



# From Agony to Ecstasy: The Transformative Spirit of Yaje

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Paintings by Alexandre Segregio

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For centuries, the indigenous people of the Amazon River basin have used a magical healing sacrament known as yaje-or ayahuasca, as it is called in the Quechua tongue--in order to see into the spirit world. Yaje is a vision-inducing drink made from a psychoactive jungle vine (*Banisteriopsis* sp.) mixed with various other psychoactive [plants](#). (1) Yaje' has been used shamanically by Native practitioners to find lost objects, seek out game and fish, wage psychic warfare, influence the weather, and foresee the future. Yaje' has also been used by Native shamans and curanderos (healers) to identify the hidden spiritual causes of illnesses and to treat the source of illness through direct intervention.

Western explorers and ethnologists have written about the ceremonial use of yaje' since early in the 19th century, and there are hundreds of scholarly and popular accounts on the subject. However, for several reasons, most literature on the shamanic use of yaje' is filled with exaggerations and inaccuracies. First, traditional shamans--the only real experts on the use of yaje--have often been reluctant to reveal its true depths to outsiders. Second, even when shamans have been willing and able to talk about their use of the vine, they have had to communicate their esoteric knowledge to outsiders--mostly non-users--across almost insurmountable language and cultural barriers.

In recent decades, there has been a renaissance in the experiential use of yaje' among outsiders. On the one hand, an army of anthropologists, ethnobotanists, intrepid intellectuals, and spiritual explorers have been trotting off into remote jungles in search of traditional healing knowledge. On the other hand, some traditional shamans and healers have responded to the growing interest by moving to the cities, where they now conduct regular yaje' sessions for the principal benefit of [non-Natives](#). (2) By now,

thousands of outsiders have participated in a few yaje ceremonies. Many have written articles and books about their experiences, but few accounts have offered any substantive insights into how yaje works. Most outsiders have assumed their yaje' visions were due solely to psychedelic alkaloids in the plants, and they have looked no further. I believe the lack of understanding is due to the fact that anthropologists are bound by scientific ethics to discard supernatural explanations, and most other aficionados, like myself, are too deeply conditioned by their materialistic Occidental upbringing to believe in spiritual realms. Also, relatively few of the non-professionals who experienced yaje' have undergone long-term yaje apprenticeships, a process which may be essential to understanding yaje's full visionary and healing powers.

As an American journalist who has lived in Colombia since 1977, I have made five extended field trips to the lower Putumayo River region to study yaje' practices under the tutelage of the respected Siona shaman, Don Pacho Piaguaje. During these visits, which each lasted a month or longer, I took yaje' regularly once or twice each week, and it was only after many yaje sessions that I was finally able to make sense of what I was seeing. At the same time, the yaje' itself has made me keenly aware of the limits of my understanding. Therefore, I must caution readers that what I am about to say about the nature of yaje' is based largely on my highly subjective experiences, supplemented with insights and observations gleaned from Don Pacho and other yaje' shamans I have met.

With this caveat in mind, I will start by saying that yaje' is a truly remarkable psychoactive vine. After taking the drink many times, I fully agree with those Natives who say yaje' is a living presence with a remarkably strong and vivid personality. It is not unusual for the spirit of the vine to appear in one's visions and announce that it is a direct channel to a superior being-- God, Nature, Spirit.

Yaje' is probably best known among Westerners for its gift of extraordinary, multicolored [visions](#). (3) According to various accounts, yaje' pin tas (visions) can range from vividly detailed scenes recreated from one's memories to otherworldly panoramas filled with exotic Plants and animals, mythical creatures, and spirit beings. Some writers have compared the yaje' experience to LSD or psychedelic mushroom trips. However, the visionary voyages I have experienced on yaje' have few parallels to those I've experienced on other psychedelics-- the so-called "mind revealing" drugs.



At the most basic psycho-physiological level, yaje' visions are distinguished by bright multicolored geometrical patterns that repeat and merge into one another, creating a kaleidoscopic montage that rushes by the viewer. It is as though one is being propelled at high speed through a fantastic landscape decorated with mythical animals and religious symbols. The visual experience is comparable to watching a well-made animated film--like *The Yellow Submarine*--while one is completely stoned on strong marijuana.

Although the visual aspects of a yaje' voyage can be truly extraordinary, it is unlikely that yaje will ever become a popular psychedelic. Yaje' involves entirely too much physical suffering and soul searching for it to become a drug of choice for recreational trippers. While a few contemporary psychologists have shown interest in yaje's ability to reveal and transform deep-seated emotional problems, its emetic side effects may limit its use in conventional counseling. For those seeking a viable spiritual alternative to Western materialism, yaje's s greatest potential and appeal is its ability to open the door into highly tangible spirit realms.

Unfortunately, first-time yaje' users seldom get to enjoy or even experience the full range of yaje' visions, primarily because their visions are often obscured or even obliterated by the nausea, fear, and mental confusion that accompanies the intoxication. Beginners may feel mild exaltation and may catch glimpses of vague, fleeting images, but they are rarely able to consume enough yaje' to achieve full-scale visions. A few lucky practitioners may have extraordinary visual experiences during their first few sessions--possibly because these persons are exceptionally pure in body and [spirit. \(4\)](#) However, most foreigners and acculturated Natives find their initial experiences with yaje' disappointing. In my own case, I did not have any breakthrough visions until after I had been thoroughly purified by the vine.

Working with yaje' can involve a long-- and at times extremely traumatic--purification process. It took me several months of drinking yaje' before I was pure enough to be able to consume enough yaje to experience visions without suffering too much. Incidentally, the physical purging did not lessen as I went on. In fact, as I managed to drink more and more yaje, the purgings went progressively deeper. However, because the agony is caused not by the evacuation process itself but by one's resistance to being purged, the process become! gradually less painful. The more yaje' could tolerate, the easier I could void, and the more visions I could see.

Don Pacho sometimes compares yaje' to a wild animal which must be approached with great caution--it will not allow you to make full contact until it knows you very well. According to Don Pacho, it can take months, or even years, of drinking yaje on a weekly basis before one experiences its full benefits. Almost all of the yaje' shamans know agree that a novice must drink a lot of yaje' for a considerable time in order to become a visionary, and that it can take many decades before one fully masters the spirit of yaje'.

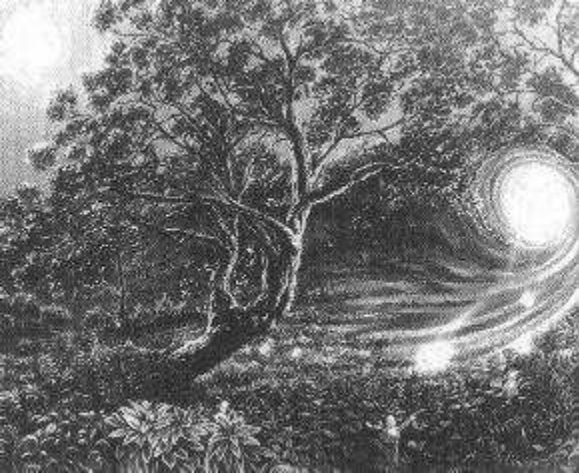
## **The Purification Process**

While yaje may resemble some psychedelics in inducing dramatic visual patterns and dreamlike images, I have come to the conclusion that the most significant yaje visions are not solely biochemically induced. Instead, I suggest that yaje' removes the physical and emotional blocks which keep us from seeing the spirit world around us. In fact, once or twice--during those half-conscious, hypnagogic states that precede sleep--I have had brief yaje-like visions that were not yaje' induced. These spontaneous experiences--and the fact that some disciplined yogis and gifted psychics seem to have regular access to the spirit world--suggest to me that it may be possible to see visions without yaje'.

Many religions preach that one must purify one's body and surrender one's ego in order to reach the divine--that one must die in order to be reborn. In the West, Christianity--with its other-worldly approach to salvation--has taught that the path to enlightenment is through purifying the soul by denying the body. In the East, yogic and tantric disciplines have taught that there is no such separation between matter and spirit, and that it is only by purifying our minds and bodies that we can open up to the spiritual. While yaje shamans seldom philosophize about their practices, I speculate that yaje' may induce ecstatic states of consciousness through a combination of physical purification and therapeutic ego-death.

The great virtue of the yaje' ritual is that it is a relatively autonomous and self-regulating path to spiritual ecstasy and enlightenment. While yogic and tantric practitioners seek ecstatic states by purifying the body through the use of physical exercises, meditations, and mental disciplines, few people today have the patience to spend decades struggling to master such rigorous disciplines in order to achieve ecstatic visions. By working with plant medicines like yaje, it may be possible to effectively purge the body through vomiting and defecating, and to achieve ecstatic visions in relatively few years.

Unlike yogic and tantric practices, yaje' doesn't require great discipline and incredible willpower to stay with the process. All you have to do is imbibe the brew, and you are irrevocably committed to an intensive transformative



process. Once you have the guts to drink enough yaje, it will not only purify your body and psyche from the inside out, it will also send you hurtling through the doors of perception.

The question is, how does purifying the body help us attain ecstatic states? Over the years, I have noticed that the people who have the most difficulty achieving ecstatic states usually suffer from hyperactive minds. Based on my experiences with yaje, I am convinced that much of their mental restlessness is a direct by-product of physical pollution due to chemical additives, too much food, and environmental contaminants. Once our bodies are purged of this excess garbage--through fasting, meditation, or purgatives--our hyperactive minds become calmer and clearer, allowing us to see, or at least sense, the spirit energy behind physical forms.

## **The Therapeutic Process**

In some parts of the Amazon, yaje' is still used to purge the body of intestinal parasites, and I do not doubt that part of the vine's mysterious healing power may stem from its ability to thoroughly clean out the intestinal tract. Vomiting and defecating are classical mechanisms for expelling illness from the body, and yaje' is certainly the quintessential purgative medicine. However, I don't want to leave the impression that yaje' is merely a physical purgative. I have seen yaje' work some of its most purgative magic and dramatic cures on people who were dealing primarily with psychological or emotional problems.

While working with Don Pacho in the Putumayo, I saw yaje' work some brutal purges on strong young farm workers who were addicted to alcohol or bazuco (crack). During the process of repeatedly spilling out their guts, these young macho men would often reveal their innermost anxieties. As they progressively faced and released the personal fears and emotional problems that had led them to their vices, they would often break down and show a softer, more sensitive' side of their personalities. The simultaneous purges of the body and mind seem to happen, in a milder way, to everyone who takes yaje'.

One interesting characteristic of yaje' is that it can make you expel much more than should fit into your intestinal tract. It can make you vomit and defecate until you think it's impossible to expel any more, and then more still comes out. When I first started taking yaje, I foolishly sought to minimize the purgative effects by fasting beforehand. To my consternation, I soon discovered that I vomited and defecated as violently as the other participants in the session. Because I was already weak from the fasting, I

almost didn't have enough physical energy to cope with the yaje's assault on my digestive system, and I sincerely felt that I was close to dying at times. I have seen similar extraordinary purges happen to others. I remember one old man whose principal reason for taking yaje' was that he had lost his appetite. Although he had hardly eaten anything for two days before drinking the potion, he proceeded to vomit continuously all night long.

Based on several such experiences, I have concluded that yaje' functions as a kind of transcendental purgative. During my extended visits--when I was taking yaje' several times a week and the purges were progressively emptying and cleansing my intestinal tract--I not only began to experience a much-improved state of health, but I also noticed that I was better able to sustain and work with my visions. While I am not sure exactly how it works, I believe that yaje' somehow breaks down the bioenergetic blocks, or tensions, that may be at the root of illness and releases them in the form of vomit or shit.

In my experience, as the yaje' slowly winds its way through my intestines (it takes at least half an hour to feel the first effects), I am thrust into an entirely new kind of sensibility. I become aware of my vital center, my essential being--what Japanese mystics call the "hara"--lodged in the pit of my stomach. The yaje' makes me aware, at a gut level, that human beings are the descendants of unicellular creatures and that--no matter how complex our subsequent development--we are still a tube or gut through which food flows.

As the yaje' works its way through your system, it not only cleans out the excessive foods, stimulants, and poisons clogging your body, but it seems to dredge up the old repressed emotions and traumas stored literally within your guts. Thus, in addition to suffering from intense pain, dizziness, nausea, and horrifying visions, most beginners must suddenly confront a lifetime's accumulation of emotional blocks and wounds.

I can recall many moments during my early sessions when I was overcome by what is called in Spanish "la palida" (pallidness). White as a sheet, nauseated, asphyxiated, and unable to move, I would experience an acute physical and moral desperation which bordered on madness. Not only was I unable to act, but I couldn't even conceive of how to release the pain and fear.

Of the many counsels given to me by Don Pacho, the wisest and most useful was that at these moments the yaje' apprentice (man or woman) must be [macho](#). (5) The apprentice has to summon the willpower to get up out of the hammock--even if it means crawling on all fours--and do his business in the

bushes. Once I learned to overcome my paralysis and to get up and defecate, I realized it wasn't my ego or self which defecates, but my body that does it.

Based on my own limited experience, I have noticed certain temporal correspondences between my visionary content and my physiological state. For example, I have noticed that many of my most intense yaje visions have occurred during my moments of greatest intestinal anguish, when I was on the verge of defecating or vomiting. Interestingly, the most prevalent figures in these early visions are inevitably serpents-- mirroring the form of both the vine and our intestines. Moreover, once I was through evacuating and I went back to the hammock, the visions of serpents often receded.

At times, I had the very real sensation of being grasped around the chest and head by these figures, as though they were trying to drag me away into a devil's realm. Interestingly, these visions and feelings were often accompanied by the sensation of an intense heat moving through my body, which tended to grow more intense as I went out to shit.

Time after time, I have realized that the weird serpents or devils in my visions were wounded spirits, rising up in my intestines and crying out in protest against years of repression and abuse. Often when I was on the verge of voiding, I would see the most malign spirits jeering at my discomfort or threatening to pull me into the ground. As I became more lucid over time, I began to recognize these monsters were my alter egos--the shadow side of the ego masks we all learn to wear in normal social intercourse. As I learned to face each of them and recognize them as parts of myself, they began to melt away.

Eventually, I learned that the only way out of the intestinal agony was to abandon my false ego and to surrender to the circumstances. Each time I managed to face the metaphorical shit responsible for my agony, I would release my physical shit, transcend my personal limitations, and achieve ecstatic visions. Could it be that enlightenment may be merely a matter of voiding--not avoiding--our old emotional shit? Ironically, it was when I was literally forced to my knees--completely helpless, with vomit flowing from one end of my body and shit from the other--that the first rung of the ladder to heaven appeared.

I am convinced that the principal reason most beginners don't have the courage to take enough yaje' is that they fear having to face the loss of self-control involved in spilling out their guts. The realization that our intestines have a life (and nearly a mind) of their own can be highly disturbing because it reminds us how much our egos are controlled by the conditioning of [others](#). (6) This recognition can provoke tears, curses, hysterical laughter, catatonic states, convulsions and even outright physical aggression.



Based on the prevalence of such emotional releases, some observers have suggested that yaje' is essentially a powerful truth serum which prompts people to relive and release intense childhood frights, interpersonal conflicts, and societal repression. The yaje' ritual is certainly one of the few places outside of psychotherapeutic institutions where regressive madness is

encouraged, and some of yajes power as a therapeutic force may come from its ability to catalyze traumatic memories.

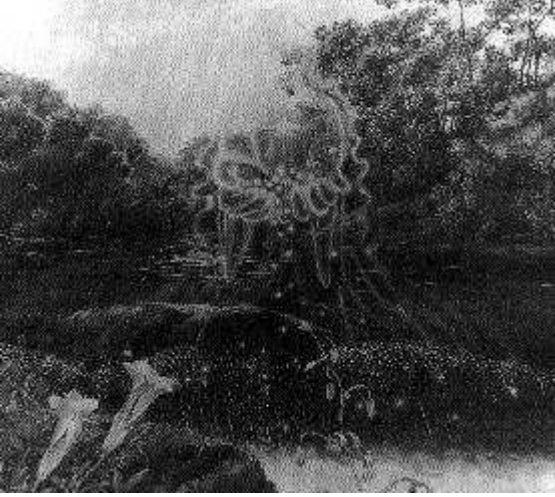
Some Western observers have suggested that the yaje' healing rituals are little more than folk-therapy--a sort of primitive precursor to contemporary psychotherapies. In certain respects, the yaje' experience does share similarities with the work of encounter groups and some contemporary schools of "anti-psychology." Like the work of R. D. Laing and Arthur Janov, yaje' rituals often seem to utilize a type of shock therapy based on a combination of painful bioenergetic release and interpersonal [confrontation](#). (7) It is quite possible that cathartic psycho-visions may contribute to the vine's healing and therapeutic powers. However, any attempts to explain yaje' sessions solely in terms of biochemical responses or as psychotherapies are inevitably doomed to failure because they overlook one essential ingredient--the role of the spirits in the shamanic healing process.

## Shamanic Healing Spirits

Although novices are often oblivious to the subtler shamanic aspects of yaje' rituals, it is difficult to participate in a yaje' session without seeing the shaman conduct a number of shamanic healings. Don Pacho often uses a combination of psychic manipulations and physical massage to treat his patients during the yaje' sessions. While chanting for spirit aid to the accompaniment of the swishing of a leaf-fan, Don Pacho physically kneads points along the torso until he finds "the imprint of sickness." Then, in alternate or imaginary reality, he extracts the illness, using a flick of the hand and a sharp exhalation of breath to blow the evil spirits away. In classical shamanic fashion, Don Pacho may also suck at a particular point, fill his cheeks with the evil intrusion, and then blow it away.

Some observers have hypothesized that such shamanic healings may serve as placebo treatments, helping only those people who believe in religious and supernatural powers. However, it is hard to ignore the hundreds of





casual testimonials and some documented healings suggesting that Don Pacho and other yaje' shamans have effected miraculous cures of real physical illnesses, based on information obtained from spirits in yaje visions.

Don Pacho attributes his successes to spirits who visit him in his visions, explain the roots of problems, and point out ways of treating them. "When I am drunk with yaje," he explains with conviction and sincerity, "I fly up to the Milky Way and converse with the spirits, and they tell me how to cure. Sometimes, in these visions, they show me a certain plant and the next day I go into the forest to find that plant and with it I heal the sick person."

I do not know whether Don Pacho believes he is actually flying around in spiritual form, or whether he is journeying in his imagination. However, Don Pacho has repeatedly said that the spirit images which surround one during a yaje' session do not really come from another "imaginary" world. He believes the spirit world reflects the deeper, fundamental essence of things, while the so-called "real world" is just an illusion. Moreover, Don Pacho firmly believes that the spirits and energies that he works with are real, transpersonal powers.

## **The Visionary Sequence**

All of the yaje' shamans I know say that apprentices go through a kind of visionary ascension before they become real seers or visionaries. One shaman explained to me that first you see the boa, whose appearance is always fearsome. The boa wraps you in its coils and strangles you so that you go into an agony of vomiting; then, after your guts are emptied, you are able to watch it dispassionately. When those unpleasant sensations disappear--although they can recur in any session--it means that you are through the first stage of purification and are ready for the higher levels. Next, you see the dragon, which is the spirit of fire. Finally, the crowning level--reached only by a few--comes when you see and can transform yourself into a tiger.

Since Indians often delight in playing up to the exotic expectations of outsiders, some of the stories about shamans changing into tigers and boas should be taken with a grain of salt. However, the basic idea of a sequential progression of images may not be that far-fetched. Certainly, further study and research needs to be conducted in this area. If the sequencing is consistent cross-culturally--and different people at different times do share the same basic sequence of visions--it could suggest that the visions may be



more than random hallucinations, and they may correspond to some "objective" reality--whether internal or external.

Once again, it may take numerous sessions before one experiences this progression. I know my own ability to see has certainly evolved over time. During my initial encounters with yaje--often just before I began to engage in serious defecating and vomiting--I tended to see vague images of stick figures and geometric patterns that sometimes formed into insect like animals but usually faded into vague outlines. My mind screen might be dense with these images, but their colors weren't very bright and the overall background was obscure. These patterns usually came and went (interspersed with periods of no visuals at all) until the first intestinal convulsions grabbed my undivided attention. Then, the figures usually became clearer and often transformed into various kinds of monsters--snakes, predatory animals, and devils--that reached out to attack me.

This sequence of images and feelings might repeat itself several times--with visions preceding each bout of vomiting and defecating. However, I don't want to leave the impression that all that happens in a yaje' session is suffering, seeing visions, voiding, and returning to your hammock to fall into a swoon. This is far from the case in most sessions. One is usually surrounded by fifteen to twenty people who are going through similar processes, each in his or her own way. People bump into your hammock, the shaman may chant and rattle as he conducts healings, and participants engage in sporadic conversations. One's visions are constantly being interrupted, influenced, and modified by all the surrounding activity.

Once I survived these initial stages of rigorous purgation--and if I managed to drink another cup of yaje--then I would begin to see calmer, clearer visions in my mind's eye. This secondary stage was often heralded by a journey through a long tunnel, or by a rush of figurative, geometrical patterns similar to those experienced earlier. However, the patterns would now kaleidoscope into complementary shapes without losing their essential nature. Gradually, the figures would slow down, become more defined, and take on brighter hues. During this secondary stage, I found it much easier to hold images in my mind. In time, I learned how to focus selectively on particular images by shifting my inner eye's field of vision.

Occasionally, my inner visions seemed to be variations on recent experiences. For example, in one session--after I had spent the afternoon walking through the forest-- I saw highly intensified surrealistic jungle landscapes. At other times, the visions contained strictly imaginary motifs,

but most frequently they contained certain conventional religious images. I occasionally saw Buddhas and mandalas, but most of- ten I saw motifs that had to do with Amazonian Indian [mythology](#). (8)

One of my recurrent visions involved an ancient maloca ([a type of large, communal thatched hut](#)). (9) This particular maloca was an enormously tall structure with a roof that extended beyond sight, reaching up to the heavens. In the upper spaces, poised upon the wooden beams and crosspieces, thousands of Indians dressed in loincloths were watching and pointing at me. In other visions, I encountered more bucolic variations on the same theme: groups of Natives lazing in hammocks, doing craftwork, or bathing in the river. These visions felt as though they might be happening in present reality but their content was definitely situated in some ideal past.

The exact content of my visions varied greatly from session to session, but I noticed there was a general progression from fear to calmness, from vagueness to precision, from dark to light. Based on the fact that the intensity, clarity, duration, color, etc., of my visions appeared to improve in accordance with the purity of my body, I believe that yaje' may cleanse and heal the spiritual fibers of our being and allow us to see alternate realities.

For a long time, I assumed that when Don Pacho spoke of spirits he was referring to inner visions. It wasn't until after I had been taking yaje' for some time that I began to experience spirits in waking visions. During most yaje' sessions, the moments of inner visions are interspersed with moments when you are fully awake--with your eyes open. As I continued working with yaje, I began to sense--without necessarily directly seeing--many spirits surrounding me even when I was awake.

My ability to perceive the spirits during waking states changed considerably over time, depending upon a number of factors: the amount of yaje' I had taken, my emotional or psychological purity, and my experience working with yaje. In time, I began to see restless configurations of energy moving through the atmosphere which betrayed the spirit presence. Then I began to see the energy fields manifest into something more substantial--zones or currents of energy charged with flashing points of light. Eventually, I could see the spirits manifest as faint, dreamlike images, and then as very vivid and substantial images.

At this point, I am unable to prove the existence of these spirits. However, when I am inebriated on yaje, I have the undeniable sense that the spirits are very real, and that I am experiencing a realm which is beyond ordinary existence. Unlike inner visions, these spirit energies felt uncannily real, as if they were independent entities. In contrast to the spirit of yaje, which feels like a benevolent master, some of these other spirits felt sublime, and some

truly evil. Interestingly, whenever these energies appeared, the yaje itself would instruct me to keep vigil over them by chanting or invoking my animal totems for protective purposes, as I have seen Don Pacho and other shamans do.

## **Paranormal Abilities**

While several recent books have discounted reports regarding the telepathic nature of yaje visions, there are some tantalizing indications that yaje' may, in fact, eventually open up a sixth sense and allow us to see into shamanic [realities. \(10\)](#) There is considerable cross-cultural evidence that Native practitioners have relied on yaje' visions to guide their shamanic hunting abilities. Numerous anecdotal reports in anthropological literature also suggest that some yaje' visions--like some common dreams--may contain precognitive information. Moreover, I have noticed that after working with yaje' for extended periods, I am often propelled into a world of uncanny intuitions and extraordinary synchronicities, a condition that lasts long after the session is over and I have returned to "normal" life.

Of course, yaje' novices should be cautious about placing too much faith in their initial visions as blueprints for real-life action. While yaje' visions--like some dreams--may contain genuine insights and clues regarding the present and future, they may contain elements of wishfulness mixed in with elements of truth. It can take considerable experience and maturity to distinguish between the two.

Don Pacho says that, when the apprentice and master are under the influence of yaje, the master can teach the apprentice directly through a process that we might call "mental transmission." According to Don Pacho, the telepathic transference of knowledge and power from master to apprentice is not a metaphor but a strictly empirical process that occurs in conjunction with the use of the magical chants. While in some cases the words of songs may assist in this process by invoking certain images through the power of suggestion, Don Pacho says that the most vital shamanic information cannot be conveyed directly in words. 11

For outsiders, the existence of yaje' spirits and the efficacy of yaje' visions may exist only in the eyes of the beholders and believers. However, based on what I have seen so far, I cannot dismiss yaje' visions as mere hallucinations or primitive superstition. It took several sessions for yaje' to cleanse my psychic windows before I could experience the spirit of yaje as a living presence. It took even more sessions before I began to see the spirit energies surrounding us, but the effort has been worth it.

Despite the emphasis in this article on defecating, vomiting, and suffering, the yaje' rituals are seldom negative experiences. Once you have survived your personal purgatory, the experience can be highly pleasant and positive. In contrast to the post-trip depression, hangover, and uncontrollable mental restlessness I have experienced with other psychedelics, yaje' has always left me feeling light, clean, calm, and filled with great optimism.

If nothing else, yaje' has enabled me to taste the wellsprings of bliss and enter into a genuine religious ecstasy, in a completely down-to-earth and unpretentious way. This may be its great paradox and great mystery. On one level, a yaje' session is a profound cathartic spiritual experience that results in the purging of pity and fear. On another level, it is a grand, rowdy party where you stay up all night in the midst of drunkenness, merrymaking, and traumatic revelations, get scared stiff and shed your worries, make friends with complete strangers, sing and curse, call on your deities--and then miraculously enter the morning without a hangover.

The yaje' ritual may start with a near-death experience, but it ultimately ends in rebirth. The sense of renewal and well being that comes as the day dawns is definitely not a delusion. It can be seen in the relaxed faces and bodies of other participants as they wake to the new day. Their radiant faces express the unpretentious, vulnerable look of young children and the illumination of those who have experienced enlightenment. Having drawn close to agony, madness, and death, the participants have come to terms with their suffering and have become better persons for it.

## NOTES

1. Although sometimes chewed and sometimes extracted cold, yaje is generally "cooked"; that is, the bark is stripped off, the vine is pounded into a pulp, and the mashed vines are boiled in water for up to a day. The vine is almost always cooked with a complementary plant, of which there are at least eighty varieties. In the community where I was initiated, the dark green leaf of another vine which Don Pacho calls el companero ("the companion") is added to the mixture, for the stated purpose of "cooling" the potion. According to Don Pacho, yaje itself is a very "hot" substance, which can "burn" internal organs if it is not balanced by this leaf.

2. In Colombia, the urbanization of yaje rituals has only occurred in an occasional and informal way. However, in Brazil, yaje visionaries have established several urban yaje' cults with many thousands of followers.

3. Throughout this essay, I have deliberately used the term "visions" rather than "hallucinations." Both may be products of the "imagination," but a hallucination implies the creation of unreal images that are the work of a diseased or malfunctioning mind. In contrast, visions carry real truths and come from a healthy and inspired mind.

4. In some Amazonian cultures, boys are initiated into the use of yaje at the age of seven or eight. According to Don Pacho, the reason is that prepubescent boys-- who are emotionally innocent, psychically clean, and sexually pure--can enter into the yaje world more easily than adults. I also acknowledge that I have seen some urbanized Colombians reach the visionary stages with remarkable speed and ease. Since most Colombians have a measure of Indian blood, I speculate that there may be a mystical genetic factor at work.

5. Of course, mastering yaje has nothing to do with being a brutish macho, or he-man. I have observed that women taking yaje generally suffer much less than men, probably because the ability to void is primarily a matter of bodily awareness, and women are often more in touch with their bodies than men. In contrast, White urban males, especially intellectuals who are out of tune with their bodies, often seem to suffer the most. Their whole ego formation is based on instinctual repression and the idea that they are smarter than everyone else--something that goes against the spirit of yaje.

6. Although the release of bodily waste is fundamentally an involuntary, organic process, our parents and society have taught us that bodily functions are dirty and disgusting. Society later uses the internalized anxieties surrounding bodily functions to teach children to deny and repress other instinctual drives. While it may be useful up to a point for children to conform to the expectations of others, most of us become slaves to a set of unconscious conditioned reflexes which not only hold us back but cause us a lot of grief and even harm. Under the influence of yaje, it is suddenly easy to understand Wilhelm Reich's concept of "body armoring." Reich argued that our neuroses stem from internalizing psychic shocks experienced in early childhood. Whenever we are punished--through words or blows--for expressing our instinctive natures, our body instinctively protects itself by forming body armoring. Moreover, because this armoring inhibits the natural functioning of internal muscles, organs, and autonomous functions, it can lead to serious physical and psychological problems later in life.

7. See R. D. Laing, *Politics of Experience* (Fanthorn, 1983); and Arthur lanov, *The Primal Scream* (Putnam Publishing Group, 1981).

8. It is worth noting that, although it is customary for participants to discuss and analyze their visions with the shaman after the session, this is usually done in a highly confidential manner. I have been told by some Native participants that it is unwise or even dangerous to reveal one's visions to anyone but the shaman.

9. The appearance of malocas in my visions was an anomaly because, while they are common in many Amazonian cultures, they are not used in the Siona community where I did my apprenticeship.

10. According to many indigenous myths and traditions, all beings were originally endowed with paranormal abilities, but humans have lost these abilities due to "contamination." It is easy to see how these visionary capacities, which were once vital to the survival of hunter-gatherers, might be forgotten and lost in urban cultures that depend upon nourishing other kinds of talents and sensibilities.

11. The memorization of myths or chants--which play such an important role in some Amazonian coca cultures--are secondary in the yaje traditions. The spontaneous yaje songs which the potion inspires in the master are not meant to be copied by the apprentice. The goal in the yaje' ritual is for the apprentice to reach a certain level of enlightenment so he can receive his own songs directly from the vine. Jimmy Weiskopf is an American-born journalist who graduated from Columbia University, New York, and Cambridge University, England. Having lived full-time in Colombia since 1977, Weiskopf is a member of the Colombia Foreign Press Association, writing for the Wall Streellournal, Time, Americas, and other publications. He also writes regularly for the Colombian Post and La Prensa, a Bogota daily. He may be reached at Apartado Aereo 55820, Bogota, Colombia.

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