

The Sound Tactics of Upper Putumayo Shamans

By

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Abstract

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In this thesis, I investigate the varied ways in which Upper Putumayo *taitas*, or shamans, understand and use sound in their ritual practice. *Taitas* perform sound laboriously for large periods of time and under strenuous circumstances during *tomas de yajé*, rituals that involve drinking *yajé*, a potent DMT-containing psychoactive brew made from local plant species. In this thesis I argue for the importance of understanding what *taitas* do – and shamanism in general – as a form of labor; in doing so, I propose a framework that permits theorizing the commodification of cultural practices that, although presently embedded in capital relations, still exist in imaginaries that place them in a distant pre-capitalist past.

Sound production is an essential, deliberate part of a *taita's* labor, particularly in ritual practice. It matters for *taitas* because it is an integral part of how they define and identify themselves; *taitas* also perform sound as a way of distinguishing their ritual practice from that of other *taitas*. *Taitas* also use sound to key frames and define context in order to help participants make sense of what they experience during the sensorially demanding *tomas de yajé*; sound helps participants experience the *pintas* – visions, hallucinations – produced by *yajé* while simultaneously reminding them that they are participating in a *toma de yajé*, aiding them in remaining grounded to the ritual place that *taitas* construct. Through sound, *taitas* construct a place that is to a large degree independent of material constraints. *Taitas* are able to recreate it anywhere they go by indexing Amazonia sonically.

Finally, I argue for *cosmopolitan listening*, a way of listening that implies taking an ethical stance towards the human and non-human environments we encounter. Drawing from the particular case of *tomas de yajé*, I also raise broader questions about the ways in which non-verbal sound production constitutes a form of labor that can define place, context, and frames in more general situations, arguing for an understanding of sound as a way of not only negotiating with an environment, but oftentimes creating it.

a Las Bóvedas de Cartagena de Indias
y
a la memoria de Juan Delgado Delgado

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Introduction

While walking along one of downtown Bogotá's busiest streets I was struck by a graffiti mural painted on an outer wall of an apartment building. At the bottom of the mural there are two men dressed in suits lying on the floor, an image of a cityscape backlit by a full moon in the background. The men's expressions are simultaneously of astonishment and painful strife; one of them is vomiting profusely while both seem to be having – and feeling – visions. Yellow rays of light are projecting from their eyes and chests onto the main portion of the mural. At the center of the men's visions there is a *taita*, or an indigenous shaman, looking over and waving what seems to be a thick bundle of leaves. Surrounding the *taita* there is a bird, a jaguar, a gorilla, and a wolf, all of the animals with mouths wide open in fierce sound production. There are also plants around the *taita* and the animals. At the very top of the mural there is a title in capitalized white letters: *Retorno al Origen*, or "Return to the Origin." At the bottom and in smaller print we read *Sagrada resistencia*, or "Sacred resistance." The images on the wall are unquestionably about *tomas de yajé*.

Tomas de yajé 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.¹ People assemble to drink *yajé* for reasons ranging from looking for healthcare and dealing with delicate health issues to searching for inspiration or guidance in the making of important decisions. *Yajé*, once only found amongst indigenous groups in certain parts of the Amazon, is becoming increasingly known 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 Perú as the epicenter of the so-called *ayahuasca* tourism industry; it can also be found in cities across South America, North America, and Europe.² It is also possible to order do-it-yourself kits online, casually, at websites like amazon.com. There are also syncretic *ayahuasca* religions, the Brazilian *Santo Daime*, *União do Vegetal*, and *Barquinha* being the most renowned worldwide, counting with thousands of members spread throughout various localities across the world.³

¹ Some notable works that engage with *yajé*, or *ayahuasca*, include: Michael T. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, Paperback ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Beatriz Labate and Edward John Baptista da Macrae, *Ayahuasca, Ritual and Religion in Brazil* (London ; Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2010); Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Henrik Jungaberle, *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* (Wien; Zürich; Berlin; Münster: Lit, 2011); Luis Eduardo Luna, *Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman* (Berkeley, Calif: North Atlantic Books, 1991); Benny Shanon, *The Antipodes of the Mind: Charting the Phenomenology of the Ayahuasca Experience* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Plutarco Naranjo, *Ayahuasca: Etnomedicina y Mitología* (Quito, Ecuador: Ediciones Libri Mundi, 1983).

² On the topic of *ayahuasca* tourism, sources ranging from doctoral dissertations to drug policy papers and a *Time* magazine article include: Christine L. Holman, "Spirituality for Sale: An Analysis of Ayahuasca Tourism" (ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY, 2010), <http://gradworks.umi.com/34/10/3410631.html>; Evgenia Fotiou, *From Medicine Men to Day Trippers: Shamanic Tourism in Iquitos, Peru* (BiblioBazaar, 2011); Kenneth W. Tupper, "The Globalization of Ayahuasca: Harm Reduction or Benefit Maximization?," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 19, no. 4 (August 2008): 297–303; Kenneth W. Tupper, "Ayahuasca Healing beyond the Amazon: The Globalization of a Traditional Indigenous Entheogenic Practice," *Global Networks* 9, no. 1 (January 1, 2009): 117–36; Labate and Jungaberle, *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*; Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Mauro William Barbosa de Almeida, "Ayahuasca Mamancuma merci beaucoup : internacionalização e diversificação do vegetalismo ayahuasqueiro peruano," Tese de Doutorado, March 18, 2011, <http://www.bibliotecadigital.unicamp.br/document/?code=000796213>; John Otis, "Down the Amazon in Search of Ayahuasca," *Time*, April 8, 2009, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1889631,00.html>.

³ See, for example, Andrew Dawson, *Santo Daime: A New World Religion* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); Edward John Baptista das Neves Macrae, *El Santo Daime Y La Espiritualidad Brasileña*, 1. ed



Figure 1 - *Retorno al Origen*, graffiti in downtown Bogotá.⁴

(Quito, Ecuador: Abya-Yala, 2000); Labate and Macrae, *Ayahuasca, Ritual and Religion in Brazil*; Cristina Rocha and Manuel A. Vásquez, eds., *The Diaspora of Brazilian Religions*, International Studies in Religion and Society, volume 16 (Boston: Brill, 2013).

⁴ A brief note on photography: I am including several photographs that are not referenced explicitly anywhere; the photographs, like the text, could stand independently of one another. It is my intention to provide a productive visual

In this thesis, my focus is on the sound tactics of Upper Putumayo shamans in Colombia. *Taitas* perform sound laboriously for large periods of time and under strenuous circumstances during *tomas de yajé*; *taitas* use sound to key different frames 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, to a large degree, 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 thesis I argue for the importance of understanding what *taitas* do – and shamanism in general – as a form of labor; I also explore the reasons for and ways in which sound production becomes an essential, deliberate part of a *taita's* labor, particularly in ritual practice. Sound production matters for *taitas* because it is an integral part of how they define and identify themselves; *taitas* also perform sound as a way of distinguishing their ritual practice from that of other *taitas*. My approach stems from a serious engagement with understanding shamanism in terms of Marx's conception of labor, discussed by David Graeber 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."⁵

Drinking *yajé* 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; participants receive visions often described as hallucinatory. The sounds performed by *taitas*, however, are repetitive and simple. My point of departure here stems from a basic property of *yajé* – it is a DMT-containing admixture prepared from the bark of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and other plants, most frequently the leaves of *chacrana* (*Psychotria viridis*) or sometimes *chagropanga* (*Diplopterys cabrerana*). The most salient aspect of drinking *yajé* is the fact that it produces visions or hallucinations or reveals hidden aspects of reality, depending on whom you ask. There is a thin line between reality and fiction here, a point of contention I will not explore – instead, I favor referring to what those who drink *yajé* see and experience as *pintas*, the term *taitas* and *yajé* drinkers use.⁶ My enquiry starts with a deceptively simple question: why study music and sound in *yajé* rituals if the substance affects those who consume it regardless of their hearing faculties and abilities? Why bother about sound and music if *yajé's* physical and mental effects rely – to a large degree – on the beverage's chemical composition?

Some years before coming across the mural in Bogotá, I had participated in *tomas de yajé* in the town of Sibundoy, in the upper part of the Putumayo region of southern Colombia. During one *toma*, before the ritual had officially started, the *taita* was chatting informally with

complement without pointing to the photographs directly, that is, without writing statements like "See figure x." Unless noted otherwise, all photographs taken by Julia Bozer.

⁵ David Graeber, "Value: Anthropological Theories of Value." In *A Handbook Of Economic Anthropology* (Edward Elgar Pub, 2005), 450.

⁶ For a detailed article dealing with a similar conundrum, see Martin Holbraad, "Truth beyond Doubt: Ifá Oracles in Havana," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 2, no. 1 (June 19, 2012): 81–109. Thanks to Ana María Ochoa for pointing me to this source. What Holbraad proposes for Ifá practitioners might be applicable to *yajé* practitioners. From the abstract: "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."

participants that had gathered at his house that night.⁷ He winked at a group of us and subtly gestured that we should pay attention to what he was about to do. From his altar he grabbed a small metallic object in the shape of a jaguar head and snuck behind a young man known to be a regular at this particular *taita's tomas*. The *taita* blew into the jaguar head and produced a loud growl that, to everyone's surprise, sounded like a real jaguar. The young man jumped, startled by what he had just heard behind him and turned around immediately. He met the *taita's* face, which remained impassive and uncompromising for a few tense seconds. The *taita's* expression grew increasingly serious as the young man looked more and more confused, almost scared. Shortly after, the *taita's* blank stare broke out in uncontrollable laughter. The young man and the whole room then joined in in playful banter.

The incident, apparently unremarkable, points to several of the arguments I will be developing throughout this thesis. For one, the *taita's* use of humor before the beginning of the *toma* points to a kind of shamanism that cannot be understood narrowly in terms of rigid categories like sacrality and profanity. Rather, a definition of shamanism that makes room for someone like this playful, almost irreverent *taita* allows us to conceive of shamanism as a more quotidian activity, in brief, as a form of labor that depends more on real-time interactions and less on romantic images of shamans as ancient, mystical beings. Additionally, it reminds us that *taitas* deliberately dedicate significant energy to indexing the Amazon as a fundamental part of the way in which they conduct *tomas de yajé*. This brief moment of lighthearted exchange draws attention to the way sound production is imbricated in questions of social interaction, histories of exchange between different groups of people, and broader human-nature relationships. In a country like Colombia, what does it mean that a vast majority of the population imagines indigenous populations and, more generally, Amazonia, through the sounds and images associated to increasingly popular *taitas* that circulate nationally and internationally guiding *tomas de yajé*?

Sibundoy, Putumayo, Amazonia

The Valley of Sibundoy is located in the northern part of the Putumayo region of Colombia – the valley is the central part of what is known as the Upper Putumayo. At a height of 2,600 meters above sea level, it lies at an intermediate point between the Andes and the Amazon. There are four municipalities in the valley: Santiago, Colón, Sibundoy, and San Francisco. The majority of the population is either Kamsá or Inga. Although historically a Kamsá majority inhabited the valley, the Inga started settling there after the fall of the Incan empire. What for some centuries was disputed territory and ongoing rivalry between two groups has become peaceful coexistence since the beginning of the 20th century. Although both groups maintain distinct linguistic divisions, inter-marriage is common and the different municipalities often engage in communal festivities. The Valley of Sibundoy is particularly significant in Colombia because it has been a historical site of exchange between the Andean and Amazonian regions.⁸ It has commonly been known as “the gateway to the Amazon,” and the Capuchin missionaries established one of their biggest dioceses and centers of operations there in the early 1900s, maintaining sustained operations in the area for the greater part of the century.

⁷ Throughout this thesis I will not name any *taita* directly.

⁸ For a detailed history and ethnography of the Kamsá and the Inga, see Carlos Ernesto Pinzón Castaño, Rosa Suárez P, and Gloria Garay A., *Mundos en red: la cultura popular frente a los retos del siglo XXI* (Univ. Nacional de Colombia, 2004).

Forty one percent of the Colombian territory is part of the Amazon, while less than two percent of the country's population lives there. The region has been, historically, a strategic site of natural resource exploitation, and its difficult access and particular living conditions have continuously placed it as a remote and unknown, yet highly coveted, area. From colonial times,



Figure 2 - Capuchin missionary postcard, “Song rehearsals” from Caquetá, Colombia, in Archivo de la Diócesis de Sibundoy⁹

when the famous golden city of El Dorado was often hoped to be found at the river's next bend, to the atrocious rubber plantation operations of La Casa Arana, the Amazon has excited the imagination of travelers, explorers, entrepreneurs, and governments alike. In present-day Colombia, the area is often thought of as one of the more thriving hiding spots of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and as a site of armed conflict between FARC guerrillas, the Colombian Army, and paramilitary groups.

Recognizing the region's strategic political, military, natural, and economic significance, in this thesis I engage directly with some of the actors that have been historically considered less important: its indigenous inhabitants. I conducted fieldwork with *taitas*, community members, and visitors traveling amongst the Kamsá and the Inga in the Valley of Sibundoy for a period of two months in early 2012, and for three months in the summer of 2013. My first encounter with Upper Putumayo *taitas* and *tomas de yajé* happened in 2010.

⁹ I conducted fieldwork at the Archivo de la Diócesis de Sibundoy; among other forms of documentation, there is a large, mostly unorganized collection of photographs taken by Capuchin missionaries. Some of the earliest are from the early 20th century and the oldest ones are from the 1970s. Several of these photographs were turned into postcards that were then circulated among the Capuchin missionary networks worldwide.

Demistifying Shamanism

Whenever I conversed about *yajé* in Colombia, I could tell most of the people I spoke with were quickly polarized. Some were 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 spirituality, sacred ancestral knowledge, healing, and communion with nature. The great majority of the accounts I recorded necessarily reduced encounters with *yajé* to either profound sacrality or to 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. After all, a close look at the discharge reveals that in the green liquid expelled 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 following of rigid categories easily renders *taitas* as caricatures, reifying an essentialization and exoticization of indigenous populations. Michael Taussig, for example, has argued that *taitas*' perceived power in Colombia hinges on the fact that they have been historically perceived uncritically and simultaneously as beings of terror and healing.¹⁰ In this thesis, it is my intent 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.

Sensorially dense, sensorially demanding

I situate my work along those who take the research about and through the senses seriously. Throughout this thesis, I will demonstrate that the aural is a crucial element of *yajé* rituals; engaging with sound production in *tomas de yajé* necessarily raises broader questions that are relevant to virtually any social situation.

Tomas de yajé are sensorially dense. Accounts of *tomas de yajé* vary widely among those who have participated in one, but the common thread that unites reports is the extraordinary amount of sensory stimuli that is experienced throughout the ritual. Most accounts of *tomas de yajé* admit, at some point, that it is very hard to be precise about what was experienced throughout the night.¹¹ Descriptive accounts may range from the ethereal to the squalid, and all cases seem to necessarily resort to an extended use of poetic language.¹² In focusing on sound as

¹⁰ Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*.

¹¹ Michael Taussig writes, "[t]here 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." Ibid., 406.

¹² 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.'" And another passage referring again to William Burroughs' text: "Burroughs mentioned that one point he felt himself change into a black woman, then a black man, then a man and a woman at the same time, with everything writhing as in a Van Gogh painting." Wade Davis, *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 155. Davis also documents his own experience: "It was thirty minutes before I felt the first sensation, a numbness on the lips, and a warmth in my stomach that spread to my chest and shoulders even as a distinct chill moved down my waist and lower limbs. 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

an essential quality in *tomas de yajé*, I situate myself along a line of work that takes the senses and experience seriously in social situations.

In the introduction to the 2005 *Etnofoor* volume entitled “Senses,” Regina Bendix presents a case for a sensuous anthropology, highlighting the need for the development of a more holistically integrated approach to sensory dimensions in ethnography.¹³ Citing Michael Herzfeld, Bendix attributes the “relative dearth of anthropological work on the senses to the fact that anthropology, like all academic disciplines, is primarily a verbal activity”; she extends the argument by identifying the influence of the Enlightenment’s emphasis on the truth value of visual perception, discussing the prominence of logocentrism and “ocularcentrism” in the field as cause for the “neglect of culturally shaped sensory knowledge.”¹⁴ Scholars in other disciplines have also put forward this contention.¹⁵ Bendix, however, is equally concerned with pointing out that the argument is not “an effort at writing against ocularcentrism” or, as presented by David Howes, a revolt against “the linguistic turn, the textual revolution or discourse analysis.”¹⁶ Feld draws attention to the shortcomings of a “line of thinking [that] often reified a visual-auditory great divide.”¹⁷ Feld also cites Don Idhe’s critique in *Listening and Voice*, a critique “that pointed out the futility of countering the historical centrality of visualism in Western analytical discourses by simply erecting an antivisualism;” for Feld, a “reevaluation of sensory ratios must scrutinize how tendencies for sensory dominance always change contextually with bodily emplacement.”¹⁸ In a similar vein, even though this thesis focuses on the aural, the greater purpose is not one of hierarchical or mono-sensorial concerns. Rather, by thinking of the questions raised by a deep engagement with sound in *tomas de yajé*, I situate my efforts alongside Herzfeld’s quest for an “anthropology that is attuned, at once [...] to both empirical and phenomenological concerns,” and alongside Feld’s call for work committed to the idea that “experiencing and knowing place – the idea of place as sensed, place as sensation – can proceed

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.” Ibid., 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, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 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: Shanon, *The Antipodes of the Mind*; Luis Eduardo Luna and Pablo Amaringo, *Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman* (Berkeley, Calif.: North Atlantic Books, 1991); J. M. Fericla, *Los Jíbaros, Cazadores de Sueños: Diario de Un Antropólogo Entre Los Shuar: Experimentos Con La Ayahuasca*, 1. ed (Barcelona: Integral-Oasis, 1994); Jimmy Weiskopf, *Yajé: The New Purgatory: Encounters with Ayahuasca*, 1st ed (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Villegas Editores, 2005).

¹³ Regina Bendix, “Introduction: Ear to Ear, Nose to Nose, Skin to Skin — The Senses in Comparative Ethnographic Perspective,” *Etnofoor* 18, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 3–14, doi:10.2307/25758082.

¹⁴ Ibid., 7.

¹⁵ See, for example, Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self, and Society* (Psychology Press, 1993), 32–49; David Summers, *The Judgment of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 206–228.

¹⁶ Ibid., 8.

¹⁷ Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (School of American Research Press, 1997), 96.

¹⁸ Ibid..

through a complex interplay of the auditory and the visual, as well as through other intersensory perceptual processes.”¹⁹ If in 2005 Bendix could discuss a dearth of anthropological work in the senses, now we can aver that the past ten years have seen an increased amount of attention paid to the senses from a wide range of disciplines.²⁰

Sarah Pink calls into question the “idea of differentially sensing modalities attached to specific sense organs;” she argues for an interconnected understanding of sensory perception, citing neurologist Richard Cytowic, “the five senses do not travel along separate channels, but interact to a degree few scientists would have believed only a decade ago.”²¹ In the 2002 article, “A Critique of Visual Culture,” the art historian W.J.T. Mitchell argues that there are no “visual media” as such, rather, “all media are, from the standpoint of sensory modality, ‘mixed media’.”²² For Mitchell, images are “braided,” in that “one sensory channel or semiotic function is woven together with another more or less seamlessly.”²³ Similarly, in the 2003 article “Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture,” the artist and scholar Mieke Bal states, “the act of looking is profoundly ‘impure’ ... [T]his impure quality is also ... applicable to other sense-based activities: listening, reading, tasting, smelling. This impurity makes such activities mutually permeable, so that listening and reading can also have visuality to them.”²⁴ One could argue then, from a sensory standpoint, that any activity has great aurality to it. Although I acknowledge the questioning of a transparent acceptance of the classic five senses, my aim here is less to discuss synaesthesia and more to argue for the importance of sound production and sound consumption in ritual as a way to engage broader sensory questions. Moreover, I will demonstrate that engaging the aural is a productive entry point into broader questions of expressive culture, ritual, imaginaries and representation, labor, and pragmatics.

¹⁹ Michael Herzfeld, *Anthropology: Theoretical Practice in Culture and Society* (Wiley, 2001); Feld and Basso, *Senses of Place*, 98.

²⁰ For a general review, see Thomas Porcello et al., “The Reorganization of the Sensory World,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (2010): 51–66, doi:10.1146/annurev.anthro.012809.105042; A representative set of publications from 2013 and 2014 alone include: David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing: An Introduction to Sensory Studies* (Routledge, 2013); Karin Bijsterveld et al., *Sound and Safe: A History of Listening behind the Wheel*, 2014; Ian Hague, *Comics and the Senses: A Multisensory Approach to Comics and Graphic Novels*, 2014; Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Louise Joy Lawrence, *Sense and Stigma in the Gospels: Depictions of Sensory-Disabled Characters*, 2013; Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Shane Butler and Alex C Purves, *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses* (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013); “Affect, Embodiment and Sense Perception — Cultural Anthropology,” accessed March 6, 2014, http://www.culanth.org/curated_collections/16-affect-embodiment-and-sense-perception; Susanna Trnka, *Senses and Citizenships: Embodying Political Life*, 2013; Rosario Caballero and Javier E Díaz Vera, *Sensuous Cognition: Explorations into Human Sentience : Imagination, (e)motion and Perception* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2013); there is also a six-volume encyclopedia “A Cultural History of the Senses,” to be published by Bloomsbury this year, “Bloomsbury - A Cultural History of the Senses,” accessed March 6, 2014, <http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/a-cultural-history-of-the-senses-9780857853387/>.

²¹ Sarah Pink, “The future of sensory anthropology/the anthropology of the senses,” *Social Anthropology* 18: 331–333; Richard Cytowic, “Our hidden superpowers,” *New Scientist* 24, 46.

²² W. J. T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (August 1, 2002): 162.

²³ *Ibid.*, 162.

²⁴ Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (April 1, 2003): 5–32, doi:10.1177/147041290300200101.

Roadmap

In this thesis, it is 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. The way *taitas* understand, use, and develop sound tactics to support their labor and lead *tomas de yajé* successfully is the focus of my study. In Chapter 2, *Yajé Shamanism, Labor, and Individual Practices*, I outline what *tomas de yajé* are and provide general information regarding *tomas de yajé* in Sibundoy. I argue that insisting on an understanding of shamanism through oppositional terms like sacred and profane, and insisting on an understanding of shamanism that casts it as necessarily pre-modern, pre-capitalist – romantic and bucolic – inevitably leads to essentializing. Shamans can provide crucial health services while they can also have a sense of humor and work hard to make a living and support their families without being sacrilegious or charlatans. All of these activities are not incompatible. *Taitas* use sound in their ritual practices deliberately, with specific reasons that go beyond simply providing musical accompaniment.

In Chapter 3, *Questions of Framing*, I draw from Erving Goffman's frame analysis to argue that *taitas* use sound in *tomas de yajé* to help participants make sense of what they experience during *tomas de yajé*. I contend that *taitas* strive to make sure participants are indeed able to make sense of what they experience. Sound performed in specific ways by *taitas* allows participants to remember they are, indeed, at a *toma de yajé*, even if the effects of *yajé* can lead them to perceive utterly different realities. I conclude with a discussion of how the sound tactics of Upper Putumayo *taitas* become fundamental in keying frames and defining context in *tomas de yajé*.

In Chapter 4, *Questions of Place*, I argue that *taitas* use their ritual sonorous instruments in order to create a ritual place that is independent of physical constraints; place is understood sonically. The *taitas'* instruments are highly portable and permit *taitas* to deliberately 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 San Francisco Bay Area, or France. *Taitas* develop what I term sound signatures, that is, the specific and recognizable musical characteristics that define their playing, especially on the harmonica. I also argue that sound functions as a grounding, or anchoring, device. *Taitas* index the Amazon both verbally and non-verbally. Verbally, at the beginning of the ritual, they 'bless' the *yajé* to be drunk and 'invoke' the rainforest by reciting the name of plants, animals, and sometimes spirits that inhabit the Amazon. Non-verbally, they index the sounds of water, wind, and animals of the Amazon.

In the Conclusions section, I argue for *cosmopolitan listening*, a way of listening that implies taking an ethical stance towards the human and non-human environments we encounter. Drawing from the particular case of *tomas de yajé*, I also raise broader questions about the ways in which non-verbal sound can define place, context, and frames in more general situations, arguing for an understanding of sound as a way of not only ordering an environment, but oftentimes creating it.

Before continuing, I would like to return to the *taita's* metallic jaguar head and to the jaguar portrayed in the Bogotá mural. One could say that the mural certainly represents the way *taitas* are imagined to be able to heal a money-obsessed Colombian – or more broadly, a global capitalist – society. One could also say it is little more than an exoticization, even an animalization, of *taitas*. It could certainly be both. Similarly, the episode with the playful *taita* and the jaguar growl could be interpreted as showing how *taitas* do not actually take rituals seriously; it could also illustrate how *taitas* can negotiate and interrogate, in complex ways,

expectations and ideas of what a *taita* should do and be like. Throughout this thesis, I will demonstrate how sound production is necessarily interrelated with questions and imaginaries of place, shamanism, ritual practice, and labor, sound production constituting a crucial part of the varied ways in which *taitas* work and make a living.

Chapter 2: *Yajé* Shamanism, Labor, and Individual Practices

In this chapter I will describe what *tomas de yajé* are, arguing that although no two shamans conduct *tomas* alike, *tomas* share the characteristic of being sensorially dense. My description will focus on the different sensory dimensions of drinking *yajé* and the different objects involved in *tomas de yajé*. In stating that no two shamans conduct *tomas* in the same way, I will also argue that throughout their lives, shamans develop individual ritual practices, that is, specific and highly personalized ways of conducting *tomas*. Through a case study, I also place a particular importance on understanding *yajé* shamanism in terms of labor, exploring an area often overlooked in academic discourse. Sound production matters to *taitas* because it is an essential part of the way they perform their labor. Sound production is also a way in which *taitas* define and differentiate their individual ritual practices and, ultimately, their identities. What kinds of research questions result from a serious engagement with Marx's conception of labor – as discussed by David Graeber 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” yet still embedded in relations of capital – when applied to shamanism?²⁵

Individual Practices

In discussing what *tomas de yajé* are like, I will draw a picture of the elements generally common to the ritual. However, from the beginning, it is important to note that each individual *taita* develops individual practices throughout his lifetime, that is, highly personalized ways in which they conduct the ritual. These individual practices are a product of the *taita*'s particular experiences and preferences that, while particular and personal, also maintain a loose adherence to generally accepted ways of conducting *tomas de yajé*. It must be stressed that even the same *taita* will perform a *toma de yajé* somewhat differently every night.

In discussing the way ‘practice’ has been conceived from points of view ranging from philosophy (Wittgenstein, Dreyfus, Taylor) to social theory (Bourdieu, Giddens), cultural theory (Foucault, Lyotard), and science and technology studies (Rouse, Pickering), Schatzki asserts that a central core of theorizing practice is to conceive of practices as “embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding.”²⁶ Schatzki, like others, has been concerned with interrogating “individual actions and their status as the building-blocks of social phenomena, and to transcend rigid action-structure oppositions.”²⁷ Shove, Pantzar, and Watson pose the question: “How do practices emerge, exist and die?” They suggest that practices “emerge, persist, shift and disappear when connections between elements [...] are made, sustained or broken.”²⁸ The elements they refer to include materials – things, technologies, tangible physical entities, and so forth; competences – skill, know-how and technique; and meanings – symbolic meanings, ideas, and aspirations. Shove et al., aware that their formulation might be understood as a “reductive scheme,” contend that “this simple formulation is useful in that it provides us with a means of conceptualizing stability and

²⁵ David Graeber, “Value: Anthropological Theories of Value.” In *A Handbook Of Economic Anthropology* (Edward Elgar Pub, 2005), 450.

²⁶ Theodore R. Schatzki, “Introduction,” in *The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory*, eds. Theodore R. Schatzki, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 12.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar, and Matt Watson, *The Dynamics of Social Practice : Everyday Life and How It Changes* (Los Angeles [i.e. Thousand Oaks, Calif.]; London: SAGE Publications, 2012), 14.

change, and does so in a way that allows us to recognize the recursive relation between practice-as-performance and practice-as-entity.”²⁹

In entitling this thesis “The Sound Tactics of Upper Putumayo Shamans” I mean to emphasize the ways in which *taitas* deliberately use sound as a way of directing a *toma de yajé* and also the way in which sound tactics are a fundamental part of a *taita*’s labor. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a tactic as “[a]n action or strategy carefully planned to achieve a specific end” and technique as “[a] way of carrying out a particular task, especially the execution or performance of an artistic work or a scientific procedure.”³⁰ I favor the usage of tactic over technique in describing how, why, and what it is that *taitas* do with sound – a tactic is *carefully planned*. By stressing the careful planning done by *taitas*, I am not implying that *tomas de yajé* are rehearsed and prescriptive. Rather, the “careful planning” refers instead, in this case, to a lifetime of learning and development of tactics that are employed by *taitas* to respond in real-time to situations that arise in *tomas de yajé*. The careful planning also includes the elements enlisted by Shove et al., that is, materials, competences, and meanings. In this way, my understanding of tactic is closely linked to that of individual practices. *Taitas* develop competences throughout their lifetimes in order to be able to respond in real time to the material conditions of a *toma de yajé*, e.g. the kind of room used, the distance from the *yajé* room to the bathroom, the acoustics of the place, lighting, the kinds of people present, and so forth. Arguably, what *taitas* do is to enable participants find their own meanings in a *toma*. The concept of sound tactic is also inextricably linked to questions of labor, as *taitas* perform sound in *tomas de yajé* for reasons beyond providing a musical background, light entertainment, or some kind of ambiance ornamentation. The performance of sound during a *toma de yajé* is not trivial; *taitas* sometimes play for consecutive hours during a time of physical discomfort, after having had little rest, and for reasons specific to the guidance of a particular *toma* on a particular night.

Due to practical reasons, this thesis does not follow closely the long process of apprenticeship that leads to someone becoming and being known as a *taita* – such a study would require long years of research during a boy’s growth and development and the varying periods of training and involvement with his master(s). My focus here is instead on the ways in which *taitas* – already established as such – use and continue to develop their sound tactics in their ritual practice. In this chapter I describe what a ‘generic’ *toma de yajé* might be like, and where appropriate, I discuss variants in *taita*’s individual practices. I also describe the different sonorous instruments *taitas* use and conclude with a case study on the questions that arise from considering *yajé* shamanism as a form of labor.

Sensorially dense, sensorially demanding

As developed in the introduction, drinking *yajé* is sensorially dense. It follows that it is sensorially demanding. In this section, I will present a general outline of the different parts of a *toma de yajé* in chronological order, paying particular attention to sensory stimuli and to the way *taitas*’ sound tactics and individual practices relate to the senses:

- (1) *Arrival and set-up: Tomas de yajé* in the Upper Putumayo always take place at night, and are most often held at a specially designated room inside the *taita*’s house. While most

²⁹ Ibid., 15.

³⁰ *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed April 11, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/198458>, s.v. “technique”; *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed April 11, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/196961>, s.v. “tactic.”

taitas agree that *yajé* should be drunk at night, different *taitas* summon participants at different times. Some might say seven or eight in the evening, some might say ten, eleven, or even midnight. In any case, it is understood that although *taitas* tell participants they should arrive at a certain time, the drinking will not start immediately. There is a period of waiting for everyone to arrive that can be understood as a time for setting up and engaging in informal conversation.

During this phase, participants set-up their sleeping arrangements – hammocks, mattresses, etc. – and speak amongst themselves. Usually participants introduce themselves to each other and the *taita* is often around, coming in and out of the room while engaging in conversation here and there. During this time, participants also talk to the *taita* if it is their first time drinking, or discuss in detail their reasons for attending the *toma de yajé*. *Taitas* may or may not have helpers or apprentices on any given night, although generally speaking, *taitas* tend to have at least one helper per *toma*. At this time the *taita* and his helpers are likely to be chopping wood to be used during the *toma* and bringing it inside the *yajé* room. The *taita* and his helpers also start ‘purifying’ the room with *copal*, a profoundly aromatic tree resin that is burnt in different kinds of chalices or thuribles. Different *taitas*, depending on the contact they might have had with other *taitas* and shamans from different cultures, might use incense or even *salvia*, a plant species that is not native to the area. Walking into a *yajé* room is almost always entering an immediately fragrant place.

- (2) *Signaling the beginning*: *Taitas* have a way of indicating that the ritual will ‘officially’ start. This means that both participants, as a collectivity, and *taita* alike acknowledge that there is a frame shift.³¹ Informal chatting is no longer acceptable, and everyone in the room is silent, with the exception of the *taita*.

At some point between the set-up phase and the signaling, *taitas* and helpers will have changed into their ritual clothing. This involves wearing the traditional *cusma* - a thick and finely woven shawl; *cascabeles* –necklaces made of various beads, seeds, and animal teeth; and head decorations – some *taitas* wear a headpiece with colored feathers. Sometimes *taitas* will change into their ceremonial attire at the *yajé* room, as this changing of clothing is more of an adding of layers; sometimes they will leave and come back fully dressed.³² *Taitas*, once they are wearing their ceremonial clothing, will signal the beginning of the ritual verbally.

One *taita* is knowing for always explicitly saying, “*vamos a comenzar*.”³³ At this point, *taitas* might give something like a small informational speech oriented mostly toward first-time participants. These speeches are almost always informal in tone and often interspersed with humorous commentary. *Taitas* might describe what the ritual is about, what to expect, what to do if the going gets tough, and so forth. Some *taitas* might limit themselves to telling participants where to find the bathroom. Some *taitas* are more oratorical while others are less inclined to give a long-winded introduction. In summary, the *taita* will signal in some way that it is time to start the ritual. Participants, in turn, will

³¹ “Frames” and “framing” will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3: Questions of Framing.

³² I had several similar conversations with participants in Bogotá that seemed particularly bothered at discovering *taitas* don’t actually dress in *cusmas*, feathers and *cascabeles* on a regular basis.

³³ “Let us begin.”

acknowledge the signal by remaining silent and seated in their respective places within the room, paying attention to the *taita* and his subsequent actions.

- (3) *Summons, or the calling to the table*: Whether the *taita* has given an introductory talk or not, the moment in which he summons the first participant to the ritual table marks the clear beginning of what we could say is the drinking phase of the ritual. Before calling the first participant, *taitas* bless the recipient that holds the *yajé* by doing one, a combination, or all of the following:
- a) blowing smoke onto the *yajé* from cigars or cigarettes
 - b) blowing their breath onto the *yajé* recipient
 - c) making the sign of the cross over it with their hands
 - d) playing the waira sacha
 - e) playing the harmonica
 - f) ‘conjuring’ it verbally – reciting words, often the names of plants and animals, that are meant to ‘activate’ *yajé*
 - g) singing
 - h) whistling

This initial blessing might be quick or fairly lengthy, lasting up to ten minutes or so, depending on the *taita*. After pouring the first participant’s dose – which will be served in recipients that can range from a gourd, an espresso cup, or even shot glasses – the *taita* will repeat the blessing operations he employed (from the a-f list above) on the participant’s dose before offering it to the participant and allowing them to drink it. Generally speaking, all of the men drink first, and then all of the women drink.³⁴ In the moment after arriving to the table and before drinking, the *taita* might ask, in a low voice, why it is that the participant is drinking. The *taita* and the participant might then have a brief conversation.

The calling to the table phase can be understood as an introduction to the *taitas*’ basic sound repertoire. Before being summoned to drink, all participants will already have seen and heard most of the *taitas*’ sonorous instruments. The taste and smell of *yajé* – famously described by Wade Davis as “that of the entire jungle ground up and mixed with bile” – will almost certainly remain in the participant’s nose and palate for most, if not all of the night.³⁵

- (4) *Waiting for the onset*: After all participants have had a chance to drink *yajé*, the *taita* will start playing his sonorous instruments while participants sit down in silence. The *taita* might sing, play the harmonica, play the cascabeles, whistle, and/or play the waira sacha. Generally speaking, *taitas* favor playing the waira sacha during this time, and might do so for a few minutes or for a longer period of time over an hour. During the onset, most participants are still trying to get used to the taste and smell of *yajé*. Participants also start to feel dizzy, light-headed, and nauseous. The room is still fragrant, and the *taita* starts to change the illumination of the room. The lights – usually electric – are dimmed or turned

³⁴ The quantity served by the *taita* for each individual varies, see *Sound and Power*, 54-55.

³⁵ Wade Davis, *One River: Explorations and Discoveries in the Amazon Rain Forest* (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 191.



Figure 3 - Altar in a yajé room, Vereda Tamabioy, Putumayo, 2013

off entirely, while candles that have been previously lit are placed around the *taita*'s table, altar, and sometimes throughout the room.

- (5) *Onset*: My definition of onset assumes it begins on the moment in which a participant starts to receive *pintas*. It is difficult to state precisely how long the *pintas* last, or to identify discrete units within the 'onset' phase, as the effects of *yajé* on different individuals varies widely.

Generally speaking, participants and *taitas* agree that before the *pinta* starts, the body feels especially dizzy – the words generally used to describe this state are dizzy (*mareado*) or drunk (*borracho*). When *taitas* perceive participants are starting to feel 'mareados' they play the harmonica with remarkable vigor, attempting to stimulate the full onset of the *pinta*. The *pinta* phase might last from a few minutes to one or several hours. It is also frequent to vomit profusely or to have diarrhea before or during onset. In fact, it is highly unlikely to not vomit. Vomiting is a big part of the cleansing beliefs associated to drinking *yajé*. Vomiting is certainly encouraged and considered desirable. At this point, most participants, even if not experiencing *pintas* per se, are experiencing the wider range of *yajé* effects.

- (6) *Second round*: Many *taitas* offer a second round of *yajé* to those participants who want to drink again – participants might want to repeat because they did not see *pintas* with their first dose, because they want to 'refresh' their *pintas* and add potency to them, or because although they did see *pintas*, the *pintas* went away and they want a new round of them. The *taita* will generally follow the same blessing and conjuring procedures he did during the first round of drinking *yajé*. Usually, the second round happens three to four hours into the ritual. It must be noted that participants can ask for more *yajé* at any point of the night, and it will be up to the *taita*'s discretion whether and how much a participant can drink again.
- (7) *Waiting out the night*: Several hours into the *toma*, after participants have almost certainly all vomited, and onset is still going on, whether after one, two, or more rounds, participants might choose to sleep, remain lying down, or engage in conversation with other participants or the *taita*. Different *taitas* play different combinations of their sonorous instruments at their discretion, at varying intervals and volumes and for different reasons. Throughout the onset phase and throughout the night, the room will continue to be filled with *copal* smoke, the sounds of the *taita*, but also the sounds of other participants living the *toma*.
- (8) *The cleansing frame*: Although it is understood that throughout the *toma* participants are being cleansed by both *yajé* and the *taita*, there is a moment in which healing takes place explicitly. This is called the *limpieza*, or cleansing. Depending on the *taita*, and depending on how many participants are present, cleansing may be done individually or collectively. If cleansing is done collectively, women and men are cleansed as separate groups.

Cleansing involves drawing out disease and as some shamans now say, negative energies, from a participant.³⁶ Participants usually sit on chairs that are placed in the middle of the *yajé* room, either by themselves or lined up along with fellow participants. *Taitas* play the waira sacha around participants but also *on* their bodies, from head to toes. Some *taita* also rub stinging nettle all over the participants' bodies. *Taitas* also sing, whistle, blow smoke, and play the harmonica all over the participant's body. *Taitas* employ a great deal of energy in this part of the *toma*, as they are playing, dancing, and singing vigorously and moving rapidly around the participant.

Depending on the *taita*, the cleansing might take place when it is already light out, or before. The cleansing might lead to a resting period where participants and the *taita* himself sleep, or it might happen right before the *toma*'s conclusion.

- (9) *Conclusion*: Different *taitas* end the *toma* in different ways. Most *taitas* let participants sleep in indefinitely. Other *taitas* make sure to emphasize, after the *limpieza*, that a breakfast will be served and that the *toma* has ended. Some *taitas* might stay and sleep in the *yajé* room or they might go to another part of their house. Some *taitas* might favor having a communal breakfast during which people are encouraged to speak of their experiences and to ask questions.

The Yajé Room

Yajé is almost always consumed inside a specially designated room within the *taita*'s property. In the Upper Putumayo, *tomas de yajé* hardly ever take place outdoors or in public places, although special occasions might ensue having a *toma* in a more open place, like in the backyard of a community-owned building. When *taitas* lead a *toma de yajé* in their homes, they tend to always do it in the same place. In fact, *yajé* rooms are often decorated intentionally to reflect their being *yajé* rooms and not any other kind of room. Although in a later chapter I develop the idea that *tomas de yajé* are portable and ultimately independent of a particular material configuration, in this section I will describe the general characteristics of a *yajé* room in the Upper Putumayo.

Yajé rooms are sparsely furnished, as most of the space in the room will be designated for laying out mattresses, sleeping bags, or tying hammocks. The minimal requirements of a *yajé* room are for it to have one table, an altar, space for participants to sit down or lie down, and a bathroom within the room or reasonably nearby.

The *yajé* table is the place where the *yajé* is placed before the ritual starts. Often, it is also where the *taita* keeps some of his ritual implements, including tobacco, gourds, drinking utensils, and sonorous instruments. The *yajé* table is usually located at one end of the room, and it is the place where the *taita* stays during the *toma*, generally speaking. The table itself is nothing fancy or elaborate; often, modest wooden or plastic tables do. There is also nothing specific about the kinds of seats and chairs the *taita* keeps in the room. The table's location, however, is significant in that it is the place from where *taitas* produce sound, and in a way, becomes what we could call

³⁶ I often encountered some shamans that consciously employed New Age discourse and scientific discourse to talk about *yajé*. This is a research question I was not able to explore further. Taita Juan Agreda discusses his discovery of the term "DMT" when imprisoned in Texas after attempting to transport *yajé* through the Houston International Airport. See Brian T. Anderson, Beatriz Caiuby Labate, and Celina M. De Leon, "Healing with Yagé: An Interview with Taita Juan Bautista Agreda Chindoy," in *The Therapeutic Use of Ayahuasca*, ed. Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Clancy Cavnar (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2014), 197–215, http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-642-40426-9_12.

a sonic radius throughout the *toma*, an aural-based center of grounding and gravity. *Taitas* do move around throughout the night to go to the bathroom or to talk to participants, but generally speaking, they will gravitate back to the table area.

Usually there is also an altar near the *taita's* table. The altar most often features a wide range of images and statues. It is frequent to find statues and images of the Virgin Mary, various saints, and images of a crucified Jesus. Along these, it is also common to find plastic animals – usually those that inhabit ‘the jungle,’ broadly understood – artisan ornaments, candles, pieces of granite, quartz, and other minerals, the *taita's* sonorous instruments, and all kinds of ointments, creams, and droppers full of various liquids. The altar is also where the *taita* might keep his cascabeles when he is not wearing them. The altar itself does not play an explicit role in the *toma*, but its position next to the table suggests it is important; at the very least, participants have to come near it when they approach the table.

The bathroom is an indispensable place in *tomas de yajé*, as most, if not all, participants will need to use it at some point of the night. Some *taitas* keep buckets handy inside the *yajé* room in case participants need to vomit immediately and cannot take a step outside to do so. Generally, participants can vomit in a few designated areas outside that are not pathways and are not necessarily toilets or sink; some *taitas* build trench-like openings where people can vomit without having to worry about aim or having to wait for their turn.

Yajé rooms also often have pictures of the *taita* with important figures of the local community, the *taita* in remote places, posters of conferences or meetings where the *taita* might have participated, and often portraits and photographs of the *taita's* master(s). Some *taitas* also have images of jaguars and birds across the room, and one even has murals that were painted on his walls by some participants. Although part of the argument I make in this thesis is that the place most relevant to *tomas de yajé* is a place constructed, maintained, and performed through sound tactics, and one that is indeed highly portable and independent of a particular geographical location, the more permanent *yajé* rooms in *taita's* houses are not negligible locations. *Taitas* believe their rooms are sedimented with the history of *tomas* that have been conducted there. Their altars, too, are cumulative in all senses of the word.

Who attends a yajé ritual and why

Who might attend a *yajé* ritual can vary drastically from one night to another. Oftentimes, the participants are mostly, but not exclusively, members of the indigenous communities of the valley (Inga and Kamsá); at times, other indigenous people from outside the valley might seek the *taita's* services; other times, attendants could be a mix of locals, non-local indigenous people, non-indigenous Colombian nationals, and foreigners from near and far. The short answer is that shamans will allow almost anyone to drink *yajé* with them, as long as the participant understands basic information about what *tomas de yajé* are. In general, we can say people attend a *yajé* ritual for medical reasons, spiritual reasons, and for practical, non-medical reasons.

A good amount of the mestizo population in Sibundoy and neighboring areas often go to *taitas* when they feel that medical services at the local hospital – there is only one hospital in the town of Santiago that services the entire valley – are either unsuccessful, too expensive, or not worth the long waits. I even encountered mestizo locals that seemed generally unsympathetic and even untrusting of local indigenous culture but that, when it came to emergency healthy matters, had no qualms about taking their ill children to see a *taita*. Local indigenous groups see *taitas* for medical reasons, and going both to a *taita* and to a doctor at a hospital are not seen as mutually

exclusive or as particularly problematic. One of the *taitas* that I met claims to have cured cases of cancer, AIDS, and heroin addiction.

A more recent kind of participant has more abstract, spiritual reasons for attending a *toma de yajé*. These are participants on a self-discovery quest, and these participants usually come from major cities of Colombia, other countries of Latin America, or North America, Europe, and to a lesser degree some parts of Africa and Asia. Drinking *yajé* is seen by many as a rite of passage, as a kind of enigmatic experience through which a certain kind of traveler should go through. There is a growing number of so-called ‘ayahuasca tourists’ and travel operators that cater to this type of clientele. Many express their desire to “expand their consciousness” and experiment with substances on their ‘psychonautic’ journey.

Taitas also told me a wide range of stories about the different people that come to see them. One *taita* spoke of soccer players from Cali that had come to receive guidance, agility, and sportsmanship through drinking *yajé*. He told me they eventually became regular visitors and that they come a few days before important matches in the local league. A Kamsá artisan told me that she sometimes goes to see *taitas* when she needs to get new ideas for designs she will later implement in hand-woven bags, bracelets, cusmas, and tapestries. She also goes when she is planning to enter some of her artisan work into national contests. I was encouraged by some *taitas* to drink *yajé* in order to better think about this thesis project. Other participants came to *taitas* because they were soon getting married, moving, or embarking on a large-scale project.

It is generally recommended that before drinking *yajé*, one should tell the *taita* what it is one is looking for, be it overcoming childhood trauma, fighting cancer, or looking for guidance before embarking on a difficult endeavor. *Taitas* insist it is important to concentrate on something specific throughout the night, and that when one voices this goal, one is effectively asking *yajé* to grant something.

The widely reaching and relatively unbounded range of reasons people drink *yajé* is not incompatible with the idea that *yajé* is sacred. For a *taita*, a participant looking for a cure to a terminal disease or one trying to learn to love others more deeply is not superior to a participant looking for a job or a participant simply wanting to experience something new. Yet *yajé* is still presented and understood as ancestral knowledge, and as something to be treated with the utmost respect and gratitude.

I would like to insist on the idea that the sacrality of *yajé* is elastic by presenting one final account: one of the most prominent *taitas* of Sibundoy was very attached to a dog he had come to own, a particularly unruly and disobedient canine that had, in recent months, committed a series of minor crimes and was becoming unequivocally a public nuisance. This *taita* called onto two other prominent *taitas* to help him hold a *toma de yajé* to “calm the dog down.”³⁷ I was told the *toma* was indeed helpful, and that it yielded an impeccable, exemplary hound. Nobody in the community seemed to question the *taita* or his intentions. A significant amount of people I interviewed outside of the community, including devout *yajé* drinkers and ayahuasca researchers, found the account irresponsible, if not outright sacrilegious. Traditionally, Western discourse – both New Age and academic – has understood shamanism very rigidly in terms of concepts like sacred and profane, or as necessarily involving supernatural interactions with gods and goddesses and the forces of nature. While I am not attempting to discount these interpretations, I am introducing the idea that shamanism is a form of labor with tangible and immediate – sometimes even banal – results, clients, patients, and beneficiaries. While for some *yajé* might be exclusively about abstract questions, for many, including *taitas* themselves and Kamsá and Inga

³⁷ “Para amansar al perrito.”



Figure 4 - Taita Salvador Chindoy, photographed by Richard Evans Schultes, undated³⁸

³⁸ Richard Evans Schultes, *El Bejuco Del Alma: Los Médicos Tradicionales de La Amazonia Colombiana, Sus Plantas Y Sus Rituales*, 1. ed. en español (Santafé de Bogotá : Medellín : Santafé de Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes ; Editorial Universidad de Antioquia ; Banco de la República, 1994), 59.

community members, drinking *yajé* is a means of making decisions and obtaining practical results for everyday problems and situations.

The taitas' sonorous instruments

A major part of the way in which the *taitas* vary in their individual practices is in the ways they use their different sound instruments. The main instruments they utilize are the harmonica, the waira sacha, the cascabeles, and their singing. *Taitas* invariably use the waira sacha, wear the cascabeles, and sing; although the majority of *taitas* I interviewed play the harmonica during *tomas de yajé*, some spoke of how playing the harmonica is a more recent development. The waira sacha is by far the most ubiquitous sonorous instrument that *taitas* use. It looks like little more than a bundle of dry leaves tied at one end, but both *taitas*, participants in *tomas de yajé*, and community members understand it as an instrument of power. The species usually used is *Pariana stolonemma* and the name waira sacha, in Kichwa, means roughly 'wind plant,' waira meaning 'wind, air,' sacha meaning 'forest, jungle, plant.' The waira sacha is also known as shakapa in Perú and more generally in Spanish as 'escoba,' or broom, amongst indigenous *taitas* and mestizo healers in Colombia.³⁹ All of the names suggest something about how the waira sacha is understood – the waira sacha is related to notions of wind, air, and cleansing. Although it is played as a percussive instrument and used sometimes to keep a steady rhythm when accompanying singing or harmonica playing, it is also understood as an instrument producing wind. It is also a healing implement that not only purifies the air inside a *yajé* room but one that also cleanses and expels sickness from a body. The waira sacha is also used to 'bless' *yajé* before it is drunk.

The cascabeles are necklaces made from various seeds, beads, and animal teeth that *taitas* wear around their necks. The 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; the *taita* can be heard coming and going through the night, his presence made manifest by the sound of the cascabeles, reminding participants that they are not alone.

Taitas sing 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 *tigrecito*, *selva*, *pinta*, and so forth.⁴⁰ Blowing smoke, breath, and whistling are operations considered directly linked to singing.

Nobody I spoke with remembers who the first *taita* to use the harmonica in *tomas de yajé* is or was. There is photographic evidence of a *taita*, *Taita Salvador Chindoy*, clasping some plants and, among other things, a harmonica in a series of photographs taken by the botanist Richard Evans Schultes in Sibundoy.⁴¹ The question of the origin of the adoption of the harmonica does not seem like a question that is productively approached in terms of identifying

³⁹ William Torres, "Huairasacha," *Revista Cultura y Droga*, 12(14) 2007, 28.

⁴⁰ Tiger (or "little" tiger, an affectionate diminutive), jungle (or rain-forest), pinta, etc.

⁴¹ None of the photographs in the publication are individually dated. Rather, the prologue tells us they were taken by Schultes sometime between 1941 and 1961. Richard Evans Schultes, *El Bejuco Del Alma: Los Médicos Tradicionales de La Amazonia Colombiana, Sus Plantas Y Sus Rituales*, 1. ed. en español (Santafé de Bogotá : Medellín : Santafé de Bogotá: Ediciones Uniandes ; Editorial Universidad de Antioquia ; Banco de la República, 1994), 59, 72–73.



Figure 5 – Cascabeles, Vereda Tamabioy, Putumayo, 2013

specific dates or specific persons; attempts of establishing those questions would be, at best, a matter of speculation. On this point I have heard a wide range of theories:

- (1) *La Guajira*: The Colombian musicologist, Egberto Bermúdez, has recently written about the history of the circulation of accordions in Colombia, tracing Caribbean Colombian ports, notably La Guajira, as the main points of entry of accordions into the Colombia territory.⁴² He also writes of the harmonica as an instrument that circulated along with the accordion, and one that was taken up in Colombia around the same time period (mid to late 19th century). In personal conversation, Bermúdez speculated about the harmonica trickling down and at some point getting to the Putumayo from La Guajira. At best, a distant entry point could be speculated about, but it seems difficult to discuss this particular history of circulation with much specificity.
- (2) *La Casa Arana*: Conversations with other scholars of Colombian history led to hypothesizing that the harmonica could have reached the Putumayo from Ecuador, through the incursion of wire-tappers and other workers associated to rubber-extraction operations along the Colombia-Ecuador border. The notoriously atrocious history of the

⁴² Egberto Bermúdez, “Beyond Vallenato: the accordion traditions in Colombia,” in *The Accordion in the Americas Klezmer, Polka, Tango, Zydeco, and More!*, ed. Helena Simonett, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

Casa Arana has been the most documented.⁴³ As far as I know, however, there is no mention of musical exchange, instrument circulation, and so forth in the literature.⁴⁴

- (3) Another possibility is that the harmonica, along with other Western instruments, was introduced by the Capuchin priests in their various incursions to the Colombian territory. The Capuchins left a meticulous record of their mission in the Putumayo and other parts of the Colombian Amazon; the majority of these documents are now at an archive that is housed at the Diócesis de Sibundoy, including photographs numbering in the thousands and a vast number of volumes of written records dating from the early 20th century to the 1970s. Some of the photographs depict priests teaching local communities how to play Western instruments; I have not found any photographs that include harmonicas in them.⁴⁵
- (4) A less glamorous theory is that rather than the product of an institutionalized or ongoing encounter, the harmonica first arrived in the Putumayo by chance encounter. A traveler, like Schultes himself, might have given one to a *taita* on a trip.

Rather than a question of who or when, I have found focusing on the ‘why,’ or reasons behind the appropriation of the harmonica, more productive. When we consider the harmonica along the other ritual instruments – the cascabeles, the waira sacha, singing – and more general ideas of smoke, wind, and breath in broader Amazonian ritual practice, it is not difficult to understand why the harmonica has been adopted as a ritual instrument in *tomas de yajé*.⁴⁶

Questions of labor, a case study

In this section I will put forward the idea that labor is a useful, necessary concept – although one not usually employed – for discussing regarding shamanism and shamanic practices. In an attempt to generate productive avenues of enquiry, and drawing from a particular case study from my fieldwork, I will present some of the generative questions that arise when

⁴³ Some sources include Justo Casas Aguilar, *Evangelio Y Colonización: Una Aproximación a La Historia del Putumayo Desde La Época Prehispánica a La Colonización agropecuaria*, Colección Interés General. Area Historia (Santafé de Bogotá: Ecoe Ediciones, 1999); Roger Casement, *Putumayo: Caucho Y Sangre: Relación Al Parlamento Inglés, 1911*, 2a ed (Quito : Abya-yala, 1988, n.d.); Franco Armando Guerrero Albán, *Colombia Y Putumayo En Medio de La Encrucijada: Narcotráfico, Fumigaciones, Economía Y Soberanía*, 1. ed (Bogotá, Colombia: Ediciones Claridad, 2005); Cristóbal Rodríguez Guerra, *Putumayo: Vallenato Y Fusil*, 1. ed (Quito: s.n., 2001); Norman Thomson and Roberto Pineda Camacho, eds., *El Libro Rojo Del Putumayo: Precedido de Una Introducción Sobre El Verdadero Escándalo de Las Atrocidades Del Putumayo ; Prólogo de Roberto Pineda Camacho*, 1a ed. de Planeta Colombiana, Lista Negra (Santa Fe de Bogotá: Planeta, 1995); Michael T. Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, Paperback ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); Roberto Pineda Camacho, *Holocausto En El Amazonas: Una Historia Social de La Casa Arana*, 1. ed, Espasa Fórum (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Planeta Colombiana Editorial, 2000).

⁴⁴ Garzón Chirivi discusses the exchanges between the Upper and Lower Putumayo and speculates that the harmonica arrived to the Upper Putumayo from such exchanges. Omar Alberto Garzón Chirivi, *Rezar, soplar, cantar: etnografía de una lengua ritual* (Editorial Abya Yala, 2004), 67.

⁴⁵ Thanks to Prof. Lev Michael for pointing to a similar emphasis on teaching Western music by Jesuits in Maynas, Perú in the 17th century. As far as I know, the question of why missionaries in the Amazon seem to have been remarkably intent on transmitting musical practices remains unexplored.

⁴⁶ For a comparative study of ritual wind instruments across Amazonia, see: Jonathan Hill and Jean-Pierre Chameuil, *Burst of Breath: Indigenous Ritual Wind Instruments in Lowland South America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011).



Figure 6 – Upper Putumayo *taita* and son at home. Santiago, Putumayo



Figure 7 – Upper Putumayo *taita*, wife, and son wearing cusmas. Santiago, Putumayo

considering shamanism as labor. It is also my intention to frame my discussion of what *taitas* do in terms of labor.

One of the *taitas* I worked most closely with – *Taita Alberto* – lives in a small, dispersed village about twenty kilometers outside of the Sibundoy town center.⁴⁷ It is only possible to get there walking or by taxi. From the village’s main road there are several small paths, only traversable by foot, that go deeper into clusters of houses. One must follow one such path for about three kilometers, through several fruit fields and cow pastures in order to get to *Taita Alberto*’s.

We were talking inside his living room when his cell phone rang. One of the *taita*’s friends in town, 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 on a price over the phone.

I will not describe the details of this 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, one Colombia’s largest cities several thousand kilometers away – he was unsatisfied at having been charged a fixed price ahead of time, regardless of what the quantity 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 either mean 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 some *taitas* operated this way, but thus far he had not found one that did. Similarly, a scholar in Bogotá had warned me of *taitas* that “are in it just for the money” and – although highly skeptical of the term ‘authentic’ – suggested “more sincere *taitas*” will not specify a pre-determined monetary amount for their services but rather be content with whatever one wants to give them.

⁴⁷ This is a fictitious name.

This case study will serve as a starting point for an investigation of shamanism as labor. How are ideas of ‘purity,’ ‘sincerity,’ and ‘authenticity’ 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 a serious engagement with Marx’s conception of labor – as discussed by David Graeber 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” yet still embedded in relations of capital – when applied to shamanism?⁴⁸

Definitions of shamanism: histories of expectations

Perhaps one of the most known and diffused definitions of shamanism comes from Mircea Eliade’s 1951 *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l’extase*, translated into English in 1964. Eliade proposes, in what he terms “the least hazardous” way, that shamanism is a “technique of religious ecstasy.”⁴⁹ Although a detailed review of literature on shamanism is beyond the purview of this chapter, it is necessary to state few or none have theorized shamanism explicitly as a form of labor.⁵⁰ Boekhoven posits that “the field of shamanism is largely informed by the values and concerns of the embracing society.”⁵¹ 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 labelled shamanism are historically specific, but also because the definitions are historical products of discursive processes.⁵²

Along similar terms, in *Du Marxisme au Chamanisme* (2011), Jean Paul Sarrazin examines the way Colombian middle and upper classes have constructed notions of indigenous

⁴⁸ David Graeber, “Value: Anthropological Theories of Value.” In *A Handbook Of Economic Anthropology* (Edward Elgar Pub, 2005), 450.

⁴⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton University Press, 1964), 4.

⁵⁰ Piers Vitebsky hints at an understanding of shamanism as labor but only in passing: “Shamans are at once doctors, priests, social workers and mystics. They have been called madmen or madwomen, were frequently persecuted throughout history, dismissed in the 1960s as a “desiccated” and “insipid” figment of the anthropologist’s imagination, and are now so fashionable that they inspire both intense academic debate and the naming of pop groups. Shamans have probably attracted more diverse and conflicting opinions than any other kind of spiritual specialist. The shaman seems to be all things to all people.” Piers Vitebsky, *Shamanism* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001), 10; “The shaman’s experience is never just a personal voyage of discovery, but also a service to the community. Through the ordeal of initiation, the shaman is enabled to empathize with the sufferings and needs of others. 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.” Ibid., 96. A recent publication that presents a detailed genealogy of the term’s usage, although not identifying concerns with labor, is: Jeroen W. Boekhoven, *Genealogies of Shamanism: Struggles for Power, Charisma and Authority* (Barkhuis, 2011). It is also telling that there is no entry on “labor” in comprehensive publications like Graham Harvey, *Historical Dictionary of Shamanism*, Historical Dictionaries of Religions, Philosophies, and Movements, no. 77 (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2007); and the two volume Mariko Namba Walter and Eva Jane Neumann Fridman, eds., *Shamanism: An Encyclopedia of World Beliefs, Practices, and Culture* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2004).

⁵¹ Boekhoven, *Genealogies of Shamanism*, 309.

⁵² Ibid., 312. See also, International Society for Shamanistic Research, *The Concept of Shamanism: Uses and Abuses*, ed. Henri Paul Francfort, Robert Hamayon, and Paul G. Bahn, Bibliotheca Shamanistica, v. 10 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2001).

alterity based, to a large degree, on their particular perceptions of indigenous shamanism.⁵³ Despite – for this discussion’s intents – its suggestive title, his discussion is less about proposing a labor-based understanding of shamanism and more about the influences of global discourses on local constructions of ethnicity and shamanism.

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. In Chakrabarty terms, shamanism is to this day firmly affixed and understood in terms of a type of History 2. In the words of 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."⁵⁴

Robert Gregg discusses this distinction as follows:

History 1 is the story of capital becoming or making itself. This is not a teleological perspective that might propose that everything coming before capitalism is in a process of becoming capitalist. It is rather the process by which capital appropriates things that may or may not be its antecedents. It is about archive formation, the formation of a past that is retrospectively posited by capital, or, in short, the process of rewriting history so that it fits. History 2, by contrast, is resistance to 1, or life itself. For Marx, Chakrabarty suggests, capital can never be universal: "No global capital can ever represent the universal logic of capital, for any historically available form of capital is a provisional compromise made up of History 1 modified by somebody's History 2s." [70] As such, Marx's analysis can be as applicable to places where it has been considered irrelevant owing to particular economic conditions as to those places where it has long been applied (industrialized Europe).⁵⁵

Although Chakrabarty is concerned with contesting the default, uncritical acceptance of History 1, I would like to point out that romanticized versions of History 2s might be equally problematic. Pretending that History 2s do not ever change or intersect with History 1 can lead to facile generalizations. Alex the Scotsman's disenchantment and the Bogotá scholar's trepidations can be thus understood as a radical clinging to a conception of shamanism that is free from their own urban, neo-liberal, lived reality of History 1, "a past posited by capital itself as a precondition."⁵⁶ Where then would the power of a shaman lie if it were – as it veritably is, more often that not – entwined in that which their Western imagination is dramatically seeking to escape, that is, a History 1 in which nothing can exist outside of capitalist relations? Why is it so problematic to think of shamanism as a valid means of subsistence, as a respectable profession and source of means for an indigenous family? In this thesis, I also argue that part of the significance of the sound tactics lie in the fact that asserting that they are an essential part of a *taita's* individual ritual practice certainly also means that they are crucial elements of the way in which *taitas* make a living.

⁵³ Jean Paul Sarrazin, *Du Marxisme Au Chamanisme: Naissance d'un Indigénisme local à l'heure globale*. (Editions universitaires européennes, 2011).

⁵⁴ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N. J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 63.

⁵⁵ Robb Greg, "Provincializing the Past," *Histrionics Blog*, June 16, 2004, <http://loki.stockton.edu/~greggr/chakrabarty.htm>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.



Figure 8 - Upper Putumayo *taita* and apprentice after a toma de *yajé*, Vereda Tamabioy, Putumayo

Throughout *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig sustains the argument that the alleged savagery of the Indians, in the eyes of the colonialists, and the latter's subsequent despising of the former in all their wildness and paganism, is what ultimately has allowed indigenous populations in Colombia to be understood as possessing extraordinary healing powers and access to dimensions beyond daily, mundane strife.⁵⁷ At the time the book was written – in the late 1980s – *yajé* shamanism was already gaining momentum in the Colombian territory as a well-known indigenous practice. It is surprising Taussig does not address explicitly, or with much detail, the commodification of *yajé* and the different ways *yajé* shamanism becomes a source of income. He does mention the way a Lower Putumayo shaman looked down on Upper Putumayo (specifically Sibundoy) shamans for engaging in commercial relations with their patients through shamanism.⁵⁸ What complicates this shunning 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-sell it. I will take up this paradox in the following section. 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.

Toward research questions

In *Art Workers*, Julia Bryan-Wilson presents an overview of the way artists mobilized themselves as 'art workers' in response to the Vietnam War and its associated political turbulence. Citing Helen Molesworth, she states that "in the period following World War II, artists came to see themselves not as artists producing [in] a dreamworld but as workers in capitalist America."⁵⁹ What then, if Putumayo shamans are understood as workers in present-day neoliberal Colombia?

During my fieldwork, I observed different *taitas* had different opinions on what it means to be a *taita* and to what degree their being a *taita* was perceived as a vocation, a hobby, a calling, a responsibility, work, and so on. Although the conversations were never directly expressed in those terms, there were obvious discontinuities in the way each understood their shamanic practice. I noticed that some *taitas*, although few, are truly full-time *taitas*. *Taita* Alberto, for example, drinks *yajé* with participants, or often patients in his case, at least five days a week, sometimes seven.⁶⁰ When I visited him, he had a teenager interned in his house, following a two-month treatment against 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, "[w]ho 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."⁶¹ If we take her statement seriously, what is the relationship between the everyday and ritual performance for *taitas*? How does a

⁵⁷ Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 255–258.

⁵⁹ Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 4.

⁶⁰ 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. It is not the case that *taitas* can simply stay in bed next morning.

⁶¹ Kathi Weeks, "Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique, and Post-Fordist Politics." *Ephemera: Theory & Politics in Organization* 7 (1), 246.

taita like Alberto think about the times he is not conducting a ritual? In what ways are ‘work’ and ‘life’ separable and mutually constitutive?

Some *taitas* renounce living with the 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, say, a 200 kilometer radius), far-away cities in Colombia, and sometimes even 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.”⁶² Returning to Chakrabarty’s discussion on the two types of histories, Alex the Scotsman, and the accusations of the Lower Putumayo *taitas* referenced in Taussig’s work: what if *taitas* are thought of as laborers? Going further, and drawing from Lazzarato’s argument that “labor produces not only commodities, but first and foremost it produces the capital relation,” what and how are the relations on which *taitas* embark on in exercising their profession?⁶³

Partial conclusions and more questions: the shaman as employer

A full-time *taita* like Alberto does not run a one-man operation. Following Marx, “[if] we take away the useful labour expended upon them [commodities], a material substratum is always left, which is furnished by Nature without the help of man.”⁶⁴ Who supplies *Taita* Alberto with *yajé*? How much does he pay for it? How does the exchange take place? How is *yajé* transported? How does the *taita* earn money to purchase the *yajé* that will eventually lead to more income?

On the more mundane, but potentially insightful: who cleans the *yajé* bathrooms that are used during a *yajé* ritual? Who cooks the morning breakfasts that patients enjoy after the long nights of drinking *yajé*? Where do the eggs in the omelets come from? Who washes the dishes and cleans the table after everyone leaves? Who are the behind-the-scenes actors in *yajé* rituals? What are their relationships with the *taita*? Do they get paid? What greater roles and relationships, say of gender and power, are enacted through these exchanges?

It is possible to engage with shamans as laborers, and even as employers. Alex the Scotsman’s disenchantment with *taitas* being evidently inserted in capitalism is not entirely romantic: 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.⁶⁵ Jean Langdon and Isabel Santana 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.⁶⁶ They understand shamanisms as emerging in specific political and historical contexts:

⁶² Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (New York, N.Y.: Classic Books International, 2010), 458.

⁶³ Maurizio Lazzarato, “Immaterial Labor,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: a Potential Politics* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 5.

⁶⁴ Marx, *Karl Marx*, 464.

⁶⁵ These tourism tendencies have even been documented by Time magazine: Otis, “Down the Amazon in Search of Ayahuasca.” See footnote 2 for a list of references that engage with ayahuasca tourism.

⁶⁶ Esther Jean Langdon and Isabel Santana de Rose, “(Neo)Shamanic Dialogues: Encounters between the Guaraní and Ayahuasca,” *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 15, no. 4 (May 1, 2012): 36–59, doi:10.1525/nr.2012.15.4.36.

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.

But 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 middle-men? Can *taitas* be understood, in the words of Matt Stahl, as “unfree masters” subject to payment by their patients (or clients) but also as “free-lancers,” their activities devoid of legal contracts?⁶⁷ What does it mean that in 2000, an organization like UMIYAC (Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yajeceros de la Amazonía Colombiana) was organized through the Amazon Conservation Team’s efforts?⁶⁸

Admittedly, my discussion of labor raises questions and does not attempt to answer them. 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 are sometimes simultaneously of terror and healing, oftentimes figures of romantic fascination and little else than poetic beings at the margins. Being a *taita* is no trivial matter; it is a seriously difficult profession. Waving a waira sachá for consecutive hours 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. Someone like *Taita* Alberto drinks *yajé* most nights of the year; this means having an irregular sleep schedule, throwing up 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.⁶⁹ What does it mean then, that someone who makes these statements also of claims also claims to have done them, in a large part, with a *harmonica*?

⁶⁷ Matt Stahl, *Unfree Masters: Popular Music and the Politics of Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁶⁸ One of the *taitas* that I worked closest with told me briefly about the endeavor: *taitas* that are affiliated gain a certain kind of reputation, as being certified and certainly “good” *taitas*. About the Amazon Conservation Team, an NGO based in Arlington, Virginia (USA), he said very little other than “they seemed to have good interests but they did not continue funding us.” Who gets to be in the Union? What are the Amazon Conservation Team’s interests? Is the state involved in any of this? What are the parameters used in certifying a *taita*’s “goodness”? Unfortunately, I was not able to further research the UMIYAC or the Amazon Conservation Team.

⁶⁹ Anderson, Labate, and Leon, “Healing with Yagé.”

Chapter 3 – Questions of Framing

In this chapter I take Erving Goffman's seminal *Frame Analysis* (1974) as a departure point to examine the varied ways in which Upper Putumayo *taitas* use sound to organize experience in *tomas de yajé*.⁷⁰ Sharing Goffman's preoccupation with answering the deceptively simple question, "what is it that is going on here?," I borrow some of his concepts – namely *framing* and *keying* – in order to discuss how non-verbal sound produced by *taitas* helps participants make sense of their experiences. I contend that a big part of *taitas*' labor consists on striving to make sure participants are indeed able to make sense of what they experience. I conclude with a discussion of the way the sound tactics of Upper Putumayo *taitas* become fundamental in keying frames and defining context in *tomas de yajé*.

Introduction

One of the central points I sustain throughout this thesis is that *taitas* deploy sound in specific ways in order to guide participants through the sensorially demanding experience of drinking *yajé*. Thinking in terms of frames and framing is one productive way of discussing *taitas*' sound tactics in *tomas de yajé*, but more broadly, an important and useful way of engaging with sound in social situations. In doing so, I am introducing a type of engagement thus far absent at the intersection of sound studies and ritual studies.

Drinking *yajé* can make participants lose sense of their immediate surroundings. The general frame, "This is a *yajé* ritual" is often challenged by what can seem like more pressing concerns. For example, participants often report seeing their own death in the *pintas*. It is common for participants to feel transported elsewhere and to feel like they are in a completely different place, like riding a boat down a river or sitting on top of a building. This chapter concerns the way *taitas* use sound to remind participants of the most general and basic frame pertinent to drinking *yajé*, "This is a *yajé* ritual." This helps participants to ground their experience while also allowing them to interpret it.⁷¹

Framing

Gregory Bateson first proposed a definition of 'frame' in the essay "A Theory of Play and Fantasy," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972): "the first step in defining a psychological frame might be to say that it is (or delimits) a class or set of messages (or meaningful actions)."⁷² For Bateson, frames define a framework within which to construe subsequent activities. He elaborates: "A frame is metacommunicative. Any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, ipso facto gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame."⁷³ Bateson's development of the term also includes a list of the "common uses and functions" of frames, including (1) the way they can exclude, "by including certain messages (or meaningful actions) within a frame, certain other messages are excluded"; (2) conversely, the way they can include, "by excluding certain messages (or meaningful actions) within a frame, certain other messages are included"; (3) and the way frames

⁷⁰ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Northeastern University Press, 1986).

⁷¹ Garzón Chirivi claims that when the effects of *yajé* are at the peak of their intensity, the *taitas*' songs "order and calm, and remind [participants] of their place in the world" (my translation). The original reads: "Cuando la borrachera del *yagé* está en su mayor intensidad, el canto ordena y tranquiliza, recuerda el lugar en el mundo." Chirivi, *Rezar, soplar, cantar*, 130.

⁷² Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 186.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 187.

relate to “premises.”⁷⁴ By this latter point Bateson refers to the way frames indicate one “is not to use the same sort of thinking” when attending to one particular frame as when attending to others. He illustrates by referring to a picture frame that “tells the viewer” that thinking about the picture contained within the frame is different from thinking about the wallpaper coating the wall on which the picture frame is hung. I will return to these three functions when discussing drinking *yajé*.

Erving Goffman took up Bateson’s terminology and developed it considerably in *Frame Analysis*. In the words of Stef Slembrouck, and referring to the source in question, “[h]is [Goffman’s] writing strategy often resulted in an almost never-ending series of examples which function as subtle variations on a broad theme, rather than a straightforward conceptual exposition.”⁷⁵ To put it briefly, Goffman’s book-length essay is an exercise in taxonomy that although meticulous is far from clear or conclusive. Goffman’s definition of frame is also elusive: “I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events – at least social ones – and our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify.”⁷⁶

Thomas Scheff, citing Thomas König and drawing from a vast array of reviews and articles written about *Frame Analysis* – Scheff reminds us that the *Social Science Citation Index* contains more than 1,800 references to Goffman’s work – argues that “a close reading of the citations suggested that Goffman’s ideas have not fared well. Most of the responses have been of three kinds: paraphrase, harsh criticism, and adopting terms from frame analysis but ignoring or misconstruing Goffman’s approach.”⁷⁷ For König, “frames are basic cognitive structures which guide the perception and representation of reality. On the whole, frames are not consciously manufactured but are unconsciously adopted in the course of communicative processes. On a very banal level, frames structure, which parts of reality become noticed.”⁷⁸ König also presents a useful genealogy of the ‘frame’ concept:

Todd Gitlin has summarized these frame elements most eloquently in his widely quoted (e.g., Miller 1997: 367; Miller and Riechert 2001: 115) elaboration of the frame concept: “Frames are principles of selection, emphasis and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters.” (Gitlin 1980: 6) While it is hard to improve theoretically on this definition, the trouble starts, when it comes to the identification and measurement of frames. Precisely because frames consist of tacit rather than overt conjectures, notorious difficulties to empirically identify frames arise (Maher 2001: 84). The difficulty of measuring latent frames could partially explain the gradual theoretical shift towards a conceptualization of frames as being more actively adopted and manufactured. Particularly in media studies, it has become commonplace to treat the choice of frames as a more or less deliberate process. Entman’s famous definition of frames led the way. For Entman, “[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Stef Slembrouck, “Goffman’s Frame Analysis: a recent rejoinder,” in *From Will to Well: Studies in Linguistics*, ed. Slembrouck et al. (Gent: Academia Press, 2009), 381. Slembrouck also points to some of the more salient criticism directed to Goffman, most notoriously Verhoeven’s claim that Goffman’s work is “mainly concerned with trivialities and marginalities” and the public debate sparked by Denzin and Keller’s reading of frame analysis as “structuralist.”

⁷⁶ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 10–11.

⁷⁷ Thomas J. Scheff, “The Structure of Context: Deciphering Frame Analysis,” *Sociological Theory* 23, no. 4 (December 1, 2005): 369, doi:10.1111/j.0735-2751.2005.00259.x.

⁷⁸ Thomas Koenig, “Concepts for Frame Analyses,” 2005, <http://www.ccsr.ac.uk/methods/publications/frameanalysis/>.

problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation." (Entman 1993: 52)⁷⁹

For Slembrouck, one important “uncertainty” surrounding the concept of frame is “the relative centrality of non-verbal actional behavior in a conceptual understanding of frame (and footing), and how this ties in with a particular conception of the nature of social interaction.”⁸⁰ In this chapter I am directly concerned with the use of non-verbal sound in *yajé* rituals. I am also following Entman’s definition, cited above, that stresses *selection* as a fundamental part of framing. My interpretation of framing in *tomas de yajé* also follows König’s statement that “frames are not consciously manufactured but are unconsciously adopted in the course of communicative processes” – the critical distinction I make is that *taitas* do use non-verbal sound to “consciously manufacture” the frames that will be, to a great degree, “unconsciously adopted” by participants in a *toma de yajé*.

“The labile nature of the frame”

Returning to Bateson briefly:

In the Andaman Islands, peace is concluded after each side has been given ceremonial freedom to strike the other. This example, however, also illustrates the labile nature of the frame ‘This is play,’ or ‘This is ritual.’ The discrimination between map and territory is always liable to break down, and the ritual blows of peace-making are always liable to be mistaken for the ‘real’ blows of combat.⁸¹

Frame lability is perhaps one of the central characteristics of *yajé* rituals. From one moment to another, participants might find themselves experiencing an entirely different reality. As discussed in a previous chapter, *taitas* encourage participants to close their eyes and let go. It is often easy for participants to forget that other people are within the same room; it is also easy for them to forget who they are sitting or lying next to.

Bateson stresses that many times, a frame is consciously recognized and even “represented in vocabulary (‘play,’ ‘movie,’ ‘interview,’ ‘job,’ ‘language,’ etc.).”⁸² Other times, there might be no explicit verbal reference to it, and participants might not be conscious of it. This often happens in *tomas de yajé*. The onset time of the effects of the brew is unpredictable, as are the effects themselves. Although we can generalize in saying that the effects include dizziness, diarrhea, *pintas*, vomiting, etc., the time of onset and the content of the *pintas* are not predictable. A *pinta* might take a participant to a microcosmos located inside, say, the roof of the *yajé* room or even within the participant’s hand. Traveling further and further – microscopically, atomically – is one common description of what a *pinta* looks like. Others are more specific in saying that rather than penetrating deep into the stuff of objects, they instead traverse the Amazonian jungle either by foot, water, or air. One *taita* jokingly tells participants at the beginning of *tomas* to be especially careful about following a *pinta* too intensely while using the bathroom because this might delay access for others and bring about “unfortunate accidents.” He sometimes tells the story of someone who, thought lost by her companion, was then found to have been staring at – some would say traveling within – a toilet paper roll for over an hour while sitting on the toilet.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, 182.

⁸² Ibid., 186.

Within a *toma*, participants are in constant flux between their *yajé*-induced reality and their more immediate surroundings, that is, the *yajé* room and the fact that they are along others who have also consumed *yajé* under the guidance of a particular *taita*. A few hours after all participants have drunk *yajé*, the *taita* might call for those who want to drink a second time. Generally, one could say those who drink again are sufficiently embedded in the “This is a *yajé* ritual” frame, for they can get up from their seat, hammock, or mattress, understand the *taita* is offering a second round, accept the *taita*’s offer, and go back to where they previously were. A sign of experience as a *yajé* drinker is to be able to drink more than once and to remain calm at all times. However, even experienced apprentices that appear to maintain a general awareness of the basic frame can slip out of it and be completely transported to their *yajé*-induced frame. In one *toma*, I remember an apprentice who went from standing calmly to suddenly lying down on the floor, shrieking, and gesticulating in a way that suggested he was holding on to a tubular object with both his hands and arms. This lasted for about fifteen minutes; he later reported having been riding a giant anaconda across a swamp.

At this point, a clarification is necessary: I do not mean to imply that ‘letting go’ of the basic “This is a *yajé* ritual” frame is seen as negative. There is a paradox at the heart of the *yajé* experience: as I will illustrate in the following chapter, one of the reasons for which *taitas* play the harmonica is in order “to take participants away,” that is, to aid them in receiving *pintas*; however, *taitas* also play the harmonica “to bring them back” if and when they go too far. A certain willingness to “leave” the basic frame is necessary in order to take off, as it were, and have a vivid *pinta*. What *taitas* seem to value, however, is the ability to remember – even when interacting with, or at the very least, witnessing profoundly whatever the *pinta* brings about – the primacy of the basic “This is a *yajé* ritual” frame when the going gets rough. *Taitas* strive to assist participants in handling simultaneously at least two frames: (1) the basic “This is a *yajé* ritual” frame and (2) the *pinta* frame. In very practical terms this ability to maintain a kind of double-consciousness translates to minimizing health hazards that can happen, ranging from participants barring access to toilet facilities to participants passing out or even dying from a heart attack. It is not the case that *taitas* expect all drinkers to be experts in what we could call the control of their framing mechanisms or the management of a kind of double-consciousness of competing frames. Otherwise, an important reason for which *taitas* are seen as indispensable would disappear. *Taitas* use sound to reinforce the basic frame. *Taitas* value knowing one’s limits while maintaining an openness towards pushing them. *Taitas* often remind participants that if *pintas* get too intense, unpleasant, or outright scary, they should by all means ask for help.

Goffman writes about “the special vulnerabilities” to which frames can be subject.⁸³ He discusses how something going on, from an individual’s point of view, might instead be in fact a joke, a dream, an accident, a deception, and so forth. He states that in his project, “attention will be directed to what it is about our sense of what is going on that makes it so vulnerable to the need for these various re-readings.”⁸⁴ One principal value *taitas* espouse is that having a *pinta*, regardless of the nature of its content, is a learning experience, therapeutic. This can be interpreted as a post-facto framing that happens more verbally than musically, as in the case of using the harmonica and the *waira sacha* to remind participants of the basic frame.

Keying

Goffman defines keying as

⁸³ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 11.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else. The process of transcription can be called keying. A rough musical analogy is intended.⁸⁵

For our case in hand, the musical analogy is indeed welcome. The movement within frames a *taita* effects, or as described previously, the reinforcement of the basic frame, can be understood as a way of guiding a *yajé* ritual through the keying of frames.

Experienced *yajé* drinkers and *taitas* claim they can control the nature of their *pintas* through sound. That is, in a way, by anticipating the *pinta* by providing a soundtrack that they deliberately play either on the harmonica or on the waira sacha. Here, I am less concerned in this personal effecting of keying, and more in the way a *taita* can key and indeed transpose someone else's – a participant's – frame.

Goffman sustains that “participants in the activity are meant to know and to openly acknowledge that a systematic alteration is involved, one that will radically reconstitute what it is for them that is going on.”⁸⁶ Generally, in the case of the reinforcement of the basic frame keying I have referred to thus far, participants acknowledge this alteration by being, or at the very least appearing, less disturbed. Demeanor becomes a basic way of displaying the ability to handle framing mechanisms. It is important to emphasize it is not likely a *taita* would intervene when a participant seems to be laughing abundantly or dancing vigorously; intensity of reaction is not enough of a reason for suspecting a participant needs help. It is also important to emphasize that the particular sound tactic so far referred to as ‘reinforcing the basic frame’ does not necessarily imply a termination of the *pinta*. In Goffman's words, “the systematic transformation that a particular keying introduces may alter only slightly the activity thus transformed, but it utterly changes what it is a participant would say was going on.”⁸⁷ It is more of an attenuation of aspects in the *pinta*'s content that might be causing despair in a participant.

Another way to describe the keying of the basic frame is through Goffman's discussion of what he terms out-of-frame activity:

Given a spate of activity that is framed in a particular way and that provides an official main focus of attention for ratified participants, it seems inevitable that other modes and lines of activity (including communication narrowly defined) will simultaneously occur in the same locale, segregated from what officially dominates, *and will be treated, when treated at all, as something apart*. In other words, participants pursue a line of activity – a story line – across a range of events that are treated as out of frame, subordinated in this particular way to what has come to be defined as the main action (emphasis added).⁸⁸

Taitas are not interested in using sound as a way of coercing participants to live their *yajé* experience in a narrowly defined way. If we assume that a participant is experiencing intensely a *pinta* frame and thus interpreting the content of the *pinta* frame to be “the main action,” *taitas* would limit their intervention to making sure the participant is able to remember out-of-frame activity, even if such activity treated as “something apart.” In this example, out-of-frame activity refers to most of the content of the “This is a *yajé* ritual” frame, e.g. that other people are present in the *yajé* room, that there is a *taita* that can assist, and so forth.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 43–44.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 45.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 201.

In addition to the keying *taitas* perform in order to remind participants of the basic “I am at a *yajé* ritual” frame, other uses of non-verbal sound for keying include:

- (1) Playing the waira sacha at the beginning of the ritual to clean the room and to signal a frame of expectation. This playing of the waira sacha comes after the beginning of the ritual has been keyed verbally. One *taita* is known to explicitly say, “we are going to begin,” in order to draw an unquestionable separation from pre-ritual talk – general chatting, casual conversation, an informal ambiance – to a solemn and quiet frame. After all participants have drunk *yajé*, the lights are dimmed and the *taita* plays nothing but the waira sacha while the onset happens. It signals a quiet moment of introspective calmness, expectation, and concentration.
- (2) Playing the waira sacha to help participants ‘concentrate.’ In a way, *taitas* can be understood to be giving participants a figural object to focus on, that is, the “This is a *yajé* ritual” frame. This type of keying is closely related to Goffman’s discussion of out-of-frame activity. *Taitas* often discuss how, when going to a *toma de yajé*, it is important that participants have a specific reason for drinking *yajé*, and that they keep focused throughout the ritual on that which they desire to attain by participating. It is common practice that participants tell the *taita* what it is they desire right after being summoned by the *taita* and before first drinking *yajé* at the altar. Goffman recognizes that during any event or “strip of activity,” participants can either attend to or disattend competing events, “disattend” referring to a “withdrawal of all attention and awareness;” he elaborates: “[t]his capacity of participants, this channel in the situation, covers a range of potentially distracting events, some a threat to appropriate involvement because they are immediately present, others a threat in spite of having their prime location elsewhere.”⁸⁹ Experiencing a *pinta* is not enough. *Taitas* insist that participants should face the *pinta* and maintain a dialogue with it based on the participant’s objectives and intentions. However, the unpredictability of the *pinta*, and the general state of the participant – dizzy, tired, light-headed – make it difficult for a participant to remain focused. Goffman provides another way to think about the relationship between the *pinta* frame and the basic frame:

It has been suggested that during the occurrence of any activity framed in a particular way one is likely to find another flow of other activity that is systematically disattended and treated as out of frame, something not to be given any concern or attention. Drawing loosely on a particular imagery, it was said that the main track carrying the story line was associated with a disattend track, the two tracks playing simultaneously.⁹⁰

The point here, again is that the “disattend track” while a *pinta* is being experienced – that is, the basic information reminding a participant that they are indeed at a *yajé* ritual – should not be completely neglected. As already discussed, there are serious stakes of life and death during a *toma de yajé*. Additionally, *taitas* stress that while experiencing a *pinta*, participants should, as much as possible, be respectful of others’ experiences. By

⁸⁹ Ibid., 202.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 210.



Figure 9 - "Cleansing," Vereda Tamabioy, Putumayo

this they mean participants should try to remain as disattended to others as possible in order to allow fellow participants to concentrate.⁹¹

- (3) Playing during varying intervals throughout the night to affect the *pintas* collectively. A *taita* might allow prolonged moments of silence ranging from 10 minutes to an hour; on the intervals during which a *taita* plays, the sounds vary in terms of volume, tempo, and pitch. *Taitas* report that through their practice they are able to determine how the group is doing and effect necessary changes. If it seems that the group needs to concentrate more, or the *yajé* needs to be further activated, the *taita* will play in a certain way – with more clearly defined rhythms and at faster tempi. If it seems the group needs evening out, the *taita* will play in a different way – dragging and softer. One *taita* is especially proud of a six-sided harmonica that was given to him by a participant after conducting a *toma de yajé* in New York City. He told me in a matter-of-fact tone, but also laughing, that his six-sided harmonica is especially appropriate for when he wants to change the *toma*'s key.⁹² It is hard to say precisely what frame is keyed by *taitas* when they attempt to affect *pintas* collectively. Rather, they attempt to modify the "This is a *yajé* ritual" frame by providing additional information that is embedded sonically. For example, slow and long phrases might suggest tranquility and calmness. Of all the keyings *taitas* perform, this particular one, affecting *pintas* collectively, proved the most challenging to research, talk, and write about.

⁹¹ The way *taitas* regulate others' sound production is discussed in *Sound and Power*, pp. 54-55.

⁹² "Facilito se le cambia el tono a la cosa."



Figure 10 - Upper Putumayo *taita*'s harmonica collection and waira sacha, Vereda Tamabioy, Putumayo

- (4) Playing directly at and literally on participants while conducting what we could call the “cleansing” frame to heal and clean them. The *tomas* usually end with the *taitas* performing a cleansing of participants. *Taitas* will start playing the waira sacha directly on each of the participants’ bodies, from head to toes, focusing especially on playing around the participants’ head. The leaves of the instrument make contact with the skin and the sound of the leaves in what feels like stereo surround is decidedly different from hearing the waira sacha coming from one specific direction throughout the night. This change in proximity, volume, and contact is an integral part of keying the cleansing frame. Similarly, the *taita* sings during this time, and plays the harmonica at a very close distance from the participant.

Conclusions by way of context

It is difficult to discuss frames and framing without making reference to context. The two notions are deeply intertwined; as Duranti and Goodwin contend, context can be understood as “a frame that surrounds the event being examined and provides resources for its appropriate interpretation.”⁹³ Although context is not something that can be given a “single, precise, technical definition,” in their view, this is “not a situation that requires a remedy.”⁹⁴ The same has been said before about concepts like ‘frame’ and ‘keying.’ But using these concepts and examining the relationship between the *yajé* vision frame and what I have thus far termed “the

⁹³ Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin, “Rethinking context: an introduction”, in *Rethinking Context: Language as an Interactive Phenomenon*, ed. Alessandro Duranti and Charles Goodwin, (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

more basic frame” (in the *toma de yajé* case) or, more broadly, “focal event and context” (using Duranti and Goodwin’s vocabulary) is of

central relevance to one of the key issues that has emerged in contemporary studies of language and interaction: the use of background information to produce and understand action, and the question of how such background information is organized, recognized, invoked, and understood.⁹⁵

Duranti and Goodwin refer to focal event as the “phenomenon being contextualized,” and state that the notion of context involves both a focal event and “a field of action within which that event is embedded.”⁹⁶

What interests me here is the idea that *taitas* can strategically produce non-verbal sound with what might seem like banal instruments – the *waira sacha*, a bundle of leaves held together by a string or a rubber band, and the harmonica, commonly referred to as the poor man’s accordion, the accordion being the poor man’s orchestra – to dramatically shape the way participants in a *toma de yajé* make sense of the *pintas* they receive, images and motions that might be of astounding pulchritude, ineffable horror, and all in between. Duranti and Goodwin emphasize “the capacity of human beings to dynamically reshape the context that provides organization for their actions within the interaction itself;” they are also attuned to the way a strategic actor “can actively attempt to shape context in ways that further their own interests.”⁹⁷ It is relevant here to note that one famous *taita*, while giving a talk about *yajé* in Bogotá, was told by an attendant that bringing the ritual to the city was disrespectful because it equated to taking it out of context. She believed that the ritual belonged in the “jungle.” The *taita* replied, “I am the context. I bring the context.”⁹⁸

As Goffman would have it,

[i]n doings involving joint participation, there is to be found a stream of signs which is itself excluded from the content of the activity but which serves as a means of regulating it, bounding, articulating, and qualifying its various components and phases. One might speak here of directional signals and, by metaphorical extension, the track that contains them.⁹⁹

I am here emphatically suggesting that non-verbal sound in *yajé* rituals is one means of regulating, bounding, articulating, and qualifying individual experiences throughout the night. Although I am here concerned with a narrowly defined set of sounds – those produced deliberately by the *taita* – it is necessary to also address the broader soundscape that occurs during *tomas*. For, as Duranti and Goodwin argue, context is best understood dynamically: context and talk (although for talk we could understand frame, focal action, etc.) stand “in a mutually reflexive relationship to each other, with talk, and the interpretive work it generates, shaping context as much as context shapes talk.”¹⁰⁰ Following this line of thinking, one could ask, how is interpreting a *yajé pinta* different in a house in Bogotá, with its urban sounds, than it is in the deep Amazon, with its own distinct set of sounds? To what degree are the *taitas*’ sounds independent of all other sounds involved in a *toma*? In what ways does the retching of a fellow participant affect someone’s experience of a *pinta* and the ritual in general? In what ways can we

⁹⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 5–6.

⁹⁸ “Yo soy el contexto. Yo traigo el contexto.” Chirivi, *Rezar, soplar, cantar*, 153.

⁹⁹ Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 238.

¹⁰⁰ Duranti and Goodwin, *Rethinking Context*, 31.

say that singing and playing the harmonica, the waira sachá, and the harmonica constitutes labor for a *taita*?

More generally, in considering sound production as an essential part of a *taita*'s labor, I am also connecting the present discussion on frames, keying, and context to Steven Feld's arguing for the "potential of acoustic knowing, of sounding as a condition of and for knowing, of sonic presence and awareness as potent shaping forces in how people make sense of experiences. Acoustemology means an exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense, to knowing, to experiential truth."¹⁰¹ I also want to recall here Catherine Bell's understanding of ritual that emphasizes the centrality of a participant's body in a "specially constructed space" as "simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment."¹⁰² I propose a consideration of the audible that places it as one central value ordering the environment in ritual practice, of sound as a fundamental aspect of framing and contextualizing. In *yajé* rituals, *taitas* use sound as a way to define – or impose – values on the environment; sound becomes a central sensory modality that is experienced, or received, by participants in their attempts to grasp the meaning of a *pinta*.

¹⁰¹ Feld and Basso, *Senses of Place*, 97.

¹⁰² Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82.

Chapter 4: Questions of Place

In this chapter I argue that another fundamental part of *taitas*' labor is to be able to construct a specific ritual place sonically – singing, playing the harmonica and the waira sacha, and sounding the cascabeles as they move throughout the room. I argue that in *tomas de yajé*, this specific place is one independent of material constraints or geographical location. Rather, I am proposing a sound-based definition of place. The *taitas*' instruments are highly portable and permit *taitas* to deliberately construct a ritual place inside their living rooms in the Upper Putumayo, but also in nearby villages in southern Colombia and locations as remote as Bogotá, the San Francisco Bay Area, or France. In order to make sure a *toma de yajé* is successful – that is, one in which participants are able to make sense of what they experience – *taitas* not only guide the ritual through their own playing; they also monitor and control the sounds produced by participants during *tomas de yajé*.

In this chapter I will begin by tracing a genealogy of the ways 'place' has been theorized with regards to ritual in order to contextualize my proposal that Upper Putumayo *taitas* use sound to *construct* a ritual place. I also include a description the aesthetics of the sounds that *taitas* produce, followed by a discussion on how they come to learn how to play. Throughout their apprenticeship and subsequent practice, *taitas* develop what I term 'sound signatures,' that is, specific and recognizable musical characteristics that distinguish their playing, especially on the harmonica. Following the previous chapter's discussion of keying and frames, I argue that sound grounds, or anchors participants to the place constructed by *taitas* in *tomas de yajé*. The two main operations *taitas* perform are seemingly paradoxical. On one hand, *taitas* say they play the harmonica in order "to send away" participants, allowing them to experience vivid *pintas*. On the other hand, playing the harmonica also helps *taitas* "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* with a specific purpose while allowing them to avoid going "too far away."

My discussion of place as understood and performed by *taitas* is also intricately connected to notions of sound and authority; if there is indeed a place that is constructed sonically, it is possible that certain sounds may disrupt this place. *Taitas* exert authority through the control of sound production within the ritual.

Finally, I explore the ways *taitas* index the Amazon both verbally and non-verbally. Verbally, at the beginning of the ritual, they 'bless' the *yajé* to be drunk and 'invoke' the rainforest by reciting the name of plants, animals, and sometimes spirits that inhabit the Amazon. Non-verbally, the sounds produced by both the waira sacha and the harmonica imitate and index the rainforest. For *taitas*, 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 often emphasize the importance of staying within the confines of the room designated for the *toma*. Although it is understood that all present will most likely, at some point, need to use the bathroom and exit the room, *taitas* stress the necessity of returning to the *yajé* room as soon as possible. *Taitas* want to make sure all participants remain within their supervision. At the beginning of the ritual, this oversight means, literally, within the sense of sight: all participants must be visible to the *taita*, and the *taita* must be visible to all participants.

As the night progresses, the lights are turned off and illumination is provided by a few candles usually concentrated near the altar but sometimes scattered throughout the room. Most often, participants and *taitas* alike close their eyes throughout the night while *yajé* starts to settle – the first manifestations of this settling are feeling dizzy, cold, and eventually starting to receive *pintas*. In this new context of closed eyes and sparse illumination, oversight turns to mean within the audible radius of the *taita*'s sound production; conversations with both *taitas* and participants confirmed this point.

The sense of sight is, by far, the one most affected by *yajé*. Most phenomenological accounts of the experience place an emphasis on the nature of the visions received, and understandably so – most attempts to describe them end up admitting the visions' ineffability. Arguably, *yajé* visions, or *pintas*, are beyond the *taita*'s control.¹⁰³ What participants hear, however, is within the *taita*'s range of command. In this sense, the sounds produced by the *taita* throughout the night serve as a common denominator for those sharing an experience that would otherwise be highly individualized. 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. In this section, I will focus on this sound-based notion of place in *tomas de yajé*, tracing a genealogy of the way 'place' has been theorized with regards to ritual.

Scholars from disciplines as wide-ranging as philosophy, anthropology, geography, and ecology have theorized the notion of place extensively. Almost any publication that engages critically with the concept presents a detailed literature review of its intellectual lineage.¹⁰⁴ The past two decades have seen a deeply engaged initiative towards theorizing landscape, place, and space, from the point of view of anthropology. In the words of Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, "anthropologists are rethinking and reconceptualizing their understandings of culture in spatialized ways."¹⁰⁵ Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso write, in the introduction to *Senses of Place*: "we seek to move beyond facile generalizations about places being culturally constructed by describing specific ways in which places naturalize different worlds of sense."¹⁰⁶ If, following Catherine Bell's definition, we accept that ritual at its simplest implies a body moving within a specially constructed place, "simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment," 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.

The traditional approach ritual theorists have taken to understand 'place' in rituals has been to focus on the architectural. The literal construction of a physical space is a recurrent theme in Mircea Eliade's work, particularly in his interpretation of Tjilpa myth: in discussing the existence of a sacred pole that for the Tjilpa delimits a sacred space, Eliade claims that "seldom

¹⁰³ The relationship between the harmonica – and sound, more broadly – and *pintas* is, in short, complicated. For some, it is causal, for others generative, and for others circular.

¹⁰⁴ See, for example, Dragos Gheorghiu and George Nash, eds., *Place as Material Culture: Objects, Geographies and the Construction of Time* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Pub, 2013); Thomas F. Thornton and Sealaska Heritage Institute, *Being and Place among the Tlingit*, Culture, Place, and Nature (Seattle: Juneau [Alaska]: University of Washington Press; In association with Sealaska Heritage Institute, 2008); Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (School of American Research Press, 1997); Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, eds., *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, Blackwell Readers in Anthropology 4 (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003); Eric Hirsch and Michael E. O'Hanlon, *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (Clarendon Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁵ Setha M. Low and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga, eds., *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture*, 1st ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 1.

¹⁰⁶ Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, eds., *Senses of Place*, (School of American Research Press, 1997), 8.



Figure 11 - Altar in a yajé room, Vereda Tamabioy, Putumayo

do we find a more pathetic avowal that man cannot live without a ‘sacred center’ which permits him to ‘cosmize’ space and to communicate with the transhuman world of heaven”; Eliade’s center is a “place established by its connection with cosmogony and by its opening toward a world that is superhuman.”¹⁰⁷ Jonathan Z. Smith presents an extension of the physical edifice onto a more generalizable place through liturgy.¹⁰⁸ Smith discusses the construction of places literally, situating “building ideology along a continuum from the sphere of ‘nature’ to that of ‘culture.’”¹⁰⁹ Some examples he presents are the *aedes*, “with its notion of fire, hearth, and home” standing somewhere between the natural and social; Indian temples, ideologically considered to have “grown” from a “seed”, standing at the organic end of the continuum; and Near Eastern temples associated with the opposite, constructivist end.¹¹⁰ Smith elaborates, stating that

a preliminary understanding of ritual and its relation to place is best illustrated by the case of built ritual environments – most especially, crafted constructions such as temples. When one enters a temple, one enters marked-off space (the usual example, the Greek *temenos*, derived from *temno*, ‘to cut’) in which, at least in principle, nothing is accidental; everything, at least potentially, demands attention.¹¹¹

For Smith, sacrality is above all, a category of emplacement.¹¹² Smith moves on to discuss place more abstractly: “place is not best conceived as a particular location with an idiosyncratic physiognomy or as a uniquely individualistic node of sentiment, but rather as a social position within a hierarchical system”; he understands “place in the sense of social location, of genealogy, kinship, authority, superordination, and subordination.”¹¹³ Smith develops the idea that from a strict place-orientedness arose a temporal system of meaning built through liturgy: “through a concentration on the associative dimensions of place together with the syntagmatic dimensions of narrative, a system was formulated that could be replicated away from the place”; in his case study this “system” was liturgy.¹¹⁴

Steven Feld writes, “as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place.”¹¹⁵ Drawing from years of fieldwork with the Kaluli, he defines acoustemology as “local conditions of sensation, knowledge, and imagination embodied in the culturally particular sense of place resounding.”¹¹⁶ Citing Henri Bergson and Edward Casey, Feld argues that “sensation, sensual presence, is still more than embodiment, more than perceptual figure-grounds, more than the potential for synesthesia; because motion can draw upon the kinesthetic interplay of tactile, sonic, and visual senses, emplacement always implicates the intertwined nature of sensual bodily presence and perceptual engagement.”¹¹⁷ Feld argues for the “potential of acoustic knowing, of sounding as a condition of and for knowing, of sonic presence and awareness as potent shaping forces in how people make sense of experiences. Acoustemology means an exploration of sonic sensibilities, specifically of ways in which sound is central to making sense,

¹⁰⁷ Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (Cornell University Press, 1973), 53.

¹⁰⁸ Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 21-22.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 103–104.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, 44–46.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹¹⁵ Steven Feld, “Waterfalls of Song,” in *Senses of Place*, eds., Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, 91.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 93–94.

to knowing, to experiential truth.”¹¹⁸ He concludes, “[a]coustemology means that as a sensual space-time, the experience of place potentially can always be grounded in an acoustic dimension.”¹¹⁹ Following and expanding Feld’s discussion, I am proposing here something far more radical: while I agree that “the experience of place” always has a sonic component to it, I am instead suggesting that sound production can itself *constitute* a place, that is, as in the case of *taitas* from the Upper Putumayo, *to create it*.

I argue here that sound is the main way in which *taitas* construct their ritual place. *Taitas* are able to replicate the ritual place they have in their living rooms through their sound tactics. Place in this sense is understood as performed and as having a temporal dimension. I borrow here Thomas F. Thornton’s definition of place: “[a] place is a framed space that is meaningful to a person or a group over time.”¹²⁰ Thornton then discusses how his definition requires entangling three main elements: time, space, and experience. Here I will focus on the temporal aspect of place-making in *yajé* rituals.

Just like a wheel that is set off rolling along a path eventually stops rolling due to friction, so happens with the place performed by *taitas* through sound. Friction in this sense refers to distractions in the *yajé* environment. It also refers to the fact that most often, *taitas* do not play all night long without ever stopping. Like everyone else, they might need to use the bathroom or step outside for a period of time. The idea I am introducing is that it is not enough for a *taita* to perform at the beginning of the ritual, or at a specifically strategic moment in time a few hours into the ritual: instead, sound is maintained throughout by the *taitas*. This has two important implications. First, just as it is possible to speak of a ‘sonic radius’ that delimits the ‘place’ in question, this place is also time-sensitive. This leads to the idea that the place constructed and its respective indices and framings have what we could call an expiration date. *Taitas* must continue the performance of place through their sonic practices. The second implication is that if this performance does exist, this place is 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’ audible radius.

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. Instead, they make these calls intuitively. Even in the case described before, of *taitas* playing when participants look *mareados*, the precise moment and duration of the *taita*’s performance will vary according to each *toma*. *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 layerings they can provide. When *taitas* move around the room, their presence is made audible because of 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 that they are not alone.

The place constructed is not fixed. Different kinds of playing and singing can change the nature of the place strategically. Different rhythms, textures, tempi, and phrasings can drastically change the nature of the place. There is one particular *taita* that owns an antique six-sided

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 97.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Thomas F. Thornton, *Being and Place among the Tlingit*, Culture, Place, and Nature (Seattle : Juneau [Alaska]: University of Washington Press ; In association with Sealaska Heritage Institute, 2008), 10.

harmonica, each side tuned to a different key. This has become his harmonica of choice. The first reason he listed for it was that, literally, “con ésta se le puede cambiar el tono a la noche facilito” (With this one [harmonica], one can change the night’s tone [or key] very easily). His musical pun was not accidental. *Taitas* firmly believe in their instruments’ agency and power.

The aesthetics of the taitas’ sounds

If *taitas* are indeed able to construct sound-based places within which specific *tomas de yajé* will take place, it is necessary to address the aesthetics of these sounds. Alan Goldman, in *The Aesthetic*, admits that what is meant by ‘aesthetics’ is something that has broadened through time. Departing from a preliminary preoccupation with the nature of beauty, “[i]t now qualifies not only judgments or evaluations, but properties, attitudes, experience and pleasure or value as well, and its application is no longer restricted to beauty alone.”¹²¹ Along similar lines, in *Sound and Sentiment*, Steven Feld discusses how issues around aesthetics and expressive culture might best be engaged with not by asking if a certain group of people – in his case the Kaluli – “have” aesthetics “in an objective, reverifiable sense,” but instead by interrogating and describing the quality of experience that is felt by those involved in any event.¹²² He elaborates, citing Robert Plant Armstrong’s work (*Wellspring*, 1975; *The Affective Presence*, 1981), by stating that an adequate approach to culture “cannot be simply a reduction to functions and structures but must concern itself with experience;” he also insists on how an understanding of aesthetics is fundamentally based on multi-sensory perception.¹²³ In the case of *tomas de yajé* in the Upper Putumayo, in stating that *taitas* create a specific sound-based place in order to conduct *tomas de yajé* successfully, I am arguing that the aesthetic qualities of the sounds they perform deeply influence the way participants experience *tomas*. My emphasis in thinking about the aesthetics of *taitas’* sounds interrogates how formal characteristics relate to broader questions within *tomas de yajé* – in this chapter, these questions revolve around the creation of a ritual place, indexicality, emplacement, and displacement.

Mark DeBellis writes about three main ways in which music is traditionally said to be valued aesthetically. One line of thinking, referred to as expressionist, places emphasis on the expressive character of music – music is valued for how it makes listeners feel, “for its ability to evoke emotion in us.”¹²⁴ Another line of thought, referred to as formalist, stresses the “cognitive grasp of musical properties and relationships such as repetition and contrast, formal structure (sonata, rondo, ABA form), motivistic relationships, harmonic structure, and so on, where such properties are understood to be non-referential.”¹²⁵ A third one values music “iconically,” claiming that music is relevant insofar as it signifies something in the human world: music is understood as “an imitation or representation of, and thereby refer[ing] to, some aspect of the extramusical, ‘human’ world of emotions, character and ideas.”¹²⁶ DeBellis discusses how many have illustrated ways in which these three values can overlap. For example, sounds that imitate, say, birds, could be valued iconically in terms of their accuracy in representing a particular species while simultaneously having formal value in terms of harmonic or rhythmic content.

¹²¹ Alan Goldman, “The Aesthetic,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 2nd ed (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 255.

¹²² Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, 3rd ed.; thirtieth anniversary ed. with a new introduction (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2012), 233.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Mark DeBellis, “Music,” in *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, 669.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Formally, the sounds *taitas* play can be described, generally speaking, as simple and repetitive. The *waira-sacha* is essentially a percussive instrument.¹²⁷ For the average ear, it produces only one pitch. *Taitas* play it by waving the bundle of leaves in the air and varying the intensity and length of each individual stroke. The waving is usually rhythmically regular, and tempo variations are introduced by the *taita* throughout the night at will. Generally speaking, however, it is easy for a listener to ‘keep the beat’ to the sound of a *waira-sacha*. Listeners can expect a certain consistency from the *taita*’s playing. The sounds the *taita* plays on the harmonica are also repetitive and simple. *Taitas* usually play motifs – or what I term sonic signatures – that last from a single measure to two or three. Different *taitas* have a different repertoire of sound signatures – some have only one, and some may have two or three. Following DeBellis’ terminology and also the way Feld and Goldman suggest that engaging with aesthetics means more than taxonomizing, this chapter will also deal with the indexical and emotional features of *taitas*’ sounds during a *toma de yajé*.

Sonic Signatures

I interviewed several *taitas* about the way they come to learn their particular sonic signature(s). Invariably, they said “the plant” – *yajé* itself in a prepared, consumable state – “taught them to them.” Some said that at first they would do their best to imitate the way their master shaman played, and that slowly, through participating in *tomas*, *yajé* would guide them towards developing their own signatures. I was not able to get more precise details on this process of learning. However, this apparent vagueness – “the plant teaches you through time” – is, although not a focus of this thesis, something worthy of a separate discussion.¹²⁸

The most salient point about the *taitas*’ sonic signatures is that they are recognizable. This recognizability came to be relevant during my fieldwork experiences in two ways. On one hand, seasoned *yajé* drinkers and local community members were able to identify particular *taitas* based strictly on their sonic signature. It would be possible, then, for a habituated listener to know exactly who is playing the harmonica during a *toma de yajé* when the lights are turned off and effectively identify an individual and their associated power and prestige.¹²⁹ Similarly, someone walking outside a *taita*’s home during a *toma* would be able to know whom the person or persons playing inside are *or are not*, based entirely on the sound signatures heard.

On the other hand, it could be argued that sound signatures bear no special significance for first-time participants that might not know that these so-called sound signatures exist or even that *taitas* play the harmonica, for that matter. A minimally attentive ear will, however, after a

¹²⁷ It must be noted, however, that etymologically, as pointed in a previous chapter, *waira sacha* can be translated as “wind plant” from Quechua.

¹²⁸ The idea that “the plant teaches you” is never articulated with more detail or specificity by Upper Putumayo *taitas*; this raises questions about a particular way of believing in the plant’s power for those who persevere – trial, suffering, and overcoming being central values of the *yajé* experience – and also about knowledge through habituation: a common trope is to talk about people who misguidedly think of themselves as knowledgeable and experienced because they have drunk *yajé* “many” times, “many” never being enough. A common saying is that someone “*ya se cree taita solo porque tomó yajé varias veces*.” The transmission of knowledge from “the plant” seems to be a common trope across ayahuasca traditions. Prof. Lev Michael points to how iquitos make similar assertions about their individual ayahuasca songs; a similar idea exists in the way *Santo Daime* practitioners are said to “receive hymns” and Peruvian mestizo shamans learn songs and ways to treat and diagnose. See, for example, L E Luna, “The Concept of Plants as Teachers among Four Mestizo Shamans of Iquitos, Northeastern Peru,” *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 11, no. 2 (July 1984): 135–56; Beatriz Caiuby Labate and Gustavo Pacheco, *Opening the Portals of Heaven: Brazilian Ayahuasca Music* (LIT Verlag Münster, 2011).

¹²⁹ It is not uncommon for there to be more than one *taita* at a *toma de yajé*.



Figure 12 - Upper Putumayo taita with harmonica, Santiago, Putumayo

few minutes of listening to the sound signatures realize the content is repetitive and in many ways predictable. Even a participant that is not – and I use the term with reservations –musically inclined will, by the end of a *toma*, realize that sound signatures are cohesive, repetitive units: it was not uncommon for me to listen to participants humming sound signatures the morning after. In fact, some participants were able to hum – approximately – some of the sound signatures the *taitas* played. In the following sections, I will develop to a greater degree the significance of what might seem like a strictly formal feature of *taitas'* sounds.

Sound as anchoring device

If during a *toma de yajé* a participant is indeed purposefully emplaced by the *taita* inside a sonically constructed place, it is also plausible that participants – for a wide variety of reasons – may leave this place, even if their bodies remain within the *yajé* room. In this chapter I will argue that *taitas* employ sound tactics to anchor or emplace individuals during a *toma de yajé*. In this section, I will develop the two operations Upper Putumayo *taitas* report as essential to their harmonica playing, namely, 'llevar' and 'traer.'

Llevar y traer

Once ideas of emplacement and displacement have been introduced, it is possible to think of the *yajé* experience as one of movement, as one of oscillation and travel. It is not surprising that *taitas* and participants use words like exploration and discovery when referring to what they do while seeing *pintas*. Experiencing *yajé* can also be understood broadly as a full-fledged plunge into a liminal state. However, my understanding of liminality differs from the classic conceptualization famously formulated by Victor Turner. While Turner's liminality celebrates the "betwixt and between"-ness of ritual experience and emphasizes the lack of emplacement and the high degree of indeterminacy lived during a ritual event, I propose that in order to

appreciate this separation from the apparent stability of ordinary, everyday experience, there must be an anchoring device from which to draw contrasts and bridges between different kinds of realities.¹³⁰ In other words, my reading is far more conservative: I am problematizing a traditional interpretation of ritual liminal states as radical departures from the quotidian in which all is left behind and in which all is novel and unfixed, entirely unsettled. I would like to stress that in order to draw meaning from a liminal experience, there has to be a minimal amount of grounding. In the case of *tomas de yajé*, this grounding is sound-based.

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."¹³¹ The metaphor is revealing of a persistent, overarching idea of place and transit – both operations, taking away and bringing back, imply movement, although it is understood participants drinking *yajé* will most likely be lying down on a hammock or on a mattress on the floor.

A significant amount of *yajé* narratives emphasize access to remote places, alternate dimensions, and the ability to cover wide distances with relative ease. *Taitas* often speak of transforming into animals and then visiting those animals' realms; during a *yajé* ritual, experienced *taitas* can leave their bodies and go through various transformations and beyond various kinds of boundaries. This chapter will address how these two operations – *llevar y traer* – relate to the place constructed by *taitas* and the idea of sound as an anchoring device; I will also discuss several moments in the *yajé* ritual that require active participation by the *taita* – through his sound tactics – in order to emplace or ground participants.

Llevar

'Llevar' is a difficult verb to translate as it can simultaneously mean, among other things, the following: a) to carry along or to take with, in the sense of transporting something or someone; b) to guide someone, as in a tour guide *llevando* someone through a city; c) to bring about, as in an action resulting in or leading to a specific outcome or end.

All of the *taitas* that I interviewed reported that they use the harmonica to help participants start receiving visions. Although participants attend *tomas de yajé* for a wide number of reasons, the most immediate desired effect is indeed to receive the visions. In a way, receiving them demonstrates unequivocally, to participants, that *yajé* is having an effect. *Taitas* perform at different times throughout the night, but there is one specific time during which they perform to carry out the 'llevar' operation. *Taitas* generally agree in saying they play the harmonica with a particular vigor when they see participants are first starting to look "dizzy" (*mareados*).¹³² At this moment, it is key to play so that participants will receive the full range of effects brought on by *yajé*. It is a common belief that sound will stimulate the onset of visions.

Although the 'llevar' metaphor implies taking elsewhere, or displacing, I interpret this 'taking away' as a particular kind of grounding to the visions frame and as intersubjectively acknowledging that participants are entering a state – or place – that could be called '*yajé* reality.' 'Taking away' means providing the bridge between the initial and most immediate effects of *yajé*

¹³⁰ Victor Witter Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, The Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures 1966 (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co, 1969).

¹³¹ "Sirve para llevarlos y traerlos."

¹³² "Estar mareado," literally "to be dizzy" is a common phrase employed to describe this moment, roughly between 10 and 40 minutes after drinking *yajé* and before the onset of visions.

– a bitter taste in the mouth that does not go away easily, fluctuations in bodily temperature, nausea, dizziness – and what will become an ineffable experience.

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” on the relationship between music and trance.¹³³ The argument, in short, has been that the right combination of notes can induce a state of trance in the right listener, be it through sensory overload, disturbances of the inner ear, or through transcendent, unqualifiable properties inherent to music. Such theories have been sustained by fanciful association and esoteric and mystical argumentation at best. Gilbert Rouget, in the 1980 study, *La Musique et la transe: Esquisse d'une théorie générale des relations de la musique et de la possession*, was the first to question the relationship of causality thought to exist between music and trance and possession states. In the words of Jankowsky:

In his magisterial and meticulous consideration of the diversity of possession musics throughout the world, Rouget called attention to the paradoxical relationship between music and trance: while ritualized trance by and large cannot occur without music, there are no formal qualities (rhythms, modes, tempos, frequency, instrumentation, etc.) of music that appear necessary for trance. The missing variable in previous approaches, for Rouget, was culture, which conditions the way that trancers are socialized into modes of connecting music and trance. Different cultures have different ways of understanding both trance and music, as well as the principles underlying the relations between the two. While he imposed a sweeping structuralist typology [...], [h]e did leave us with the invaluable insight that any relationship between music and trance is first and foremost culturally conditioned.¹³⁴

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.

Traer

‘To bring back,’ that is, to the place *taitas* construct, is the most common anchoring tactic *taitas* employ during *tomas de yajé*. The ‘to bring back’ operation occurs throughout the night, but can only happen if ‘llevar’ has already happened. *Taitas* will need to bring back, or anchor, those who have gone too far away.¹³⁵ Going too far away can mean several things: in this section, I will provide specific examples of how *taitas* use their sound tactics to bring back participants that go too far away, including participants experiencing fear, detachment, or physical turbulence beyond what is considered normal within a *yajé* ritual.

The very first time I drank *yajé* was in December of 2011. I had read about the experience from both academic and informal sources. Accounts varied wildly from descriptions that emphasize pleasure and revelation as central values in the experience to those that describe drinking *yajé* as being essentially about fear, discomfort, and bodily trial. This variation seems to be the norm: there is no way to predict how the experience will unfold. Within a single night, a participant might experience both bliss and unforgiving darkness, in that particular order, in reverse order, or simultaneously. That first night, those going to the *toma* assembled outside a

¹³³ Richard C. Jankowsky, *Stambeli: Music, Trance, and Alterity in Tunisia*, Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 22.

¹³⁴ Ibid.; Gilbert Rouget, *La Musique et La Transe: Esquisse D'une Théorie Générale Des Relations de La Musique et de La Possession*, Nouv. éd. rev. et augm (Gallimard, 1990).

¹³⁵ In the words of a *taita*, “a los que se van demasiado lejos.”

store in a commercial area in southern Cali, the third largest city of Colombia. From there, we arranged transport to Jamundí, a small town located 23 kilometers south of Cali. While we waited, I started talking to Lorena, a young woman who was also going to drink *yajé* for the first time. She said she wanted to participate in the ritual because she felt stagnated; she did not feel particularly challenged by her work environment and she had grown tired of her social life. She also admitted that she felt curious about it, and that wanted to “see for herself what the experience was all about.” She did not appear anxious or nervous about the *toma*, and we continued speaking throughout the night.

Sometime around one in the morning, after most of us present in the *toma* were experiencing the effects of *yajé* – a close friend of mine reported, for example, that she had been convening and conversing with a palm tree and a large rock for what seemed to be several hours – Lorena started shouting intensely. She was standing at a staircase, looking and acting petrified: she believed she was not able to move. Or rather, that she should not move.

The *toma* was taking place at Nicolás’s house out in the countryside, a European IT professional who had been living in Colombia for over twenty years. He had been hosting *tomas*, at least once a month, for several years – to my knowledge, he is still holding them with a similar regularity. We had been instructed to stay within the confines of an outdoors clearing where people hung their hammocks and the *taita*’s helpers built a fire. The stairwell led to Nicolás’s home, and we were politely asked to avoid going up the stairs and into the house. The most immediate reason was out of basic respect for Nicolás’s private living area. The more significant reason was that we should all stay within the *taita*’s supervision – that is, in this particular context, within the radius of the *taita*’s sounds. For this reason we were also discouraged to wander around in the woods area surrounding the clearing.

For about five minutes, Lorena shrieked and cried. She had started going up the stairs, and after spending some time sitting on the stairwell, she started climbing down slowly, one step at a time. She reached one particular step that unleashed her emotional outburst. She declared that every further step she took downstairs made her fall deeper into hell; she described images of being in a dark abyss, and she felt like she was sinking deeper and deeper. She was also able to communicate that a few minutes earlier, she had been speaking with her parents, both long dead. She did not say what they spoke about, or under what circumstances.

Calming down Lorena took a lot of work from the *taita*. After seeing speaking and attempting to reason with her was not enough, he started playing the harmonica and the waira sacha. He elicited the help of his mother, known as La Abuela, who was also present in the *toma*.¹³⁶ La Abuela also played the harmonica and the waira-sacha, and after some time – roughly ten minutes – the *taita* and La Abuela were able to calm her down and get her to come down the stairs. Next morning, Lorena reported feeling very happy and serene – it was almost as if she did not remember the intensity with which she expressed her discomfort. It is hard to state objectively whether it was indeed the way the *taita* and La Abuela played that led to her calming down and subsequent serenity. Less than being concerned with the effect of sound waves on neurological processes, my interest lies in the fact that, even in the absence of quantitative hard data pointing towards any particular direction, both participants and *taitas* share the belief that

¹³⁶ There are very few female *taitas* and almost all, if not all, of them are from the Lower Putumayo. They are usually known as “abuelas” or “mamas.” As rich as the general topic of gender and *yajé* is, it is not something I was able to address during my fieldwork. That one *toma* in 2011 is the only time I have spoken with a female *taita*. I do know of a couple more, but I was not able to find them this time around.

there is an inherent power that resides in the harmonica and the waira sachá that is activated when performed by *taitas* at a time of need.

Another instance of the use of sound as anchoring device involved Manuel, a teenager who had been interned at a *taita*'s house for a period of two months. During that time, Manuel and the *taita* drank *yajé* almost every night. Manuel was said to be fighting drug addiction – which kind of drug addiction was never specified. Manuel was a bit of a wildcard; during the day, he would oscillate between periods of exuberant sociality, often joking around in a very extroverted fashion, and moments of short-tempered rage. While drinking *yajé*, Manuel would become strikingly serene and introspective.

One night Manuel looked too calm. He was sitting on the floor, breathing, his eyes open, but his gaze decidedly unfocused, his stare blank. His mother, doña Lola, had been present for the past two nights. She became worried and summoned the *taita*. Manuel was completely unresponsive, although it could not be said that he had fainted or that he was asleep. The *taita* was calm and said that it was not uncommon for participants to look – or even get – lost. The *taita* played the harmonica and the waira sachá for Manuel and after about ten minutes, he became responsive again. The *taita* did not say much else – to him this was a routine operation. Manuel told me the next morning that sometimes *yajé* made him go places where all he felt like doing was sitting still for an indefinite amount of time. To him, the *taita*'s sounds invigorated him and gave him “energy.”

I was able to see the same *taita* perform the bringing back operation some weeks later, at the same place and in the same nonchalant fashion, with a young woman from Neiva, a city in southern Colombia. Her name was Barbarita, and she was there keeping her cousin Mario company. She had drunk *yajé* some years before, and she was not entirely sure she would drink again – no specific reasons were given. At the very last minute, she decided to do so. She spent most of the night lying down silently, going outside to throw up about once every two hours. She did not seem particularly agitated or bothered. She seemed sleepy more than anything else.

Sometime around five in the morning, her cousin went outside looking for her. Barbarita had taken too long at the bathroom and her cousin grew concerned. He found her surrounded by other participants inside the bathroom. Barbarita had apparently fallen asleep next to the toilet.¹³⁷ She was being helped back on her feet when she collapsed on the ground and fainted. She was then taken to a chair and as the *taita* was approaching the scene, thick foam started emanating from her mouth.

It is important to note that most of the participants started reacting with consternation. They were clearly disturbed and worried by the sight of Barbarita's inert body, and it seemed like nobody wanted to intervene. Those around her immediately agreed that they should get the *taita*. In a characteristically tranquil fashion, the *taita* started playing the harmonica and the waira sachá in an attempt to calm Barbarita down and bring her back. Barbarita did not want to speak about it next morning. Mario reported that he did not feel comfortable sleeping after the incident and instead decided to stay up watching his cousin as she slept, occasionally checking to see if she was actually breathing. Mario explained that his attitude came not from skepticism towards the *taita*'s abilities but more because of what he felt was his own neglect of his cousin. He stated that had something happened once again, he would have certainly alerted the *taita* immediately.

¹³⁷ Her explanation, later on, was that she was wearing a necklace with the design of a frog. She said that, like a frog, she had wanted to be somewhere cool and moist, “Como la ranita de mi collar.”

Taitas report that often, participants go too far away, and this can mean, among many possible interpretations, that they are either very scared of the content of the images they are seeing – as in the case of Lorena; absent or removed from the present – as in Manuel’s case; or reacting with an alarming physical intensity – like Barbarita. My research is less about measuring quantitatively the effect of particular sounds on a *yajé*-affected body and more about the way sound and instruments are understood to possess agency and efficacy within a ritual place.

Sound and Power in Tomas de Yajé

In this section I will elaborate on the idea that *taitas* are concerned with keeping the ritual place they construct well-maintained. In the last third of *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell offers a detailed review of the way ritual and power have been theorized, making questions of control, authority, belief, and ideology central to the discussion.¹³⁸ She points to and challenges a long tradition of conceptualizing ritual and power that takes as an unquestioned departure point the notion that ritual functions as an instrument of social control. For Bell,

ritualization, as a strategic mode of action effective within certain social orders, does not, in any useful understanding of the words, ‘control’ individuals or society. Yet ritualization is very much concerned with power. Closely involved with the objectification and legitimation of an ordering of power as an assumption of the way things really are, ritualization is a strategic arena for the embodiment of power relations. Hence, the relationship of ritualization and social control may be better approached in terms of how ritual activities constitute a specific embodiment and exercise of power.¹³⁹

Following Bell’s discussion, and taking some distance from some of the more salient points raised when discussing ritual in Amazonian and Andean societies – for example, claiming that ritual helps regulate balance between species – I want to draw attention to some of the ways in which a *taita* asserts his power during a *toma de yajé*. *Taitas* control variables in the *toma de yajé* environment, but my claim is not that by controlling certain elements of the experience they are indeed enacting forms of social control. Rather, *taitas* are asserting their power by allowing certain things to happen and by disallowing others to happen. I propose that the authority and power *taitas* exert in *tomas de yajé* is directly linked to maintaining the place they construct by minimizing any potentially negative influences or disturbances on the ritual place.

First of all, *taitas* decide who gets to drink at a *toma de yajé*. Although generally speaking *taitas* allow most people to drink, there are cases in which *taitas* might deny someone access to *yajé*. The most striking case of access denial is the general forbidding attitude *taitas* have towards menstruating women drinking *yajé*.¹⁴⁰ *Taitas* hold the belief that women that are menstruating should not drink *yajé*, for their ‘energy’ level will be such that the ritual place would become overwhelmed to the point of ‘de-activating’ the *yajé* brew, rendering it ineffective for participants. Another interpretation given for the prohibition of menstruating women’s participation is that the visions unleashed by the combined potency of *yajé* and feminine reproductive faculties will be unbearable for those partaking in the ritual – some *taitas* claim the visions will be of an unendurably intense redness.¹⁴¹ Interestingly, there is one *taita* who holds *yajé* rituals *strictly* for menstruating women. Other *taitas* operate on a “don’t ask don’t tell”

¹³⁸ Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 169–223.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

¹⁴⁰ The general topic of gender and *yajé* is virtually inexistent in academic discussion, but unfortunately one I did not focus on during my fieldwork.

¹⁴¹ “Uno solo ve todo bien rojito.”

policy when conducting rituals in large cities of Colombia. *Taitas* can also deny *yajé* to someone who looks clearly drunk, disturbed, or otherwise unstable.

Another way in which *taitas* exert power for place maintenance purposes is by controlling the dose of *yajé* that each person will drink. How *taitas* decide the appropriate quantity for each individual participant is something they did not discuss with much detail. At best, I could conclude that they ‘eyeball’ it – dosage is not as obvious as, say, smaller quantities for smaller people. However, *taitas* did stress that giving everybody the exact same quantity could potentially be disastrous. The source of their reasoning was not revealed but the purpose was – giving too much or too little *yajé* to somebody means potentially having an altered participant who in turn is likely to disturb the *toma*. One *taita* has several shot-glasses that he uses for administering *yajé*, some containing names of places he has visited and others containing humorous inscriptions like “this is the last one, for real.”¹⁴²

Sonically, one way the *taita*’s power is expressed is through the regulation of participants’ sound production. Although generally speaking, participants who ask the *taita* for permission to play during the ritual will be allowed to perform, *taitas* intervene when sonic production disturbs the place the *taita* has been zealously constructing. In a way similar to the menstruation example, many *taitas* are reported to be slacker about their ritual control when outside their communities.¹⁴³

Michael Taussig raises the question of how the decision of seeking indigenous shamans for healing purposes means at once placing *taitas* – and consequently indigenous communities – in a position of authority while also following a long genealogy of exoticization and essentialism: the paradox is that the same *taita* that can heal is also a terrifying savage.¹⁴⁴ The discussion I pursue here is less about larger claims relating to the perceived power of *taitas* – within a nation, or even globally – and more about the immediacy of authority as power and its practical implications for the maintenance of a notion of ritual place that is desirable to a *taita*.

Sound and Indexicality

In addition to regulating sound production to maintain the place constructed for *tomas de yajé*, *taitas* are also concerned with producing sounds that index the Amazon.

Half-joking, a friend of mine once described one of the *taita*’s *yajé* rooms as looking like something halfway between improvised war-time medical ward and slumber party. The room was lined with two rows of mattresses, blankets, hammocks, and sleeping mats. Many considered themselves medical patients, while a smaller number was there for reasons not directly linked to health problems. In any case, the room’s arrangements did look improvised, and it was – if suddenly observed out of context – little else than a disparate group of people in comfortable nighttime clothing sleeping or lying down next to each other, some agonizing, some snoozing pleasantly. From that image alone, how could anyone think there is a connection between the room and the Amazon? Why would it matter if this connection existed, anyway?

Sound is used in *tomas de yajé* to index the Amazon rainforest. *Taitas* use sound to invoke its ambiance, its inhabitants, the rivers, the plants, in short, and as one *taita* put it, “its

¹⁴² “¿Este es último, en serio!”

¹⁴³ I heard this from what I call “yajé promoters” – a sort of middlemen that organize the bringing of *taitas* into the cities; promoters often – but not always – get a cut from the income derived from attendance costs. I did not ask *taitas* directly about their slackening in the major cities because at the time it was not a research question I had thought of.

¹⁴⁴ Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*.

essence.” The idea that a non-verbal sound may point to a specific object, place, person or situation is what I mean by ‘sound indexical.’¹⁴⁵

Within a *toma de yajé*, *taitas* use sound to index notions related to Amazonia and some of the ideas most frequently associated to it. Generally speaking, *taitas* from the Upper Putumayo emphasize an understanding of the Amazon as a place full of life, power, and natural elements. *Taitas* in the Upper Putumayo often look at the Lower Putumayo region as the ‘true’ source of *yajé* and the *yajé* ritual.¹⁴⁶ Upper Putumayo *taitas* have a deep respect for the *taitas* from the Lower Putumayo and 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*.¹⁴⁷ 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’ – let’s say northern California or Belgium – *taitas* reinforce the importance of remembering the place of origin of *yajé*. The place *taitas* construct for a *toma de yajé* necessarily indexes the Amazon.

Taitas often speak of ‘conjuring’ and ‘activating’ *yajé* the moment immediately before participants drink it. Their singing often includes words like *madrecita*, *selva*, *yajé*, *bosque*, *tigrecito* – creating imagery pertaining to *yajé*’s origins. *Taitas* believe that while *yajé* is highly portable, it is important to activate it before the ritual begins. Similarly, *taitas* report that the *waira-sacha* is used to re-create the sounds of the jungle. It is the sound of 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 put in terms of feeling like the Amazon is brought into the *yajé* room. The particular architecture of the *yajé* room becomes 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

¹⁴⁵ For more discussion on indexicality, see: Carmen Llamas, Louise Mullany, and Peter Stockwell, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Sociolinguistics* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2007); Robert Bayley, Richard Cameron, and Ceil Lucas, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Sociolinguistics*, Oxford Handbooks in Linguistics (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Asif Agha, *Language and Social Relations*, Studies in the Social and Cultural Foundations of Language, no. 24 (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Rick Altman, ed., *Sound Theory, Sound Practice*, AFI Film Readers (New York: Routledge, 1992); Leanne Hinton, Johanna Nichols, and John J. Ohala, eds., *Sound Symbolism* (Cambridge [England] ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1994); *Rethinking Context*; Barbara Johnstone, Jennifer Andrus, and Andrew E. Danielson, “Mobility, Indexicality, and the Enregisterment of ‘Pittsburghese,’” *Journal of English Linguistics* 34, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 77–104, doi:10.1177/0075424206290692; School of American Research (Santa Fe, N.M.), *Meaning in Anthropology*, ed. Keith H. Basso and Henry A. Selby, 1st ed, School of American Research Advanced Seminar Series (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1976).

¹⁴⁶ 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 María C. Ramírez de Jara., and Carlos E. Pinzón Castaño. “Sibundoy shamanism and popular culture in Colombia, in *Portals of Power: Shamanism in South America*, ed. Jean Matteson Langdon et al. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992). See also María Clemencia Ramírez de Jara and Fernando Urrea Giraldo, “Dinámica etnohistórica sociodemográfica y presencia contemporánea del curanderismo Ingano-Kamsá en las ciudades colombianas,” September 19, 2013, <http://bibliotecadigital.univalle.edu.co/handle/10893/5485>.

¹⁴⁷ See for example, João Pacheco de Oliveira, “Movilidad espacial e identitaria en el Putumayo,” in *Perspectivas Antropológicas Sobre La Amazonia Contemporánea*, ed. Margarita Cháves et al. (Bogotá, D.C., Colombia: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia : Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2010).



Figure 13 - Mural inside a taita's yajé room, Vereda Tamabioy, Putumayo

with images – posters, paintings – and figurines – usually plastic animals – of Amazonian flora and fauna. While traveling, however, *taitas* don't carry these material elements of their altars with them.

When talking to several *taitas* and participants 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 “[I]a selva ya trae su armónica incorporada. Por eso los *taitas* del Bajo Putumayo no tienen que tocar tanto.”¹⁴⁸ In this sense, the sounds performed by *taitas* can be understood to index the Amazon.¹⁴⁹

Conclusions

Tomas de yajé 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 real requirements for a *toma* to happen. *Taitas* themselves are highly mobile. Not only do they perform rituals in their local communities and in neighboring ones but they often travel to cities in Colombia, sometimes as far as one or two days' travel. Some *taitas* regularly travel to neighboring countries and even to cities in North America and Europe to officiate *tomas de yajé*.

When at their community, *taitas* hold *tomas de yajé* in their own homes, often indoors and at a living area dedicated almost exclusively to hosting rituals. These spaces are usually sparsely furnished – the room will later on be filled with mattresses, sleeping mats, and chairs for participants. The spaces always feature a highly personalized altar adorned with a wide range of ritual objects, including all the sound producing instruments the *taita* will employ during the ritual. *Taitas* also make use of a table, which is from where they summon each participant individually; after each participant has approached the table, the *taita* pours the appropriate dosage to be consumed into a small receptacle, blesses it, often by blowing smoke or breath into the cup, and offers it. When *taitas* travel, however, there is no reasonable way for them to transport the very specific *yajé* room they have constructed throughout their lives. In fact, *taitas* recognize the personal value they ascribe to their ritual space while admitting a *yajé* ritual does not depend on a particular architecture or edifice.

Sound is a way in which *taitas* not only construct their specific ritual place; sound is also a way of maintain and modifying it. *Taitas* also use sound to ‘llevar’ and ‘traer’ participants, that is, to send them away but also to bring them back to the place constructed sonically for *tomas de yajé*. Sound also indexes the Amazon rainforest and ideas of origin, nature, and power. Place-hood or place-ness is something constantly performed by the *taita* through the employment of sonic tactics. From this point of view, I offer one explanation for the appropriation of the harmonica by Upper Putumayo *taitas*. *Taitas* are highly mobile, and they officiate *yajé* rituals in a wide range of places. In the same month, they might hold a ritual at their home, at another community member's living room, at a country house outside Bogotá or at an outdoors retreat in Switzerland. In all the cases listed, the harmonica and the waira-sacha, both small and portable,

¹⁴⁸ “The jungle comes with its built-in harmonica. That is why *taitas* in the Lower Putumayo don't have to play as much.”

¹⁴⁹ It must be noted that, similar to the way Upper Putumayo *taitas* believe Lower Putumayo *taitas* are closer to a more powerful type of *yajé* shamanism, Lower Putumayo *taitas* themselves would look somewhere else for a purer, more powerful source of *yajé* practice. The idea that there is always an older and stronger *yajé* origin seems like a recurrent trope in *ayahuasca* shamanic practice.

provide a convenient way to carry inside their pockets a way of constructing a place larger than any building.



Figure 14 - "Philharmonic Rehearsals," from the Archivo de la Diócesis de Sibundoy, Putumayo



Figure 15 - Graffiti in downtown Bogotá

Chapter 5: Conclusions

What first drew me to research sound in *yajé* rituals was the realization that a particular *taita*'s harmonica playing – a playing that I would now qualify as that specific *taita*'s 'sonic signature' – remained in my head for a long time after having first participated in a *toma de yajé* in 2010. Several months later, after having left Colombia and having taken some time to digest what I experienced in that *toma*, I was struck by how unusual the whole situation seemed. I could still hear the sounds an indigenous shaman from the Putumayo had played on, of all instruments, a harmonica, while conducting a *toma de yajé* in the city of Cali in southern Colombia. The shaman waved a bunch of leaves and played the harmonica while a disparate group of people groaned, vomited, crawled, and lay down on an improvised room composed of mattresses, sleeping bags, and hammocks. There was a candle-lit altar with framed images of saints, Jesus, the virgin Mary, and also rock sculptures of the Buddha, and an assortment of plastic animals – mostly jaguars and birds. Those present were a rich mix of Cali locals, including teachers, street vendors, artisans, musicians, and even a diplomat; indigenous Colombians, some from relatively nearby villages and some that had come all the way from the Putumayo to accompany the *taita*; Colombians from main urban centers like Bogotá, Medellín, or Barranquilla; and a couple of foreigners like myself. At the time, it was hard to understand how and why such a motley group of people had managed to assemble in a small house in the countryside for the purpose of drinking *yajé*. Even now, putting forward explanations is a challenging task.

The sounds also brought back to memory the conversations I had with the other participants who were at the *toma*, the large majority of them seasoned *yajé* drinkers. I was reminded of the wide array of stories told and conversations had, mostly revolving around expectations, fears, vulnerabilities, and hopes, on one hand, and ideas of spirituality, indigeneity, healing, rights and citizenship, colonial history, on the other. Before leaving Colombia, I had also visited the prominent *Museo del Oro* in Bogotá, the capital. The *Museo del Oro* contains one of the largest, if not the largest, collections of Amerindian goldwork in the world. To my surprise, the third and top floor of the museum was, and still is, curated around topics of shamanism and spirituality. This is not the place to discuss at length the history or the politics of representation at play in the *Museo del Oro*, owned by the *Banco de la República*, Colombia's central bank, a rich research topic in and of itself. However, the point I want to make is that the different expositions in the museum raised similar questions about imaginaries, encounters with, and representations of indigeneity and alterity. One of the main panels in the third floor displays an image of a *taita* holding a harmonica. What happens in the intimacy of a *toma de yajé* is not so intimate in the end, *taitas* and *tomas* becoming more and more popular in present day Colombia, Amazonian nations, and increasingly, the Western world. What I mean by this is that speaking of a harmonica or a *waira sacha* played in a small countryside house is not an isolated event; I contend that these sounds are increasingly becoming crucial elements of imaginaries of Upper Putumayo *taitas* in Colombia, and more broadly, crucial elements of the way indigenous populations, in general, are imagined and represented in mainstream Colombia. It is also important here to recall the *Retorno al Origen* graffiti referenced in the introduction, with its *waira sacha*-waving *taita* in one of Colombia's busiest streets. In this thesis, I have made a broad argument in favor of the aural as a significant entry point into large questions of expressive culture and sociality.

In the second chapter, *Yajé Shamanism, Labor, and Individual Practices*, I demonstrated that any consideration of shamanism that leaves out questions of labor necessarily leads to uninterrogated reifications, romanticizations, and essentializations; it has been my intention to

recast shamanism in terms of labor. By arguing that *taitas*' sounds are inextricably linked to their individual practices, that is, the specific ways in which they choose to personalize the conduction of their rituals and distinguish themselves from other *taitas*, I am also suggesting that sound production and musical performance are fundamental parts of a *taita*'s labor. I also propose a framework for understanding *yajé*, or *ayahuasca*, in the context of capitalism. More broadly, it is a framework that allows us to engage with and theorize the commodification of cultural practices that, although embedded in capital relations, still exist in imaginaries that rigidly place them in, using Chakrabarty's terms, History 2, as "antecedents of capital."¹⁵⁰

In Chapter 3, *Questions of Framing*, I employed frame analysis as a way to theorize what sound does in *tomas de yajé*. *Taitas*' laborious playing helps participants in a *toma de yajé* to manage a kind of double-consciousness; *taitas* are interested in making sure that participants are able to experience *pintas* – visions, hallucinations – while simultaneously remembering they are participating in a *toma de yajé*. More broadly, I raised questions at the intersection of ritual studies and sound studies in order to propose a way to engage with verbal and non-verbal sound in any social situation.

In Chapter 4, *Questions of Place*, I argue for a sound-based understanding of place in *tomas de yajé*. Many scholars have argued for the importance of paying attention to the sonic qualities of the places we encounter and inhabit; I propose that sound not only grounds or modifies our experience of places, but it can also *create* them. In *tomas de yajé*, *taitas* rely on their sonorous instruments to construct ritual places that are temporally and sonically bound. In this way, *taitas* can conduct *tomas de yajé* in any place of the world, paying particular attention to indexing the sounds of Amazonia throughout the ritual. *Taitas* also rely on using sound to ground, or anchor, participants in the place constructed during a *toma de yajé*.

Throughout this thesis I have demonstrated that the performance of sound is a crucial part of Upper Putumayo *taitas*' labor. Performing sound is a way to modify and create a ritual place in ways mostly independent of material constraints; it is also a way in which *taitas* can ground participants in the place constructed. Sound also helps participants interpret what they experience during the sensorially demanding *tomas de yajé*. The *taita*'s waira sacha, cascabeles, and harmonica constitute the sonorous instruments that allow *taitas* to deploy sound tactics to conduct *tomas de yajé* successfully and make a living through their labor.

Toward cosmopolitan listening

As part of this conclusion section, I will risk introducing a new concept to the reader. My reasoning is that, although this is, for the most, a text-based thesis that will be *read*, it deals for the most with *listening*. Listening to the sounds of an Upper Putumayo *taita* was what initiated this project. In a way, it seems fair to conclude it with a discussion on the act of listening.

Several *taitas* that lead *yajé* rituals in their homes, catering to a mostly local clientele, are also embedded in national and international labor circuits. These shamans might travel to near-by villages and cities to perform *yajé* rituals. They might also lead rituals in major cities of Colombia and neighboring countries. Some travel regularly to Europe and North America as part of their shamanic labor. These shamans travel light; they pack a change of clothes, the *yajé* that will be consumed, and their ritual instruments. While in this thesis I have focused on *yajé* rituals conducted in the Upper Putumayo, I would like to explore here some questions involving Upper Putumayo *taitas* conducting *yajé* rituals elsewhere. What does it mean that traveling *taitas*, far

¹⁵⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 63.

from their local communities, claim they can invoke the Amazon rainforest through their playing and singing? What is required from a participant in the ritual to take this claim seriously and not



Figure 16 - "Meeting/Encounter with representatives of the Inga people from the Colombian Upper Putumayo"

dismiss it as little more than poetic speech? What is required from a shaman to make this claim, knowing a fair amount of the participants in a *toma de yajé* held in an international setting have never been to the Amazon? What is required of a researcher in order to engage critically with these questions? What kind of *listening* are we talking about here?

From cosmopolitan reading to cosmopolitan listening

In the essay, "Cosmopolitan Reading," Anthony Kwame Appiah defines cosmopolitanism as "universalism plus difference."¹⁵¹ In the same piece he claims that "we should attend to novels morally," stressing a cosmopolitan way of reading that emphasizes

¹⁵¹ Anthony Kwame Appiah, "Cosmopolitan Reading," in *Cosmopolitan Geographies: New Locations in Literature and Culture* (Psychology Press, 2001), ed. Vinay Dharwadker, 202.

“dialogue among differences.”¹⁵² What we find in a novel, for Appiah, derives from “an invitation to respond in imagination to narratively constructed situations.”¹⁵³ He continues,

Cosmopolitan reading presupposes a world in which novels (and music and sculptures and other significant objects) travel between places where they are understood differently, because people are different and welcome to their difference. Cosmopolitan reading is *worthwhile* because there can be common conversations about these shared objects, the novel prominent among them. Cosmopolitan reading is *possible* because these conversations are possible. But what makes the conversations possible is [...] the capacity to follow a narrative and conjure a world.¹⁵⁴

The cosmopolitan listening I propose is not radically distinct from cosmopolitan reading. It is important to stress here that the move from reading to listening is not one of antagonism; by focusing on aural modalities I am not espousing the construction of an anti-visualism, be it of images or of printed words. What I am hoping to add is a way of expanding and nuancing Appiah’s engagement with novels “and music and sculptures and other significant objects.”¹⁵⁵ These objects – in the case of listening – can range from a live performance experienced in situ to a major hit played throughout international radio stations; these objects can range from overhearing a conversation at a market to attending a public lecture or listening to a *taita* play the harmonica during a *toma de yajé*. Listening does not presuppose literacy, while it maintains “an invitation to respond in imagination to narratively constructed situations.”¹⁵⁶ In any case, it admits that the act of listening is potentially “braided” in that “one sensory channel or semiotic function is woven together with another more or less seamlessly,” giving way to a broader sensory understanding of what Appiah’s “significant objects” might be.¹⁵⁷ Cosmopolitan listening certainly maintains a moral attention.

Several authors pose cosmopolitanism as essentially an ethical stance, an “openness” to cultural difference and to a broader humanity beyond local, racial or national affiliations; it is also understood as a disposition of intellectual and aesthetic openness to people, places and experiences.¹⁵⁸ In the words of Eduardo Mendieta, a review of the literature

reveals that we can analyze cosmopolitanism as both an ‘epistemic’ and a ‘moral/ethical’ principle. As an epistemic attitude it challenges the monopoly of one worldview, and advocates epistemic humility and fallibilism. As an ethical/moral principle or guiding norm, it commands the mutual respect of humans and the solicitous moral regard for those who are our others.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵² Ibid., 207.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 223.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 224.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ W. J. T. Mitchell, “Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 1, no. 2 (August 1, 2002): 262.

¹⁵⁸ Some include, Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (Routledge, 2002); Steven Vertovec and Robin Cohen, *Conceiving Cosmopolitanism: Theory, Context and Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2002); John Urry, *Global Complexity* (Wiley, 2003); Gavin P. Kendall, Ian Woodward, and Skrbis Zlatko, *The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism: Globalization, Identity, Culture and Government* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, United Kingdom: Palgrave MacMilla, 2009), <http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=276453>; Martha Nussbaum, *For Love of Country?: A New Democracy Forum on the Limits of Patriotism* (Beacon Press, 2010); David A. Hollinger, “Not Universalists, Not Pluralists: The New Cosmopolitans Find Their Own Way,” *Constellations* 8, no. 2 (2001): 236–248.

¹⁵⁹ Eduardo Mendieta, “Interspecies Cosmopolitanism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Cosmopolitanism Studies* (Routledge, 2012), ed. Gerard Delanty, 282. Mendieta’s provocative piece argues, ultimately, for animal rights from

It follows that cosmopolitan listening would be, conversely, an ethical stance.

The second half of cosmopolitan listening

Listening, like cosmopolitanism, has been theorized in various ways. Here, I would like to focus on two definitions that are key to the discussion at hand. Ana María Ochoa and Carolina Botero, drawing from David Novak, discuss listening “as ‘a historical relation of exchange’ that has been crucial for the development of musical genres and ideas of creativity and production”; they argue for understanding listening not only in the “moment of consumption” but also “behind the scenes” – they argue that an understanding of listening as site of exchange is crucial to engaging the productive and creative processes of music production.¹⁶⁰ Ochoa and Botero elaborate, positing “listening as a locus of constitution of socio-political processes” and conceiving “listening as a practice of circulation in articulation with other practices that interface with it such as technologies of production (itself conceptualized as another mode of relation), labor practices and economic conditions of production and distribution.”¹⁶¹

Krista Ratcliffe engages with a type of listening she calls “rhetorical listening.”¹⁶² She defines it as “a trope for interpretative invention and as a code of cross-cultural conduct . . . [which] signifies a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture.”¹⁶³ She elaborates on what this openness implies; it is an ethical stance in which “a listener must be imagined with an agency that enables him or her to *choose* to act ethically, either by listening and/or by acting upon that listening...given this agency, listeners must be provided with a lexicon and tactics for listening and acting upon their listening.”¹⁶⁴

Both definitions of listening broaden our discussion of cosmopolitan listening. Ochoa emphasizes listening in a way that affords a valorization of social relations, with a keen inclusion of labor processes. Ratcliffe reaffirms listening as ethical stance, as one necessitating not only openness but also the willingness to make choices and act. Cosmopolitan listening is simultaneously a reminder of one’s agency and an invitation to use it.

Cosmopolitan listening beyond the human

So far, although the development of a concept of cosmopolitanism has covered fair ground, it remains exclusively a human endeavor. Far reaching as it is, from a larger-scale point of view it remains narrow. And this narrowness has called the attention of theorists and artists alike recently. Lucien Castaing-Taylor asserts, discussing what informs his cinematic endeavors: “I hope to continue to push for a cinema and an art that could be called post-human, one in which humanity is reduced to a more modest scale than that it occupies in most cinema and art, and which enmeshes us in the larger swath of nature of which we tend to forget we are but a tiny, if

a philosophical point of view; in the process of doing so, he covers a broad range of philosophical, moral, and ethical terrain.

¹⁶⁰ David Novak, “2.5×6 Metres of Space: Japanese Music Coffeehouses and Experimental Practices of Listening,” *Popular Music* 27, no. 01 (2008): 16, doi:10.1017/S0261143008001517; Ana María Ochoa and Carolina Botero, “Notes on Practices of Musical Exchange in Colombia,” *Popular Communication* 7, no. 3 (2009): 158-159, doi:10.1080/15405700903023400.

¹⁶¹ Ochoa and Botero, “Notes on Practices of Musical Exchange in Colombia,” 161–163.

¹⁶² Krista Ratcliffe, *Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005).

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

increasingly ruinous, part.”¹⁶⁵ Jonathan Urry points to how “arguing that there is a substantive shift from the human to the post-human presupposes that there was really a previous era where the world was ‘human’ and principally constituted through disembodied and dematerialized cognition [...]” he highlights how “the powers of ‘humans’ are always augmented by various material worlds, of clothing, tools, objects, paths, buildings and so on.”¹⁶⁶ Both stances attest to a paradox at the heart of the post-human condition; the conversation is still very much in terms of what it means to be human, although the term ‘post-human’ could imply otherwise. And that is precisely the point: it means embracing a broader picture of humanity alongside the non-human worlds surrounding us. Castaing-Taylor stresses the larger natural world we form a part of; Urry focuses on the objects that surround us but that are and have been crucial for our development as species.

Eduardo Kohn discusses at length what he calls an “anthropology beyond the human.”¹⁶⁷ Based on fieldwork among the Runa in Ecuador, he insists that “that which we take to be human (our souls, our minds, or our cultures)” currently dominates our thinking, effectively relegating “the realm of the others, the nonhumans (evacuated of animacy, agency, or enchantment)” to a secondary plane.¹⁶⁸ Kohn also explains why he favors the “beyond” part of thinking “beyond the human:”

“Beyond,” as I deploy it, exceeds, at the same time that it is continuous with, its subject matter; an anthropology beyond the human is still about the human, even though and precisely because it looks to that which lies beyond it – a “beyond” that also sustains the human.¹⁶⁹

Kohn’s discussion on the “beyond” is a necessary component of an ethically grounded cosmopolitan listening that is also beyond the human.

In their review of “sounded anthropology,” Samuels et al. conclude provocatively, “configurations of sound have political implications for a public, which is always a cosmopolitan listening public.”¹⁷⁰ And while I agree at a basic level with their proposition, it is important to include here a brief critique of their review. In the section “Ethnographies of sound and the soundscape,” they identify four types of ethnographies that favor soundscaping: “Recording the Rainforest,” “Recording Cosmopolitanism and Struggle,” “Studio Production and Listening Practices,” and “New Forms of Place in the Global Economy.” And while I understand the organizational necessity of categorization, they limit the scope of ‘cosmopolitanism’ to the metropolitan and to the explicitly political, reifying, in a way, the kind of culture/nature divide Kohn sets out to dismantle. I insist here on an ethical stance through a cosmopolitan listening beyond the human, one attuned to relations and exchange, aware of multiple levels of agency, and inclusive of the non-human.

¹⁶⁵ “Lucien-Castaing Taylor / The Alpert Award in the Arts: Half-Knowledge,” *The Herb Alpert Awards in the Arts*, accessed December 9, 2013, <http://www.alpertawards.org/artist/half-knowledge>.

¹⁶⁶ John Urry, *Mobilities* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), 44–45.

¹⁶⁷ Eduardo Kohn, *How Forests Think Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹⁷⁰ David W. Samuels et al., “Soundscapes: Toward a Sounded Anthropology,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 39, no. 1 (2010): 339, doi:10.1146/annurev-anthro-022510-132230.



Figure 17 - Images of taitas in the third floor of the Museo del Oro, Bogotá, Colombia

Tomas de yajé revisited

Cosmopolitan listening is one way to take on David Harvey's provocative question, "what geographical, ecological, and anthropological knowledges would be required for any decent [...] cosmopolitan project to succeed?"¹⁷¹ Cosmopolitan listening is one way to engage meaningfully, in the words of Steven Feld, with "lived interactions between humans and nonhumans, humans and environments;" it is also a way to approach a "convivial ethics of coeval and intertwined presence."¹⁷² Listening cosmopolitanly to *tomas de yajé* raises important questions of representation and imagination, questions that due to focus reasons are not explored at length in this monograph. Why is it, for example, that an overwhelming majority of the sounds involved in *tomas de yajé* are produced by men? How are ideas of sound production and ritual control linked to broader questions of gender? What kind of stories are told through the circulation of instruments in and out of regions like the Upper Putumayo? Why are sounds and images of jaguars and 'the jungle' so persistent in *tomas de yajé*? How does thinking about the harmonica, the waira sacha, and the cascabeles change if we understand them decisively as tools for working and as crucial instruments in *taitas'* labor, and not as merely decorative pleasantries? How are these sounds represented in other locations, like the *Museo del Oro* in Bogotá?

In this thesis I have argued that sound allows *taitas* to create and define a specific place for ritual practice. Sound also allows participants to contextualize, frame, and interpret their

¹⁷¹ David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (Columbia University Press, 2013), 76.

¹⁷² Steven Feld, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra: Five Musical Years in Ghana* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 126.

experiences. Sound is also a way to, as posed by Catherine Bell, define (or impose) and experience (or receive) values in an environment. Although my study case has been specific to *tomas de yajé* as conducted by Upper Putumayo *taitas*, similar questions regarding sound, place, context, and framing are applicable to a wide variety of everyday and extraordinary situations. Sound plays a crucial role in our experience of environments, and raises ethical questions of the way we imagine, engage, and interact with places, animals, humans, and environments near and far.

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