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The Revitalization of Yajé Shamanism among the Siona: Strategies of Survival in Historical Context

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines the transformations of yajé shamanism among the Siona Indians of the Northwest Amazon Basin of Colombia. The shaman's role and the political and sacred use of yajé rituals have changed since colonial times and can be seen as a result of adaptive strategies for survival. This study examines the factors that have contributed to the current revitalization due to state and popular representations of the ecological and wise Indian. Although Gow and Taussig argue that ayahuasca shamanism in Peru and folk healing in Colombia rose out of colonial domination and proletarian concerns, Siona shamanic practices are best understood as a transfiguration and result of their particular response to outside forces. Their contemporary use of yajé reflects this past and the discourse, aesthetics, expectations, and demands of the larger society.

KEYWORDS: contemporary shamanisms, Siona Indians, yajé, history, multicultural politics

After almost a complete extinction of Siona shamans and their rituals in the second half of the 20th century, yajé performances have reemerged in recent decades among this Western Tukanoan group of Colombia's northwest

Amazon Basin. The revitalization of yajé rituals among the Siona is part of a larger process throughout Latin America in which shamanism has come to be associated with ecological preservation, traditional medicine, ethnic identity, and community well-being (Conklin 2002; Ulloa 2005). In the lowland region of Putumayo State in Colombia, shamanic yajé rituals play a central role in the complex field of negotiations between indigenous communities, the state, nongovernmental organizations, extractive industries, and the diverse armed groups (paramilitaries, drug traffickers, military, and guerrillas) (Carrizosa 2015). In addition, Siona *taitas*, the current designation for lowland *ayahuasca* shamans, currently receive important recognition for their participation in contemporary shamanic networks in the Colombian highlands as well as in several countries in the Americas and Europe (Caicedo Fernández 2013).

This article outlines three historical periods of yajé use among the Siona: (1) the colonial period in which the shamanic role transformed into that of the powerful *cacique curaca* despite repression; (2) the first half of the 20th century that resulted in near extermination of shamans and yajé rituals; and (3) the revitalization of shamanism and reincorporation of the shaman and yajé rituals into the political process. It examines the factors that have contributed to the current revitalization, arguing that, unlike *vegetalismo* in Peru (Gow 1994) or the folk healing (*curanderismo*) system in Colombian popular culture (Taussig 1980), current Siona yajé shamanism has deep roots in their autochthonous practices and strategies to resist colonial control, although contemporary practices also reflect the discourse, aesthetics, expectations, and demands of the larger society that have arisen in the last 30 years.

My introduction to *ayahuasca*, or *yajé* as it is called in Colombia, began in 1970, when I conducted interdisciplinary medical research in the highland Sibundoy Valley before initiating my doctoral fieldwork among the Siona of the lower Putumayo. The Sibundoy *curacas*, the regional designation for these Kamsa and Ingano shamans at the time, participated in a widespread *curanderismo* (Urrea Giraldo and Zapata Ortega 1995; Taussig 1980) network composed of both indigenous peoples and mestizos. They trained as apprentices with Amazonian shamans, among them Siona, Kofan, and Inganos. Serving as mediators between the lowlands and Andean highland, they journeyed to urban markets throughout Colombia, performing yajé rituals, and selling remedies and magical amulets from the jungle. Because of their fame, non-Indians from Bogotá, Cali, Pasto, and other cities also sought healing sessions with them in the valley for problems that had not been resolved by conventional biomedical therapies. My experience with the Sibundoy *curacas* led me to the reserve of Buena Vista on the Putumayo River, where Banisteriopsis originates, to conduct research with the Siona in hopes of understanding better the origins of yajé shamanism.

In contrast to the vitality of Sibundoy shamanic practices, the Siona were going through a crisis that could be defined as “shamanism without shamans” (Brunelli 1996). There were no practicing shamans at the time, and constant laments were expressed about the loss of the powerful shamans of the past, attributing bad hunting or harvests, strange illnesses, and other misfortunes to their absence. Much of my fieldwork was dedicated to collecting shamanic narratives told by the elders that documented the role of shamans and yajé for their understanding of history as well as cosmology. However, in 1970, no Siona felt powerful enough to assume leadership of the rituals that had been essential for the well-being of the community and its individuals for hundreds of years. The elders’ narratives portrayed the shamans as important protagonists in their history since the Spanish invasion, explaining how they triumphed against the Spanish, negotiated with the masters of the animals, traveled to the different realms of the universe, and caused illness, death, and misfortune. Given what seemed to be an ongoing rapid assimilation into the surrounding society, when I left in 1974 I did not see any possibility of a revival of their shamanic practices. I did not imagine that ayahuasca would become a globally known substance and objective of shamanic tourism in Peru, Ecuador, and Colombia. Nor did I foresee the receptivity and widespread demand for yajé among Colombian middle class society that has influenced the revitalization of Siona rituals over the last three decades.

Another important factor contributing to this revitalization is the global, political process that has led to the recognition of indigenous rights and citizenship, one that has come to be called *ethnogenesis* and *ethnic transfiguration* (Bartolomé 2005). Fomented by a number of international documents, among them the Declaration of Barbados, the Convention 169 of the World Labor Organization, and the growth of indigenous movements in the 1970s and 1980s, constitutional changes have been approved throughout Latin America recognizing indigenous peoples as full citizens and the multicultural nature of the nation-states. The 1991 Colombian constitution was considered one of the earliest to guarantee autonomy to these peoples, recognizing collective territorial rights, autonomy in judicial processes, and the authority of traditional spiritual leaders (shamans) for the preservation of environment, health, and community.



SIONA COSMOLOGY AND ONTOLOGY

The Siona Indians share, in a general way, the epistemological and ontological principles of the shamanic cosmology that have been described for other Amazonian groups (Seeger et al. 1987; Viveiros de Castro 1996, 2006). The

cosmological world is one of constant transformation in which Western distinctions, such as nature/culture, animal/human, or natural/supernatural, do not apply. The cosmos is constituted by a multiplicity of owners/masters and their people, and these collectivities are repeated infinitely throughout the different realms of the universe in a “fractal logic” (Kelly Luciani 2001; Cesarino 2010:153). The Siona concept of *kāʔko*, or “side,” expresses their experience with the fractal and transformative nature of the universe. Perception and experience have different sides: *ʔi kāʔko*, or “this side,” refers to that which is normally visible, whereas the other, *yeki kāʔko*, “the other side,” is that of the occult forces that influence and interfere in the collective processes of well-being. One’s perception depends upon the side from which one is observing.

Yajé makes possible the experience of entering the other side to know and mediate with the beings there. The other side is perceived as an animate counterpart to the one we ordinarily see, and it is populated by various kinds of beings that have correspondence to elements in the natural environment. It is organized into different levels or *heavens*, each divided into realms or locations and each inhabited by particular beings. The level we live on is called the first heaven and is divided between the river, jungle, and human realms. The second heaven begins where the sky river separates it from the first at the point where the eye can no longer see. In the second heaven, Sun, Moon, Thunder, and other astral phenomenon live with their “people,” and their activities are manifested on this side in the daily and seasonal climatic cycles. The jungle and river realms, when visited in shamanic journeys, also resemble the human realm and likewise are divided into different settlements that belong to the different collectivities, such as the masters of the animals and fish or owners of special locations. Like human social organization, these “people” are also led by their caciques and curacas. One potentially dangerous class of beings is that of the *watí*, who can be encountered in the various realms. Encounters with *watí*, as opposed to those of the animal masters or other “peoples,” require extreme caution to avoid misfortune or illness. *Watí* can appear in misleading forms, as relatives or friends offering food or gifts, and are often at the service of aggressive shamans that intend to send misfortune. *Watí* can appear in yajé journeys, dreams, or in moments alone in the forest, and they must be perceived correctly in order for the person to escape unharmed.

The narratives told to me became the basis of my understanding of the Siona shamanic complex, and I came to interpret their oral performances as central to the Siona religious system according to the perspective of Geertz (1966). During the 1970s, when yajé rituals were absent, narratives, as a form of cultural performance, played an analogous role of enacting experiences with the invisible realms and transmitting knowledge (Langdon 2013a).

Narrative performance, like ritual, is a heightened experience and displayed publicly (Bauman 1977; Schechner 1995:20). The shamanic narratives I collected concerned important existential questions by presenting a model “of” and model “for” reality (Geertz 1966). It was through their narratives that I was able to understand the ontological relation between the invisible world and that of daily experience.

Their oral tradition recreates what has been experienced on the other side and conveys to the listener how the different peoples appear and what to expect in similar experiences. In addition to the narratives, other expressions of shamanic experiences in the early 1970s included the production of face paintings and other designs that invoke personal shamanic experiences (Langdon 2013a; Langdon 2013b; Langdon 2015). Elders who had significant shamanic experience were still creating the intricate geometric designs that they saw when taking yajé, although the youth had not learned this aesthetic tradition. The Siona distinguished their shamanic knowledge and practices from those of other ethnic groups in the region by these expressive modes that, for them, were diacritical markers of their specific knowledge and use of yajé manifested in ritual and daily life.



HISTORY AND SHAMANIC TRANSFORMATIONS

In earlier publications, I have examined the transformations that yajé rituals and shamans underwent and the role they played as major protagonists in historical processes (Langdon 1990, 2012). Siona ethnohistory documents how yajé became the prime defense against colonial control and repression as the shaman expanded his role beyond the sacred domain into the political and became the cacique curaca or “shaman chief.” With the rubber boom of the early 20th century and the region’s growing economic importance, forces worked against the continuation of shamanic practices through a combination of epidemics that decimated Siona communities, territorial loss, and forced education of the children in the mission boarding school. As the non-Indian population increased in the region, indigenous peoples were subject to discrimination and marginalization and were without full rights as citizens (Chaves Chamorro 2002). When I arrived in 1970, the Siona were aware of their pejorative status and, as a solution, appeared to be integrating into the surrounding mestizo society. Their last shaman chief died in the 1960s, and there was no living curaca who felt capable of assuming his role of leading the communal yajé rituals, the basis of their practice and their political and sacred powers. Language, traditional dress, and material culture, as well as rituals enacting their relation with the natural and invisible worlds, were being abandoned.

The Putumayo region has been subject to a number of extractive interests, beginning with gold in the seventeenth century and continuing to the present with petroleum and coca. Siona oral history tells of the entrance of the Spanish and subsequent indigenous resistance against the invaders through a number of narratives. These oral histories document how the shamans used their power to resist the activities of the Franciscan missionaries before their exit around 1800. In early publications (1990; 2014), I have sought to show how their shamanic practices based on yajé became the primary mode of resistance to external control. Below I present a history that portrays colonial curiosity in and repression of their shamanic practices. The narrative evidences the ritual process that the Siona performed to enter the other side, transform into animals, and travel to other realms of the universe. It also documents the repression of shamanic practices that contrasts markedly with the receptivity of these practices by the contemporary urban shamanic movement as well as by governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

First there were two jaguars, shamans they were. They were yajé drinkers. There was a town of whites. The Spanish called them to the town and said “Drink yajé today, and we will watch.”

Thus our people began to drink yajé. They drank two nights of yajé rituals, but first they only drank without singing. On the second night, they began to sing. One shaman turned into a pig. The other turned into a jaguar. They transformed and ran about singing yajé chants. One went about growling like a jaguar. All this the Spaniards watched; they watched the shamans until dawn.

Without speaking, they returned to their village after commanding them, “Tomorrow, cook yajé again.”

The shamans cooked again, and three priests came with two white leaders. They came and watched the shamans drink yajé.

The shamans drank, swooned and arrived (reached the other side). They chanted over the yajé and drank again. They invoked yajé songs and sang to the game animals.

“White lipped peccaries come,” they sang, invoking the game animals. Then one put on the clothing of the white lipped peccary, and ran about grunting like one. The other lay down as a jaguar in the hammock. Then as a jaguar, he left the yajé house and played the coconut flute.

As he played, the Spaniards watched. Seeing all this, the priests ran to their cots and just stood there. Standing there, they watched.

They watched the shamans perform and sing until dawn. At dawn, the Spaniards said, "Okay, now," and called the police. "Catch these people, they are bad. They are only doing evil." And two police came to catch the Indians. When the Indians saw them, they drank all the yajé that was left in the pots. Then the police caught them and took them and locked them in prison.

Inside, those ones remained courageous. "We will leave, we must leave or die in this jail. Yajé will help us," they said. They drank and at mid-day, they rose up to the heaven like scarlet macaws. They saw the heaven watí and spoke to him. At night the watí descended to the whites' village and ate everyone, finishing every one of them. The next day it dawned pure fog.

One good priest was left and he went to the Indians. "My people did much harm to you. Have compassion. Please forgive me. I am a good person," the priest asked them.

"We have seen that you are a good person. Go to your place," they said.

"Okay, thank you," he said, and he gave away all his merchandise to them. They received all the goods, and after a time, a fire boat arrived. Only half of the dead had been buried, and the others all rotted. Buzzards came down and ate the dead.

The priest said to the Indians, "I am going. I am going to my land, to Spain," he told them and returned.

The Indians went to live in another town; they were left alone.

[Narrated in Siona by Ricardo Yaiguaje, Buena Vista, 1972]

This narrative describes the shamanic techniques with yajé that facilitate transformation into animals or other beings and enable them to enter the other side and to negotiate with the beings there. The elders with shamanic experience often affirmed that it took three nights of rituals (or "houses", as expressed in Siona) for the ritual participants to fully experience the particular realm intended to be revealed according to the class of yajé chosen, its preparation, and the ritual action directed by the master shaman (Langdon 1986). As can be seen from the narrative, the rituals increase in intensity—the first night with no singing and no transformation, the second night when

transformations begin, and the third night when the shamans “swoon and arrive,” specifically referring to the state of consciousness that marks entrance into the other side. It is extremely difficult to translate the verb, *suña-*, which refers to the experience produced by yajé that Harner calls the “shamanic state of consciousness” (Harner 1982). It is what the Siona seek in their yajé rituals and is clearly distinguished from the state of drunkenness (*g^webe-*).

The exit of the Franciscans at the end of the 18th century left the region in relative isolation for almost a century, until quinine and rubber extraction brought increased contact and interest in the 1880s. The Capuchin missionaries took responsibility and authority for the Putumayo region in the beginning of the 20th century, founding Puerto Asís and a boarding school for indigenous children. As a consequence of the school and the extractive activities, epidemics spread throughout the native settlements. By the mid-1920s, several Siona communities had disappeared and their population was reduced to 300, a third of what it had been in 1900. Several Siona youth participated in the Colombian-Peruvian conflict in the 1930s on the lower Putumayo River. As the nonindigenous population slowly increased, the Siona established trading and *compadrio* relations with their colonist neighbors and the local businesses in Puerto Asís. In the 1950s, oil was discovered in the region and a road from the highlands to Puerto Asís was completed the next decade, bringing thousands of settlers to the Putumayo and virtually surrounding the last few Siona communities.



SIONA SHAMANS OF ORITO, 1930S (DE CALELLA 1940–41).

As compared to the colonial period when the shaman’s role was strengthened as a result of resistance to the Franciscan missionaries, the shamanic complex did not withstand the demographic and economic changes of the 20th century. Siona ethnohistory documents the extractive activities and arrival of

outsiders along with the epidemics that brought the end to several communities. By the 1920s, most Siona children were forced into the mission school in Puerto Asís where they were forbidden to speak their language. The Siona men of my generation attended the mission school in the 1950s and 1960s and tell of how their language and cultural practices, including those related to yajé, were repressed and condemned. Many of them were sons and grandsons of the last curacas residing in Buena Vista and the two nearest settlements of Piñuña Blanco and Granada. All took yajé in their youth, but after internship in the school, they did not undertake full shamanic apprenticeship.

The death of the last master shaman, Arsenio Yaiguaje, in the early 1960s, marked the end of the cacique curaca tradition as developed after the arrival of the Spanish. In the 1950s–60s, there were approximately eight practicing curacas in the Siona communities on the Putumayo River, some considered more powerful than others. They were ambiguous figures. On the one hand they were necessary for the well-being and health of the community members; on the other, they sent illness and misfortune to those who angered them and to rival shamans. The many shamanic narratives that recount events in the 20th century document shamanic sorcery attacks and evil actions due to rivalry and competition. The period in which the last curacas died in the 1950s–60s is remembered in a sequence of narratives that attribute their demise to the exchange of retaliations. Today they refer to this cycle of reciprocal attacks as the “great shamanic war,” in which one shaman’s sorcery led to another’s until Arsenio’s death in Buena Vista in the 1960s.



RICARDO YAIGUAJE, WITH FACE DESIGNS, PERFORMING A CURING SESSION IN THE 1960S. (PHOTO BY CARLOS GARIBELLO)

Al Wheeler, the Summer Institute of Linguistics missionary residing in Buena Vista at the time, said that the elders gathered after Arsenio’s death to

drink yajé hoping to identify the next one to assume shamanic leadership. Contrary to expectations, all of the participants suffered bad experiences, with no one capable of guiding the others through the heaven realms. They emerged from the ritual devastated with the situation. After this, yajé ceremonies performed by Siona shamans in Buena Vista ceased until the late 1970s, when Francisco (Pacho) Piaguaje and his brother Luciano began preparing and drinking yajé (Langdon 2010). This is not to affirm that Siona did drink yajé during this time but that when they did they participated in rituals under the guidance of shamans from other ethnic groups in the region. Gossip abounded as to the sorcery attacks from these causing serious illnesses and deaths in Buena Vista (Langdon 2014).

In the 1970s, the young adults who were descendants of the curacas of the great war and my good friends and *compadres* seemed to take little interest in undertaking shamanic apprenticeship, one that required periods of isolation, sexual abstinence, and *dietas*. In addition, they were abandoning the practices related to menstruation and pregnancy designed to avoid pollution of yajé rituals and shamans. The colonists did not practice such practices, and interaction with them was ongoing. Siona journeyed to the bustling town of Puerto Asís, some eight to twelve hours upstream by cargo canoe, to sell corn and rice and to purchase products such as salt, cloth, shotgun shells, and so forth. In their interactions, younger generations sought to mimic the surrounding population to avoid being victims of discrimination. Food habits, clothing, and housing increasingly resembled those of the nonindigenous population. Because of friendships and commercial relations, colonist neighbors were frequently present on the reserve and attended community festivities. Several young people told me that they were ashamed to speak the native language.

I left the Putumayo in 1974 predicting the end of Siona shamanism and their assimilation into mestizo peasant society. However, my return visits indicated a reversal in this trend. In 1980, Pacho and Luciano, who had both abandoned shamanic apprenticeships when young, had resumed performing yajé rituals on the reserve, although it was not clear how much of the community participated at this time. In 1985, Luciano had died, but the surviving brother, Pacho was conducting healing rituals in Buena Vista and participating in the regional shamanic network, made up of both indigenous and mestizo shamans. By 1992, Pacho was part of a larger shamanic network that took him to Pasto and Bogotá, leading rituals with anthropologists, journalists, and urban professionals in *tomas de yajé* that were growing in popularity (Caicedo Fernández 2009; Uribe 2008). Shamanic networks between lowland indigenous shamans and nonindigenous apprentices have resulted in the establishment of several ritual centers, or *malocas*, in major cities. Pacho was the mentor of a nonindigenous shaman who founded the maloca known as

Cruz del Sur (Southern Cross), located outside of Pasto, an Andean city in southern Colombia. Pacho provided yajé and conducted ceremonies for large groups of people (Caicedo Fernández 2013).²

The decade of 1990 was extremely violent, marked by increased cocaine production and the arrival of new actors to dispute of control of the region, among them paramilitaries and drug lords from Medellín and Cali. The guerillas controlled much of the region and became known as a “third drug cartel” (Ramírez 2011:54). As coca production diminished in Bolivia and Peru because of US intervention, Colombia became the largest producer by 2000, and its cultivation was criminalized and violently repressed (Ramírez 2011:56). In 1994, aerial fumigation of coca plantations with the toxic herbicide glyphosate began and increased significantly during the next ten years. In spite of the adverse health and environmental impacts, spraying has continued until the present, including the fumigation of indigenous reserves.

The Siona communities are in the middle of a violent situation between armed actors and have suffered from invasions, threats, and assassinations. In the late 1990s, families began to displace to the urban centers of Puerto Asís and Mocoa to escape the situation. In spite of the violence of the 1990s, it was also the decade of the consolidation of the revitalization of Siona ethnic identity and its shamanism on the political front. Many of the Siona friends of my generation became important protagonists. These include Pacho’s five sons, as well as several others who are descended from Arsenio and other curacas of the 1950s. In June of 1999, the *Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yageceros de Colombia* (UMIYAC) was founded in a meeting of regional indigenous shamans organized by the NGO Amazonian Conservation Team and Tanda Chiridu Inganokuna, a Quichua indigenous organization. Five Siona participated in this meeting that was attended by 40 indigenous taitas, including Pacho Piaguaje, who was elected to Larger Council (*Unión de Medicos Indígenas Yageceros de Colombia* 1999).

Siona taitas not only are integrated into regional *curanderismo* networks based on yajé rituals, but they have become highly visible on the national and global level. A tribute to Pacho, who died in 2004, can be found on a bank wall in the center of Puerto Asís. His portrait and other new age representations of shamanic powers are accompanied by the caption:

Shamanism is the path that each Pueblo has been able to find toward the ineffable, toward the depth of the human being, his sacred essence. In the Centenary of Puerto Asís, I pay homage to Pacho Piaguaje, Jaguar curaca from the margins of the Putumayo River. J. Chavez [Translation by author]



HOMAGE TO PACHO ON BANK WALL IN PUERTO ASÍS, 2012 (PHOTO BY PEDRO MUSALEM)

His sons and other Siona taitas continue to conduct rituals in Pasto, Cali, Medellín, Bogotá, and other Colombian cities, and several have travelled to Spain, Brazil, Peru, Chile, Canada, and other countries to conduct yajé ceremonies in association with the nongovernmental organization UMIYAC. One taita living in Mocoa, the capital of Putumayo State, has received busloads of tourists to drink yajé at his maloca sent from Bogotá by a well-known nonindigenous shaman. Not only have these networks resulted in national and international recognition, but they also generate financial gain and have come to represent an important source of individual income.

Along with the involvement in contemporary tomas de yajé, shamanic practices are an integral part of the strategies of ethnic revitalization that the Siona have undergone since the 1991 constitution. Shamans once again play a political role as they did in the past. The Siona as an indigenous people have survived and grown as a political force due to the Constitution of 1991, and their political and spiritual leaders participate in the regional and national indigenous movement. The constitution recognizes the pluriethnic and multicultural character of the state, granting indigenous peoples increased rights and autonomy. It confirms collective ownership of indigenous territories, called *resguardos*, and they have the right to use them as they see fit, including prior informed consent for development projects proposed for their lands.³ In addition, the constitution recognizes the *cabildo* as the form of indigenous governance, and the formation of a *cabildo* may be requested by a group of Indians independently of association with a particular *resguardo*.

Since 1991, indigenous identity has become to be officially associated with the ecological Indian and receives a positive value not seen before in state documents:

The new constitution recognized the native's territorial difference and autonomy relying largely on their role as keepers of the ancestral

knowledge that allows the continuity of the biological diversity contained within their territories. Los territorios indígenas (indigenous territories) were finally recognized as the spaces of custom and tradition but also of preserved “ecological places.” [Carrizosa 2015:24]

The recognition of indigenous rights and representations of ancestral knowledge in governmental documents and programs has had a positive effect on Siona as an indigenous people. The population has grown to 2,578 Siona located in six reservations as well as in urban areas (Asociación de los Cabildos Indígenas Pueblo Siona 2012:40). This growth is not due to increased birthrate but to the “re-indigenization” process among mestizos in the region in the face of the heightened status of the indigenous peoples (Chaves Chamorro 2002). While at one time mestizo identity received a higher status than that of the indigenous, the new constitution has caused a reversal, and many people are rediscovering and identifying with their indigenous roots. Buena Vista has grown from the 27 families in 1972 to 161 in 2012 (Asociación de los Cabildos Indígenas Pueblo Siona 2012:40). Two of the more recent *cabildos* are located in the urban centers of Puerto Asís and Mocoa, created by displaced families from the rural areas because of the violence and environmental destruction. Displacement initiated in the late 1990s has continued until the present.⁴ Some 28 families live in Mocoa and another 45 in Puerto Asís (Asociación de los Cabildos Indígenas Pueblo Siona 2012:40). They have not lost ties with their home territories, and there is constant movement between the indigenous rural communities and urban areas (Musalem Nazar 2015).

In 2002, the pan-Siona association, *Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas de los Pueblos Siona* (ACIPS), was recognized by the Minister of Interior (Asociación de los Cabildos Indígenas Pueblo Siona n.d.). Its primary goals include promotion of culture, values, and traditional norms outlined in the *Life Plan* and representation of the communities whose cabildos belong to the association. It serves as an important mediator between communities, government, and NGOs and has gained funding for a number of projects, initiating with the first *Life Plan*. The *Siona Life Plan* outlines seven “pillars of community well-being” as goals for recuperation: traditional medicine, native language, subsistence, territory, environment, collective control, and thought (*pensamiento*) (Portela Guarín et al. 2003). As “traditional authorities,” the *taitas* have a central role in the community political process:

Within the system of self-government, the Jaguar People, or traditional authorities, are considered to be a transversal body for the resolution of conflicts. This means for the Siona People that the maximum figure of authority is found in the Jaguar People, who, with their orientation and counsel, are present in the most important decisions and resolutions of conflicts when

these occur within the community. As spiritual guides and traditional doctors, they possess the capacity to guide and lead us to the understanding of our realities. Their example teaches us and with the diets that they maintain, they always are purifying their relation with the spirits and equilibrating the energies that can affect us. (Asociación de los Cabildos Indígenas Pueblo Siona 2012:74, translation by author)

The role attributed to them in the *Life Plan* draws upon the traditional role of cacique curaca as protector of Siona communities as well as mediator with the outside world. Shamans are present in community decision-making processes. As Joaquín Carrizosa (2015) documents for the Kofan, they conduct yajé rituals following community meetings to continue the discussions and deliberations (Carrizosa 2015). Juan Yaiguaje, the father-in-law of ACIPS' president, is a powerful and respected taita who participates in meetings with cabildo representatives as well as with governmental and nongovernmental participants. He often conducts yajé ceremonies for these officials once the formal meetings are over. The coordinated political action between the president of ACIPS and his father-in-law demonstrates the way in which shamans play a political role as spiritual authorities. Taitas are given an important voice in community meetings and interethnic political encounters. The latest ACIPS participatory project assessing the situation of its communities and collective goals was conducted through visits to Siona communities accompanied by the taitas as traditional authorities. The central photo of the cover of the final document of the two-year process (2011–2012) presents six taitas dressed in *cusmas* and shamanic necklaces with jaguar teeth and is entitled “Our Protection. Cabildo Jai Ziaya Bain (Buena Vista) Meeting of Taitas and Elders, December 7, 2011, Mocoa” (Asociación de los Cabildos Indígenas Pueblo Siona 2012). Ethnoeducation projects funded by the Minister of Education from 2010 to 2013 and carried out in Siona communities were accompanied by taitas, who participated in the workshops during the day and conducted yajé ceremonies at night.

The current reception and attraction to yajé practices contrasts markedly with the situation described in the narrative told by Ricardo Yaiguaje about the imprisonment of the curacas some three centuries ago. For purposes of comparison and final reflections on the transformations of contemporary Siona shamanism, I present an anthropological narrative of a yajé ceremony conducted by Siona in the IV International Encounter of Andean Cultures (Encuentro Internacional de las Culturas Andinas) held in the city of Pasto, Nariño, in the Andean cordillera of southern Colombia. This event reflects the national and global interchange occurring between government, NGOs, indigenous peoples, and interested public that reinforces and values shamanic activities as ancestral knowledge and spiritual harmony.

The Siona taitas have participated in these encounters since their beginning in 2009. Indigenous shamans and other healers, academics, political activists, and artists gather together around the themes of ancestral knowledge and indigenous medicine, cultural politics and patrimony, biodiversity and climate change, and territory, autonomy, and peace. The idea of spirituality and well-being pervades all the activities, which include a series of conferences and roundtables, conversations with shamans, healing ceremonies, art expositions, and an arts and crafts fair. Both the indigenous representatives and others come from various countries, including various South American countries, Mexico, and the United States. In 2014, the event was held simultaneously with the celebrations of the 110th Anniversary of the State of Nariño, which sponsored a diversity of cultural performances in the center of the city that drew large crowds. The government of the State of Nariño, municipal agencies, federal ministries, universities, and numerous other governmental and nongovernmental organizations and industries are supporters and financiers of the events. I was invited to present my recently published ethnography (Langdon 2014) in a round table featuring the taitas and their wives from Buena Vista. Both my expenses as well as theirs were paid for by the organizing committee.



SIONA TAITAS IN ROUND TABLE (ARTISTIC PORTRAYAL OF SHAMANISM ON POSTER IN BACKGROUND) (PHOTO BY ALAN STONE LANGDON).

Indigenous healing ceremonies and rituals with entheogenic substances were organized throughout the nine-day event in 2014. Conferences and art exhibitions were located in the Casona Taminango, a museum of art and popular traditions dedicated to the maintenance of traditional knowledge and crafts. The foyer at the entrance of the conference auditoriums and exhibition section of the museum was full of tables offering healing practices and arts and crafts organized by the different ethnic groups. The Sibundoy Indians seemed

to dominate the space, selling their woven goods, bead works, and magical amulets. Dressed in their traditional ponchos, long strands of beads, and shamanic feather headdresses, they performed blessing rituals in front of their tables for those who asked. Several Sibundoy shamans could also be seen through a large window performing more elaborated “cleansing” rituals with their leaf whisks and herbal waters that they sprayed over the patients. A group of Siona from Buena Vista had mounted two tables selling different bead crafts. Other groups participating in the fair included Guambianos, Quilasingas, Kofan, Ingas, and Pastos.



EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY SIONA BEADWORK (PHOTO BY ALAN STONE LANGDON)

In addition to these cleansing ceremonies, more elaborate rituals common to the neo-shamanic circuit using entheogenic substances were held during each day and night of the encounter. Shamanic specialists came from Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and Brazil to administer rituals with yajé, peyote, the frog poison *cambo*, *yopo*, *rapé*, coca (*mambe*), *ambil*, and San Pedro cactus. Members of the ayahuasca religion Santo Daime also conducted ceremonies with yajé. Pacho’s sons from Buena Vista led yajé rituals nightly, at times in association with the encounter and others privately in various locations in and around Pasto.

Curious to witness a Siona ritual within this context, my son and I signed up and paid \$20 for one led by Taita Felinto Piaguaje⁵ on the last night in the Casa Inga. The Casa Inga is large house that serves as a residence for Ingano students with space for meetings and activities. The ceremony was held in the central room, in which some 25 nonindigenous participants were organized in a large circle around the room in plastic chairs. There was also a number of Ingano Indians participating, but they stayed in an adjacent room. Participants were of various ages. Although most came from

Colombia, there was a group of young Argentineans who happened to hear about the possibility of participating. A Colombian woman in her late 40s or early 50s indicated that she had been living for several years in the United States and that she was visiting her sister when she heard about the ritual. Like the others, she was there out of curiosity. Most of the nonindigenous participants had little or no experience with yajé and were oriented by the motivation to experience it.

Around 11 PM, several hours after the appointed hour of beginning, Felinto Piaguaje, his two sons, and a tall mestizo entered the darkened room dressed in the traditional cusma and adorned with necklaces of beads, nuts, and jaguar teeth, and feather crowns common to taitas in Colombia. Besides the ceremonial dress, the ritual shared common features characteristic of those that circulate in the national shamanic network. It opened with Catholic prayers led by one of Felinto's sons. When the yajé was served, each person went individually to receive a serving at the front of the room where the shamans sat. After the first serving to everyone, there was silence for quite some time. People began to moan, some laughed, and others were silent. Some got off their chairs and lay on the floor. After some time of silence, Felinto's three shamanic helpers chanted in Spanish and Siona language and rhythms. At other moments they played the harmonica. Yajé was offered to the participants three times during the night. After the second time, probably around 4 AM, the singing resumed and a group of Ingas got out their instruments, including guitars and drums, and began to play and sing loudly in music that represented a highland popular tradition. After a long period of singing and playing, they began the ritual cleansing. A group of eight people were called to sit in chairs that had been placed in a line in the middle of the room, and each received the cleansing ceremony from Felinto, his two sons, the mestizo, or one of the Ingas. As seen in the garden in the museum, the cleansing ceremony involved the spraying of *aguardiente* mixed with herbs to the rhythm of the leaf whisk and chanting. The band played loudly as they "cured." Those who had specific health problems were cured first and then the others. My son and I were called last and received what seemed to be a more prolonged cure performed by Felinto and his two sons. One of Felinto's sons asked me at some point if I had had good visions.

The cleansing ceremony was the culmination of the ritual, but all remained in the room until it was daylight. Around 6 AM people began to leave. My son and I bid goodbye to those around us. Felinto and his group had left and gone to rest. Upon our return to the small hotel that morning, the attendant asked us if we had enjoyed the ritual and seemed quite pleased that we had participated.



FINAL COMMENTS

Siona shamanic revitalization is a result of forces on the local, national, and global level, but the roots lie in a pre-Colombian tradition that has adapted to the various historical situations and their interactions with outsiders. As shown by the narrative that recounts shamanic repression in the colonial context, shamans and yajé rituals were central protagonists for their ethnic survival during this period. In the 20th century, the ambiguities and rivalries of shamanic power led to their own demise. In the 1970s, the Siona continued to remember and identify with their shamanic practices in spite of the absence of shamans. It was a situation of “shamanism without shamans” (Brunelli 1996). The impressive revitalization and reconfiguration of their shamanism, which became consolidated in the 1990s, is due both to the popular and political representations of the “ecological Indian” as well as the popularity of yajé in Colombian society. The association of indigenous spirituality with environmentalism has become an important reference in the struggle for indigenous rights throughout Latin America (Ulloa 2005; Conklin 2002; Conklin and Graham 1995) and also for the globalized neo-shamanic movement seeking a return to primordial knowledge and equilibrium through participation in shamanic performances.

In some ways, my reflections on Siona shamanism parallel anthropological thinking reflected in Geertz’s two articles on religion that were separated by 36 years (Geertz 1966, 2000). His early article, “Religion as a Cultural System,” was written in a time when culture still figured as a major concept for American anthropology, and we tended to imagine it as having clear-cut frontiers. The symbolic process of ritual was seen as enacting reality with such force that it served as a model for action. My analysis led me to interpret Siona shamanism as a religious system, and the experience provoked by the performance of shamanic narratives as analogous to that of ritual. Oral performances of these narratives enact important existential questions about the nature of misfortune and its causes. They are concerned with the perception between different “sides of reality” and how to distinguish them in daily experience to discover the nature of the misfortune and what action to take.

We can perceive in contemporary Siona practices with yajé the multiplicity of dimensions that Geertz (2000) recognizes for religion in his article published some 36 years later. Shamanism is much more than the producer of meaning and practice through the ritual process. Performing shamanism with yajé articulates the spiritual, political, and economic dimensions of the complex situation that has impacted upon their lives during the last three decades. They struggle for autonomy and citizenship in a context of armed actors and extractive activities that limit the full exercise of their rights. Their

traditional means of subsistence has been destroyed and dependency upon extractive and economic activities of the region is almost total. Yajé performances, as embodied knowledge, have become the principal means for engagement of outside resources and alliances, creating and transmitting knowledge while expressing identity in a post-colonial violent setting. Yajé shamanism is the central pillar of the ongoing ethnopolitical movement that has allowed the Siona to survive as a collective group in the face of the violence and the growing economic importance of the region during the last 30 years. In this process of dialogue with global and national discourses of the ecological Indian, Siona shamanism has undergone a transfiguration and their yajé rituals reflect the incorporation of traits that have come to be nationally identified as authentic (Conklin 1997). As Miguel Bartolomé points out, cultural transfigurations are adaptive strategies that subordinated societies generate to survive and in which they transform their cultural profile, in order for them to continue to be who they believe themselves to be (Bartolomé 2005).

The transformations in Siona shamanism can be understood a result of strategies for survival. This article has reviewed changes in shamanic discourse, aesthetics, and rituals through their political organization, published documents, and participation in the IV International Encounter of Andean Cultures. Their public discourse has greater affinity with that of global representations of the ecological Indian, where indigenous medicine and shamans are linked with spiritual well-being, peace, and harmony. Tales of sorcery and the ambiguous powers of shamans are absent from their current representations. Taita Felinto told me at one point that as members of UMIYAC, sorcery is not a part of their shamanic ethos any longer nor do they transform into animals in their rituals. In addition, their ceremonial dress and intricate yajé designs painted on their faces of the past been modified by aesthetic expressions that represent the generic Amazonian taita. The beadwork they produce for sale reflects the patterns and styles found in the earrings, bracelets, and necklaces recognized throughout the Americas as indigenous. Yajé rituals have also come to reflect their participation in the contemporary shamanic and folk healing network, appropriating Christian elements, including prayers, blessings, music, and the cleansing ceremony that marked the end of the yajé ritual performed by Felinto. However, the case of the Siona experience with the revitalization of the use of yajé presented here must be seen as a strategy of survival that has emerged from their autochthonous shamanic practices and knowledge, and not one that is merely an appropriation of external forms and demands.



NOTES

- 1 Preparations of ayahuasca based on species of *Banisteriopsis* and admixtures are most commonly designated in Colombia as yajé. I am using the graphism of yajé, and not yagé, as suggested by Uribe (2008).
- 2 Yajé has become so popular that there is even a debate for patrimonializing it (Caicedo Fernández 2010). At the same time, Amazonian taitas condemn nonindigenous use (Unión de Medicos Indígenas Yageceros de Colombia 1999).
- 3 Contradictorily, this does not include sub-soil resources, which belong to the government.
- 4 For instance, in 2013 the guerrillas broke an accord they had with the Siona of Buenavista and invaded the *resguardo*, forcing several families to leave.
- 5 Taita Felinto must be recognized as an indigenous intellectual, not only for his shamanic knowledge but also for his work with the Siona language and the collection of Siona texts. We were collaborating on the use of these texts for the Siona ethnoeducational program when he suffered from serious health problems in 2013 and could not continue our work (see Langdon and Langdon 2015).

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