

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ATW-8

In the Land of Yagé II: Down in the Valley

Pasto
Colombia
May 29, 1972

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017
U.S.A.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The Valley of Sibundoy is a strange and beautiful world. Because of its natural isolation by rugged mountains, the Indian villages within it have developed unique customs, particularly in regard to the use of plants. In fact, some of the plants themselves are unique, as we shall see, and one Colombian botanist I know says a man cannot really call himself a botanist until he has worked in Sibundoy.

An unpaved but good road leads to the Valley from Pasto, the capital of the mountainous state of Nariño in the southwest corner of Colombia. Pasto is on the Pan-American highway and is near the border of Ecuador, where the three mountain chains that run through Colombia join to form the northern end of the Cordillera de los Andes, the backbone of peaks that runs the length of the western edge of South America. Leading east from Pasto the road to Sibundoy immediately climbs through mountainous farmlands and slopes that are cultivated despite their incredible steepness. The land glows with a distinctive emerald-green color -- a consequence of the richness of the volcanic soil. In a short time the road climbs above ten thousand feet into a region of fog and peculiar low vegetation; then, crossing the ridge, it drops quickly into a valley that

holds a large and beautiful lake, the source of the Río Guamues, a tributary of the Putumayo.

After skirting the northern edge of this lake, the road climbs again, this time to nearly twelve thousand feet, which brings it into a distinctive topographic zone known as paramo. Paramos are pockets of alpine-like vegetation that occur in certain parts of the tropics at elevations between eleven and fourteen thousand feet. They are favorite haunts of botanists because they contain a tremendous variety of species not found anywhere else. Colombia has a great many paramos (there is a large one in the mountains just outside of Bogotá), and they are popular sightseeing points because of their other-worldly beauty. Sightseers rarely stay for long, however, because the weather on a paramo, like the ground underfoot, is almost always soggy.

The paramo on the road to Sibundoy is small but lovely. The day I drove through it there was fog, mist, and drizzle. The ground was sodden and spongy, covered with many creeping plants of the blueberry family and dotted everywhere with flowers. The most characteristic inhabitant of paramos is a relative of the sunflower -- a tall plant with downy, silvery leaves and large yellow flowers -- and it was abundant on both sides of the road as I continued on my way. Then, abruptly, the paramo ended, and I was back in what botanists call "sub-paramo," the low, scrubby forest I had passed through on the previous ridge. Moments later, I crossed the border of the State of Nariño and entered the Territory of Putumayo, and spreading out before me, thousands of feet down, was the Valley of Sibundoy.

The Putumayo Territory is named for the Río Putumayo, a tributary of the Amazon and one of the mightiest rivers in South America. The Valley of Sibundoy is the source of this river, which begins here as a rushing brook. But the Valley is not typical of the rest of the Territory, most of which is tierra caliente -- hot country of tropical forests and rivers, in fact, the beginning of the Amazon basin. The Valley

is separated from the Amazon basin by a range of mountains to the east and is much higher and colder than the land on the other side. Its area is about one hundred square miles, and as one winds down into it on the road from the west, it appears to be a fertile, flat basin, completely enclosed by mountains.

Four small towns and a few lesser settlements occupy the floor of the valley and are connected by the road. Santiago, the first town on the western edge is the center of an Indian tribe known as the Ingas or Inganos, descendants of the ancient Incas as their name suggests. Sibundoy itself, the largest community in the Valley, is the tribal center of the Kamsas. Men of both tribes wore characteristic costumes that include several pounds of beads worn around the neck.

I arrived in the Valley in the middle of "winter" -- the season of heavy rain and cloud that runs from May through July. And it certainly did rain a great deal while I was there. The sun peeked through the cloud cover occasionally, but almost always the weather was gray, damp, and chilly.

One of the first things I did on settling down in the town of Sibundoy was to call on Salvador, a Kamsa witch-doctor who specializes in the preparation of yagé. Before I describe that meeting, I should explain that the term "witch-doctor" really has no correspondence in Spanish. "Witch" is brujo, and while this term is commonly used by white scientists for men like Salvador, it is usually not used to their faces, for it has the same dark connotations as its English equivalent. The Spanish term for a medical doctor is medico, and some native practitioners insist on being addressed by it. A third term is curandero, or "healer," perhaps a more accurate designation for someone who has the power to cure by unorthodox methods.

Salvador, however, asks to be called a medico and has a certificate from a botanist at the National University in Bogotá announcing to whom it may concern that he is a skilled practitioner of herbal medicine, and, especially, an expert on the preparation and administration of yagé. Now, yagé, as I ex-

plained in the previous newsletter, is a native of the hot country; it does not grow anywhere near the Valley of Sibundoy. Consequently, the Ingas and Kamsas who have learned its use have had to cross the mountains to the east and descend into the Amazon basin to study with men of tribes who live in the area where Banisteriopsis grows. And, when they want to use yagé, they must make the same long trip to get a supply of the bejuco to bring back to their valley.

Salvador lives with his family and animals in a thatched house not far from the town of Sibundoy. To get to it, one must tramp through fields that are quite wet in the rainy season and cross several mildly ticklish log bridges over small ravines. Eventually one reaches a sort of dense thicket of strange plants, in the middle of which is Salvador's house.

It is said that the inhabitants of the Valley of Sibundoy use a greater variety of intoxicating plants than any other people. And most of those plants grow right in Salvador's garden. Perhaps the most eye-catching are the Tree Daturas, relatives of our own jimsonweed. They are mostly smallish trees, almost always in flower, and the flowers are quite spectacular: foot-long trumpets that hang straight down from the branches. Some are tubular and red, others flaring and white with a thick, heady fragrance. All parts of these plants are intoxicating, if not actually poisonous, but local brujos (or medicos or what-have-you) use them regularly to induce altered states of consciousness. The Tree Daturas are known collectively as borracheras, a name that indicates their intoxicating power because borracho is the Spanish adjective for "drunk." Like many other members of the Solanaceae or Nightshade Family (such as belladonna and henbane) Daturas contain mixtures of the so-called "tropane alkaloids" that cause delirium and amnesia. Two of these alkaloids, atropine and scopolamine, are used in orthodox medicine; scopolamine is the "Twilight Sleep" that is still used to make women amnesic for the experience of childbirth. Plants that contain tropane alkaloids are associated with

witchcraft in many societies. A common experience of people who consume them is that of flying through the air.

I have said that Salvador had Tree Daturas in his garden. Actually, his house seemed to be in the midst of a whole grove of them of many different types. Now, it is most peculiar that in the Valley of Sibundoy and nowhere else Tree Daturas seem to be infected with a virus that makes them assume grotesque forms. At least, botanists assume the cause of these deformations is a virus because Solanaceous plants are especially susceptible to viruses (Tomatoes, tobacco, and potatoes, for example, are all attacked by virus diseases.) In Sibundoy these grotesque Tree Daturas breed true and are recognized by the Indians as distinct varieties with distinct pharmacological effects. Salvador had a number of them growing around his house in addition to the normal types.

The first time I entered the house Salvador's wife was attempting to get a fire going in the middle of the earthen floor. A huge fire-blackened pot rested on some stones, and she was blowing on some glowing wood underneath it, trying to produce flames. The house was filled with smoke. It was mid-afternoon, but Salvador was curled up in bed, looking under-the-weather. With some effort he got up, explaining that he had taken yagé the previous evening with some visitors and was now tired. He says he is between sixty and seventy, but his face is youthful and of indeterminate age. He has an engaging smile. He speaks perfect Spanish with visitors, but converses among his family in the Kamsa dialect.

Salvador told me that he was a medico and a famous one, since people from all over came to see him, principally to take yagé. He showed me a book in which all of these visitors had recorded their names and addresses. Then he asked me if I would get him a document from the United States certifying him to be a medico and an expert on medicinal plants. It would have to have an official seal, he added. I said I would see. His request rubbed me the wrong way; after all, I hardly knew him,

and if a medicine man is really a medicine man, why should he need certificates from the United States to prove it?

We drank several cups of chicha, a mildly alcoholic fermented mash of cornmeal, water, and raw sugar.⁹ I told Salvador I was interested in seeing him prepare yagé and asked him what he made it from besides the bejuco. He said the only thing he added was the leaves of chagrapanga. Chagrapanga, I knew from my reading, is a related species, Banisteriopsis rusbyana, whose leaves contain DMT (dimethyltryptamine) but none of the harmalines that are in B. caapi. Synthetic DMT, when available on the U.S. black market, is usually smoked (mixed with marihuana or mint leaves) and rarely injected. It cannot be taken by mouth because an enzyme in the human digestive tract inactivates it. But (as Indians have long known and pharmacologists have recently discovered) it is effective orally if mixed with yagé, because yagé contains substances that inhibit the enzyme. Consequently, chagrapanga is never taken by itself but is always mixed with yagé, and it is one of the commonest additives to the potion. When I asked him why he added the chagrapanga, Salvador replied: "To make the visions brighter" ("Para brillar la pinta").

We decided that I should come back the next day to make and drink yagé. Salvador explained that the potion is prepared in the afternoon and drunk only at night. Women may not be present during the preparation but may consume the finished drink. He told me I should not eat on the day of taking yagé and, particularly, should avoid milk. He then requested that I buy him some meat, coffee, salt, sugar, candles, and, most important of all, aguardiente for the ceremony. Aguardiente is an unaged whiskey distilled from sugar cane, sweetened and flavored with anise; it is the local fire-water of South America. Since

⁹Chicha varies tremendously from locale to locale. Originally, it was made by masticating corn, spitting it into earthen vessels, and allowing it to ferment. The enzymes in saliva converted the starch to sugar, and yeasts in the air converted the sugar to alcohol. It is still made this way by tribes remote from Western influence. In Sibundoy today, sugar is added to a cornmeal-water mixture, and the chicha is drunk as soon as it is mildly carbonated and tangy.

I like neither alcohol nor anise, I was not much looking forward to drinking it and wondered just how much of it we were going to use in this "ceremony."

I went back to the little town of Sibundoy to shop. It was a cold, gray afternoon. As usual the streets were full of people doing nothing, mostly Indians but a fair number of hippies as well. This latter group was international: Americans, Europeans, Latin Americans, all with little or no money and yagé uppermost in their minds. Sibundoy, because it is the closest yagé-center to the Pan-American Highway, has been visited increasingly by freaks, many of whom have not the time or means to continue over the eastern mountains to the Amazon basin. Salvador's address book testifies that they have been coming for several years now, and one effect has been that yagé has become good business for the brujos and medicos of the Valley. For a fee, they will put on a yagé ceremony for you.

One of the surest ways to debase the ritual use of a drug is to begin selling the drug to strangers. Evidently, this process had been going on in the Sibundoy for some time, and what I was going to see would be a fairly debased ritual. I decided that a good way to gauge the degree of debasement would be to pay attention to the preparation of the drug. Most people who come to the Valley pay their money and drink their yagé; I was glad I had asked Salvador to let me in on the making, and I supposed his requests for groceries were the additional fee for this privilege. (I assumed he would want a few dollars cash for the actual ceremony.) As a standard of comparison I had in mind a description of a yagé preparation that took place many years ago in the remote forests of Peru among a group of Amahuaca Indians as yet untouched by Western ways. These Indians made their drink from the bejuco of yagé and from the leaves of another plant, probably also chagrapanga. Here is an excerpt from that description (from

Wizard of the Upper Amazon by Manuel Córdova-Rios and F. Bruce Lamb; New York: Atheneum, 1971; pp. 32-33):

". . . the serious preparations started accompanied by almost continuous chanting. First the vine was cut into one-foot pieces with the stone ax and pounded on a flat stone with a large wooden mallet until it was well mashed. . . . A layer of mashed vine pieces was then carefully arranged in the bottom of a large new clay pot. On top of this was laid a layer of the leaves in the shape of a fan Then alternating layers of mashed vine and leaves were put in place until the pot was more than half full. Clear water from the stream was then added until the plant material was well covered.

A slow fire was started under the pot and the cooking was maintained at a very low simmer for many hours until the liquid was reduced to less than half.

When the cooking process was completed the fire was removed and, after cooling, the plant material was withdrawn from the liquid. After several hours of further cooling and settling, the clear green liquid was carefully dipped off into small clay pots, each fitted with a tight cover.

The entire process took three days, being done with utter calmness and deliberation. The interminable chants accompanied each step, invoking the spirits of the vine, the shrub, and the other forest spirits.

This carefully and reverently prepared extract provided the potion for many subsequent ayahuasca (i.e., yagé) sessions in the peaceful and secluded forest glade, sessions that progressed to incredible vision fantasies."

Well, I thought, let us see how Salvador measures up. When I went back to his Datura-surrounded house, it was raining steadily, and by the time I got there, I was soaked. This time Salvador's son was present, Juan Pedro, a young man in his late twenties. I handed over the groceries, and Salvador immediately extracted the aguardiente, saying it would be good for all of us to drink some. He poured out shot glasses

of the stuff, and we all gulped it down in turn; it was even worse than I remembered from my last encounter with it a number of years ago. Salvador was not satisfied with one round. He continued passing out the booze, usually serving himself two shots for every one given away, while Juan Pedro served up bowl after bowl of chicha. Outside the rain kept up a steady patter; inside, chickens ran around on the floor, and the fire went out, causing clouds of smoke -- apparently a chronic problem in the wet season.

In a short time I was feeling pretty drunk, but the drinking went on with no signs of our doing anything about the yagé. Then Juan Pedro asked me if I had any marihuana on me. I told him I did not, which disappointed him, because he said many people who came told him how great marihuana was, but he had only smoked it once and had not gotten high on it. I managed to turn the conversation to yagé, and Salvador launched into a long series of anecdotes about the miraculous powers of the drug. (By the way, he never referred to it as a drug always as el remedio -- "the remedy." But the condition it produces is a borrachera or "intoxication.") There were stories of locating lost objects through yagé visions, solving crimes, and producing miracle cures. I listened to these stories with interest, but I have learned that witch doctors always have good raps about their products, and the stories are very much the same, whether the drug is peyote, yagé, magic mushrooms, or anything else (which may simply mean that the "effects" of the drug are really capacities of the mind in other states of consciousness).

Finally, when we had dispatched the bottle of aguardiente and my stomach was about bursting from the volume of chicha I had drunk, Salvador decided we could start making yagé. Happily the rain had let up, and a little bit of sun was even showing. We took wooden stools from the house and walked through the Tree Daturas to a little clearing, partly shel-

tered by banana fronds. A large fire-blackened caldron was on the ground next to the ashes of an old fire. And on a mat of banana leaves was a pile of the bejuco -- lengths of the woody stems of yagé.

Salvador indicated that the first step was to strip off the outer bark of the bejuco, and I set to work on that task with the blade of a pocket knife. The bejuco seemed neither very fresh nor very old. Looking at the cut ends, I noticed that it had the requisite number of "hearts" and therefore was mature enough for use. The bark came off easily. Meanwhile, Salvador had uncovered the caldron, which contained a mess of black, cooked leaves and mashed bejuco in a rusty-brown liquid -- apparently the remains of the last batch of yagé. He poured the liquid into a bottle and fished out the spent leaves and stems. Then he seemed a bit confused and mumbled something about firewood that I did not catch.

The next step in the process was the mashing of the bejuco, a job that took considerably more energy because the stems -- up to three inches in diameter -- were tough wood. There was a smooth flat stone to lay them on and a heavy rock to pound with. I set to work, taking frequent rests. When I was finished and had an armload of mashed bejuco, Salvador announced that there was no firewood so that we would have to make this yagé without actually cooking it. Nor, apparently, was there any fresh chagrapanga, because he began putting the old, unattractive leaves back into the caldron with the freshly-pounded bejuco. He then poured the liquid from the old brew into the pot, plus a little fresh water, and set about mashing everything together with a heavy stick. After about ten minutes, he felt the potion was finished and poured it into two empty aguardiente bottles; it was a muddy brown liquid. Then we walked back to the house.

In that moment I knew that I had no desire to spend more

time with Salvador and certainly no interest in drinking his yagé. His preparation had turned out to be much sloppier and more haphazard than I could have imagined. I was not expecting a three-day production with interminable chants, but, at least, I wanted cooking, particularly since the alkaloids of yagé are not terribly soluble and require long boiling to release them from the plant tissue. I doubted that Salvador's brown liquid had any potency except what might have been there from the previous batch if that were made properly.

It was now nearly dusk, and Salvador suggested that I go off and return at nine to take the drug. "And don't forget to bring more aguardiente for tonight," he said. I was still a little wobbly from all the drinking I had done that afternoon, and the thought of more sickly-sweet-anise-flavored alcohol did not make me feel better. I said good-bye and made my way back to the road.

To solidify my decision not to take yagé that night, I went back to Sibundoy and ate a large meal. My stomach had been crying out for something to soak up the remaining aguardiente and chicha. Shortly afterward the rain started again, this time in torrents. I doubt that I could have made it back to Salvador's house even if I had wanted to.

I felt I had seen enough of yagé in Sibundoy. I decided I would leave the Valley the next morning and head into the hot country, over the mountains to the little town of Mocoa, the capital of the Putumayo Territory. There, I hoped, the hippies would be fewer and the Indians a little more scrupulous about their yagé rites. Besides, the damp chill of winter in Sibundoy was getting to my bones, and I longed to be somewhere where the chance of seeing sunshine was a bit better.

I went to sleep that night listening to the heavy rain and thinking that the following night I would be warm.

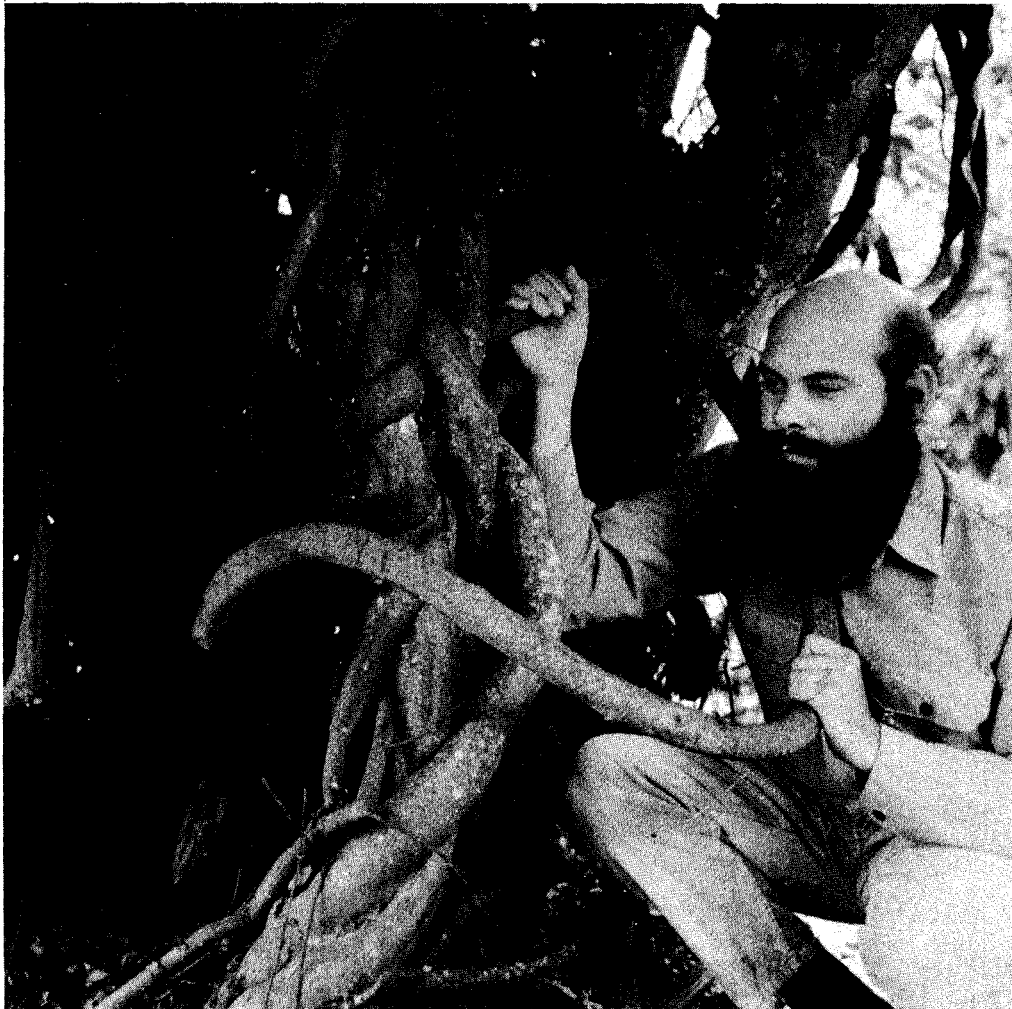
But it was not to be.

Sincerely yours,

Andrew T. Weil

Andrew T. Weil

Author at base of a liana of yagé.



Received in New York on June 19, 1972