

Yagé Among the Siona: Cultural Patterns in Visions

E. JEAN LANGDON

Investigations and literature concerning the use of hallucinogens among indigenous groups in the Amazon basin have been increasing at a rapid rate.¹ One aspect of the use of hallucinogens that needs further investigation is the role of cultural variables in the altered states of consciousness induced by drugs. Although Wallace (1959) drew attention to the problem some years ago, only a few studies have addressed themselves directly to it.² The purpose of this paper is to present a brief description of the use of *yagé* (*Banisteriopsis*) among the Siona Indians of the northwest Amazon basin with reference to the cultural influences on the *yagé* experience.³ Two Siona texts will be presented to illustrate the nature of "culturally influenced" visions.⁴

The data upon which this work is based were gathered during eighteen months of fieldwork in Colombia between 1970 and 1972. The study was supported in part by the Tulane University International Center for Medical Research grant AI-10050 from NIAID, NIH, United States Public Health Service.

¹ Some of the recent sources include Bristol (1966); der Marderosian et al. (1968, 1970); Dobkin de Ríos (1970a, 1970b, 1971, 1972, 1973); Harner (1962, 1968, 1972, 1973); Katz and Dobkin de Ríos (1971); Pinkley (1969); Reichel-Dolmatoff (1970, 1971); Robinson (1972); Schultes (1957, 1960, 1963, 1967, 1970); and Seijas (1969a, 1969b).

² See Dobkin de Ríos (1974) for an overview; also Dobkin de Ríos and Katz (n.d.) and Siskind (1973).

³ *Yagé* is the term most widely used in Colombia for species of *Banisteriopsis*. In Peru and Ecuador it is known as *ayahuasca*, "vine of the souls," as *caapi* in Brazil, and as *kahi* and *pinde* in other parts of Colombia.

⁴ The term "culturally influenced" visions is similar to Dobkin de Ríos's use of the term "stereotypic visions" (1974:15). I have chosen "culturally influenced" visions to emphasize the role of cultural variables in the visionary experience.

HISTORY AND SETTING

Traveling down the Putumayo river in southern Colombia, one is unaware of passing through an Indian community unless an elder in traditional dress appears along the river bank. The Siona, once a large group that ruled the upper Putumayo, have been reduced to approximately 250 individuals. About half are located in the communities of Buena Vista, Granada, and Piñuña Blanca below Puerto Asis in the Intendencia of the Putumayo. The rest are further downstream scattered along the river mixed among the white and black colonist population. Many traditional beliefs and practices have been abandoned, and they are rapidly assimilating into the mestizo culture. The indigenous political and religious organization based on the role of the shaman and the use of *yagé* has completely broken down. Previously subsistence activities were divided evenly between hunting, gathering, and horticulture, but cash crops have altered the organization of labor and resources. Western dress and food have been adopted by most Siona, and the younger generations deliberately speak Spanish as a first language and avoid addressing their children in Siona (a Western Tukanoan affiliate). Only the elders maintain the old traditions and language.

YAGÉ AMONG THE SIONA

Prior to the 1950's, the indigenous political and religious organization centered on the shaman and his ability to influence all aspects of life through his power gained from *yagé*. He played the key role in the ingestion of *yagé* and the maintenance of cultural practices surrounding it. Due principally to missionary activities, but also to the growing colonist population during the first half of this century, only a handful of Siona have pursued the career of shaman during the last forty years, and those that did failed in their endeavors to achieve the level of full competence, that of the master shaman. When the last shaman died in the 1960's, no elder felt competent to take his place as leader. Several survivors had sufficient knowledge and curing powers to cure minor illnesses stemming from supernatural causes. Moreover, they possessed extensive knowledge about the supernatural world that is reached through *yagé*. However, all of them had been through repetitive bad experiences with *yagé* and were fearful of assuming the full responsibility of shaman. The belief system and use of *yagé* described here has not yet disappeared among the Siona. Among the elders it is acknowledged in its most complete form. Even the younger generations hold to the general principles outlined, although their knowledge of the details and full complexity of the system is severely limited. *Yagé* still occupies a role of fundamental importance

in the indigenous religious and curing beliefs of the Siona. The problem they face today is a renewal and reaffirmation of those beliefs through performance of the rituals surrounding *yagé*, since no Siona feels competent to lead the community in the ceremony. Thus, the Siona now resort to shamans of neighboring tribes to lead them in the *yagé* ceremony. Naturally, the frequency of ingestion has been severely reduced, and moreover, the goals now sought in such ceremonies are limited primarily to the curing of serious illnesses and no longer include the other goals sought in the past, such as the securing of game, good weather, or prophecy of the future.

The use of *yagé* among the Siona is very similar to that of other tribes in the Amazon basin. It is ingested to know the ultimate reasons or causes for past, present, or future events, as well as to influence events, such as changing the weather, curing, or sorcery. In Siona cosmology, the events in this world are affected by hundreds of spirits that lie behind each plant, tree, rock, or animal; by spirits that populate the rivers; by those in the underworld; by those in the three heaven levels of the universe; and by those in the "ending place" at the edge of the world. Everything that happens in the world has its ultimate cause in the supernatural. This includes the normal rhythm of life, such as the change of seasons, the appearance of game or fish, and the maintenance of good health. Equally, all disruptions of this rhythm, particularly misfortunes, illness, and death, have their ultimate causes in the actions of the spirits. Contact with the supernatural beings is necessary, therefore, to assure that life proceeds normally and to defend oneself if misfortune occurs. *Yagé* provides the major means of this contact. Although many other additives are employed in the tealike brew, and other vision-producing stimulants are also taken separately, *yagé* sets the pattern for their use.

The Siona term for *yagé* is *?iko*, which signifies "remedy" in the language. All other remedies, whether used for attacking the physical symptoms of an illness or the supernatural causes, are designated as a subclass of *?iko*. The concept of *yagé* as "remedy" has a much wider application among the Siona than in Western society. For the Siona, "well-being" involves more than the physical health of an individual; it also implies the well-being of society — that all is proceeding normally, that there is food, that people and animals are performing their roles, and that there is no sickness in the Western sense. When they speak of the state of well-being, they use the term *wahi*, which signifies being alive, being in a state of fatness, greenness in the sense of ripeness as well as color, freshness, and rawness. The term *wahi* represents the growing force of life. It contrasts with the destructive force represented by the term *hū?i* "to be dying" or by *dau*, which implies sickness, thinness, blackness, darkness, and rottenness. Thus, for the individual or society there are two forces operating, one of growing life force and one of

destructive force of death and rotteness. Through *yagé* one can influence these forces.

The Siona do not have two separate terms to distinguish between hallucinogenic "remedies" aimed at supernatural causes and those which cure nonsupernaturally caused symptoms, such as Kensinger (1973:13) has described for the Cashinahua. It is apparent, however, that the distinction between the two kinds of remedies is understood covertly within the culture. Often the Siona will state that a certain remedy does not work because the cause is a supernatural agent and that *yagé* must first be taken by a shaman before the patient can "receive" the other remedies. This distinction has allowed easy acceptance of white man's remedies as those which work well upon naturally caused symptoms, while *yagé* still must be employed for the supernaturally caused illnesses. Those which are suspected of having a supernatural cause are generally the more serious and uncommon diseases.⁵ In this respect, *yagé* is the central part of the Siona religious and cosmological system. It deals with the meaning of life; it provides answers to the question of the ultimate "why" of events, as well as offering protection, provision of food, and curing powers.

The shaman, the specialist in *yagé*, is singularly important in this system. Through many years of apprenticeship and training, he builds up power and knowledge so he can interpret and influence events by contacting spirits. On most occasions, the spirits are neutral powers, with potential for good and evil. The shaman acts as a mediator, attempting to influence the supernatural beings. He bargains with them in a manner similar to that of the Desana shamans, described by Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971:125). The power of the shaman to deal with the spirits enables him to influence all aspects of Siona life. He drinks *yagé* to contact the spirit parents of the game or fish so that the animals will come out of their houses under the ground to be hunted. He drinks to influence the seasons to favor agriculture, hunting, and fishing. He drinks to find individuals lost in the jungle, and to cure people of serious illnesses and behavioral disorders. He occasionally will also use his powers to cure animals, particularly the hunting dogs. It must also be mentioned that a shaman can cause harm when he wishes, and much illness and misfortune within the tribe are blamed on sorcery.

When there were living shamans among the Siona, the *yagé* experience was a communal experience. Under the guidance of a master shaman, the adult men of the community and a few women not in a state of contamination due to pregnancy or menstruation gathered weekly to drink *yagé*.

⁵ See Seijas (1969b) for a complete explanation of this distinction. Although she is describing the distinction as it operates among a different group, it applies in a manner similar to the Siona. Also, Langdon and MacLennan (n.d.) address themselves to this distinction and to the adoption of Western medical practices.

They also united on special occasions when the necessity to take *yagé* was urgent. It appears that much of the Siona ceremony was influenced by early missionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The ritual paralleled the Catholic mass in many ways. The Siona drank *yagé* in a separate shelter located in an isolated part of the jungle. The shaman sat at one end of the shelter, with the others around the sides. The implements of the ceremony were placed on a small bench in front of the shaman. Their organization resembled that of an altar, and the *yagé* implements included a chalice for holding the *yagé* while the shaman blessed it. In recalling the ceremony, Siona informants emphasize how the shaman's role in administering the ceremony is similar to that of the priest during mass, and say it is because God authorized the shaman to be his representative among the Indians.⁶

No *yagé* ceremony can be conducted without the presence of a shaman, and for this reason they now rarely occur in Siona communities. The shaman's role is one of guiding the people through the other realities that are visited during the night of drinking *yagé*. There are two aspects of this guidance. The first is to set the theme of the visions by telling the people what they are seeing. Before they drink *yagé*, he "arranges" the *yagé* by singing of the spirits and places that he wishes to contact and chases away malevolent spirits. Then, when under the affects of *yagé* he sings of what he is seeing; he sings of the spirits who are coming and describes their clothing, faces, houses, and furniture. All the spirits have designs on their bodies and belongings, and the shaman sings of the motifs of the designs by naming the motifs and their colors. These different motifs are already known to the Siona, for they occur on the painted faces of the elders, on the decorated pots and other artifacts, and in times past on their clothing. Moreover, much of Siona oral literature includes the descriptions of the spirits and journeys to see them. Siona dress has been a conscious attempt to emulate the elegantly dressed spirit people with their beads and necklaces, sweet-smelling plants, and feather crowns. Thus, that which is supposed to be seen by the participants in the *yagé* visions is already familiar to them. Choosing from these elements, the shaman guides the visions of his people, helping them to experience other realms and spirits of the universe.

The second aspect of the shaman's role is that of protection on these journeys. There is constant danger of bad experiences due to the presence of evil spirits or contaminating agents that may arouse the "jealousy" of the *yagé*. A bad experience on *yagé* is not seeing and hearing what is

⁶ The format and description of the Siona ceremony closely parallels that of the Campa, as described by Weiss (1973). However, review of the historical sources indicate that at least in the case of the Siona, the priestly elements of the shaman's role were a definite result of early missionary influence (Langdon 1974:24-45, 110-116) rather than elements reflecting an evolutionary transition from shaman to priest as suggested by Weiss for the Campa.

expected. Instead, the individual is plunged into blackness and silence or hears the shrill zing of insects singing in the darkness. Menacing black spirits may come and attempt to tie one up. If a guiding shaman is not there to return the individual to normal consciousness by chants and beatings with nettles, it is feared the individual will die.

THE TRAINING OF SHAMANS

As already pointed out, the shaman has the knowledge and experience to contact and influence the spirits and to lead others in the visions. This "knowledge" is gained through prolonged training with an experienced or "master" shaman. When a young man decides to undergo apprenticeship, he first spends a month or more in isolation, purging his body of the substances that would otherwise obstruct his learning and cause bad visions. Then he begins prolonged periods of ingesting *yagé*, such as drinking for three nights in a row, resting one, and resuming again. This continues for periods ranging from two weeks to two months at a time. Throughout these sessions, the apprentice attempts to pass through a set of "culturally influenced" visions. It is recognized that all men must pass through the same experiences and visions if they are to accumulate knowledge.

The knowledge gained by *yagé* is not a limited concept, nor is it conceived as a single stage of enlightenment. If the comparison can be made, it is more like our educational system with a series of subjects in which one may master and specialize. All the spirits have their "design" as well as their songs which the novice learns when he "arrives" at their place. He first must pass through the visions necessary for all who wish to leave their bodies and travel. Then he is shown the visions that his teacher shaman has acquired. As the novice enlarges his repertoire of visions and songs, he increases his power with the spirits he knows and can deal with. Once well established in his knowledge, he may visit other shamans and learn their specialities. He may find that he has a facility for certain specialities, i.e. drinking to see specific spirits, for hunting, or for curing. Once he is sufficiently trained to lead his own *yagé* sessions, he may show others what he knows, but the road to knowledge never ends, for a shaman constantly strives to contact more and more spirits and see their visions.

The initial part of the *yagé* training is particularly influenced by culturally expected visions whose nature and content are common knowledge to all Siona. The following text is an account of one informant's first experiences with *yagé*. Similar accounts with the same basic elements were collected from all the other informants who began shamanistic training as young men. The text not only represents an account of what all

Siona novices expect to see when they begin training, but also illustrates the stages of knowledge that must be achieved if one is to eventually master the *yagé* experience.⁷

When I First Left My Body and Arrived

When we lived in San Antonio, my father gave me *?io yagé* (1) for the first time and I drank. At the time when the sun had reached the tops of the trees, it dawned a good day. At this hour I shouted and fell from the hammock to the ground (2). I lay there unconscious, and my older brother tied my feet. Then I saw (3).

First a big screaming fire came burning the whole world (4). In this way came *yagé* the first time, and I remembered nothing of this world. The fire came, and then the Jaguar Mother (5) appeared and said to me, "You are going to die forever, grandson. Why did you drink the *yagé*? You are to blame and will die forever. You will not see your mother, your older sisters and older brothers. What kind of a person are you, poor child, for drinking the *yagé* and dying?" Then she began to cry (6).

To the side of her I saw my casket placed and arranged. There was my twisted *chambira* fiber for making hammocks, the clothing I wear, and all my things. All of my things were put there.

"These things of yours you are going to leave. Why did you drink the *yagé*, for you will die?" she said to me screaming and crying (7).

Then a big machine burning with fire came to me. As it came toward me, it was grinding up everything in sight (8). She gathered me in her arms and said to me, "Ah, poor little grandson, you will die" (9). Then she put me on her knee and wrapped me in a long piece of cloth. The cloth was full of designs (10). Then she threw me out to the side as the cloth wrapped around me unwound.

Thus the elders have said that one must do in order to be able to see in *yagé* (11). When she throws you out, on this side one is seen as falling from the hammock, lying on the ground and turning over and over (12).

Again she came and gave me her breast to suck. "Suck this, child, the breast of the Jaguar Mother," she said to me. So I sucked her breast. "Now, good, grandson, you have sucked my breasts," she said (13).

Then seeing, I turned and when leaving (14) [my body] I saw the *yagé* people all pretty and gold. They are like people, like us (15).

They came to me singing. The youths came down singing their songs, "To you little parrot (16) the visions have been ugly, and you have suffered and cried. But now you have left and now you will cry no more, for when you drink *yagé*, you will see us here. When you arrive to us, you will no longer think of crying. Here we are.

⁷ Mallol de Recasens (1963) also presents examples of the culturally expected visions.

the living *yagé* people. We are coming to you. And you personally have come to know us; thus there will be no bad visions."

They spoke, and I saw them. Then the reed flutes came down hanging in the air. It was not yet the time for me to play them, so I just looked at them (17).

"If you had arrived, you would have played these flutes," they said to me. "But you still have not arrived to play them. Drinking another house of *yagé*, you will play them" they said to me (18). I watched as they spoke.

Thus I saw what my father gave me to see (19). When I saw, "Good," I thought, and I was very happy. Later I woke up on this side. I came back to this side and the visions were over (20). "Now it is good; I saw the visions," I thought.

The informant said that he was about twelve years old when he had this experience. The following analysis clarifies some of the elements in the text:

Prior to this experience, the informant had prepared himself for drinking *yagé* by isolating himself in the jungle and taking a series of emetics under the supervision of a shaman. The Siona relied principally on the leaves of the *yagé* vine to purge themselves till they reached a state of dizziness and momentary visions. Once the visions begin to occur, the student is then ready to begin actually drinking *yagé*. In the early stage of training, *?io yagé* (1), a class named for its burnt and thick consistency, is administered.

The first stage of drinking *yagé* is a period of plain dizziness, or "only drunkenness" (*do g ebeyi*), as expressed by the Siona. No visions accompany the dizziness but the stage must be passed through if one is to see the visions later. It is said that the dizziness and sometimes resulting "craziness" cannot be avoided, for the pleiad people left it as a necessary stage when they walked on the earth and established the customs surrounding the ingestion of *yagé*. A Siona myth tells of how the Pleiades' youngest brother, playing the role of trickster, screamed, shouted, defecated, and urinated on himself before he saw the visions. In this text the narrator refers to this period when he fell from his hammock (2) and his brother bound his feet to prevent kicking (3).

After passing through the stage of drunkenness, the narrator begins to see his first set of visions (3), which are marked by an intense fear of death (4, 8), and his first acquaintance with the Jaguar Mother (5). Facing the idea of death (4, 8) is a very important aspect of drinking *yagé*. It is said by all Siona that a man must be very strong to drink *yagé* and become a shaman. Thus, facing an intense fear of death is a test he must pass through to prove he has the strength. Throughout his entire career in *yagé* he is constantly threatened by death from spirits and other shamans. Only the strongest are able to continue living and drinking it; the weak must give it up or perhaps even die. It could be suggested that, in this respect,

only the men of strong egos or personalities became master shamans, for the weaker characters perhaps could not withstand the constant ingestion of *yagé* that is necessary for a shaman.

The Jaguar Mother (5), also known as the *Yagé* Mother, is a principal figure in the *yagé* system, for she is also the mother of the shamans, who are jaguars in their transformed state. Before she accepts the novice as her son (10), she also tests him as to his strength and fearlessness by reinforcing the fear of death. She cries and tells him that he will die (6, 7, 9). As his "grandmother" she sings the Siona mourning chants as she points to his coffin and personal effects (7). According to Siona myth, the mourning chants practiced by the Siona were originally learned from her.

When the novice sucks her breasts (13), we can see another aspect that is necessary to gain knowledge. Not only does the novice have to be strong, but the mystical death also symbolizes a return to a state of innocence and dependence upon the Jaguar Mother. Shamans transform into jaguars when they drink *yagé*, and the Jaguar Mother becomes their mother when they become shamans. Thus, this vision is a symbol of mystical death in which the apprentice leaves this world through death and is reborn as a child of the Jaguar Mother. His dependency and infant status are symbolized by drinking from her breasts.

Once the stage of fear is completed, the informant "turns" from his fear and begins to experience the visions that will give him knowledge and power (14). These visions are pleasant and beautiful to see. In them one meets the spirit companions, the *yagé* people, who accompany the Siona shamans and instruct them as to what they are seeing. The informant tells us that they look like the Siona, not only in their physical features, but also in their dress and adornments (15). The Siona say that their own manner of dress has come from copying the clothing and markings of the beautiful people in the visions.

The *yagé* people address him as *ho?ya Kiyi* [domesticated parrotlet] (16). The term *ho?ya* means "domesticated" and refers to a fundamental social order perceived by the Siona. Man's domain is the domesticated domain, and all his animals and plants are his "domesticates," implying his role as master and protector of them. In the same sense, the *yagé* people become the spirit allies of the novices and have the role of protecting him. The relation between the shaman and his people is expressed in the same way. The people are the *ho?ya* of the shaman. In the spirit world, the wild animals are the "domesticates" of their spirit parent.

The term "parrotlet" (*kiyi*) refers to a small parrot that is regarded as a representation of the novice's soul. Very often in dreams and *yagé* visions, the soul of the Siona appears in the form of a bird. The shaman's soul appears as a scarlet macaw; an adult's soul as a species of oriole; and that of children and youths as the parrotlet.

As mentioned, the spirits all have their songs, and the learning of their songs and other music is an important aspect of acquiring knowledge. All shamans play small reed flutes bound in red or white thread. The Siona say that these flutes fall from the sky where the *yagé* people live. In this case, the informant sees the flutes, but cannot reach them yet in order to play them (17). The *yagé* people inform him that he must drink another night (house) of *yagé* to do so (18). This demonstrates the cumulative nature of the visions. Each night of drinking the novice sees and learns a little more of what he is desiring and expecting to see.

The informant tells us that he is happy to have seen what his father intended for him to see (19). His father conveyed this when he "arranged" the *yagé*, singing about the visions that would occur, and when he sang during the time that they were both under the effects of *yagé*. Earlier in the text, we have already been told that he was prepared by the elders to expect the stage of fear (11). Moreover, the motif content of the geometric designs (10) are part of common knowledge, since in the past the Siona decorated their faces, clothing, pottery, and other implements with designs inspired by *yagé*.

In three parts of the text the narrator reminds us that the experience is one of double reality (12, 14, 20). In the first he contrasts the two sides by pointing out that the spinning thrust from the Jaguar Mother is seen on "this side" as one falling from the hammock and turning over on the ground (12). When he passes from the stage of fear to that of visions of knowledge, he then leaves his body and travels in the other side (14). Finally, when the travels are over, he returns to "this side" of reality (20).

The informant continued to drink *yagé*. He "arrived" to play the flutes and continued to build up his knowledge. The accumulation of this knowledge is marked by the growth of a substance called *dau* within the body. The substance *dau* is both a symbol of the shaman's knowledge and his power that results from that knowledge. When one learns from another shaman, he receives part of the teacher's *dau*. The Siona concept of *dau* is very similar to the Jivaro *tsentsak* as described by Harner (1973:17), although it is not possible to verify if an actual object was passed from the master shaman to the novice in the same manner. When it is in the shaman's body, it is an intangible substance dispersed throughout the body, but when it is taken out to pass to the novice or to cause illness, it appears as a physical object. The common forms are a spine, a rock, or a lump of rottenness. At times it may appear as a shield around the shaman which is used for protection when other shamans are throwing their *dau* at him.

LOSS OF KNOWLEDGE

Dau has a double-edged meaning. As it grows and gives more power to the man, it also makes him more susceptible to its damage. The Siona say it makes the shaman "delicate." This means that he can be affected by the contamination of menstruating or pregnant women and their spouses. This contamination will harm the *dau*, causing bad bodily feeling and bad visions when drinking *yagé*. *Dau* may also be damaged through the conscious effort of another shaman to destroy the power of a rival. This may be done by the shaman who gives the *yagé* to the other to drink. He can "think evil" as he arranges the *yagé*, and thus the victim will suffer a bad trip. The bad visions generally result in sickness afterward, and it is said by the Siona that the cure involves removing all the damaged *dau* from his body. In other words, it causes a great setback in one's progress, for it means that one loses part or all of one's knowledge and power. The other manner in which *dau* can be damaged is through sorcery in which the aggressor sends a spirit to cause illness to the other, so that the *dau* must be removed to cure him. When an individual's *dau* is damaged, it is very difficult for him to continue his work with *yagé*. Instead of seeing the expected visions that the master shaman is preparing for him, the victim is plagued by frightening and evil visions. As is shown in the following text, these visions are not without their cultural content. They are full of cultural symbols that represent sickness, sorcery, and death to the Siona. The symbols take on frightening and realistic visual forms that force the victim once again to face death. In the first text, the narrator was expecting the frightening experience; however, in the following text, the fear of death is unexpected and the surprise element inspires in the victim the thought of never returning to this side of reality.

How I Lost my Knowledge

When I was about fifteen I went to the jungle with my brother-in-law. "Let's go kill a tapir," said Dútu Wati. We went into the jungle a long way. As we walked, the dogs made a wild turkey fly, and my brother-in-law went after it. "Stand here and wait," he said.

"Okay," I said and stood and waited. I was standing by the root of a *chonta* palm (1), and suddenly there was a *tūūūūūh* sound from the ground (2). "What did I hear?" I thought, listening.

Then from the ground came the sound like a newborn baby. "Ūmmu Ūmmmm," growled the earth. Then like a child crying, "Ūmmee ūmmee umnn ūnnnee ūnneeh," the spirit growled. It cried, and I listened.

"Who cried?" I thought. Then my brother-in-law whistled, but I could not shout at all. My mouth was paralyzed. I couldn't walk and was completely stunned. "Who is doing that speaking?" I thought, listening. Again my brother-in-law

shouted, and I didn't answer at all. Then again he shouted, and I took hold of myself and went to him.

"Why didn't you answer?" he said.

"No," I said, "Someone spoke to me like a child crying from inside the roots of the *chonta* palm" (3).

"A spirit wants to eat you, and for this he cried," he said (4).

"What cried as a small child?" I said.

"Perhaps the spirit has eaten you," he said.

"I don't know," I said.

He had found the tracks of a tapir, and we followed and killed a small tapir. "Let's return now, for we can't walk in the jungle if you are bad," he said. We returned. "How does your body feel?" he asked me.

We arrived at the house, and it became dark. I went to the river to bathe and returned. Very rapidly the sickness came (5). A very strong fever came to me. "Are you dying, child?" said my father (6).

"Yes, I am dying," I said. Then I had diarrhea, and I felt very bad as my whole stomach churned. The diarrhea was a black liquid (7) with rotten leaves (8). I told my father, "Father, black leaves are coming out."

"If that is so, a spirit has eaten you, child," he said (9). I began to vomit a lot. I vomited green leaves (10). "Someone has thought evil and for this the spirit has eaten you," my father said. Then he sang a chant of the spirits over a remedy (11). He said nothing as he gave me the remedy to drink. Then he went to the jungle to look for jungle remedies. He came back and chanted over the remedy and said, "Vomit this child. Don't be afraid."

So I drank it and threw up. I threw up only black liquid. Then again I drank and vomited. Finally clear liquid (12), only the remedy came out. So I told my father, "Father, I threw up well."

"How did you vomit?" he said.

"First only black liquid I vomited. Then afterwards, water liquid, I vomited."

"Thus being, perhaps the spirit did not eat you but only frightened you," he said (13). Then he blew over me (14), and saw a bad dream (15). "Ignacio has thought evil of you. Since you were beginning to see the *yagé* visions, he thought evil so that the spirit would scare you in order that the visions that he gave you would be lost," he said (16). "Thus being, he did that, and the spirit didn't eat you. He only frightened you to clean you of the visions that he had given you." I listened to him without speaking.

Then they cooked *yagé*, and my older brother carried me to the *yagé* house. My father blew *dáu* (17). He cured all the spirit *dau* that had been sent to me when I was frightened. He sang *yagé* songs and seeing all that the spirit had given me, he cured me (18). I got better and became well.

Time passed and they cooked another house of *yagé*. They cooked, and I thought that I would drink *yagé*. My father sang many *yagé* songs (19). He sang, and then he cured me (20), and I asked him to give me *yagé* to drink.

"You want to drink?" he said.

"Yes, I want to drink," I said. He began to cure the *yagé*. He arranged it, finished, and then blew (21). "Drink one mouthful, child, and you will see," he said (22).

So I drank one mouthful, and the *yagé* came to me. When it came, the *yagé* showed only black insects. Then I saw black men and their land (23). Thus the *yagé* came to me. Then the drunkenness spirit people came, the *yagé* drunkenness spirits (24). They arrived and tried to tie me up (25). They tried to do so, but I defended myself. I worked to defend myself, and then the drunkenness people pulled out their tongues and came screaming at me. I was not remembering

anything of this side. I was dying (26). My father had gone to the jungle singing (27). When he returned, I was not remembering anything of this world.

"Oh! Little brother is dying," said my older brother coming over to me.

"Singing parrot," he said (28). I wasn't thinking anything. Then he sang a chant of the spirit. I couldn't swallow, so he got a knife and pried open my teeth and poured some water in my mouth. The water flowed in smoothly. Then he blew *dau*. I saw then the heaven people, *yagé* people; like us they are (29). They came as if arriving personally and came down on a big mirror. With this mirror my father was seeing and curing me. He blew and saw the place of drunkenness. Much *yagé* language he spoke, also spirit language. He blew, and I was seeing what he did and thus came back to this side. I turned, and all the *yagé* people seemed to be coming down to the place of my father. Thus, my father showed me the visions. Thus he cured me from dying, and rapidly I came turning to this side. When I came back, I was well (30).

In the text presented here, the narrator tells of a frightening experience in the forest which led to his loss of power. The experience related is a common means of sorcery among the Siona. A shaman enlists the collaboration of a spirit to take his victim by surprise, and the frightening encounter results in sickness. In recounting the experience, the narrator includes several culturally significant elements that indicate evidence of sorcery and supernatural elements in the events. The first is the sound *tūūūh* that is heard in the quiet of the jungle (2). The sound is that of a door in the ground opening. It is said by the Siona that when the spirits of the earth leave the "house," the opening and closing of their door can be heard. Another element, mentioned twice, is that of the *chonta* palm (1, 3). This palm has spines covering its trunk. When describing *dau* in the form of a witchcraft substance, the Siona often say that it resembles the spine of this particular palm. Mention of it twice helps to set the scene for sorcery.

Following the frightening experiences, the narrator becomes ill. The manner of onset of the illness also indicates supernatural causation (5). It comes quickly and severely after a bath in the river. Many supernaturally caused illnesses begin in the same way. After a strange experience or dream, the victim bathes in the river and becomes ill immediately. A possible interpretation of this is that the initial fright resulting from the spirit encounter created a weakened state in the victim so that he was vulnerable to a river spirit during his bath.

When describing the illness, its symptoms, and the process of the disease, certain fundamental concepts regarding the dichotomy between "well-being" and dying are expressed. True sickness is referred to by the Siona as *dau*. It is distinguished from minor ailments which are referred to by describing the symptoms, i.e. "it hurts," "it itches," "it burns." However, when an ailment persists, it becomes a true sickness, *dau*. Here the double meaning of *dau* comes into play. Not only does it mean that the patient is truly ill, but also that the *dau* within him may consist of a

substance of sorcery that a shaman has sent. If so, the *dau* must be removed by a shaman before the patient can become well, regardless of the progression of his physical symptoms. In this use, *dau* also signifies the destructive forces in life that operate against the positive forces of growth. Synonyms for having *dau* as an illness include terms that mean the person is thin or dying (6), or has rotteness (8) or blackness (7). Synonyms which are associated with living *wahi* include being fat, being green (in the sense of color and of growth), or being well. In the text we can see how these symbolic concepts operate on a concrete level. Very early after the fright, the brother-in-law speculates that a spirit wishes to "eat" the victim (4, 9), thus causing thinness and emaciation that is associated with death. The victim tells his father that he is dying (6), and he vomits black and rotten leaves (7, 8). Luckily, the black liquid is followed by green leaves (10), indicating that he is not totally rotten nor dying inside. When administered the emetic, he eventually purges himself of all the rotteness and vomits only water and the remedy (12).

Sorcery is immediately suspected (4, 9, 13), because of the fright and rapid onset of serious symptoms (5). The narrator's father, a shaman, performs a minor curing rite of "blowing" (14). This ceremony helps the shaman to dream (15). Like visions, dreams also help to interpret events. In this case, the dream not only confirms the suspicions, but also indicates the aggressor to be another shaman, Ignacio. Ignacio, who once had shown his visions to the victim, was jealous and fearful of the victim's potential as a shaman and thus sent the spirit to destroy the victim's knowledge (16).

The process of curing is not complete. The narrator has been administered herbal emetics (11) for purging the rotteness within him. These emetics help to cure the physical symptoms, but the witchcraft substance *dau* still remains within him and requires a ritual curing ceremony. It is partially begun in a "blowing" rite, and is completed by the full ritual in which *yagé* is ingested and full explanation of the event is known (17, 18). The Siona often speak of this dual nature of curing by remarking that without the *yagé* ceremony, any disease resulting from sorcery cannot be cured, regardless of the curing of the physical symptoms.

Once well, time having passed, the narrator wishes to resume drinking and learning from *yagé*. His father prepared it by cleansing it and singing of the visions that would be seen once it was ingested (19, 21). He cleansed his son in order to remove any possible evil substance or spirit that might be about to cause bad visions (20). Once fully cleansed and knowing what visions his father intended to show him, the informant testingly drinks a small amount of *yagé* to see if the effects will be as expected (22).

Instead of seeing the beautiful visions, he is plunged into a world of blackness. As discussed, this blackness is associated with the dying forces

of life (23). The black men are standardized conceptions of the spirits that also appear in nightmares. Seeing blackness and feeling nauseated (24), the informant faces the possibility of death as the black men try to tie him up to prevent him from returning to this side of reality (25), of which the informant is slowly losing consciousness (26).

Once his father returns from his journeys to the jungle spirits (27), he calls to his son using his *yagé* name (28). He performs a curing ceremony to show his son the spirit allies, the *yagé* people, so that they will defend him from the black men (29). He also goes to the place of darkness and, with his knowledge of songs, he brings his son back to this side of reality (30).

Although the informant was cleansed again after this experience by prolonged periods of ingesting emetics, when he resumed the study of *yagé*, he had more bad visions as well as spirit encounters that never let him progress far enough to become a shaman who can lead the ceremonies. His knowledge is sufficient to do so, for he has had extensive experience with *yagé*, but he cannot resolve the problem of bad visions.

CONCLUSIONS

This informant's inability to continue the *yagé* study to its full culmination resulting in the status of shaman is an example of a frequent occurrence. All the Siona elders in the community of Buena Vista claim that similar incidents destroyed their knowledge so they could not lead the ceremonies by themselves. All Siona men attempted to go as far as possible in the study of *yagé*. It was expected of men as part of their role as protector, provider, and master of the family. Once a man became a shaman, he performed a similar role for the community. However, few of the men who attempted to become shamans actually achieved the status, and among those who did, many often lost the status due to bad visions. These bad visions are always blamed on sorcery rather than on incompetence.

Given the high incidence of bad visions, one can see the importance of the cultural determinants therein. The culturally expected visions are intimately related to a psychic equilibrium which enables a Siona who is constantly ingesting the hallucinogen to retain some sense of normal reality. The *yagé* experience is treated with great respect. It is taken only under certain conditions when a master shaman is present to lead the visions and help those who may encounter trouble. Moreover, the constant ingestion of *yagé* that is necessary when serving as an apprentice is influenced very heavily by cultural elements. The novice strives to see culturally expected visions. The Siona have known through oral literature and experiences related by their fathers what they should expect when they drink *yagé*. Moreover, the shaman sings of the visions before they

drink and also during the period of inebriation so that his songs play a role in guiding the visions the novice is seeing. These cultural determinants function to help the individual organize his hallucinogenic experience. When he becomes experienced with *yagé*, he then may do his own guiding. However, by the time this stage is reached, it can be inferred that he has sufficient experience and confidence to handle the unknown without the support of a master shaman. Those who do not have the psychic stability within them to withstand prolonged periods of ingesting *yagé* experience bad visions and tend to reduce their use of it. Bad visions occur when the individual loses the direction that is being given to him, and he is plunged into darkness filled with the symbolism of death and destruction. They are unexpected visions filled with symbolic elements that frighten them and cause the experience to be unpleasant. The culture, however, provides an explanation for the man who cannot follow the career of shaman. There is no shame in saying that a shaman with greater knowledge has destroyed your own and that you cannot continue to fulfill the masculine duty of becoming a shaman.

REFERENCES

BRISTOL, MELVIN

- 1966 The psychotropic *Banisteriopsis* among the Sibundoy of Colombia. *Botanical Museum Leaflets, Harvard University* 21:113-140.

DER MARDEROSIAN, A. H., *et al.*

- 1968 Native use and occurrence of N-N-dimethyltryptamine in the leaves of *Banisteriopsis rusbyana*. *American Journal of Pharmacy* 140(5):137-147.
- 1970 The use and hallucinatory principles of a psychoactive beverage of the Cashinahua tribe (Amazon Basin). *Drug Dependence* 5:7-15.

DOBKIN DE RÍOS, MARLENE

- 1970a A note on the use of *Ayahuasca* among urban mestizo populations in the Peruvian Amazon. *American Anthropologist* 72(6):1419-1422.
- 1970b *Banisteriopsis* in witchcraft and healing activities in Iquitos, Peru. *Economic Botany* 24(3):296-300.
- 1971 *Ayahuasca*, the healing vine. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 17(4):256-269.
- 1972 *Visionary vine: psychedelic healing in the Peruvian Amazon*. San Francisco: Chandler.
- 1973 "Peruvian hallucinogenic folk healing: an overview," in *Psychiatry: proceedings of the fifth World Congress of Psychiatry*, volume two. Edited by Ramon de la Fuente and Maxwell Weisman. Amsterdam: Excerpta Medica.
- 1974 "Cultural persona in drug-induced altered states of consciousness," in *Social and cultural identity*. Edited by Thomas K. Fitzgerald. Southern Anthropological Society Proceedings 8. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

DOBKIN DE RÍOS, MARLENE, FRED KATZ

n.d. "Hallucinogens, music, and the jungle gym in consciousness." *Ethos*. In press.

HARNER, MICHAEL J.

1962 Jivaro souls. *American Anthropologist* 64:258-272.

1968 The sound of rushing water. *Natural History* 77(6):28-33, 60-61.

1972 *The Jivaro: people of the sacred waterfalls*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday.

HARNER, MICHAEL J., editor

1973 *Hallucinogens and shamanism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

KATZ, FRED, MARLENE DOBKIN DE RÍOS

1971 Hallucinogenic music: an analysis of the role of whistling in Peruvian *Ayahuasca* healing sessions. *Journal of American Folklore* 84(333):320-327.

KENSINGER, KENNETH

1973 "Banisteriopsis usage among the Peruvian Cashinahua," in *Hallucinogens and shamanism*. Edited by Michael J. Harner. New York: Oxford University Press.

LANGDON, E. JEAN

1974 "The Siona medical system: beliefs and behavior." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Tulane University, New Orleans.

LANGDON, E. JEAN, ROBERT A. MAC LENNAN

n.d. "Conceptos etiológicos de los Sibundoy y la medicina occidental. *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*. In press. Bogotá.

MALLOL DE RECASENS, M. R.

1963 Cuatro representaciones de los imagenes alucinatorias originadas por la toma del yagé. *Revista Colombiana de Folclor*, second series 3(8):59-79. Bogotá.

MALLOL DE RECASENS, M. R., T. JOSÉ DE RECASENS

1964-1965 Contribución al conocimiento del casique curaca entre los Sions. *Revista Colombiana de Antropología* 13:91-145. Bogotá.

PINKLEY, HOMER

1969 Plant admixtures to *Ayahuasca*, the South American hallucinogenic drink. *Lloydia* 32(3):305-314.

REICHEL-DOLMATOFF, GERARDO

1970 Notes on the cultural extent of the use of yagé (*Banisteriopsis Caapi*) among the Indians of the Vaupes, Colombia. *Economic Botany* 24(1):32-34.

1971 *Amazonian cosmos: the sexual and religious symbolism of the Tukano Indians*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

ROBINSON, SCOTT

1972 "Shamanism entre los Kofanes," in *Actas y memorias del XXXIX Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, 1970*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos.

SCHULTES, RICHARD

1957 The identity of the malpighiaceae narcotics of South America. *Botanical Museum Leaflets, Harvard University* 18:1-56.

1960 Pharmacognosy. *The Pharmaceutical Sciences* (third lecture series) 1965:138-185.

1963 Botanical sources of the New World narcotics. *Psychedelic Review* 1(2):145-166.

1967 "The place of ethnobotany in the ethnopharmacologic search for

- psychotomimetic drugs," in *Ethnopharmacologic search for psychoactive drugs*. Edited by D. Efron, 33-57. Public Health Service Publication 1645. Washington, D.C.
- 1970 The plant kingdom and hallucinogens (part III). *Bulletin of Narcotics* 22(1):24-52.
- SEIJAS, HAYDEÉ
- 1969a Algunos aspectos de la etnomedicina de los Indios Sibundoy de Colombia. *Boletín del Departamento de Antropología IVIC* 6:5-16. Caracas.
- 1969b "Medical system of Sibundoy Indians." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Tulane University, New Orleans.
- SISKIND, JANET
- 1973 "Visions and cures among the Sharanahua," in *Hallucinogens and shamanism*. Edited by Michael J. Harner. New York: Oxford University Press.
- WALLACE, ANTHONY
- 1959 Cultural determinants of response to hallucinatory experience. *American Medical Association Archives of General Psychiatry* 1:58-69.
- WEISS, GERALD
- 1973 "Shamanism and priesthood in light of the Campa *Ayahuasca* ceremony," in *Hallucinogens and shamanism*. Edited by Michael J. Harner. New York: Oxford University Press.