# The Radical Otherness that Heals

To cite this book: http://dx.doi.org/10.30778/2020.32

# The Radical Otherness that Heals

## Yagecero Neoshamanism in Colombia

Alhena Caicedo-Fernández

Translated by
Tiziana Laudato

Universidad de los Andes
Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Anthropology

Nombre: Caicedo Fernández, Alhena, autora. | Laudato, Tiziana, traductora.

Título: The Radical Otherness that Heals : Yagecero Neoshamanism in Colombia / Alhena Caicedo-Fernández ; translated by Tiziana Laudato.

Descripción: Bogotá : Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Departamento de Antropología, Ediciones Uniandes, 2021. | xvi, 234 páginas : ilustraciones ; 17 × 24 cm.

Identificadores: ISBN 9789587980868 (rústica) | ISBN 9789587980875 (electrónico)

Materias: Chamanismo – Colombia | Yagé | Ceremonia de la ayahuasca

Clasificación: CDD 291.144 –dc23 SBUA

First English edition: March, 2021
First Spanish edition: October, 2015



Ediciones Uniandes
Carrera 1.ª n.° 18A-12
Bogotá, D. C., Colombia
Phone: 3394949, ext. 2133
http://ediciones.uniandes.edu.co
http://ebooks.uniandes.edu.co
infeduni@uniandes.edu.co

Faculty of Social Sciences
Carrera 1.ª n.° 18A-12, bloque G-GB, piso 6
Bogotá, D. C., Colombia
Phone: 3394949, ext. 5567
http://publicacionesfaciso.uniandes.edu.co
publicacionesfaciso@uniandes.edu.co

The translation into English of this book was supported by the Office of the Vice-Dean for Research, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad de los Andes.

ISBN: 978-958-798-086-8
ISBN *e-book*: 978-958-798-087-5
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.30778/2020.32

Copy-editing: Jaimie Brzezinski
Typesetting: Andrea Rincón
Cover layout: Ossman Darío Aldana
Cover image: Guache.co, use permission granted by Oscar Javier González Sepúlveda

Printing:
Nomos Impresores
Diagonal 18 Bis n.o 41-17
Phone: 2086500
Bogotá, D. C., Colombia

*Impreso en Colombia* – Printed in Colombia

Universidad de los Andes | Vigilada Mineducación. Reconocimiento como universidad: Decreto 1297 del 30 de mayo de 1964. Reconocimiento de personería jurídica: Resolución 28 del 23 de febrero de 1949, Minjusticia. Acreditación institucional de alta calidad, 10 años: Resolución 582 del 9 de enero del 2015, Mineducación.

*To the taitas Domingo Tisoy*
*and Martín Agreda*
*and all the yagecero curacas*
*of Putumayo*

*The solution to the mystery is always inferior to the mystery itself. Mystery has something of the supernatural about it, and even of the divine; its solution, however, is always tainted by sleight of hand.*

Jorge Luis Borges (1980: 97)

# Content

# List of Figures

# Acknowledgements

I WOULD ESPECIALLY like to thank taitas Domingo Tisoy and Florentino Ágreda for their patient willingness to answer all my questions throughout all these years. To Carlos Pinzón, Ana María Arango, Ricardo Díaz, William Torres and Nancy Riascos for allowing me to enter, each in their own way, the world of yagé. To all the taitas and yageceros who were willing to share part of their life, experience and vitality with me. To Professor Anne-Marie Losonczy, director of the doctoral research that gave rise to this book, for her patience and interest, and above all for her insightful comments; and to Professor Jean Langdon for her enormous generosity and her critical readings of the manuscript.

To my family, to Inge Valencia and to Héctor Ulloque. To all the friends who have been there, to those who are no longer there and especially to RaizAL. For the readings, suggestions and comments, I want to thank Eduardo Restrepo, with whom I have had conversations ranging from the deepest to the most trivial from which I have learned the radical importance of academic production in the construction of possible worlds.

# Introduction

Shamanism is in vogue. In recent years, we have seen references to shamanism burgeon on the shelves of bookstores, in movie theatres, in plays, and in tourist offerings. There is something shamanic in the origins of art, and there are certain ethereal values of social solidarity associated with the practice of shamans that are vindicated from within the field of ecologism. Shamanism is spoken of in trends and fields as diverse as medicine, feminism, transpersonal psychology, biology and vegetarianism, and it is even fuelling the idea of new psychiatric therapies. In fact, Internet users can attest to a good number of websites on the subject that connect with different offers and discussion forums. People are no longer surprised to receive invitations to conferences, seminars and workshops on shamanism, and many have, by now, already been to see a "shaman". The great number of current meanings and connotations summoned by the term shamanism have turned the concept into a sort of ungraspable nebula that requires us to ask ourselves about the image that we build around the Indian being and his world.

For the social sciences, these manifestations do not go unnoticed. Reported in places including Korea, Japan, Russia and Europe, and especially in the heyday of the American continent, the revitalisation and appropriation of practices and elements originating from shamanic traditions seems to reveal a social phenomenon of global importance. There is no doubt that there is a longstanding Western fascination with the figure of the shaman. From the time of the first explorers of the Siberian tundra—among other things, cradle of the original Tungus term *šaman*, which extends through to the present day—, the role of the *brujo,*[1] priest, doctor, mystic in societies called

1 The Spanish term *brujo* alludes to the notion of the Amazonian *brujo*. In Colombian popular culture, this reflects the negative stereotypes linked with the difference attributed to Indians, while synthesising the idea of a specialist in different types of magic that combines healing powers as well as the ability to cause misfortune.

"primitive" by science, has represented a great cognitive challenge for Westerners. It is precisely this challenge that has caused science—and in particular anthropology—to try to account for extremely complex and heterogeneous phenomena, present in very different and distant societies, by means of the artificial category of shamanism. Originally created as an analytical tool used to compare semantic realities, this concept has become one of the most controversial issues for ethnologists and anthropologists. Its history as a concept has been the living reflection of the Western gaze on those other exotic bodies who populated the new colonised geographies. Thus, from demon worshippers onwards—as recorded by chroniclers—these characters began to incarnate the misfits and mentally ill observed by enlightened thinkers. Indeed, today, we witness a sublimation of Indian worlds in which the shaman becomes a paradigm of wisdom and a role model for sustainable development.

The particularity of the current phenomenon lies precisely in the fact that, far from calling for a uniform and hegemonic perception, shamanism is proposed to the social sciences through a concept of its own nature, which goes beyond the limits of disciplinary domination and that has begun to circulate, void of any type of control. Although the umbilical cord that links it to anthropology (still the source of legitimacy for its references) has not been cut, the concept of shamanism has become popular, and is currently taken up by many social actors from different ideological positions.[2] It is precisely the confirmation of this fact that gave rise to the notion of neoshamanism or modern western shamanism as a global phenomenon from which new subjectivities, philosophies, ethics and aesthetics of life are being summoned under the umbrella of Indian spirituality as an alternative to the hegemonic model (Perrin 1995; Vazeilles 2003).

At present, neoshamanism (or rather, neoshamanisms) represents only part of the hundreds of currents and movements that highlight the crisis of

2 Mircea Eliade's work *El chamanismo y las técnicas arcaicas del ectásia* (Shamanism and the archaic techniques of ecstasy) is a milestone in this regard. This author bases his work on statements that presuppose an ethical-philosophical commitment to shamanism. Understanding it as an archaic technique of ecstasy, he introduces the concept of the sacred as a transcendent ontological reality that can only be experienced as authentic. One of the criticisms made of Eliade has to do with his understanding of shamanic praxis as essentially positive. This tendency moves away from ethnographic reality, which shows the ambivalent sense of shamans. In this respect, it injects a mystical sense into the ordinary concept of shamanism. The case of Carlos Castaneda seems to be more significant in the diffusion of Western shamanism. After the enormous success of his first book, published in 1968, this American ethnologist has published more than ten books about his experiences as an apprentice of the Yaqui shaman Don Juan Matus. Castaneda develops a discourse centred on the idea of a state that transcends existence and is situated beyond social contexts. His influence permeates the concept of shamanism from a reference to immanent universal wisdom, outside of particular cultural realities (Caicedo 2004, 8).

modernity and the emergence of new ways of connecting the relationship between the human being and his environment. These are the new religiosities, with all the burden that the term implies for the social sciences. The lack of credibility in institutions, as a result of growing inequalities and social exclusions; the acceleration and routines of modern life, which restrict vital spaces to the logic of productivity and consumerism; and individualism and the erosion of social ties are just some of the factors that stimulate ontological insecurity in much of the Western world. Thus, the search for new living spaces and collective experiences that give meaning to existence encourages an irrepressible feeling of finding new paradigms of well-being.

In Latin America, the emergence of neoshamanisms represents an interesting challenge. Configured in direct relation with diverse ethnic groups, Latin American societies have built their own versions around inter-ethnic relations that present themselves as an alternative to the knowledge built by the dominant society. In other words, Latin America's ethnic nature opens a particular horizon of analysis when it comes to understanding the way in which Indian traditions, and their knowledge and practices are represented. For many specialists, the Western re-elaborations of shamanism are exclusive manifestations of the new globalised tendencies of New Age esotericism, but this revitalisation of shamanism must also be analysed on a local scale. In Colombia's case, no attempt at theorising this phenomenon is possible without considering the complex historical processes in which inter-ethnic relations that have linked Indian and non-Indian populations through ritual practices are inscribed, as well as the profound transformations in the image of the Indians that have taken place in recent years, especially in the national socio-political field. The displacement of rituals of Indian origin towards urban areas highlights the complexity of a phenomenon that cannot be described as merely an imported trend.

*Yagé,* also known as *ayahuasca*, is a psychotropic drink, traditionally used by a number of ethnic groups (Inga, Kamentsá, Kofán, Siona and Coreguaje) that inhabit the departments of Putumayo and Caquetá, in the Amazon foothills of southwestern Colombia. It is made from *bejuco* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and *chagropanga* (*Diplopterys cabrerana*), and is consumed mainly for healing purposes and shamanic learning. In the last fifteen years, ritual yagé consumption has spread extraordinarily through several Colombian cities, as well as through sectors of the urban population that had previously not had any contact with these kinds of practices. Although yagé and its associated therapeutic traditions have been present in large Colombian cities for at least forty years—as attested by the research conducted by Pinzón, Suárez and Garay—its use was concentrated among the popular classes of immigrant peasants, a traditional scenario of hybridisation and mestizaje of medical systems and

networks of exchange of knowledge and medicinal plants between mestizo *curanderos*[3] or healers and Indian *curacas* or *taitas*[4] (Pinzón and Suárez 1991; Pinzón and Garay 1997a). Although yagé arrived in the city some time ago, it has only recently begun to be used by elites and the urban middle classes.

Urban consumption of yagé is popularly known as *tomas de yajé* (yagé sessions). These are private encounters in which the psychotropic is ritually consumed under the guidance of a specialist, usually a *taita yagecero* from the Putumayo region: an area traditionally inhabited by Indian groups that consume yagé. Conceived as a practice of traditional indigenous medicine,[5] the sessions are currently offered as a therapeutic or healing alternative with a pronounced spiritual component (Ronderos 2001; Uribe 2002; Weiskopf 2002). In this respect, yagé sessions are configured as new intersections where the therapeutic and the religious merge.

The elite and middle-class sectors' growing interest in these practices dates back to the 1990s when curacas or *taitas yagecero* from Putumayo began to travel to cities such as Pasto, Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and Pereira to guide yagé sessions for small groups of intellectuals, academics and artists. They were usually invited to do so by acquaintances belonging to these social circles and only spent short periods of time in these cities. Thus, such traditions—for a long time associated with representations of the popular sectors and considered "cheap superstition", "*brujería*" and "sorcery"—acquired an inverse value when taken up by these sectors. Soon, yagé sessions began to attract followers among university students and the middle classes. The taitas were invited to the city with increasing frequency, and this modality of yagé consumption gradually turned into a growing source of income and status for the taita yageceros. With the arrival of the new millennium, yagé consumption

3 The popular concept of the *curandero* is equivalent to that of the *curandier* or shamanic healer in Chaumeil (1988, 2003) or the folk-healing in Langdon (1991) and Taussig (1998)

4 *Curaca* is an appellation introduced after the arrival of the Spaniards, widely used in southwestern Colombia, to refer to the connoisseur of and specialist in *yagé*. It is what the classic terminology of anthropology might call a shaman. The name taita father" in the Quichua language—is traditionally used in Indian communities to refer to respected older men (parents, grandparents, authorities), which is why the older *curaca* is also called taita. In the urban contexts described here, the term *taita* is used to refer to *yagé* specialists. This book does not use the term curaca since it is associated with popular representations of the *brujería* of the rainforest Indians.

5 I use the Traditional Indigenous Medicine (TIM) category as a derivation of the Traditional Medicine TM category used by WHO. I also use the Traditional Doctor category to refer to TIM specialists. As I will discuss throughout this section, the practices linked to yagé consumption in Colombia involve intensive use of this institutionalised term. The emphasis on the "indigenous" or "Indian" should be understood as a significant marker of authenticity in the context of the multicultural state of Colombia.

boomed and many middle-class individuals became interested in these rituals that traditional indigenous medicine offered as a therapeutic resource.

Not only did the most recognised and mediatised curacas or taitas periodically travel from the rainforest to the cities to distribute yagé, but other Indians, especially from younger generations and with varying degrees of experience and training as curacas, began to guide their own sessions.

In a few years, the supply of yagé sessions increased and the modes of convocation diversified: small groups of around ten to twenty acquaintances became large groups of up to a hundred. In several cases, the same Indian authorities from different groups decided to offer yagé sessions as a strategy to resolve issues relating to ethnicity, politics and identity.[6] In less than a decade, yagé consumption conquered a space of visibility and legitimacy hardly reached before by any other practice of Indian origin.

This visibility and success of the sessions has been subject to rapid transformation in recent years. On the one hand, the economic reward that urban sessions have generated for taita yageceros has revitalised learning and promoted new generations of young yageceros. But it has also led many Indians to move to cities to try their luck as improvised shamans. On the other hand, the gradual evolution of the phenomenon reveals the emergence of a sector of intermediaries that act as "bridges" and move at the intersection between the urban population interested in these practices and the Indian curacas and their communities (Caicedo 2004, 26-ss.). Indeed, this intersection, initially composed of intellectuals, academics, artists and Indian activists who invited taitas to offer sessions in the cities, gradually gave way to other forms of mediation when several of these intermediaries began an initiatory career as taita yageceros under the guidance of these curacas. In recent years, the expansion of ritual yagé consumption has revealed a new process related to the emergence of new taita yageceros initiated in Indian traditions and rooted in cities. These shamans—as the majority calls themselves—have capitalised on the urban demand by proposing a ritual practice of taking yagé which, without disassociating themselves from the traditional rituality of the Indian heritage, welcomes new languages and proposals aimed at a mostly urban public. In synthesis, the yagecero field can be characterised as a sociological field where yagé production (production, distribution and consumption) is articulated, and it is dynamised by different forms of symbolic and material exchange (in which the networks are going to be central) between Indians and non-Indians in local, regional, national and, more recently, also international milieus.

6 This is especially sensitive if we consider that these Indian people originate from the border regions of the country, isolated by the armed conflict and totally neglected by the State.

## Shamanism and its overflows

Today, we can perceive the extent to which the analytical models defining shamanism have diversified, largely motivated by recent research into the expansion of these shamanic practices, into other contexts. The study of shamanism reveals a need to understand the phenomenon from its localised historical and spatial perspective, rather than as being based on its intrinsic characteristics. Beyond that, however, we are at a time when the nature of the phenomena to be analysed questions shamanism as an analytical category. How should we understand shamanism when it is a category used in different guises and with different interests by different social actors?

Some new proposals for analysis have put forth an approach to the subject based on the relational condition of shamanism. For Roberte Hamayon (2003), shamanism, as an analytical category, is a mirror of the West that allows a definition of itself and the Other. In this sense, our understanding of shamanism is impregnated with the representations that guide that view. María Clemencia Ramírez (1996) speaks of shamanism as a field of articulation between different actors and discourses in a perspective that advocates a dialogical and contextual understanding of the phenomenon based on tracing the relationships between the actors involved. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (1998) speaks of shamanism as a translation, whereby the shaman would not only be a mediator between worlds but also a translator of Indian knowledge for non-Indian people. The concurrence of this movement between worlds and its role as mediator explains the ease with which vernacular shamanic practices have become international. The concept of translation, however, seems to fall short of taking into account the character and nature of the multiple exchanges that take place between the different actors. If, on the one hand, the notion of translation is based on a univocal understanding of the exchange, on the other, such an exchange often works on the basis of misunderstanding (Losonczy 2002). In this vein, Anne-Marie Losonczy and Silvia Mesturini propose shamanism as a multipolar field of translation (Losonczy and Mesturini 2010) and as a constant negotiation of co-knowledge (Losonczy 2002), while Jean Langdon analyses the construction of shamanism as a dialogical category (Langdon 2008).

Thus, understanding this phenomenon in the current context poses a double challenge. On the one hand, it is a phenomenon that must be understood at scale. That is to say, the study of yagecero shamanism as a field requires a spatial reading of the relations that take place at local and regional levels, as well as at national and transnational levels. Multiscale analysis is fundamental if we are to determine the set of relationships that allow for the expansion of yagé consumption in Colombia. On the other, it is a social phenomenon that can only be understood in depth if we take into account the historical particularity

of the relationships between the actors involved in the field. It is from this perspective that we ask ourselves about the yagecero field in Colombia: about the way it has been constituted; about the logics of the historical functioning of its networks; about the multiple actors that are part of it, its assets, orders and internal hierarchies; about its processes of reproduction as a group; and about the strategies of expansion of its action and its logics of modernisation. It is a question of introducing a sociological perspective to the analysis that accounts for the field of inter-ethnic relations historically constituted at regional and, above all, national levels, given that, to a great extent, it constitutes the basis on which both the social relations and representations on Indian alterity and those of national identity stand.

In this respect, we resume the concept of national formation of alterity proposed by Rita Laura Segato (2007, 27) as the medullar axis of analysis. As an approach that understands difference (otherness, ethnisation, racialisation) as the historical production of the nation, the national formation of alterity is understood as an idiosyncratic matrix of production and organisation of the nation's internal alterity. In this regard, we consider it fundamental to historically and spatially (locally, regionally, nationally and transnationally) understand the logics of the production, consumption and distribution of yagé as well as how these are inscribed in vast networks of relations between national society and its particular forms of Indian alterity. Following the proposal of Jean Langdon (2007a), we think that the new premises of shamanism in Colombia can be understood if they are focused as dynamic and historical processes, resulting from multiple dialogues and exchanges that today construct what we consider Indian as what we consider national.

## Some methodological considerations

My interest in this topic is not the result of a previous approach to this type of practice. On the contrary, what led me to wonder about shamanism and its new versions was a profound unease with the discourses of those who were closely associated to the topic. At Universidad Nacional, where I completed my undergraduate studies, it was relatively normal for some anthropology students to discover—within certain practices and traditions of Indian origin—a form of mystical identification that had nothing to do with the actuality of the country's Indian populations. A certain fetishism about the Indian world concealed, in my opinion, a less romantic reality about the conditions in which these populations exist in Colombia.

Choosing a work topic out of unease rather than identification poses its challenges. On the one hand, it was a vague subject, little studied in Colombia

and with only incipient developments in other countries. Neoshamanism or modern Western shamanism was just beginning to work as a sociological phenomenon in the countries of the North and from the perspective of European and North American academics interested in understanding the incidence of discourses and practices of neoshamanism among the followers of these new practices. Both the reception in these countries of people from the so-called Third World who call themselves shamans, and the expansion of tourist networks and destinations that connect these countries with this Third World—much of Latin America, for example—are undoubtedly two frequent lines of work in the academia of the North. In Colombia, however, the phenomenon takes on a different dimension. Given that, rather than an openly imported phenomenon, it is a set of discourses and practices that, in some way, call into question known geographies, histories and populations. As for the academic contributions to these cases, the most representative works come from a certain line of anthropology that proposes a historical reading of the phenomena linked to popular religiosity. These investigations connect, to a great extent, the focused works on the Indian shamanic systems of the Colombian Amazonian piedmont with the historiographic analysis of the processes of conquest, colonisation and national configuration of the territories where these populations are settled. Thus, the attempt to understand how the yagecero field in Colombia works and what is happening with the expansion of ritual yagé consumption in cities, poses the challenge of constructing an interpretive framework that recognises different scales. On the one hand, a local, regional, and national scale linked to particular historical configurations of interethnic relations in connection with the ritual practice of yagé. On the other, a transnational scale from which such phenomena begin to be identified by analysts as a broad social phenomenon, inscribed in networks and economic and cultural dynamics characteristic of the period.

In an attempt to highlight aspects that are important to me when dealing with an issue of this nature, and to clarify certain issues that do not appear explicitly in the work, I take this opportunity to mention three methodological issues that affected the way in which I conducted the research. My intention to conduct an ethnographic study of the urban settings where the yagecero field is expanding in Colombia made it necessary for me to take part in those spaces directly. Indeed, in order to access the universes of meaning developed by urban yageceros today, one must enter such scenarios.

To this extent, the research implied my participation in the ceremonies and, therefore, taking yagé on a regular basis. It would have otherwise been impossible to access the rituals in which observers are not allowed. In this respect, from a methodological standpoint, the involvement of the researcher's body is an important dimension that must be taken into account in

this type of ethnography. However, despite the fact that this is an unusual approach, given the nature of the phenomenon to be analysed, my participation, as researcher, in these scenarios did not necessarily depend on my adherence as a believer. Many anthropologists who have worked on such issues have taken a committed stance. However, this is not a generalizable fact or one that implies the impossibility of conducting an in-depth ethnography that maintains a distance between the observer and the object of study. The researcher's involvement focuses on the ritual exercise and not the creed, so my inner sphere was not compromised in terms of beliefs. From this perspective, I consider that anthropological research into both religious phenomena and practices linked to the use of psychoactive substances—whereby its analysis forces the researcher to become involved as a person and a body—does not necessarily imply personal involvement. It is, thus, an orthopractic exploration of ritual practice, and I believe that I must clarify that I consider the analytical perspective of anthropology, with its scope and limitations, as one of the possible approaches. Undoubtedly, the yagecero field proposes a multifaceted reality of dissimilar dimensions in which anthropology contributes to a vast understanding of the complex of social and historical relations that unfold there. However, I also believe that there are dimensions of the field in which anthropological analysis is narrow. In other words, I continue to believe that there are things about yagé about which academia has little to say.

Another consideration regarding the fieldwork that underpins this research has to do with the researcher—myself—being a woman. Although this subject has been examined from various points of view by contemporary anthropology, my position on it has to do, above all, with the implications of a field of study such as yagecero shamanism being approached by a woman. Yagecero shamanism is a male affair, and gender-based power relations are active and have their effects. This is evident, for example, in the difficulties in accessing certain ritual spaces or certain discourses and narratives exclusive to men, both in traditional contexts and in the new urban ones. But beyond that, my intention has been to show how the ethnography of restricted spaces becomes possible for a researcher if different strategies are employed. Such strategies must not be based on the external (often violent) positioning of the academic expert. They should, instead, be based on the type of relationships that are built in the field, especially the relationship with the women in those milieus: the women who surround the taita yageceros and the new taita yageceros, their spaces and everyday life. Much of the data collected for this research was produced based on exchanges with those who gravitate around restricted spaces, understanding these people as a constitutive part of the yagecero field.

Finally, one last consideration has to do with the difficulties and unforeseen advantages I encountered in identifying myself as an anthropologist in