

ATW-10

In the Land of Yagé IV: A Rainy Day in Mocoa

Pasto  
Colombia  
May 31, 1972

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
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535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10017  
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

The next-to-last checkpoint on the one-way road from Sibundoy to Mocoa is called Mirador ("Lookout") and it looks out on a spectacular view: the sheer drop of the eastern edge of the Cordillera Portachuelo with the road falling thousands of feet in narrow switchbacks and the panorama of the Amazon basin stretching out to the distant horizon. Here begins the most dangerous part of the road: a steep, twisting descent that leads, finally, out of the mountains and into the land of forest and river. It is a great relief when the last checkpoint is passed and one can accelerate a bit without fear of falling off a mountain.

Of course, it was still winter when I arrived, meaning more rain and gray skies, but there were sun and rainbows, too. And when the sun is out, with puffy cumulus clouds dotting a bright blue sky, the Putumayo seems a very good place to be. Yagé is much talked about here along with the famous machaca -- a beetle (mythical, I think) whose bite is supposed to be the most powerful aphrodisiac known (death within twenty-four hours, goes the tale, unless one makes love). A recently-published government booklet designed to promote tourism in the Putumayo Territory boasts about the machaca and says also that the colors and images of native handicrafts are invented "by taking doses of hallucinogens like yagé." It goes on to hint at the existence of hallucinogenic mushrooms in the Territory as well.

Not surprisingly, this kind of advertising has brought numbers of hippies to the Putumayo and, in addition, has given impetus to the commercialization of yagé. In fact, in Mocoa itself and in all the sleazy communities along the road to the busy town of Puerto Asis on the Río Putumayo, yagé "priests" abound who sell the drug and its rites for money and aguardiente. (The fee is usually lower than in Sibundoy.) I was not surprised to find this degree of commercialization but hoped to see something to do with the drug that was a bit more impressive than what I found in Sibundoy.

A few days after getting to Mocoa, I kept a date with a witch doctor a few miles from town to prepare yagé with him. His name was Ambrosio, an Indian of the Mocoa tribe who lived in an isolated house above the banks of the Río Rumiyo. Like most of the rivers in the area, the Rumiyo is a roaring torrent, fresh out of the mountains, especially high at this time of year. It was raining hard the morning I went to make yagé with Ambrosio, and the path along the river was slippery mud. It skirted fields of sugar cane and occasional patches of pineapple, then crossed the river on a log bridge. On the other side I had to scramble up a muddy bank, walk through wet fields, and then struggle up a long hill. The house was a rickety wooden frame, high above the ground on stilts, thatched over with palm fronds. Ambrosio and his son Carlos were there along with another Indian, who, Ambrosio said, was sick with fever. They all seemed slightly drunk although it was early morning.

Ambrosio does a bit of carpentry, but he is more interested in yagé than wood. He has both yagé and chagrapanga growing near his house, and when I had visited him the previous afternoon, he had said we could cook up a batch from scratch. Ambrosio laughs at nearly everything that happens or anything anyone says to him, and this morning things seemed to strike him especially funny. I had brought along the expected offering of aguardiente, and once I had established that we were not going to drink it off immediately, we decided the first order of business would be to collect the leaves of chagrapanga. Accordingly, Ambrosio with a woven basket on his back, Carlos with a machete, and I with nothing trudged out into the pouring rain, down a muddy hillside into a tangle of vegetation where chagrapanga was to be found. The plant (or plants: it was hard to tell in such dense undergrowth) seemed to be a shrubby, woody vine with many large smooth leaves. Carlos and I ripped off handfuls of them and stuffed them into Ambrosio's basket. When the basket was nearly full, we left the site and marched further on in the same direction.

Presently we came to a cliff and climbing down it came again to the bank of the Rumiyo where there was a sort of ramada -- an open, thatched hut that seemed to be used for cooking yagé. In the middle of it was a fire-pit full of ashes and piled up to one side was a huge stack of wood, mostly trunks of small trees about six feet long. Getting a fire started was not easy. We had only a few matches among us; Ambrosio's lighter was out of fluid; and everything was damp. We assembled a stack of logs with much kindling and got some sparks going but couldn't seem to produce flames. Ambrosio found all of this immensely funny. After much work, the fire roared to life, and we arranged the logs so that they could be pushed into the pit from different directions as they were consumed. Carlos took a huge fire-blackened kettle to the river, filled it with water, and set it on some rocks over the fire. Into it went the chagrapanga leaves from the basket.

"Now we get the yagé," said Carlos. "We go up." And up we went, up a mountainside of pure mud, slipping, sliding,

and sloshing. Ambrosio laughed all the way, especially loudly whenever he fell into mud. After an age we got to the top and turned off the path into a dense woods. Carlos hacked open a path for us, and after a good trek we came to a place where several large trees had fallen. Twined all about these fallen trees and completely tangled with the neighboring plants as well were the huge woody stems of Banisteriopsis caapi. We had reached Ambrosio's yagé grove.

Carlos set about chopping off lengths of bejuco and cutting them into one-foot sections. I loaded them into the basket of Ambrosio, who was now giggling quietly to himself. When the basket was nearly full, we retraced our steps and began the descent of the mudslide, which reactivated Ambrosio's full-blown hysterics. I thought we would go immediately to put the bejuco in the pot, but Carlos said, "Let's leave it here and go have some aguardiente first." I saw no good coming of this decision, but while I was considering how to object, Ambrosio threw down the basket and he and Carlos went off in the direction of the house. I followed through a field of ankle-deep mud.

This time I had the sense to decline aguardiente right from the beginning (I said it was bad for my stomach) and merely watched while Carlos, Ambrosio, and the sick friend killed the whole bottle. The rain increased steadily, to the delight only of a family of ducks that padded around outside the house. Ambrosio and Carlos were soon so drunk that they could hardly stand and had glazed looks. At every opportunity, I urged them to resume the job of making the yagé, but the alcoholic inertia was terrific. Finally, finally, we all started off into the downpour to collect the basket of bejuco. Ambrosio's laugh was now a drunken cackle. He got quite lost trying to get back to the ramada, and it was with some difficulty that we reached the cliff, got down it, and eventually came out on the right spot. Logically enough the fire had gone out during our absence. Starting it was only slightly easier than before.

"That's chagrapanga," Carlos told me, pointing to the kettle and weaving back and forth. He repeated this statement about thirty times in the next hour, not being able to think of anything else to say. "What does the chagrapanga do," I asked. "It makes the visions brighter," Ambrosio replied and burst out laughing at the hilarity of it all. Then we began scraping the bejuco, pounding it with rocks, and adding it to the caldron. Carlos stirred the mixture with a long paddle. Now that it was no longer just chagrapanga, he had to think of a new thing to say to me, and he quickly hit upon, "¿Como le parece, Doctor?" ("How does it look to you, Doctor?") which he asked me every few minutes for the duration of the cooking.

For the next hour and a half, we sat on logs, took turns stirring the brew and rearranging the logs in the fire, and listened to the pouring rain. Ambrosio laughed. Carlos kept

asking me how it looked. ("Muy bien" was the only thing I could think of to answer, which seemed to please him.) The pot boiled vigorously. After about two hours of cooking in all, Ambrosio thought the rusty-brown soup was done. We poured the liquid into another pot, discarded the leaves and bejuco, then returned the liquid to the large kettle and quickly boiled it down to about a quart, just enough to fit into an empty aguardiente bottle.

It was now late afternoon and, miraculously, the rain stopped. Ambrosio asked if I wanted to drink the yagé that night. No, I told him, I would rather take it with me. That was fine with him. This preparation of yagé was a considerable improvement over Salvador's in Sibundoy (at least we cooked it), but I did not feel drawn to drink it in an atmosphere so thick with alcoholic haze. I would keep looking, I resolved.

I regret to say that, although I looked quite a bit in the Putumayo, I did not find any other yagé-men who inspired more confidence. I fear that the old rituals are not to be found any more in this part of the Amazon and that what exists now is simply the drug, isolated from its former tribal context. Certainly, the heavy use of aguardiente -- a white man's liquor if ever there was one -- reflects this debasement of older Indian ways. But there are many other regions of yagé use in South America, and perhaps one day I shall find one where the ritual is more impressive. I am going to leave the Land of Yagé now to look at other things for a while. When I return, I will continue this series of newsletters.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Andrew T. Weil". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the typed name.

Andrew T. Weil

Received in New York on June 19, 1972