

Cofán-curaca in trouble – About the controversy between the indigenous Cofan and Alberto Varela (Ayahuasca International)¹

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Summary

The use of the sacred plant Yagé (Ayahuasca) among the indigenous Cofán (Southern Colombia) is deeply rooted within their local cultural context and linked to complex ethics. For quite some time now Alberto Varela's organization Ayahuasca International has been offering Ayahuasca ceremonies in different countries and has also been training therapists for their work with Ayahuasca. Neither the way in which apprenticeships are carried out by Ayahuasca International nor the format of their ceremonies are in line with the Cofán's Yagé ethics. Nonetheless, referring to two documents allegedly signed by Cofán-curaca Taita Querubin, Varela claims he served an apprenticeship with the Cofán. Leading representatives of this indigenous people, however, challenge the authenticity of those documents. Irrespective of the issue whether the documents are authentic or faked, the conflict between the Cofán and Ayahuasca International can be called symptomatic of Ayahuasca's growing globalization as it reflects a number of fundamental issues.

Taita Querubín

It was in January 2000 when I met Taita Querubin Queta Alvarado for the first time in a small Cofán village at Río Guamues (Department of Putumayo, South Colombia) where I drank Yagé³ with him. The lovely old man, who is considered one of the most respected *curacas*⁴ among the Cofán and within his country

¹ Translation into English by Tom John Wolff, Quirin Grossmann, Heiner Dörfler and Terri Funseth Graziano. This paper appeared originally in German in the link http://neip.info/novo/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/I%C3%BCtte_Cof%C3%A1n_curaca_in_trouble_University_Marburg_2016.pdf

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³ Yagé is the colombian term for Ayahuasca, which is a psychoactive potion made from the liana *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the DMT-containing leaves of *Dypllopterus Cabrerana* and sometimes other additives.

⁴ The Cofán do not use the term "shaman", but use other expressions within their complex hierarchy of knowledge. For the Cofán people *Curaca* or *Taita* (Kichwa) referres to a sort of "master-shaman", who has a somewhat top position among the healers.

Colombia, sang the most powerful of all Yagé-chants that I had ever heard. He also knew to play the blues on the guitar. He is said to be one of the last true master *curacas* whom not only received his Yaje chants personally from the spirits after decades of training but also has learned to transform himself into a jaguar. This art has become rare because we live in the new age. More and more the forest loses its original strength due to the progression of the "civilization" and because the plant Yagé is increasingly weakened due to the fact that it leaves its Amazonian home. This I was told by Cofán friends at Río Guamues where I was allowed to live a whole year 2005/2006.

In his 100 years Taita Querubin has already experienced so many deep hits of his people in contact with the "civilized" world and certainly has every reason to distrust white strangers but yet he always seemed to me of trusting friendliness that it surprised as touched me. The Cofán have been in trouble since long time. Their history is affected by the machinations of ruthless prospectors, missionaries and rubber barons, forced labor, displacement and internment into Christian boarding schools. The beginning of oil production in the Putumayo department in the 1960s was also the beginning of a massive increase of the population. This caused a massive destruction of the environment. Then the Cocain production appeared and with this the guerrillas and paramilitaries. And finally the armed conflict culminated in the US-initiated Plan Colombia under the slogan "war on drugs". In the early years of this millennium this had a tremendous devastating impact on the residents and the ecosystem of South Colombia.

According to many Cofán their culture would already have disappeared without their sacred healing plant Yagé (Ayahuasca) in which they are experienced since many generations. The curacas play the key role in all matters concerning Yagé. They communicate through this plant with the non-human beings (spirits) within their multilayered cosmos and use their forces, which they obtained under the influence of Yagé, for various purposes - such as the diagnosis of disease and its cure. They also are able to concert themselves into other beings.⁵ The villagers consider the frequent intake of Yagé as healthy and a cleaning method. Through the rituals, which are always run by a *mayor*⁶ or *sabedor*, cultural knowledge and tradition is passed on.

Currently the psychoactive plant Yagé (Ayahuasca) is seen as THE new "El Dorado"⁷ and panacea in Europe, especially in neo-shamanic circles as well as among representatives and supporters of the psycholysis – but certainly it is

⁵ Jütte 2016:244

⁶ Spanish: "oldest" Yagé- specialist of the village

⁷ nach Zuluaga 1999:14.

not.⁸ Already at the beginning of this millennium Taita Querubin produced headlines in various medias when he appeared together with other indigenous representatives at the White house in Washington to protest against the patenting of their sacred plant Ayahuasca. Currently Taita Querubins name circles again through the Internet, newspapers and television programs.

Controversial documents

For quite a while a company called *Ayahuasca International* calls attention through aggressive marketing strategies. Ayahuasca International, that was founded from the Argentinean Alberto Varela, offers Ayahuasca sessions in different countries of the world and also offers formations to become an Ayahuasca therapist. Those therapists offer Ayahuasca themselves and provide a kind of psycholysis. The length of the training period, the format of the Ayahuasca sessions and the way of advertising do not correspond to the ethics of Yagé-use of the Cofán and in no case refer to an apprenticeship with Yagé specialists of this indigenous group. But Varela relies on two documents that allegedly would be signed personally from Taita Querubin and authorize him to spread Ayahuasca into the world and conduct such rituals as his alumno. In a public statement these documents were then declared false by some representatives of the Cofán as well as Taita Querubin himself.⁹ Also some known scientists supported this statement.¹⁰ However, the matter became even more complicated when a grandson of Taita Querubin said that his grandfather was forced by political leaders of the Cofán to deny the authenticity of the documents.

Whether Varelas documents are genuine or not, whether he is right or wrong and whether someone conceded and promised something or not, this will probably hardly ever be reconstructed. However, this may not be the point. It is a fact that Taita Querubin is a very good-natured old man who rarely says no. It is also a fact that the natural habitat of the Cofán is destroyed and that one or another at the prospect of extra income would maybe go to one or other compromise – since for a long time one can not live solely on subsistence farming and is thus integrated into the monetary system, but unfortunately has hardly stable revenue sources. In my opinion a moral judgement can not be rendered by an outsider with regards to the given political and social situation, armed conflict and environmental degradation in the Putumayo region.

⁸ Firstly, there are still diseases among the so called indigenous Yagé-cultures. Not all of them can be cured with the help of Yagé. In addition, among different urban Yagé-groups during the last 15 years I have observed that the positive effects on depression and addiction did not last for long. Some of the participants of Yagé rituals developed psychotic disorders.

⁹ http://www.bialabate.net/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/Public_Letter_Cofan_Alberto_Varela_Ayahuasca_International.pdf

¹⁰ Vgl. http://www.ayahuasca.com/wp-content/Letter_of_the_100.pdf

Varela accuses the Cofán of envy when they argue in public against him and his work. But how can a company like Ayahuasca International, whose founder explicitly relates to training with the Cofán, NOT pull displeasure on itself, regarding the psychoactive potion Yagé and the special ethics of this ethnic group?

Apprenticeship at the Cofán

An apprenticeship with Yagé in Cofán communities is not at all a weekend affair, but a learning process of several decades. Before a *tomador*¹¹ begins the actual learning process, he has been drinking Yagé regularly – two to three times a week – for several years. More intensive phases of the apprenticeship are characterized by strict diets, the intake of other entheogens and phases of retreats in the forest. Only then can someone become a *sabedor* or *conocedor*¹²: *Someone* who knows "something", and perhaps much later someone who "knows a lot", or even someone who "knows a great deal".

The terms *curaca* or *taita*¹³ express the highest respect within this hierarchy of knowledge, which the Cofán also call "*ciencia*" (science). My Cofán friends always described this science as "very deep" and "quiet". There is the view that someone who talks a lot about his or her knowledge does not really know anything. The exact speed at which knowledge acquisition takes place is individual and is ultimately determined by the plant Yagé.

Although Yagé itself is considered to be the real teacher, it is obligatory that the learner goes into the care of an experienced *sabedor* to not to lose himself in the learning process, as the exams are hard. Prerequisites for a suitable novice are a good physical condition as well as mental stability. For the apprenticeship in general hurry and ambition are not appropriate and rather counterproductive. So-called "Yagé things" must be addressed with peace and patience. This differs from Western conceptions of a 'spiritual career' and the desire of a certain scene in which currently every second person wants to become a shaman as fast as possible.

The knowledge acquired through years or decades of regular intake of Yagé is not intellectually, but physically acquired knowledge. It also has a certain ambivalence, because it can be used for both healing and harming other people.

¹¹ Yagé-'Drinker' (from span. tomar = drink)

¹² In this text, I deliberately chose the male form, since primarily men are considered to be *sabedor* ("knowing"). However, there are also "knowing" women who own Yagé songs and work as healers.

¹³ In other indigenous tribes, such as the Ingá or the Siona, the Kichwa term *taita* is used even for the elderly without a special spiritual knowledge. Not so with the Cofán.

However, the training to become a healer is more difficult than that of the sorcerer. According to many Cofán, the way of *brujería*¹⁴ is the simpler one.

The plant Yajé, which was given to the Cofán by the sun god Chiga, is considered to be a divine living being with human and ambivalent properties: On the one hand, it is considered to be loving and healing, on the other hand it is also wild and unpredictable, sometimes even cruel, as it can demand a great deal from its novices. In addition, it is considered to be extremely *delicado*, 'sensitive', which is why all Yajé things (such as cultivation, harvesting and preparation etc.) are also *delicado* and require a special handling according to special rules. And - Yajé can sometimes be deceptive! Yajé can make someone see things that are not true to test a person's heart. A befriended Cofán-*tomador* gave me an example, which is very often mentioned in his village in this context and probably corresponds to what Adelaars calls an 'ego or power trap', which can affect both traditional ayahuasqueros, as well as Western ayahuasca healers¹⁵:

"Yajé falsely shows you that you already wear a feather crown, a bigger one than even the old *taita*, who runs this ritual. You have much more Jaguar tooth chains and the most powerful Yajé songs. You think you are already very far, you know, you are super powerful and you can heal the people. Then you have to look very carefully into your heart, to see if that's true. Because it's easy to live 'cheated' [vivir engañado], to live an illusion, and not wake up from it. Many people in the cities today live cheated, they carry more chains than the old *taitas* themselves and consider themselves to be exceptional, and at the same time they do not know anything."¹⁶

Feather crown, ritual chains, the *sanganga* (also: *wairasacha*) lea tufts used for medical treatment and other ritual objects are given to the novice in an advanced stage of his apprenticeship, personally presented in the Yajé world by the *yajé a í*, the spirit within in the Yajé plant.

It is said that one has to 'earn' these objects [*hay que ganarselo*]. You can't buy them somewhere and simply use them. The same applies to the Yajé songs, which originate also from the plant. They cannot be learned by simply copying the song.

New times, new challenges

The Cofán are well aware that new times require new procedures. Thus, for about fifteen years, there has been a new novitiate of Cofán in the urban centers of Colombia, in whose creation well-known Cofán-*curacas* are decisively involved.¹⁷ Although there are occasional disagreements regarding the content and form of knowledge transfer among the indigenous *curacas*, this new type of

¹⁴ sorcery

¹⁵ Adelaars et al. 2006:262.

¹⁶ My fieldwork record of June 2005, Valle del Guamués.

¹⁷ About the new urban novitiate of Cofán see Jütte 2016:272-301.

novitiate is also characterized by years of apprenticeship and the observance of certain rules.

If today's leaders of Neo-shamanic ayahuasca centers claim that the indigenous traditions are "narrow-minded" and with their many rules just want to "scare" to insist on a power monopoly¹⁸, this is probably a profound cultural misunderstanding. The Cofán and many other indigenous groups with Ayahuasca as a cultural heritage know exactly what they are doing, and they are nothing more than responsible in their handling of this powerful entheogen. In the eyes of the Cofán, Western Neo-shamans, who participate so-called *cursos express* ('Express Courses') in dealing with ayahuasca in order to then make the world happy with their supposed healing knowledge, are nothing more than irresponsible adolescents who should not be allowed to treat other people. It should be mentioned, however, that today, if not even earlier, there are also a lot of indigenous charlatans.

The conflict that currently exists between the Cofán and Ayahuasca International can be described as symptomatic for the increasing global spread of ayahuasca. It mirrors some fundamental and not quite new topics: The West is coming and as it has done since the Conquista, it uses and markets without taking into account the cultural heritage of indigenous peoples. In the face of new times, which demand new answers to new challenges, indigenous people vacillate between perseverance on tradition and openness to transformation, including occasional cooperation with new forms of spiritual imperialism¹⁹ At the same time, they feel disregarded and quarrel about this dilemma among themselves, which in turn harms its own socio-cultural survival.

Personally, I have no solution to this problem. And no matter whether, or under which circumstances Alberto Varela obtained the controversial documents, and no matter whether Ayahuasca International and other ayahuasca companies²⁰ focused on mainstream advertising without a substantiated background, I still wish Taita Querubin a long and carefree life. *Bendiciones, Taita!*

¹⁸ For instance was this the argumentation of the German biologist Ulrich Meyerratken (owner of the Ayahuasca-Centre Ayamira in Brasil) during his proposal "Let's talk about Ayahuasca. Ein Gespräch aus der Praxis" at Entheoscience-Kongress in Berlin, Germany (September 3, 2016).

¹⁹ Term according to Hanegraaff 2001: 27-28.

²⁰ The Viennese ethnologist Manfred Kremser, who died at an early age, already showed in his observations in the 1990s novel initiations of New Afro-Latin American religions promoted in the internet, that were not recognised by traditional priests. It appeared a completely new form of cultural and religious transformation of cosmological worldviews and ritual systems in the digital age. (<http://www.univie.ac.at/ksa/elearning/cp/rebespektrum/rebespektrum-114.html>; (For this reference I thank Prof. Dr. Mark Münzel).

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