsible for the transport of the departed souls to the afterlife.

readers could replicate comfortably in their living room—which stimulated the imagination of millions of Castaneda’s aficionados. Such elements as the use of peripheral vision or the ingestion of hallucinogenic mushrooms gave to his “followers” the exciting impression that they could be real “sorcerer’s apprentices” and enjoy a homemade shamanic experience. In sociological terms, Castaneda books contributed to popularize the collective fascination for the most folkloric aspects of native medicine (and world vision), strengthening the underground culture which contributed to the flourishing of neo-shamanism. The fact that Castaneda’s books continue to be regarded as the manuals of the *New Age* movement is certainly not fortuitous.

The Appearance of the Shamanic Tourism

The neo-shamanic discourse providing the structure of reference for hundreds and thousands of *yajé* communities has now spread not only to all the countries of Latin America, but also in North America, Europe and Oceania, despite the existing legal limits: *Banisteriopsis caapi* is listed in the legal systems of most of the states as a plant which cultivation and consumption are considered unlawful. The limited diffusion it has had in Asia is probably a reflection of the limitations mentioned above, as well as an effect of the impossibility of cultivating the vine locally (there are, however, some clandestine communities in South Korea, Japan and Thailand). Indeed, as in the days of Wasson, Burroughs, Ginsberg and Castaneda, neo-shamanic tourism continues to fuel the *yajé* circuit in those regions where the plant is endemic. The psychotherapist and anthropologist Marlene Dobkin de Rios (1994), who has studied the ethnobotanical characteristics of *yajé* for more than thirty years, notes that since the early ’90s, the flow of foreign travelers in search of Amazonian shamans has soared. A large number of people move to Peru, where there is a well developed touristic infrastructure to receive

psychedelic travelers.²⁴ There are also several rehabilitation centers for drug addicts based on *yajé* therapy (as the Takiwasi Center, directed by the French physician Jacques Mabit) and “shamanic lodges” managed by European and American investors (Salak 2006). The Brazilian case should be considered separately, since the local *yajé* culture is associated with the syncretic neo-Protestant cults (such as the Church of Santo Daime and the União do Vegetal), in which the figure of the shaman is replaced by that of a “psychedelic pastor” (Weiskopf 2002). In Colombia there is still a good number of native therapists “in the wilderness,” especially in the southern and western regions, but the greater offer is proposed in the capital and in some secondary cities (Medellin, Cali, Cartagena, or Santa Marta), where a legion of shamans practices their profession. Most are mestizos, others are descendants of the African diasporas, some hold “real indigenous credentials” but almost all of them are children of the same rural people transplanted in suburban areas as a result of internal migration and forced displacement caused by the armed conflict and the violence perpetrated by drug-traffickers and criminal organizations. Their public (followers and customers) is absolutely nonindigenous: city shamanism attracts an urban population.²⁵

The case of Mauro, the Italian shaman in Colombia, is significant for its uniqueness. Firstly, because of the role played by the self-perception on his shamanic activity: Mauro is strongly committed to his mission and he considers himself a powerful energy catalyst, a talented therapist, a real heir of the Amazon shamans. On one occasion, I heard Mauro defining himself as a “soul warrior,” who was able to deliver sick spirits

²⁴ Professor Evgenia Fotiou (2010a) analyzed the phenomenon of shamanic tourism in Peru to describe how Westerners “pilgrims” conceptualize *ayahuasca* ceremonies and how they integrate the psychedelic experience in their existing worldviews. Even if our ethnographic works have a different social and geographical focus, we share similar conclusions: in neo-shamanic praxis, ritual is not aimed to reproduce symbolically a specific social structure (existing or desirable) but to foster “self-transformation” and to challenge the participants basic assumptions about the world.

²⁵ As a matter of fact—despite the effects of ethnic transfiguration produced by colonization and modernity dynamics—even at the present day, it would be very difficult for a person perceiving himself as an “indigenous (id)entity” to accept the authority of a therapist with whom was not established a deep human relationship based on a shared world-vision and a common interpretation of the notions of health and illness. In other words, to be effective the indigenous shaman must personally know the “patient”: an inconceivable rapport in the framework of the market system that relates urban shamans and their clients.

from evil.²⁶ Secondly, because of a personal background that Mauro himself summed up as: “wealthy origins, peaceful childhood, rebel adolescence” and a youth dedicated to experience “everything was available on the market [referring to drugs].” Thirdly, because of the composition of his mystical community: over the course of time, I found out that most of its members belonged to the group of opinion leaders, influencers, agenda setters and decision makers that feed the Colombian media and political environment. Academics, journalists, public officers, artists and businessmen flocked to Mauro’s session looking for relief from disorders generated by their daily routine. Mauro said that:

. . . when I met *yajé* my life changed dramatically. I stopped taking all the stuff I took in before. Thanks to *yajé* I decided to learn how to grow up spiritually. So, I went training with real Amazon shamans, the *taitas*,²⁷ in the wilderness. I ran into debts with my family and friends to pay for the trip to Mocoa and Puerto Asis,²⁸ where I sojourned several days to learn with them, the *taitas*.

When speaking about his apprenticeship, Mauro is more vague:

. . . a lot of exercises, *paísà*, and fatigue, tiredness, reflection . . . and silence. And the purges. Every day . . . It was not a bed of roses!

To understand better Mauro’s discourse, it is important to note that among Amazon cultures the training of a shaman is a process of human—and surely not divine—order, based on practical exercises and on refining skills. In such a context, the “enlightenment” with which many urban shamans claim to reach the spiritual ascesis cannot make

²⁶ It is interesting to note that Professor Fotiou (2010b: 192) considers that “. . . in the Amazonian cultural framework, local *ayahuasca* users tend to interpret any negative or dark experiences during ceremonies as attacks, by malevolent shamans, hired by other members of their community. The more individualistic Western cultural framework leads Westerners to interpret these experiences as part of their own psychic processes . . .” but also that this pattern has to be challenged, because “Western shamanic apprentices have integrated the concepts of sorcery and shamanic warfare into their worldview . . .” and “. . . that, in many ways, a shamanic apprenticeship for a Westerner involves a radical shift in interpretations of shamanic experience.”

²⁷ A synonym for shamans.

²⁸ Two villages of the Putumayo department, in southern Colombia, corresponding to the northwestern sector of the Amazon basin. This area hosts a large number of indigenous communities, including Inga, Siona, Awá, Embera, Paez, Kichwa and Cofán.

sense. Even if the selection of the future shaman is based on “tangible” signs considered to be of supernatural origin (a difficult birth, a stain on the skin, a form of albinism), his instruction follows the classical educative pattern that unites the “peoples of the wilderness”: to observe a process (as executed by an expert person), to repeat the action (under the gaze of the expert) and, ultimately, to act independently (Ailincai, Jund and Ali 2012).

Postmodern Shamans, Ministers of the Extraordinary

Mauro has never read the Bible. He prefers the *I Ching*—the classic text of Chinese mysticism—and interpreting of the Tarot. However, on his altar always appears a pair of holy pictures (St. George and the Virgin of Guadalupe), and a wooden crucifix. Mauro does not perceive himself in religious terms, although his performances present some resemblance to the priesthood. In Mauro’s social discourse (the representation of himself that this postmodern shaman offers to “others”), the shamanic ministry is aimed to offer his life for *yajé* and to act for the salvation of his community (and, incidentally, of all mankind). According to him, *yajé* is “a spiritual plant, because it is made of spirit and exudes spiritual energies,” as well as a consecrated Host assuming mystical value through transubstantiation. His ministry is aimed primarily to the treatment of the spirit (although the effects of his work will remain uncertain and intangible), rather than the resolution of any contingent physical or mental imbalance. Already twenty years ago, the American anthropologist Eleanor Ott pointed out that:

In present days, many of those who call themselves shamans certainly do not belong to cultures or communities integrated by a real shamanic perspective. It would be more correct to speak of common people of the present generation, which, ultimately, seek themselves. Which is why many neo-shamans are ill-prepared to engage with customers who rely on their powers to heal a variety of physical, psychological and spiritual ailments. The indigenous shaman, the traditional one, can count on the experience and knowledge accumulated by generations of therapists connected to the same cosmological tradition: this is what allows to make sense of both the disease and the healing process directed by the shaman. (1995: 245)

According to Ott, postmodern shamanism is a form of autology, an autoanalysis based on individual reflections developed in communitarian (often sectarian) contexts, contrasting with “classic” shamanism (based on ethnobotanic science), which can be thought as an eterology focused on the “analysis of the other,” cosmic reflection and, paraphrasing Schumpeter, the “creative destruction” of community order.

The *yajé* sessions directed by Mauro always end with time dedicated to reading and interpreting the Tarot. For community members, it is a very special moment dedicated to deconstruct—and reinterpret—the visions experienced and confirms the protagonist role of the shaman, able to offer explanations, reflections and some advice to his psyconaut fellows. During these sessions, participants gather in a circle, so that not only the discursive contents, but also the forms to which their bodies are subjected, clearly remember the performances proper of group therapies. Mauro is terribly talented in psychoanalytic observation and, despite never having read Sigmund Freud’s works, he can recognize the thin veil of psychopathology that permeates the daily lives of the members of his community. He listens and offers his findings, identifies sources and solutions to the problems displayed and, above all, knows the right words to say to each participant. The cultural origin and the social experience of Mauro constitute a set of skills that allows our urban shaman to always have “something interesting to say.”

Which confirms, once again, that the therapist’s personality (both shamanic or neo-shamanic) cannot be reduced to an individual or congenital factor, but should be considered in social and cultural terms, that is, as the effect of a given sociopolitical ecosystem that molds and gives sense to the shamanic performance. The shamanic endowment must be viewed as a social act, with which the community members transfer a part of their individual sovereignty—the one charged with the otherworldly relations—to preserve social well-being and to maintain a satisfactory level of relations with the unknown or the extraordinary. The shaman lives “a peripheral life” because he performs those functions that no one else could or would play: Charon’s role has never been attractive, despite the prestige that it entail. Still, his views may have huge influence. Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff considered highly plausible the hypothesis that “the source of violence and destruction typical of many chiefdoms” in pre-Columbian times was to be sought in the hallucinatory experiences of shamans (Reichel-Dolmatoff 2005: 67). Due to the absence of irrefutable archeological proofs, we may not be in agree-

ment with the hypothesis just mentioned, but the case of Mauro shows us that, even today, shamans can influence other influential people.

Shamanism, Postcolonialism and Globalization

Mauro is constantly accompanied by two apprentices: an assistant, “el Pibe,” and an aide, Alfonso. Both studied law at a prestigious private university, both came from families belonging to the Colombian economical elite, and both came in contact with Mauro through the Internet. As explained by Alfonso:

... go on Google, type in *yajé*, *taita*, Bogota and you will see how many shamans we have here in the capital!

The shamanic training of Alfonso and “el Pibe” has been achieved, above all, thanks to data, forums, articles and websites freely available online.²⁹ Alfonso tells me that this is the way they learned to cook *yajé*, “as well as it is cooked by the shamans of the jungle.” In fact, the mass of information on *Banisteriopsis caapi* available on the World Wide Web is accessible to all, without discrimination, so that anyone can learn how to prepare the hallucinogenic decoction without ever having known a shaman, nor having to suffer the discomfort of the forest. By now, the postmodern psyconaut no longer needs to fear mosquitoes or Amazon leeches: he simply needs to link his terminal (or tablet or last generation smartphone) to the global telematic network, to connect to an e-commerce website dedicated to the trade of entheogens and to conclude the transaction by credit card. A few days after, he will receive directly at home a sober, anonymous, and tax free pack: *et voilà*, *Mesdames et Messieurs*, postmodern shamanism in its fastest and aseptic version.

The Urban Circuit of Yajé in Bogota

Adopting a psychosocial outlook, Vélez and Pérez (2004) have analyzed the neo-shamanic circuit in the Colombian capital, proposing a clas-

²⁹ Indeed, on forums and social networks dedicated to the *yajé* aficionados, there is an extended offer of varied nonscientific shamanic literature: how-to-books on magic and spirituality, textbooks on self-help and personal growth, psychedelic cooking handbooks and countless reports of “sorcerer’s apprentices” (see, for example, Sombrun 2006).

sification of “users” that will help us to understand the expectations driving postmodern *yajeceros* to pursue the path of the vine of the soul. According to them, there are four key reasons explaining the growing interest of urban people for *yajé* ceremonies:

- (1) *Therapy*: when users attribute to *yajé* a curative power offering an alternative and natural solution for their personal—mostly psychological—problems;
- (2) *Spirituality*: motivated by the willingness to “know the original truth” and to “find one’s self.” In anthropological terms, it corresponds to the search for a transcendent level of personality development;
- (3) *Curiosity*: ascribable to the search of “excitement” and new experiences, it is focused on the aesthetical exploration of visions, trances and ecstasies;
- (4) *Research*: is my case, that sums up the position of scholars, doctors, journalists and other “professional meddlers” who take part in the shamanic sessions as participant observers with the aim to investigate topics related to anthropology, ethno-medicine, toxicology or addictology.

All those expectations correspond, in economic terms, to a demand for shamanic services that meets in Bogota a consistent market supply adapted for all tastes. Actually,

. . . if you come to Bogota, you have to know that every day is easier to find *yajé*. You no longer need provisions from a *taita*: now you can buy it bottled at not more than 10,000 Colombian pesos [about €4]. (Sanin, Sanchez and Chalela 2006: 238)

Even Colombian tour guides advertise homemade shamanism, a sector that does not compete with the informal network of *curanderos*, healers and miracle workers who base their sessions on *yajé*. Also, Bogota hosts a small community of indigenous shamans who came to the capital to escape from the violence of the war. They enjoy great social prestige and are very present on the media, such is the case of Don Antonio Jacanamijoy and his son Benjamin, Taita Oscar Roman, Taita Querubin or Taita Diomedes Díaz. Mauro calls them *los Abuelitos* (the grandparents): he knows them personally, all of them, and holds a souvenir from each of them:

This feather of *macaw* is a gift of the *abuelito* Diomedes, this puma tooth belonged to Taita Oscar and this is the *yajé* who offered me the old Querubin to be tasted with you.

In the district of San Victorino, near the historical center of Bogota, there are many herbalists’ shops operated by indigenous people—most of them belonging to Inga ethnic communities displaced to the capital fleeing from the violence and poverty of their ancestral territories—offering *yajé* rituals in their back shop for a very reasonable price (15,000 pesos for session, about €6). Their clients have medium-low income levels and, after the first session, they tend not to repeat the experience. Recommended by friends and acquaintances, they try the *yajé* experience to heal (especially, but not limited to) long-standing pain or love crises. Young professionals, as well as the middle classes and the curious with sufficient economic availability, prefer another type of establishment, a little more sophisticated. These are the “temples,” such as the famous Templo del Indio Amazonico—the “Temple of the Amazon Indian,” which was the forerunner of its kind, with more than thirty years of commercial activity—(fig. 1): those real supermarkets of the supernatural, carefully decorated—often with a certain kitsch taste—that offer the purchaser and the passing tourist a huge set of accessories dedicated to shamans, sorcerers’ apprentices, magicians, devotees of the occult, consumers of *yajé* and other hallucinogenic plants. The prices are not cheap and a session (with a nonindigenous shaman) could cost more than five hundred thousand pesos (€200).

Artists, journalists, students (and academics) do not frequent these places. They prefer to organize themselves into groups to carry out the ceremony at the home of one of the community members. The meetings are usually held in the “alternative” and hipster neighborhoods of Teusaquillo, La Macarena and La Candelaria or, as in the case of Mauro’s community, in some rural villages near Bogota (Neusa, La Calera, Sesquilé, Funza, Silvana, Anapoima). Appointments are given by phone, at short notice, using a coded language and never using the word *yajé*. A level of secrecy that awakened my curiosity, especially because in Colombia, unlike other countries, its consumption does not constitute a violation of law. Then, why so many secrets?

The Yajé among Terror, Therapy and Self-awareness

Banisteriopsis caapi is one of the most mysterious and inscrutable elements of the Colombia imagery. *Yajé*, it works: or, at least, that is what the followers of the vine of the soul interviewed in the framework



Fig. 1. The leaflet of the “Templo del Indio Amazonico”: a visual paraphernalia mixing shamanic tradition with popular superstition.

of this research claim. But its healing mechanism, controlled by the “supernatural” powers of the shaman, remains incomprehensible when taken out of the shamanic system of beliefs (Shanon 2002).³⁰ Neither allopathic nor homeopathic, the *yajé* seems to give the desired effect after a few sessions.

It is a shock treatment, similar to a primal scream therapy, and it works only if you believe in it and if you are accompanied by a real shaman.

Mauro tells me, leaving me to understand that, obviously, he considers himself as a member of that small élite of “real” shamans, gifted with skills that give him the ability to interact with the human body, this enigmatic universe—both physical and psychic—that under the influence of *yajé* seems to take on a transparency that allows the therapist to seek out and destroy evil. However, if in traditional therapy indigenous thaumaturges were used to confront predominantly physical malaises and diseases, in the case of neo-shamanism the challenge hovers against the illnesses and imbalances (mainly psychosocial) induced by our Western civilization and our stunning modernity (Barou and Crossman 2004). The Australian ethnologist Michael Taussig considers contemporary shamanism in terms of a postcolonial structure reinterpreting the Catholic cosmology: a “wild” response to the violent horror of the Conquest, a mimesis that has transformed the wise original therapist into an absolutely modern warrior of the supernatural (Taussig 1987). So modern, says Taussig, that his magic has turned into a commodity, an object of fetishism and, in Marxist terms, into a product of a hegemonic process of dispossession and proletarianization. Therefore, there are many contact points between the interpretation of shamanic power that offers Taussig, De Martino’s perspective about superstition and magic among subaltern rural workers and, finally, the position of Di Nola about the persistence of Devil cults in marginalized contexts: they represent a form of bottom-up resistance, a product of the popular creativity and a symbolic arena for the struggles opposing the identity forces belonging to the “local” (rooted and radical) and “global” (mod-

³⁰ A discussion in toxicological perspective about the medical effects of *yajé* would fall outside (and exceed) the limits of this short essay. The reader interested in exploring this fascinating subject of analysis will find a wide selection of bibliographic resources in Fericigla’s works (1997).

ern and positivist) sociopolitical universes (De Martino 1959; Di Nola 1976). In a landscape of poverty and injustice, such as in Colombia:

Diseases defined as “partial decoding” of the cultural order acquire a status that escapes to the medication. It is not only the loss of individual organic health that needs to be healed, but also (and especially) the breaking of codes that govern the order of cultural progress. These diseases are called syndromes of cultural affiliation (witchcraft, evil eye, jinx, bad luck, theft of the soul, fear, panic, etc.).³¹ These syndromes should be read as a cultural strategy aimed at maintaining the social order. So that the patient is conscripted into a growth dynamic of the economy of violence, as it would be right to distribute through him the aggressiveness generated by the internal and external conflicts of his ethnic group. Witchcraft is the best example of this situation, given that the “bewitched” is the receptacle for excellence of the aggressiveness flows, and considering that the attacks of witchcraft are always directed against those who defy social norms. (Pinzón 1988: 6)

By now, “indigenous science” is considered, at a global level, as a transrational solution to the illnesses caused by technological progress (Uribe 2002). The disillusionment of many urban citizens towards the efficacy of allopathic medicine against “spiritual diseases,” as well as the presence of a deregulated economic system in which the access to goods and services is defined by the mere monetary value of the merchandise, it has facilitated the emergence of a market pattern in which the person suffering from one of the syndromes mentioned above, faces a range of solutions ranging from unscrupulous quackery (and the eventual circumvention of incapable people) to holistic solutions offered by alternative therapies, passing through the “quickly and all inclusive” cures proposed by commercial companies offering experiences halfway

³¹ Commonly defined as ethnopsychiatric, culturally determined or culture-bound syndromes, they consist on patterns of disordered behavior typical of certain sociocultural ecosystem. The fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) developed by the American Psychiatric Association, keeping the names which are locally known, includes the following: Fan death, Running amok, Ataque de nervios, Bilis (or cólera), Bouffée délirante, Brain fog syndrome, Dhat syndrome, Falling-out (or blacking out), Ghost sickness, Hwabyeong, Koro, Latah, Locura, Evil eye, Piblokto, Zou huo ru mo (or Qigong psychotic reaction), Rootwork, Sangue dormido, Shenjing shuairuo, Shenkui, Shinbyeong, Spell, Susto, Taijin kyofusho and Zār (Paniagua 2000).

between shamanism and the health spa. However, if the urban patient would choose to try the *yajé*, it will receive a simplified version of “jungle therapy,” with neither prior training nor physical preparation: the exercises that traditionally precede the ingestion of *yajé* will be limited to a minimal fasting and a few minutes of meditation (Mauro, shaman of the global village, proposed a personal version of the *Padmasana*, the lotus position of the yoga tradition).

Dealing with Postmodern Psychopathology

Mauro likes to sing during “his” ceremonies. He and Julio strum the guitar and have composed several songs to play during the sessions. Among their repertoire, the composition that catches my attention the most is titled “Jesús Cristo muéstrame el camino del *yajé*” (Jesus Christ show me the path of *yajé*). The text is easy: the title is repeated a dozen of times, alternated by a short refrain to invoke the Great Spirit of the Forest, to be gifted with the right dose of visions, *ad libitum*.

May 16, 2006, 23:30. Mauro and Julio play continuously for at least an hour. The audience is limited to pronounce some “Heeeee! Hoooo!” to support the shaman effort. We already had the first cups of *yajé* and many of us (including myself) have already received the first triptaminic discharge. Catatonic, my eyes settled on the shamanic altar, dominated by the usual prayer cards (this time someone added a Last Supper and a Sacred Heart), a few crystals of quartz, amethyst and fluorite, Tarot cards, a crown of feathers and a Yanomami flute. A variegated cocktail of Catholicism, animism, alchemy, magic and sorcery, or perhaps the polyhedral expression of the same multifaceted phenomenon. I was almost starting to “fly” when a cry in Julio’s home garden interrupted my trip. “Blessed Christ! Blessed Virgin!” Cries are repeated, louder and louder. Mauro stood up, slowly, to check on what is happening outside. A young man, Alfonso, continues to cry out, he rolls on the ground, squirming. Mauro is at his side. He begins to sing an *icarus*, a slow and repetitive shamanic song, that Mauro’s interpretation transforms into a sluggish succession of syllables: maaaaa, moooo, beeee, baaaa, noooo, nuuuu . . . Mauro takes over an hour to calm him, still singing. Julio assists his Master, with a fan to cool Alfonso’s face. The others remain in the house, lingering in the grip of their hallucinations. Everything is quiet, now. Alfonso is sleeping and I smoke a cigarette with Mauro. He explains that the *yajé* can lead to such a state of disorder when the soul of the “disciple” (using Mauro’s terms) is not clear and when his spirit “is not in balance.”

May 17, 2006, 8:00. On the bus. I bring Alfonso home. He sleeps peacefully and well. He told me that the night before, he saw the image of the Death, all black, and then Christ's, all white, and the Virgin's, all blue. He saw "the death of his spirit." When I asked him if he was Catholic he said he wasn't, that his parents are Jewish and that he has never attended to a Mass.³²

The North American anthropologist Michael Brown (1989: 10) wrote that "shamanism affirms life, but at the same time also spawns violence and death." And Alfonso's hysteria, appeased by Mauro and the hypnotic power of his *icarus*, brings us back to the starting point, to the evidence of the first European observers, who saw in shamans the representatives of the devil: they, like Mauro, could speak *inter pares* with the demonic forces that had seized the sick (and by mimesis, could empathize with the patient himself, acquiring his possession and liberating him: it was exactly this "transfer of possession" that most frightened the Spanish Conquerors). Mauro, a product of the X Generation, freed himself from Alfonso's possession with a Marlboro between his lips.

When Shamanism Meets Neo-shamanism

In March 2007 I was invited to a ceremony where Mauro was not the main celebrant. With great joy to all the participants, Mauro had invited "just for us" his buddy Taita Oscar, a likeable and nice fifty-year-old Inga shaman, born and raised in Puerto Leguizamo. I thought that I was finally going to meet a "real" indigenous shaman. I was not be the only one to think so, since that night there were sixty people to welcome the wise Amazonian shaman. Taita Oscar benefits from a strong reputation as a therapist, especially in the treatment of

³² The case of Alfonso, apparently anomalous, has to be analyzed into the context of the very Catholic Colombian culture. The hallucination of which he was prey (his visionary catabasis) should be read as the effect of "a deep contact with a powerful force, divine or higher, corresponding to the cultural context from which the consumer derives (for example, an approach to God, as it is conceived in the Catholic religion, with all the cultural charge that implies)" (Vélez and Pérez 2004: 324). In a certain way, rather than the microsystems of reference (family, friends, school, workplace), they are the exo- and macrosystems (cultural norms, power structures, economic logics and relations of production) that define the course and evolution of the psychic visions.

migraines, kidney stones, unfair dismissals and matrimonial infidelity. Among his most loyal customers he can rely on ministers, businessmen, intellectuals across the political spectrum, and people from the world of show business.

I remember the ceremony began with the recitation, the look pointed towards the sky, of the Our Father, and of the Hail Mary. The distribution of the cups filled with *yajé* was preceded by the sign of the cross, while Taita Oscar kissed the little image of the Sacred Heart hanging around his neck. As Mauro, Oscar sang, talked, listened and sprinkled us with balms and ointments (to increase the effect of vaporization, he held back a swig and then blew it on our bodies). Throughout the night he provided to the wellness of all participants, searching and finding the right opportunities to talk to each of us. When necessary, he shouted against some "intruder" spirit and some negative *pinta*. He danced and wiggled, while I felt I was flying. He did not read the Tarot cards, but he invited us to discuss our visions with a coffee in his hands and his continuous digressions on Colombian politics, environmental topics or the value of solidarity and justice.

Shamans (and neo-shamans) should be observed not only on the basis of their therapeutic function, but as people capable of processing complex meanings, as well as influencing attitudes and behaviors relevant to the social structure of reference. In the case of postcolonial (and modern) shamanism, the ceremonial of these thaumaturges must be interpreted as a real therapeutic endeavor, which shows epically the struggle between the human will (more or less ordered) and the entropic and fleeting reality: a struggle that will be fought with the weapons of terror in order to gain the control of the social order (or, more exactly, the ecosystemic structure) and to recover from the hallucinatory and violent context trapping since centuries that allegory of death represented by the Colombian nation.³³

³³ For a more extensive reflection on the subject, see the works of Taussig (1987) and Uribe (2003). In the interesting analysis authored by Carlos Pinzón about the history of witchcraft in Bogota, we found this sharp consideration: "violence and witchcraft have been knotting themselves as part of a new reality: the interethnic and class relations subjugate the constructions of the popular culture, which in turn will change in sync with the social, economic and political structures of the Nation" (Pinzón 1988: 6, translated by the author).

Thanks to Mauro, Taita Oscar and other *taitas* I worked with, I have learned to consider the shamans as chronic illusionists,³⁴ in the sense that their “shamanic condition” make them capable of controlling different levels of consciousness at the same time, and to act in a performant way (often introducing innovations and “exotic” elements) to confirm their authority. Exactly, thanks to the virtue of these illusions, the “shamans of the forest,” such as Taita Oscar, survived oblivion, moved to the cities, learned Spanish, Portuguese, English or French, told their stories to reporters and have been invited into the most prestigious forums (by international governmental and nongovernmental organizations, universities, research centers and charitable foundations), maintaining not only their own ethnic identity—and conceptualizing themselves as representatives of the pure indigeneity—but also their role of mediators between different orders of reality. Their experience proves once again their ability to move from one universe to another, and nothing makes us believe that shamanism possess fewer weapons than other belief systems to deal with the complexities of a troubled modernity, even if it maintains a “refractory” perspective and an antimodern *Weltanschauung* (while skilled to use the tools of modernity). The shaman knows how to wear histrionically the right outfit for every occasion.

From Agape to Deindividuation

In 1784, the theologian and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1966) mentioned the shamans in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. His look was certainly more indulgent than those of most of his contemporaries: Herder noted that the shaman, to deploy his personality (and his powers), needs a community of believers and understands the importance of the collective imagination in the ritual domain proper of shamanism. My experience with Mauro and his community confirmed that Herder’s conclusions remain valid today, in the third millennium. Although Mauro and *yajé* may share (more or less equally) the leading role on the stage, in fact, it is the community itself (or the notion that each of us has built about the topic) that acts as a pole of attraction for its members. Julio, Alfonso, Carlos and “El Pibe” have confirmed this conclusion when they admitted that:

³⁴ I do not use the term in a derogatory sense: I would only underline their power of enchantment and their ability to fascinate their audience.

... our community is a true communion of feelings and emotions. We feel like fellows of an astral travel: we are not merely friends.

After all, none of them feels awkward to deal alone with the higher (and more difficult) levels of the *yajé* path, without the guidance of a “real” shaman and the support of a group. Mauro’s agape is a manifestation of a global ecumene, which brings together, in different forms, expressions of the same dynamic: the spiritual quest in a group setting, under the supervision of a guide and with the help of psychoactive substances.

From a social psychology perspective, the routines practiced by this neo-shamanic group—and its cohesiveness—seems to generate the typical state of decreased self-evaluation and decreased evaluation apprehension that is commonly defined as deindividuation. Such a notion, generally applied to community dynamics causing extremely anti-normative conducts (violent crowds, lynch mobs or online piracy),³⁵ describes the perceived loss of individuality and personal responsibility that can occur when someone acts as part of a group (Ellemers, Spears and Doosje 2002). In fact, Mauro’s fellows plainly admit their preference to lose their sense of self, to “disappear” and give way to the overwhelming identity of the group. Due to reduced feelings of accountability, and increased feelings of group cohesion and conformity, urban psychonauts could act in more disinhibited ways, accepting nonnormative behaviors (such the use of illicit, or almost-illicit, substances) and formalizing the boundaries between them and “the others.” But the price they pay is particularly high and it corresponds with the social construction of a hybrid identity which obliges them to jump acrobatically from their urban—and mundane—daily life to the mystical *hic et nunc* of their community, with results that, as far as I know, have never been deeply analyzed by psychological research. If traditional shamanism, as practiced by native communities, was inscribed in a social structure with a shared cosmology (the clan or tribal group) and was assigned a well defined purpose (the homeostatic balance within the community, with the neighbor groups, and with the natural environment), neo-shamanic communities, on the contrary, suffer the effects of an irreconcilable

³⁵ Even if early theorizations were focused on the negative impact of top-down manipulations, more recent perspectives, such as the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), have been underlying the role played by both mass and groups processes in developing positive behaviors and experiences (Reicher, Spears and Postmes 1995).

asymmetry separating the professed ambition to spiritual well-being and transcendent consciousness and the capitalist way-of-life led by most of their members. In Marxist terms, it could be considered as the umpteenth display of a mainstream commodity fetishism disguised with a mystical make up, associated with an antiliberal (and “countercultural”) discourse that tries to hide a very uncouth reality: that neo-shamanism, in most cases, is a commercial enterprise that ascribes human qualities (the shamanic values) to a commodity (the shamanic service), persuading its fellows (treated as users) to take part in deindividuating community dynamics (which require an economic investment) to benefit the shaman’s power. In other words, if a user does not contribute sufficient economic resources (the 35,000 pesos I paid to Mauro or the 500,000 pesos asked by the Templo del Indio Amazonico), and if he (or she) is unable to accept the irresistible identity of the group, he (or she) will never take advantage of the spiritual comfort offered by the neo-shamanic community. It is not a question of holism, magnetism or energies: it is a simple commercial enterprise.

Conclusion: The Resilient Character of the Shamanic Culture

When I lived in Colombia, I loved getting lost in the corridors of the immense collection of pre-Hispanic gold artifacts conserved into the Museo del Oro, in Bogota: a perfect retreat for those who, like me, want to reflect in peace upon the shadow of the History. Visiting its never-ending display of objects devoted both to “shamanic flight” and the figure of the shaman impressed me because it shows the level of importance that these acrobats of the supernatural had taken in the different cultures that inhabited the Andean and Amazonian landscapes. Nowadays, the powers of the shamans are definitely perceived in a different way, especially if we take into account that in a premodern context they were considered as “the center of the world” by members of their communities, which would be unthinkable in the neo-shamanic discourse, characterized by its emphasis on the power of community as a multiplier of energies. The shamanic performance (as well as the *habitus* and skills deployed by its professionals) has changed, according to the different registry and cultural capital of the new consumers: as an effect of a selective process of elimination, the ethnobotanical knowledge has given way to the ability to analyze the globalized context, the use of advanced communication tools and the effective management of economic

relations in an open market system subject to the limitations imposed by the exosystemic structures of power.

A few years ago, the British anthropologist Piers Vitebsky (1995) wrote that shamanism was a chameleonic and elusive phenomenon, seized in a continuous process of adaptation to find a stable position within the margins offered by the capitalist system and the global village economy. The intention of this essay was to confirm that, in our view, shamanism has been able to adapt appropriately, surviving the impact of modernity and postmodernity, and that to do so, it has been able to change its clothes with a certain dexterity.

Acknowledgements

The development of this research was possible thanks to the logistic help offered by both the University of French Polynesia, in France, and the Los Andes University, in Colombia. It would have never seen the light without the fundamental contribution of Professor Miguel David Amórtégui (Universidad Manuela Beltrán) who inspired and evaluated patiently the advance of this endeavor. Furthermore, I would like to highlight the role played by Professor Andrés Morales, Professor Margarita Serje and Professor Carlos Uribe (Universidad de Los Andes), whose reflections gave me the opportunity to understand the complex context of urban shamanism in Bogota, but also the inputs offered by a team of young researchers with whom I had the opportunity to discuss and review the results of my fieldwork, especially Santiago Martínez, Angela Laiton, Diana Torres, Angela Velandia, Paola Noreña, Catalina Ruiz, Lucia Rojas, Carolina Rojas, Marina Vons and Alice Daussey.

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