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Labor and the Performance of Place in the Upper Putumayo

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Resumen
En este artículo abordo una problemática en torno a dos nociones interrelacionadas: el trabajo y la performance del lugar. A partir de trabajo de campo llevado a cabo con taitas, o chamanes, de la región del Alto Putumayo de Colombia, investigo las diversas maneras en las que los taitas comprenden y hacen uso del sonido en su práctica ritual. Los taitas cantan y ejecutan sus instrumentos por largos periodos de tiempo y bajo condiciones extenuantes durante tomas de yajé, rituales en los cuales se consume el yajé, un brebaje psicoactivo elaborado a base de plantas. Los taitas sostienen que una de las razones principales por las que cantan y tocan durante los rituales es para recrear el sensorium de la Amazonía dentro de un espacio ritual, sea en zonas rurales de Colombia como en centros urbanos del Occidente. Propongo abordar las prácticas chamánicas como formas de trabajo, teorizando así la comodificación de prácticas culturales que, a pesar de estar envueltas en relaciones de capital, existen simultáneamente en imaginarios que las sitúan en un pasado distante pre-capitalista. El encuentro cada vez más común entre taitas, colombianos no-indigenas y extranjeros en general, nos permite reconsiderar preguntas básicas en torno al trabajo y nociones de lugar a través de la música y los sonidos que los taitas ejecutan en su práctica ritual.

Abstract
In this article I develop a problematic around two interrelated themes: labor and the performance of place. Drawing from fieldwork conducted among *taitas,* or shamans, from the Colombian Upper Putumayo region, I investigate the varied ways in which taitas understand and use sound in their ritual practice. Taitas sing and perform songs for long periods of time and under strenuous circumstances during *tomas de yajé*, rituals that involve drinking *yajé*, a psychoactive brew made from local plant species. Taitas claim one main reason they sing and play during the ritual is to recreate the sensorium of Amazonia, performing a ritual place that becomes replicable wherever they might conduct rituals, whether in rural Colombia or in urban centers of the West. I argue for the importance of understanding what taitas do—and conversely, shamanic practices in general—as a form of labor; in doing so, I propose a framework that permits theorizing the commodification of cultural practices that, even though embedded in present-day capital relations, exist concurrently in imaginaries that situate them in a distant pre-capitalist past. The increasingly common encounter between taitas, non-indigenous Colombians, and Westerners in general, allows us to reconsider basic questions of labor and place through the music—and more broadly, sounds—that taitas perform in ritual.

Palabras clave
Lugar, trabajo, ritual, sonido, indexicalidad, chamanismo, yajé, ayahuasca

Keywords
Place, Labor, Ritual, Sound, Indexicality, Shamanism, Yajé, Ayahuasca

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Two men in dark business suits lie prostrate on the ground, one of them vomiting profusely with a moonlit skyline in the background.[1] Both are overcome with visions of a *taita*—an indigenous shaman—waving a thick bundle of leaves over them. Surrounding the taita there is a jaguar, a macaw, a gorilla, and a wolf, all mouths wide open in fierce sound production. The scene—portrayed in a graffiti mural on the outer wall of an apartment building in downtown Bogotá—is unquestionably about *tomas de yajé.* At the top of the mural there is a title in capitalized white letters: *Retorno al origen* (Return to the origin). At the bottom and in smaller print we read *Sagrada resistencia* (Sacred resistance).

Figure 1: *Retorno al origen*, graffiti in downtown Bogotá. (Photograph by Julia Bozer, 2011; used with permission)

[1] This article is derived from my Master's thesis (2012).

Tomas de yajé—also commonly spelled *yagé*—are rituals that take place in rural and urban Colombia, during which yajé, a potent psychoactive brew also known as *ayahuasca*, is consumed under the guidance of taitas usually from the country's Amazonian region.[2] People assemble to drink yajé for several reasons, ranging from seeking healthcare or guidance in the making of important personal decisions, to recreational use. Yajé, once found almost exclusively amongst indigenous groups in certain parts of the Amazon, is becoming increasingly common in Colombian urban centers. More broadly, ayahuasca has become a global commodity. It can be found, purchased, and consumed in various places throughout Amazonia, with the city of Iquitos in Peru as the epicenter of the so-called ayahuasca tourism industry; it can also be found in cities across the Americas, Europe, and Australia.[3] It is even possible to order do-it-yourself kits online, casually, at websites like amazon.com. There are also syncretic ayahuasca religions counting with thousands of members spread throughout various localities across the world, the Brazilian *Santo Daime, União do Vegetal,* and *Barquinha* being the most renowned worldwide.[4]

Drinking yajé—a dimethyltryptamine (DMT)-containing admixture prepared from the bark of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and other plants, most frequently the leaves of *chacruna* (*Psychotria viridis*) or sometimes *chagropanga* (*Diplopterys cabrerana)*—is a physically and sensorially demanding experience that happens throughout an entire night: the taste of yajé is bitter and pungent and remains in the palate for several hours; the place where the ritual takes place is constantly perfumed with diverse penetrating herbs and fragrant resins; participants feel nausea and dizziness—vomiting and diarrhea are frequent side effects. The most salient aspect of drinking yajé is that, depending on the interpreter, it brings forth visions or produces hallucinations. I favor referring to what those who drink yajé experience as having and seeing *pintas*, the term taitas use.[5] Throughout the ritual, taitas sing, whistle, and play several instruments.

Taitas in the Upper Putumayo region of Colombia perform sound laboriously for large periods of time and under strenuous circumstances during tomas de yajé. After presenting a general context of where tomas de yajé happen and describing how tomas de yajé are conducted, I will explore some of the reasons for and ways in which sound production becomes an essential, deliberate part of a taita's labor. Taitas use sound to key different frames (García Molina 2012: 32-41, Goffman 1986) within a toma de yajé and to build a specific ritual place that is to a large degree independent of material constraints; in order to do so, taitas rely on indexing the Amazon through sound. Within this specific ritual place, sound production becomes a fundamental part of the way taitas make a living by successfully guiding tomas de yajé, ensuring participants are able to make sense of what they experience. In this article I argue for the importance of understanding what taitas do—and shamanism in general—as a form of labor; doing so means theorizing the commodification of cultural practices that, even though embedded in present-day capital relations, exist concurrently in imaginaries that situate them in a distant pre-capitalist past.

[2] Literature on ayahuasca has been growing in the past decades. For a wide-ranging recent bibliography see Labate and Clavnar (2014a, 2014b). For a seminal anthropological study see Taussig (1991).

[3] On the topic of ayahuasca tourism, sources ranging from doctoral dissertations to drug policy papers and a *Time* magazine article include Fotiou (2010, 2014), Holman (2010), Otis (2009), and Tupper (2008).

[4] On Brazilian ayahuasca religions, see Dawson (2013), Labate and Macrae (2010), and Macrae (2000).

[5] For an article elaborating on a similar conundrum, see Holbraad (2012). What Holbraad proposes for Ifá practitioners might be applicable to yajé practitioners: "Motivated ethnographically by Ifá practitioners' claims that the truths their oracles issue are indubitable, I argue that from the viewpoint of commonplace conceptions of truth such an assumption can only be interpreted as absurd. To avoid such an imputation, the article is devoted to reconceptualizing what might count as truth in such an ethnographic instance." (2012: 81).

Tomas de yajé

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for a period of nine months, spread between 2010 and 2013, among various Kamsá and Inga taitas from the municipalities of Sibundoy and Santiago in the Valley of Sibundoy, located in the Upper Putumayo region of Colombia. At a height of 2,100 meters above sea level, the valley lies at an intermediate point between the Andes and the Amazon; due to its location, it has been especially important as a historical site of exchange between the Andes and the Amazon, and is commonly referred to as the gateway into the Amazon.[6]

Accounts of tomas de yajé vary widely, but the common thread that unites reports is the extraordinary amount of sensory stimuli that is experienced throughout the ritual. Most accounts admit, at some point, that it is very hard to be precise about what was experienced throughout the night. Michael Taussig writes, "there is no 'average' *yagé* experience; that's its whole point. Somewhere you have to take the bit between your teeth and depict *yagé* nights in terms of your own experience" (Taussig 1991: 406). Descriptive accounts of pintas range from the ethereal to the squalid, all cases necessarily resorting to an extended use of poetic language.[7] Before presenting a description of a toma, I will first introduce the different sonorous instruments taitas use to conduct their ritual labor.

The taitas' instruments of sonorous labor

Besides singing and whistling, taitas play the harmonica, the *waira sacha*, and the *cascabeles*; although the majority of taitas I interviewed play the harmonica during tomas de yajé, they all pointed to the harmonica's inclusion as being a more recent development.

The waira sacha, a bundle of dry leaves tied at one end, is by far the most ubiquitous sonorous instrument that taitas use. Both taitas and community members understand it to be a powerful, essential instrument in the context of Upper Putumayo ritual practice. The species usually used is *Pariana stelonemma.* Waira sacha means roughly "wind plant" in Kichwa; waira meaning "wind" or "air," and sacha meaning "forest, jungle, plant." In Peru it is known as *shakapa* and more generally in Spanish as *escoba*, or broom, amongst indigenous taitas and mestizo healers in Colombia (Torres 2007: 28). Although it is played as a percussive instrument and used sometimes to keep time when accompanying singing or harmonica playing, it is also understood to be a wind instrument. All of its indigenous names suggest something about how the waira sacha is categorized—the waira sacha is related to notions of wind, smoke, air, and cleansing.[8] It is also a healing implement that is understood to not only purify the air inside a yajé room but to also cleanse and expel sickness from a body.

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[6] For a detailed history and ethnography of the Kamsá and the Inga, see Pinzón Castaño et al. (2004).

[7] Wade Davis, for example, paraphrases William Burroughs' account from *The Yagé Letters:* "His numb body swathed in imaginary layers of cotton, his feet transformed into blocks of wood, his eyes lost in a blue haze of larval beings, this veteran of a thousand strange scenes had one cardinal thought: 'All I want,' he said to himself again and again, 'is out of here'"(Davis 1997: 155). Davis also documents his own experience: "It was a surge of energy, part expectation, part enchantment. I heard a distant humming, which I took for cicadas or tree frogs, until I realized that the sound was vibrating beneath the surface of my skin. […] I shut my eyes, and the world inside my head began to spin and pulsate with warmth and a sensual glow that ran over a series of euphoric thoughts, words that stretched like shadows across my mind, paused, and then took form as diamonds and stars, colors rising from the periphery of consciousness and falling like demons and angels in a chaotic mix of dream and paranoia" (Davis 1997: 192). Some excerpts from Michael Taussig's account: "My body is distorting and I'm very frightened, limbs stretch out and become detached, my body no longer belongs to me, then it does. I am an octopus, I condense into smallness. […] Self-hate and paranoia is stimulated by horrible animals—pigs with queer snouts, slithering snakes gliding across one another, rodents with fish-fin wings. […] I feel the hateful situations of the past and the fear being expelled. I rejoin the group, calm, now floating on colors and wonderful sights" (Taussig 1991: 141). I only cite Taussig and Davis here but insist that virtually any account of yajé experiences will necessarily resort to metaphor and creative description. For additional sources that include detailed descriptive accounts, see, for example Fericgla (1994), Luna and Amaringo (1991), Shanon (2002), and Weiskopf (2002).

[8] For a comparative study of ritual wind instruments across Amazonia that emphasizes notions of wind, breath, air, and smoke, see Hill and Chameuil (2011).

Cascabeles are necklaces made from various seeds, beads, and animal teeth. Cascabeles form part of the taita's ceremonial attire but like the waira sacha, they are also instruments that help the taita keep time while performing on the harmonica or singing. The cascabeles also "sound" a moving taita inside a dark yajé room. Taitas can be heard coming and going through the night, their presence made manifest by the sound of the cascabeles, reminding participants that they are not alone; that is, the sound of cascabeles asserts the presence of a taita, a proximity that becomes crucial during certain points of the ritual.

Taitas sing and whistle to bless yajé. This blessing is understood as both expressing gratitude towards the plant itself for the healing it will do, but also as "activating" it within the toma and making it fit for consumption. In their singing, taitas also index the Amazon by reciting words like tiger, jungle, river, tree, and so forth, naming elements of the Amazon (in Spanish language, *tigrecito, selva, río, árbol,* respectively). Exhaling breath and smoke, inhaling, and whistling are operations directly linked to singing.

None of the taitas I interviewed knows or remembers how the harmonica came to be used in yajé rituals. There is photographic evidence of a taita, Taita Salvador Chindoy, holding a harmonica and an assortment of plants in a series of photographs taken by the botanist Richard E. Schultes in Sibundoy between 1941 and 1961.[9] The harmonica may have arrived through various routes. Bermúdez (2012) has written about harmonica and accordion circulation in Colombia, positing that the harmonica "was perhaps the first free-reed instrument to be sold commercially in Colombian territory," reaching Bogotá as early as the 1860s; "by the turn of the century, harmonicas were widespread" (2012: 205). With respect to indigenous populations, he writes:

> Free-reed instruments introduced in the 1920s and 1930s, seem to have become important in the cosmology and musical practices of other Colombian Indian groups. In the mid-1950s, shamans of the Kamemtxá of the Sibundoy area used the accordion, among other ritual paraphernalia comprising a crown and a cape of macaw and parrot feathers, necklaces of jaguar teeth and glass beads, collars of dry seed-shells and handfuls of jungle leaves, along with songs as a curing tool. In the state of Putumayo, harmonicas, along with cow horn trumpets, bells, traverse flutes and drums, were used in the early 1960s for parading carnival dances amongst the Inga (San Andrés) ethnic group (2012: 216).

Additionally, there is a long history of exchange through the Colombian-Ecuadorian border linked to rubber-tapping operations.[10] It is also plausible that Capuchin missionaries played a part in the harmonica's introduction, or that even an early traveler like Schultes might have introduced it. At this point, tracing the origin of the harmonica seems a matter of speculation at best; in any case, it is not hard to make the connection between the harmonica and other ritual instruments both in the Sibundoy Valley and in greater Amazonia through shared ideas of smoke, wind, and breath.

[9] None of the photographs in the publication are individually dated; the prologue claims that Schultes took them sometime between 1941 and 1961 (Schultes 1994: 59; 72-73).

[10] On the atrocious history of rubber plantations in the region, see Taussig (1991) and Casas Aguilar (1999).

Figure 2: Taita Salvador Chindoy, photographed by Richard E. Schultes, undated (in Schultes 1994: 59).

Description of a toma

Throughout their lifetime, taitas develop their own specific way of conducting tomas. Even for the same taita, no two tomas will ever be alike, for each instance of drinking yajé will present particular contingencies in terms of who is present at the ritual, where the ritual is conducted, and how different participants react to yajé. Sound production, as will be discussed later, is a central way in which taitas manage such contingencies. What follows is a narrative description of a toma de yajé conducted in Sibundoy, Putumayo, in 2013.

It looks like an improvised medical ward, a combination of mattresses, hammocks, and plastic chairs lining the room. It also looks like a meticulously curated space with carefully selected photographs, posters, and paintings hanging on the walls; attention to detail is also present in the conscientious construction of an altar. There is chatter and expectation between participants as the taita and his helpers enter and exit the room finishing preparations and chopping wood before the ritual starts. A volunteer walks the room burning incense and *copal*—an aromatic tree resin—in chalices and thuribles, and as people assemble and introductions are made the night grows with anticipation. A sudden silence takes over the room once the taita indicates the ritual will start. He says little more than a welcome to those who are first-timers and gives a few indications: location of the bathroom, asserts his availability if someone needs help, insists nobody should leave the room to wander on their own.

The taita now sits on a table, behind which there is an altar where figures of Jesus, Buddha, and the Virgin Mary cohabitate with rocks, crystals, and plastic animals. Before summoning the first

drinker, the taita blesses or conjures the yajé, blowing smoke from a cigar and his own breath. With one hand he gestures a cross over it and waves the waira sacha atop the liquid, whispering a litany that activates the yajé—*little tiger, soil, jungle, people, wind*.[11] The first participant has approached, and the taita whistles and exhales on the liquid before passing the gourd. Before drinking, participants might tell the taita—if they haven't already done so—specific reasons for which they are participating in the ritual. The same process will be repeated for every participant.

The taste and smell of yajé—famously described by Davis as "that of the entire jungle ground up and mixed with bile" (1997: 191)—will almost certainly remain in the participant's nose and palate for most, if not all of the night. As the taste settles and the electric lights are dimmed, the setting changes to a very specific mood of candlelight languidness, curiously always on the brink of activity as participants wait for onset. During this time the taita plays vigorously, and the performance usually starts by waving the waira sacha for several minutes, the airy texture maintaining a base that after a while becomes interspersed with singing and harmonica riffs. Sound production intensifies as the taita senses the effects of yajé are starting to take hold of the participants. As this transition happens, most participants feel nauseous to the point of vomiting; some have diarrhea. Vomiting often happens at a designated area—such as dugout trenches—just outside the yajé room. Bodily purging is encouraged, as it is one of the objectives of a toma de yajé.

The effects of yajé, manifested in visions and bodily sensations, may last anywhere from twenty minutes to a few hours, during which the taita remains in the room, continuing his labor of sound production, performing various textures and layerings by combining his instruments and singing, depending on how he senses and interprets the collective mood.[12] Those who want a second or third dose of yajé, consult with the taita, who then decides whether further doses are appropriate for a specific participant. Several hours in, some participants now lie asleep, some sit silently in the dark, and others stay up, conversing with the taita and with other participants that are still awake. Taitas continue to play and sing at varying intervals and volumes in order to maintain order in the ritual place. Throughout the onset phase and throughout the night, the room will continue to be filled with aromatic smoke and the sounds performed by the taita.

Nearing dawn, taitas perform what they explicitly call a *limpieza,* or cleansing, done collectively and segregated by gender, or individually, depending on how many are present. If so far the ritual has purged physically, the limpieza reinforces this purging by adding a spiritual layer to it. The full repertoire of sound and wind that was performed on yajé before it was drunk now applies to participants' bodies. Taitas play the waira sacha and the harmonica *on* participants' bodies from head to toes, as well as exhaling smoke and breath. The cleansing signals the ending of the toma, which might then lead to a small breakfast or a period of rest before participants depart.

Sound and the performance of a ritual place

A fundamental part of taitas' labor is to be able to construct a specific ritual place sonically. Such construction is accomplished by singing, playing the harmonica and the waira sacha, and sounding the cascabeles as they move throughout the room. In tomas de yajé, place is understood aurally, positing an understanding of place that is, to a degree, independent of material constraints or geographical location. The taitas' instruments are highly portable and permit to deliberately

[11] Tigrecito, tierra, selva, gente, viento. Such litanies are almost always improvised and might last from the enunciation of a few words to several minutes.

[12] I use the pronoun "he" conscientiously: taitas are almost always men, although there are few exceptions to the rule. Shamanism is, to be sure, a gendered activity, and so are many of the assumptions behind its operation. For a discussion of gender and shamanism in Western Amazonia, see Perruchon (2003).

construct a ritual place inside their living rooms in the Upper Putumayo, but also while traveling in near-by villages in southern Colombia and locations as remote as Bogotá, the United States, and Europe.

Taitas also use sound to ground or anchor participants to the ritual place they construct through sound. Taitas say they perform two seemingly paradoxical operations: *llevar* (to send away) and *traer* (to bring back). To send away means to assist participants in inhabiting the space of a vivid pinta. On the other hand, taitas have to bring back those participants that go "too far away." Both sending away and bringing back are directly related to the way taitas value concentration. They insist that participants should concentrate on something specific once they start experiencing pintas. This concentration—aided by the sounds produced by taitas—is what allows participants to experience vivid pintas without losing their bearings, anchoring their experience to something concrete.

Another part of taitas' sonic labor related to the construction of a ritual place involves indexing the Amazon verbally and non-verbally. Verbally, at the beginning of the ritual, they bless the yajé to be consumed and invoke the rainforest by reciting the name of plants, animals, and spirits that inhabit the Amazon. Non-verbally, the sounds produced by both the waira sacha and the harmonica are understood to resemble and summon the rainforest. For taitas, sounds in a toma de yajé should index the Amazon, regardless of where the toma itself is actually conducted.

How place is understood in tomas de yajé

Taitas emphasize the importance of staying within the confines of the room designated for the toma. Although it is understood that everyone present will most likely, at some point, exit the room to use the bathroom, taitas stress the necessity of returning to the yajé room as soon as possible, ensuring all participants remain within their supervision. At the beginning of the ritual, this oversight means, literally, within the sense of sight. As the night progresses, illumination is dimmed and participants often lay supine, often with closed eyes. In this new context of closed eyes and sparse illumination, oversight turns to mean within the audible radius of the taita's sound production; that is, within eaves. Being co-present within the aural radius of the taita's sound production brings an element of commonality to those going through starkly unique experiences.

For the past three decades, scholars in fields ranging from anthropology to philosophy have been theorizing landscape, place, and space (for instance, Feld and Basso 1997, Gheorghiu and Nash 2013, Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995, Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, Thornton 2008). Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso draw attention to moving beyond "facile generalizations about places being culturally constructed by describing specific ways in which places naturalize different worlds of sense" (1997: 8). If, following Catherine Bell, we accept that ritual, at its core, implies a body moving within a specially constructed place, "simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment" (1997: 82), we necessarily face questions of how this place is indeed constructed, and what these negotiations—imposing and receiving— with, from, and against the environment might be.

Steven Feld writes, "acoustemology means an exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth. […] Acoustemology means that as a sensual space-time, the experience of place potentially can always be grounded in an acoustic dimension" (1997: 97). Following Feld's discussion, and expanding from what I learned from taitas and participants, I am proposing here that while "the experience of place"

always has a sonic component to it, in some cases sound production can itself *constitute* a place. In the context of yajé rituals in the Upper Putumayo, sound is understood as having the agency to *create a place.* Taitas are able to replicate a version of the ritual place they construct by means of their sonorous instruments. Place in this sense is understood as being performed and as having a temporal dimension.

Thomas F. Thornton offers a concise definition of place: it is “a framed space that is meaningful to a person or a group over time” (2008:10). Focusing on the temporal aspect of place highlights the way it is not enough for a taita to perform only at the beginning of the ritual; instead, sound is maintained throughout the night by the taitas. This has two important implications. First, just as it is possible to speak of an aural radius that delimits the place in question, this delimitation is also time-sensitive; it follows that the place constructed and its respective indices and framings have, as it were, an expiration date. Taitas must continue the performance of place through their sonic practices throughout the night. The second implication is that a place created dynamically must be malleable. In other words, the place constructed can be modified as the night progresses, according to what the taita perceives as necessary. This place can also be modified by any other sounds occurring in participants’ aural radius, a contingency to which taitas are privy.

Throughout the night, taitas sing, play the harmonica, the waira sacha, and the cascabeles on their necks. They also take breaks. There is no prescribed formula that tells taitas when they should or should not play. Taitas’ experience, combined with a real-time assessment of the place’s conditions and the participants’ reactions, informs them of the appropriateness of silence and the different kinds of sound layers they provide. When taitas move around the room, their presence is made audible through the diverse rattles on their necks. When they are not playing or singing, participants can hear them as they approach and move farther away. This is a way to maintain the place that has already been initiated. Participants have reported that hearing the cascabeles approach, especially during times of hardship, reminds them of where they are, and significantly, that they are not alone.

The constructed ritual place is thus not fixed. Different kinds of playing and singing can change the nature of the place strategically. Different rhythms, textures, tempi, and phrasings can drastically modify the nature of the place. There is one particular taita that owns an antique six-sided harmonica, each side tuned to a different key. This has become his harmonica of choice for as he puts it, “with this you can change the night’s key easily.”[13]

Sound as anchoring device: llevar *y* traer

If during a toma de yajé a participant is indeed purposefully emplaced by the taita within a sonically constructed place, it is also plausible that participants may leave this place, even if their bodies remain within the yajé room. It is possible to think of the yajé experience as one of movement, as one of oscillation and contingency. The title of this section comes from a taita’s answer to the question: “Why do you play the harmonica during a toma de yajé?” His most immediate answer was to the point: “To take them away and to bring them back.”[14] The metaphor is revealing of a persistent, overarching idea of place and transit; both operations—taking away and bringing back—imply movement even if participants will likely be lying down on a hammock or on a mattress.

Both verbs, *llevar* and *traer*, are deictical in that the object of the verb depends on the

[13] Unless pointing to an existing publication, all names used are pseudonyms in order to protect the identity of patients and taitas alike.
[14] “Sirve para llevarlos y traerlos”.

articulator's position. In this case, it is from the point of view of the taita that we understand the action: taitas aid in *taking participants away* (from himself), sending them off to experience pintas; taitas also play a crucial role in *bringing back* participants to himself, to the yajé room. There is a specific time during which taitas focus on performing the "llevar" operation. Taitas generally agree in saying they play the harmonica with specific intention when they see participants are first starting to look dizzy.[15] At this moment, it is key to play so that participants will receive the full range of effects brought on by yajé.

The relationship between music and trance has been theorized extensively. As pointed out by Richard Jankowsky, there exists a long genealogy of "musically deterministic hypotheses" (2010: 22) on the relationship between music and trance.[16] The argument, in short, has been that the right combination of notes can induce a state of trance, be it through sensory overload, disturbances of the inner ear, or through transcendent, unqualifiable properties inherent to music. Gilbert Rouget, in his renowned 1980 study, *La musique et la transe*, brought into scrutiny the relationship of causality thought to exist between music and trance and possession states, highlighting instead the way different cultures socialize trance-music relations. Following Rouget's work, my research is not about searching for and revealing formal structures that allow a participant in a toma de yajé to receive visions or to enter in a sort of trance. Rather, during my fieldwork, I recorded accounts of how it is that both participants and taitas conceive the "llevar" operation.

"To bring back," that is, to the place taitas construct, is the anchoring operation taitas often employ during tomas de yajé. This operation occurs throughout the night, but can only happen if "llevar" has already happened, if participants are already experiencing pintas. Taitas will need to bring back, or anchor, those who have gone too far away.[17] Going too far away can mean several things; for example, participants experiencing fear, detachment, or physical turbulence beyond what is considered normal within a yajé ritual.

Sound and indexicality

Within a toma de yajé, taitas use sound to index notions related to Amazonia and some of the beings most frequently associated to it, such as rivers, plants, animals, and spirits.[18] Taitas in the Upper Putumayo often look at the Lower Putumayo region as the "true" source of yajé and the yajé ritual.[19] They often tell stories of how the great shaman masters come from the Lower Putumayo; almost all of the current Upper Putumayo taitas have studied at some point with a Lower Putumayo taita. For taitas, it is important that the ritual—even if taking place indoors—indexes the source of yajé. Even when far from the Lower Putumayo or any place that could be understood as Amazonian, taitas reinforce the importance of remembering the place of origin of yajé through their sound production.

Taitas often speak of "conjuring" and "activating" yajé the moment immediately before participants drink it. Their singing, as described earlier, includes words that create an imagery pertaining to yajé's origins, for taitas believe "activation" is a condition of yajé portability. Similarly, taitas report that the waira sacha is used to recreate the sounds of the jungle. It is the sound of

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[15] "Estar mareado," literally "to be dizzy" is a common phrase employed to describe this moment, roughly between 15 and 60 minutes after drinking yajé and before the onset of visions.

[16] See also Aubert (2006).

[17] In the words of a taita, "a los que se van demasiado lejos".

[18] The idea that a non-verbal sound may point to a specific object, place, person or situation is what I mean by "sound indexical." For a seminal discussion of indexicality see Silverstein (1976).

[19] The question of how this specific location has been situated as the cradle of shamanic power in the Colombian imaginary is complex and will not be addressed here. An introductory text can be found in Ramírez de Jara and Pinzón Castaño (1992). See also Ramírez de Jara and Urrea Giraldo (1990) and Cháves (2009). Moreover, the trope of an ever-illusive origin is common in and beyond ayahuasca mythology.

wind, plants, leaves, rain, and running water, all compacted into a single performative act performed on a single instrument. Some taitas claim that the harmonic content of the harmonica adds layers of animal calls and bird song. Several participants have reported that the sounds taitas perform do transport them to the Amazon. Others say it feels like the Amazon is brought into the yajé room, rendering the particular architecture of the yajé room irrelevant; drinking yajé while listening to the sounds performed by the taita can be understood as a moment of communion with the Amazon. From this point of view, it is not surprising to find that taitas often decorate their ritual rooms with images—posters, paintings, and figurines, usually plastic animals —of Amazonian flora and fauna.

When talking to taitas and participants alike about the differences between Upper Putumayo and Lower Putumayo sonic practices, I could identify one prevailing theme, best summarized by a taita's statement that "the jungle comes with a built-in harmonica. That is why taitas in the Lower Putumayo don't have to play as much."[20]

Yajé shamanism and labor

One of the taitas I worked most closely with, Taita Alberto, lives in a small, sparsely populated village about twenty kilometers outside of the Sibundoy town center. One afternoon, as we sat in his living room talking, his cell phone rang. One of the taita's friends, a wood craftsman, was calling to introduce Alex, a young Scottish man who had been asking in town about shamans conducting tomas de yajé that evening. Taita Alberto gave Alex instructions on how to arrive to his house, and settled a price over the phone for a toma to be held that night.

I will not describe the details of that specific toma here, but I would like to highlight what Alex told me in conversation the morning after. Although he was content with how the toma had been conducted—Alex had been drinking yajé regularly in the outskirts of Medellín, Colombia's second largest city, several hundred kilometers away—he was unsatisfied at having been charged a fixed price ahead of time, regardless of what the monetary amount was itself. He had been looking for "the purer kind of taita" that does not request a specific amount of money but instead leaves it up to the participant to remunerate at free will; this could mean that the participant decides what monetary amount is appropriate, or that the participant can instead offer non-monetary compensation in the form of agricultural goods or general supplies. He had heard that some taitas operated this way, but thus far he had not found one that did.

This story will serve as a starting point for an investigation of shamanism as labor. In what ways are ideas of "sincerity" and "purity" complicated by monetary exchange with shamans? What are the assumptions under which non-indigenous participants and patients generally operate in their relationships with shamans? What does an engagement with theorizations of labor add to the way shamanism is understood in academic discourse? What kinds of research questions result from engaging forms of shamanism that are embedded in capital relations in terms of Marx's conception of labor, and discussed by David Graeber (2005: 450) as "more or less identical with human creativity: it is the way human beings exercise their imaginative powers to create their worlds, their social ties as well as their physical environments?"

[20] "La selva ya trae su armónica incorporada. Por eso los taitas del Bajo Putumayo no tienen que tocar tanto".

Definitions of shamanism: histories of expectations

Although a detailed review of literature on shamanism is beyond the purview of this article, it is necessary to state shamanism has not been theorized explicitly as a form of labor.[21] Boekhoven (2011: 309) posits that "the field of shamanism is largely informed by the values and concerns of the embracing society." He elaborates:

> To paraphrase Talal Asad, there cannot be a universal definition of shamanism, not only because the constituents of the phenomena that have been labeled shamanism are historically specific, but also because the definitions are historical products of discursive processes. (2011: 312)

Along similar terms, Jean Paul Sarrazin (2011) examines the way Colombian middle and upper classes have constructed notions of indigenous alterity based, to a large degree, on their particular perceptions of indigenous shamanism. Despite its suggestive title, in *Du marxisme au chamanisme*, Sarrazin's discussion is less about proposing a labor-based understanding of shamanism and more about the influences of global discourses—particularly New Age—on local constructions of ethnicity and shamanism.[22]

I contend that a great part of the power and allure of shamanism in Western thought has resided in its interpretation as completely other, and particularly, as free from engaging capitalist relationships.[23] In Chakrabartian terms, shamanism is to this day firmly affixed and understood as a type of History 2. According to Chakrabarty,

> Elements of History 2, Marx says, are also "antecedents" of capital, in that capital "encounters them as antecedents," but—and here follows the critical distinction I want to highlight—"not as antecedents established by itself, not as forms of its own life-process". (2008:63)

History 1, for Chakrabarty, describes the process by which capital retrospectively claims or co-opts pre-capitalist forms of life; it is a logic of universalization. Although Chakrabarty is concerned with contesting the default, uncritical acceptance of History 1, I would argue that notions of History 2 are problematic when pushed to romantic extremes. Pretending that notions of History 2 do not ever change or intersect with History 1 can lead to facile generalizations. The disenchantment Alex felt when charged for his participation in a toma de yajé can be understood as a radical clinging to a conception of shamanism that is free from an urban, neo-liberal, lived reality of History 1, "a past posited by capital itself as a precondition" (Chakrabarty 2008: 63). Where then would the power of a shaman lie if it were—as it more often that not is—entwined in that which some Western imaginaries are seeking to escape, that is, a History 1 in which apparently nothing can exist outside of capitalist relations? Why is it so problematic to think of shamanism as a valid means of

[21] Piers Vitebsky hints at an understanding of shamanism as labor, only in passing: "Shamans are at once doctors, priests, social workers and mystics" (2001: 10). "The shaman's experience is never just a personal voyage of discovery, but also a service to the community. […] Being a shaman is probably, in fact, the oldest profession, covering the roles which in industrial societies are played separately by the doctor, psychotherapist, soldier, fortune-teller, priest and politician" (2001: 96). See Boekhoven (2011) for a recent publication that presents a detailed genealogy of the term's usage, although not identifying concerns with labor. It is also telling that there is no entry on "labor" in comprehensive publications like Harvey (2007); and Walter and Fridman (2004).

[22] On the reconfiguration of yajé shamanism in Colombian urban contexts, see Caicedo (2014).

[23] Stokes (2002) points to a gap in explorations of how musicians get paid; he also presents a detailed discussion on Chakrabarty's history types and money in a Turkish musical context. For a publication that engages, music and Marxist theory more broadly, see *Music and Marx,* edited by Regula Qureshi (2002).

subsistence, as a respectable profession and source of means for an indigenous family?

Michael Taussig, in his book, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, sustains the argument that the alleged savagery of Amerindians has led to understandings of indigenous populations that are simultaneously of admiration and of terror. At the time the book was written—in the late 1980s—yajé shamanism was already gaining momentum throughout Colombia as a well-known indigenous practice. Even though Taussig mentions the way Lower Putumayo shamans looked down on Upper Putumayo (specifically Sibundoy) shamans for engaging in commercial relations with their patients through shamanism (1991: 255-258), he does not address explicitly, or with much detail, the commodification of yajé and the different ways yajé shamanism becomes a source of income. What complicates the shunning described above is that Upper Putumayo shamans have historically purchased the yajé they use in the Lower Putumayo; Lower Putumayo shamans have been willing to sell it to others who then (re-)commercialize it. In short, the yajé shamanism case in Colombia demonstrates that shamanism is hardly ever an isolated activity that can depend entirely on one individual; shamanic practice, when understood as labor, necessarily involves multiple actors engaging in complex relations, some of them capital relations.

Toward research questions

What then, if Putumayo shamans are understood as laborers in present-day neoliberal Colombia? During my fieldwork, different taitas expressed different opinions regarding what it means to be a taita and the degree to which they perceived their activities as being a vocation, a hobby, a calling, a responsibility, work, and so on. Few taitas are truly full-time taitas. Taita Alberto, for example, drinks yajé with participants and patients at least five days a week, sometimes seven.[24] When I visited him, he had a teenager interned in his house, following a two-month treatment for an unspecified drug addiction. Other taitas make a habit of drinking yajé only once or twice a week, generally on Fridays and Saturdays, and the majority of their everyday life is dedicated to subsistence farming or artisan work. Kathi Weeks asserts, “who one becomes at work and in life are mutually constitutive. There is no position of exteriority in this sense; work is clearly part of life and life part of work” (2007: 246). What then is the relationship between ritual performance and the everyday for taitas? How does a taita like Alberto think about the times he is not conducting a ritual? In what ways are work and everyday-life separable and mutually constitutive?

Some taitas renounce living with their families for prolonged amounts of time in order to practice their labor. During my time in the Putumayo, I was not able to contact some taitas because they were out of town, visiting patients in nearby cities (within a 200 kilometer radius), far-away cities in Colombia, and sometimes abroad. Taitas move within certain established circuits in their labor: through their traveling, they extend their circuits and increase their possibilities for employment. Taitas do offer, following a Marxian definition, a commodity: “a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (Marx 2000: 458). Lazzarato writes, “labor produces not only commodities, but first and foremost it produces the capital relation” (1996: 147). What is the nature, then, of the relations on which taitas embark in exercising their profession?

A full-time taita like Alberto does not run a one-person operation. Following Marx, “if we take away the useful labor expended upon [commodities], a material substratum is always left, which is furnished by Nature without the help of man” (2010: 464). Who supplies Taita Alberto with yajé and where does it come from? How much does he pay for it? How does the exchange take

[24] It is important to underscore the fact that drinking yajé is demanding: it requires taitas to remain awake all night long and to be able to respond to patients’ needs. Taitas cannot simply stay in bed next morning.

place? How is yajé transported? How does the taita earn money to purchase the yajé that will eventually lead to more income? On a more mundane level: who cleans the bathrooms that are used during the ritual? Who cooks the breakfasts that patients eat after the long nights of drinking yajé? Where do the eggs in the omelets come from? Who washes the dishes and sheets after everyone leaves? More broadly, who are the behind-the-scenes actors in yajé rituals and what are their relationships with the taita? What greater roles and relationships, say of gender and power, are enacted through these exchanges?

Alex's disenchantment with taitas being evidently inserted in capitalism is not entirely naïve: there are taitas that are outright charlatans. Several strands of yajé, or more commonly in this context, ayahuasca tourism, have developed in the last decades, and yajé shamanism is certainly not a transparent endeavor.[25] Jean Langdon and Isabel Santana de Rose discuss the politics behind the recent adoption of ayahuasca ritual practices by the Guaraní of Brazil, a group that has not before used the brew. They understand shamanisms as emerging in specific political and historical contexts:

> Shamans and shamanisms should be seen today as dialogical categories, often negotiated at the boundaries of local indigenous societies and their interfaces with national and global groups. Shamanisms today are phenomena that emerge dialogically based on interactions between the actors involved in their global revival—anthropologists, journalists, environmental organizations, healthcare professionals, indigenous peoples, and neo-shamanic groups, among others (2012: 55).

And what about their relationships with money, labor, and capital? How are shamans laborers and how are they employers? How are their working relationships and traveling circuits established? Who are the middlemen? Taitas can also be understood, in the words of Matt Stahl (2012), as "unfree masters", subject to payment by their patients (or clients) but also as "free-lancers", their activities devoid of legal contracts.

Admittedly, my discussion of labor raises more questions than it attempts to answer. It is my intention to problematize, using Chakrabartyan terms, understandings of shamanism that necessarily cast it as perpetually in a state of History 2, of tempering a long tradition of romantic fascination with figures that have been constructed simultaneously as beings of terror and healing. Being a taita is no trivial matter; it is a seriously difficult profession. Waving a waira sacha for consecutive hours every night is tiring. Healing in tomas de yajé is more of a physical operation that requires a taita to move about, breath, and blow in a truly energetic kind of way. The stakes are high considering yajé and ayahuasca rituals have from time to time resulted in deaths. Someone like Taita Alberto drinks yajé most nights of the year; this means having an irregular sleep schedule, vomiting on a daily basis, and having serious responsibilities toward patients entrusting their lives on him. Taita Juan Bautista Agreda from Sibundoy has claimed to have cured cancer, AIDS, and heroin addictions (Anderson et al. 2014).

[25] For more on ayahuasca shamanism in different contexts, see Labate and Cavnar (2014a).

Conclusions

In this article, it has been my intention to recast yajé shamans as laborers, as highly agentive individuals making livelihoods while being inevitably embedded in capital relations in present-day Colombia. On one hand, I have outlined taitas' sonic labor of performing place; on the other, I have outlined possible research questions at the interface between indigenous practices and capitalist relations through tourism.

The topic of tomas de yajé is a polarizing one in Colombia. Some are ready to equate it with sorcery, qualifying yajé as a dangerous drug not to be tampered with, insisting that taitas are either malevolent, powerful sorcerers or deceitful, dangerous charlatans. Others, generally aligning with New Age discourse and tendencies, see yajé and taitas as sources of unbounded spirituality, sacred ancestral knowledge, healing, and communion with nature. The great majority of the accounts I recorded reduced encounters with yajé to either romantic sacrality or profanity of the most vulgar kind.

The graffiti mural in downtown Bogotá is helpful here to illustrate these ambivalent attitudes toward yajé and taitas. In the mural, it is unclear whether the men in black suits see in the taita an enemy to be feared or a helpful ally. Both of the men, however, are clearly in anguish. One of them is vomiting, but this vomiting could be understood as a kind of purging and cleansing. A close look at the discharge reveals that in the green liquid expulsed from the man's mouth there are dollar signs. But why is it that this taita is surrounded by animals non-existent in the Amazon, namely a gorilla and a wolf?

Retorno al origen invites multiple interpretations. What is clear is that following readings that are strict in their adherence to rigid categories easily renders taitas as caricatures, reifying an essentialization and exoticization of indigenous populations. As Taussig contends, taitas' perceived power in Colombia hinges on the fact that they have been historically perceived uncritically and simultaneously as beings of healing and terror. In this article it has been my intention to present a view of shamanism that is compatible with ideas of labor, a view that also rejects a long lineage of romanticizing, exoticizing, and essentializing taitas and more broadly, shamans and indigenous populations.

Tomas de yajé rituals are fairly portable and mobile. Besides the taita's and the participants' willingness to engage in a toma, and the availability of yajé itself, there are few other conditions indispensable for the ritual to take place. Materially, there are no other requirements for a toma to happen. Taitas themselves are highly mobile. Sound is a way in which taitas not only construct their specific ritual place; sound is also a way of maintaining and modifying it.

The taitas I worked with were older men looking over sleeping, vulnerable patients, exercising oversight by means of a bundle of leaves, a harmonica, and a respiratory system. These are taitas that need to provide for their families, facing the challenge of dealing in a controversial substance that in other contexts is highly commercialized, sometimes illegal, and the source of all sorts of tourist traps. They commune with plastic jaguars, real jaguars, and the Virgin Mary; with their breath and with instruments that fit inside their shirt pockets they index the Amazon, constructing a place larger than any building.

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