

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

ATW-9

In the Land of Yagé III: An Unexpected Trip

Pasto
Colombia
May 30, 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 road from Sibundoy to Mocoa is one of the most dangerous in Colombia, especially in the wet season when it is subject to frequent landslides. It is an extremely narrow, unpaved track through the Cordillera Portachuelo -- the last range of mountains before the Amazon basin. With luck the trip takes about three hours at an average speed of twenty miles per hour. The problem is that the road is heavily traveled, mainly by buses and huge trucks, since it is the only road connection from the Putumayo to the outside world. For most of its length the road is one-way; by means of a system of checkpoints connected by telephone, large vehicles are detained until the way to the next checkpoint is clear. Small vehicles may pass but have to be on guard for traffic coming head-on around the blind curves that crop up every few feet. During the rains, cars frequently go off, and the route is often closed by slides.

For the first half-hour out of Sibundoy the road is two-way and usually in good condition as it crosses the final stretch of valley floor and begins the ascent into the Cordillera. But on the Sunday morning I left, it had been raining hard for almost twenty-four hours. I had to ford deep flooded streams on the way up. Occasionally, a whole section of road was gone, leaving not much room for the car to squeeze between mountain-side and precipice. Moreover, no traffic had come in the oppo-

site direction since the previous afternoon -- an ominous sign of what lay ahead.

I had a hitch-hiker with me, a girl from California named Nancy who had been staying in Sibundoy with two friends, John and Lee. They were staying on to take yagé with another brujo named Pedro; she was more interested in warmth than yagé and wanted to reach Mocoa. I told her about my experiences with Salvador. She said her group had been to see him but decided not to take the drug with him because he wanted too much money -- "a whole lot of groceries in addition to his fee." Pedro, it seemed, wanted only twenty pesos (one dollar) and the usual aguardiente.

When we reached the beginning of the one-way road, we learned that the way to the next checkpoint was blocked by three separate landslides. Because it was Sunday there was not much action from the bulldozer teams whose job it is to clear the slides, but we thought we would wait to see what happened. As usual, it was a gray rainy day, even colder in the mountains than it had been in the Valley. Over the next few hours a line of trucks and buses built up behind us, the drivers and passengers all hoping to move onwards. Occasionally, the woman in charge of the little checkpoint station would call ahead to find out what was going on. The news was not good. It seemed there were fifteen landslides in all between our station and the last checkpoint, and, worse, the earthmoving machines were out of gas. We waited a little longer, then decided there was no hope of passage that day; reluctantly, we headed back to Sibundoy.

Nancy suggested that I might want to talk to her friends about Pedro. We met John and Lee as we were pulling into town; they were just on their way to Pedro's house and said they would not mind at all if we came along. Unlike Salvador, Pedro lived right in the town, but his house -- wooden with a thatched roof -- was more in the traditional Indian style than the tin-roofed adobe houses of his neighbors. He, too, had a gardenful of Tree Daturas, including some of the bizarre forms typical of the Valley. Inside was the usual smoky fire and a veritable menagerie

of chickens, dogs, cats, and dozens of birds roosting in the rafters. Pedro, also a Kamsa, was seated at a kind of desk heaped with papers and things. He wore a felt hat and masses of beads around his neck and smoked continuously. (Indians throughout the Putumayo smoke a cheap brand of cigarettes called "Redskins" (Pielroja) whose trademark is the head of a North American Indian in full war bonnet.) Pedro had a young kind face and a reserved, professional manner. He spoke with great deliberation.

It was late afternoon. John, Lee, Nancy, and I gathered around the fire. Pedro began to talk to us about yagé -- more tales of its powers as a remedy for all ills. I asked him what went into his potion. He replied that he added chagrapanga, borrachera, and a mysterious fourth ingredient. His yagé was already made up; there would be no chance to watch the preparation. I was not very happy to hear about the borrachera (Tree Datura)/ I am no lover of Solanaceous drugs, having had one experience with jimsonweed that will last me a lifetime. Evidently, Pedro added a small amount of an infusion of the flowers of one type of borrachera. I asked him what the purpose of the chagrapanga was and got the standard answer: "To make the visions brighter."

Pedro told us to come back at eight o'clock, not to eat anything (especially not milk), and not to forget the aguardiente. Before we left he asked us to put our names in his book. He, too, has a little book and says that in the past few years people have come from "all parts" to learn about yagé from him.

We left the little house just after sunset. The rain had stopped, and I wondered whether I would be able to get through to Mocoa the next day -- or whether I would be in any shape to try if I drank Pedro's potion. I was very aware that to drink yagé that night would be a violation of several resolutions I had made: not to drink yagé unless I had seen it made, not to take any Datura, and, in general, not to take a drug just because it happened to be available. But the day had been so discouraging and the prospect of a night in Sibundoy with nothing

to do was so dismal that I decided to go ahead and violate all of my resolutions. John and Lee felt they had "good rapport" with Pedro. Nancy said she would happily keep us company but had no desire to take the remedy.

And so at eight o'clock, aguardiente in hand, we trooped back to Pedro's house, which was now quite dark except for a candle burning on his desk. Pedro was still at the desk, just as we had left him, but beside him, stretched out on a rough bed, head swathed in bandages, was an Ingano patient. He remained there the whole night, and Pedro frequently conversed with him, though we never found out exactly what his problem was. It was somehow reassuring to see that Pedro actually had patients. In fact, minutes later, another man came to consult him, apparently about a problem of excess drinking. Pedro gave him advice in slow, measured tones while smoking incessantly and spitting on the floor under his desk. This man was told to return at six the following morning.

We sat around in silence for what seemed a long time until, at last, the church bell tolled nine o'clock. With great solemnity Pedro began to drink and serve shots of aguardiente. He explained it was necessary to facilitate the effect of yagé. I gritted my teeth and gulped it down. We drank three rounds of it, excluding Nancy but including the patient in bed. Then, after another silent period during which I began to feel high on the alcohol, Pedro fetched a bottle of brown liquid and poured it into a bowl. He studied the liquid for a time, then began to perform various rites over it that seemed to be purifying in intent. They included blowing cigarette smoke onto it, shaking a bunch of dried leaves rhythmically around all sides of the bowl, and, finally, chanting. Pedro's yagé chant was a half-whispered, half-whistled tune, quite melodic, sometimes wordless, sometimes with words. When it was over, he filled a small tumbler (about four ounces) to the brim from the bowl, drank it down in one swallow, and followed it with a shot of aguardiente. Then he asked us to wait for him for a moment.

Again we sat in silence. After many minutes, Pedro filled

the tumbler again and handed it to me. I took it, thought to myself, "For science," and drained it down. It was, as I expected, terribly bitter (though not so bitter as peyote), and the follow-up shot of aguardiente was welcome for the first time. I handed the empty tumbler back to Pedro and he proceeded to pour out the same dose for John and Lee.

More silence. Pedro asked us to let him know when we felt something and said we could have more if we wanted but should first wait a bit. After only ten minutes I began to feel something very definite. It started as a feeling of warmth and strangeness in my stomach, spreading rapidly to my chest and arms. This sensation increased rapidly, soon changing into a kind of thrill or vibration in all my muscles. These feelings were pleasant, seeming to represent a tremendous energy flowing through my body. At the same time I felt very clear-headed and euphoric. My companions evidently felt nothing at all yet.

Over the next few minutes I began to enter a state of consciousness somewhere between waking and dozing, with the physical sensations of energy and vibration continuing unchanged. In this reverie I had many thoughts that seemed inspired. Whenever I opened my eyes Pedro was in the same position at his desk, his face illuminated by the candle, looking intently, sometimes at me, sometimes at the others. I am not sure how much time went by. The next thing I became aware of was that John was sick. He stumbled from the room to an outhouse and we could hear him retching violently for what seemed hours. Lee said he still felt nothing. John came back looking pale and shaky. Moments later, he rushed from the house again and was seized by another endless bout of retching.

Then Pedro went out and apparently vomited also. He came back quickly and resumed his former position. I am not sure how much I was influenced by all this audible evidence of sickness. Nor can I say there was a clear-cut end to my experience of feeling exhilarated and well. I only know that I began gradually to feel unwell. At first I entertained the vain hope, could avoid getting sick by an effort of will. I lay
that I

down on the floor on my back, took deep breaths, and tried to ignore the growing nausea that welled up from my insides. The vibrations in my muscles kept going but now were annoying rather than pleasant because they made me feel that my body was in the grip of something I could not influence. I felt no inclination to vomit, but I was aware of intestinal cramps and knew I would have to move my bowels. But getting up and going outside seemed an impossibility.

Eventually, my bowels insisted. I staggered to my feet and lurched toward the door, out into the cold night. I had almost no control over my legs and avoided sprawling on the ground only by running into a tree. Every movement produced waves of agonizing nausea. Somehow I got to the outhouse. It was raining again -- a cold drizzle. I saw John lying in the mud, holding his stomach and still retching. There was nothing left inside him to come up, but he could not stop the spasms. Inside the outhouse my bowels emptied themselves of everything they contained. If nothing else, yagé is surely the most powerful purgative I have even encountered. Unfortunately, the purge did not make me feel better, and when I crawled out into the night I could do nothing but lie helplessly on the wet ground. Even thinking about moving set off new waves of sickness.

I now became aware that I was having visions, although my awareness was so dominated by the reality of being sick that I could not pay careful attention to them. These visions were like waking dreams. There was much motion, many scenes of people and places. I am sorry to say there were no jungles or jaguars, nor any telepathic news bulletins of distant events. The visions simply went on in one sphere of my consciousness, while cold-night-sickness-and-John-retching occupied another more vivid sphere. I knew I should try to get back to the house, which at least was dry and warm, but I just could not move.

Nancy was a great comfort during this period of misery. She tried very hard not to say, "I told you so," and made John

and me feel that at least someone cared. (Pedro seemed to have abandoned us to our fate, and Lee was still complaining that he felt nothing.) She tried to help me up, but the effort made me worse, and I collapsed again on the cold ground. She sat beside me for a while, talking about California, and, though I could not really concentrate on what she was saying, her voice was soothing. I do remember her telling me that she once watched two people take LSD for the first time. They both became sick, and she decided in that moment never to have anything to do with psychedelic drugs. She was certainly getting a lot of reinforcement in that decision now, I thought.

Quite suddenly I had a violent spasm in my stomach and vomited up a small quantity of intensely bitter liquid flavored with that awful anise of aguardiente. I could feel the taste through my whole body. Then I had a brief period of unproductive retching; it was quite painful, and I felt a surge of compassion for poor John who was still doing it. After another indeterminate period, Lee came out. He now had diarrhea, which was something to write home about, but insisted he felt no other effects.

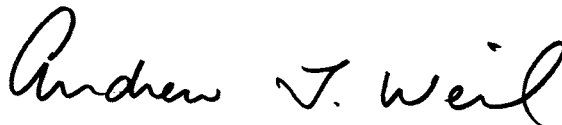
I was now cold and wet in addition to being sick. The visions continued although I still could not watch them. Finally, Lee half-carried me into the house, and I lay down in a hard bed. I did not sleep at all during the night owing to the stimulation of the drug. Gradually, the worst of the symptoms subsided. Pedro crawled into bed with his patient and the two of them kept up a lively conversation. The fire was out, and the temperature of the room dropped. Lee, John, and I huddled together under a single, thin blanket trying to keep warm.

Well before dawn, several roosters began crowing for all they were worth. Then the first light showed, and Pedro's wife started the fire up. Promptly at six, Pedro's other patient arrived. Pedro came over to the bed in which the three of us were lying and blew incense on us. Then he shook his bunch of leaves over us and chanted a bit. He said that would end the

effect of the yagé. We got up and went over to the fire. I felt thoroughly cleaned out -- a bit weak but otherwise all right. I longed for a glass of orange juice and could not wait to get away from Pedro's house to get one. But just then Pedro produced another bottle of aguardiente and said we had to drink some to cleanse the yagé from our systems. I cannot fully describe the revulsion I felt at the thought of drinking aguardiente at that hour after that night. I pleaded an upset stomach. But Pedro insisted. And when I said I really couldn't, he began to complain that I was not following his instructions. So I ended up swallowing two shots of the stuff and wishing I was dead. When he gave me a third, I held it in my mouth and spit it out in the corner while pretending to look for my jacket.

Pedro's next-to-last words to me were to remember that some people got sick the first time they tried yagé and that the cure was to take more. His last words to me were to be sure to tell people about him and send him more customers. I paid him his twenty pesos and left the house, feeling that an ordeal was behind me. I had certainly experienced a fully debased yagé ritual, I thought: light on the ceremony, heavy on the aguardiente. People in town said that a flotilla of trucks and buses had arrived from Mocoa during the night, meaning the road was open at last, and after having my orange juice I said goodbye to Sibundoy with much pleasure.

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