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THE PERFORMANCE OF DIVERSITY: SHAMANISM AS A PERFORMATIVE MODE ¹

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of shamanism as a performance mode among the Siona Indians of Colombia as an expression of cultural distinctiveness in the face of Colonial and post-Colonial violence. Oral history recounts how the shamanic role transformed to that of the powerful cacique curaca as an adaptive response to missionary activities. After near extinction of practicing shamans in the 20th Century, their performances emerged in the last two decades as a key strategy in promoting ethnic distinctiveness in contemporary struggles for Indigenous rights. Both the Constitution of 1991 and urban neo-shamanic networks associate shamanism with ecological preservation, traditional medicine, ethnic identity and community well-being. In the Putumayo, a region characterized as a “war zone”, shamanic performances are a central strategy in the complex field of negotiations between Indigenous communities, governmental and non-governmental organizations, extractive industries and diverse armed groups.

keywords

shamanism, performance,
ethnic identity, Siona Indians,
indigenous rights

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INTRODUCTION

I examine in this paper the role of shamanic narratives and other performances as expressions of cultural distinctiveness in the face of Colonial and post-Colonial violence that has plagued the Putumayo region of southern Colombia. In particular, I focus on the last 45 years in which I have accompanied the transformations of Siona shamanism as a performative mode of resilience and survival in a region that has become permeated by armed violence and characterized as a “war-zone” (Jackson 2002; Ramírez 2002; 2011). During the colonial period of territorial and population reduction, the shamanic role transformed to that of the powerful *cacique curaca* as an adaptive response of resistance to missionary activities (Langdon 2012; 2013a). After almost a complete extinction of the *curacas* in the second half of the 20th Century, Siona shamanic performances have emerged in the last two decades as a key strategy in promoting ethnic distinctiveness in contemporary struggles for Indigenous rights (Graham and Penny 2014; Jackson 2002; 2007). Shamanism has come to be associated with ecological preservation, traditional medicine, ethnic identity and community well-being, and, in the Putumayo, shamanic performances play a central role in the complex field of negotiations between Indigenous communities, the State, non-governmental organizations, extractive industries and the diverse armed groups (paramilitaries, drug traffickers, military and guerrillas).

When I initiated my doctoral research with the Siona of the Buenavista indigenous reserve on the Putumayo River in 1970, the Siona were integrating into the local economy and appeared to be a process of rapid assimilation. Petroleum extraction in the Putumayo region began in the 1960s and brought important changes to the region with the completion of the road from Pasto and the migration of mestizos from the highlands. The last shaman leader, *cacique curaca*, died in the 1960s and there was no living *curaca*, or shaman, able to lead the communal *yajé* (*Banisteriopsis* sp., *ayahuasca*) rituals, the basis of their practice and power. Language, traditional dress and material culture, as well as rituals enacting their relation with the natural and invisible worlds, were being abandoned.


My doctoral research intended to analyze the relation between illness classification and therapeutic itineraries, beginning with a somewhat tedious systematic elicitation of illness terms according to the methodology of ethnoscience. However, the Siona had little patience for my methodology and were more interested in talking about the shaman’s role in serious misfortune, invoking complex concepts and notions of shamanic cosmology. It became obvious

that Siona worldview and logic were not translatable into Spanish, and that taxonomic elicitation was not relevant to the understanding of the illness process. Thus, I undertook learning the language in order to understand their discourse and interpretations of critical events and serious illness. My strategy was to request elders to tell me “stories of the ancestors”, and during the two years of fieldwork, I dedicated half of my time to recording, transcribing and translating 150 narratives, and the other half in visits to households to accompany ongoing illnesses. As time progressed, the narrative work became richer and richer in terms of transmitting knowledge about the shamanic world as well as about the poetics of oral performance. Even more gratifying, the few elders with whom I worked came to understand my interests, and we developed a true dialogic relation as they initiated and guided the sequence and themes of the narratives that became the basis of our discussions. Not only was I told mythical and historical narratives about shamans, but also personal experiences of shamanic apprenticeship, journeys to other realms of the universe, dreams, and illnesses caused by sorcery. The narrations were enacted as dramatic events marked by poetic strategies that signal the performance of oral literature (Hymes 1981). The topic of shamans and *yajé* permeated almost all of them.

The transcriptions, translations and dialogues with the narrators as to their exegesis revealed shamanism to be central to their notions of identity and history, as well as central to the Siona religious system according to the perspective of Geertz (1966; Langdon 2014). During the 1970s, when rituals were absent, narratives, as a form of cultural performance, played an analogous role of enacting experiences with the invisible realms and transmitting knowledge. Narrative performance, like ritual, is a heightened experience and displayed publicly (Bauman 1977; Schechner 1995, 20), and, to use Geertz’s discussion of religious ritual, concerns important existential questions and presents a model “of” and model “for” reality (Geertz 1966, Langdon 2013a). Other performative forms of shamanism in the early 1970s included face paintings and other designs that invoked the shamanic experience (Langdon 2015). The Siona distinguished their shamanism from that practiced by other ethnic groups in the region by these performative modes that, for them, were diacritical markers of the specific knowledge and ethnogenic experience that their shamans invoked in ritual (Langdon 1986; 2000).

SHAMANISM, MISSIONARIES AND EPIDEMICS

The Putumayo region has been subject to a number of extractive interests, beginning with gold in the 17th Century and continuing to



the present with petroleum and coca. Siona oral history tells of the entrance of the Spanish and subsequent resistance against the invaders through a number of narratives. These oral histories document how the shamans used their power to resist the missionary activities and resulting in their exit around 1800. A second group of narratives recounts critical events dating from the beginning of quinine and rubber extraction in the late 19th Century until the 1950s, when the shamans caused their own demise. As discussed in previous articles, the social dramas recounted in Siona oral history correspond to critical events described in written sources, but the significance of such events represents a different perspective (Langdon 1991; 2007).

Historical sources tell us that Spanish forces entered the region in the 16th Century for purposes of mining alluvial gold deposits in Ecuador and Colombia. On the Colombian side they established the settlements of Mocoa in the piedmont of the Andes and Ecija on the San Miguel River. They attempted to implement the *encomienda* institution in the lowlands, gathering Indians into fixed centers for mineral extraction and agricultural production. However, native resistance on the part of the Kofan, Siona and other groups, managed to drive out the Spanish, destroying Mocoa and Ecija. Early in the 17th century, Rafael Ferrer, a Jesuit priest, entered the Kofan territory, where he found that the natives already had knowledge and desire for Catholic images and bells (Borman 2009, 222). He learned the native language and stayed among them for several years, but was evidently drowned by the natives.

The Putumayo River became the domain of the Franciscan missionaries who established several missionary outposts by the end of the 18th Century. They gathered the Indians into nucleated settlements and established trade networks with the highlands. Trade articles such as wax, handicrafts, gold, corn, turtle eggs, and other vegetable products were exchanged in Pasto for cloth, metal tools, and other items introduced by the priests. The Franciscans hoped to civilize, convert, and control the natives for productive purposes, breaking down long house organization, establishing monogamous families and clothing and baptizing them. Epidemics worked against their endeavors and missions settlements were rarely long lasting. Nucleated settlements led to the rapid spread of western diseases, wiping out entire villages in a single epidemic. Moreover, missionaries were forced to abandon their posts or died because of disease or native rebellions. Tropical diseases combined with the problems of communications in the isolated jungle contributed to a history of sporadic contact between Europeans and Indians and isolation of the region for most of the 19th century.

Siona oral history narrates the critical events related in historical documents, demonstrating that they not only maintain a memory of the Colonial past but also identify their shamanic practices as the primary mode of resistance to external control. The first invasion of the Spanish, the establishment of the missions and shamanic retaliation are part of an important metanarrative told in different versions by Siona and their Kofan neighbors and allies (Carrizosa 2015). In the Siona version, their people lived in a large city with golden bells and were organized under a single cacique that reigned over a large territory that took a month to traverse. After the armed repulsion of the first Spanish invasion, the shamans drank yajé, and made the city invisible. All the tribes dispersed to their current locations, each one assuming particular diacritical characteristics that mark their ethnic differences. Siona shamans foresaw the return of the Spanish and decided that they would use their shamanic powers, and not arms, to combat further invasions or mistreatment. Later a priest entered who spoke their language and was surprised to find them in possession of crosses and gold bells. He was drowned after he began to mistreat the people. A sequence of other narratives recounts the establishment and demise of the Franciscan missions on the Putumayo, and in most of these, the shamans are credited with causing illness, death and abandonment of the nucleated settlements. The shamans retaliated against mistreatment and protected their people. Siona oral history documents the reconfiguration of the shamanic role into an important strategy of resistance in the face of the disruption and violence that marked the Colonial period.

SHAMANISM, EXTRACTION AND EPIDEMICS

The exit of the Franciscans at the end of the 18th Century left the region in relative isolation until quinine extraction in the 1880s and later rubber brought increased contact and interest to the region once again. The upper Putumayo region did not suffer the devastating violence and slavery that Casa Arana inflicted upon the Huitoto on the lower Putumayo (Taussig 1987). However, recent historical work indicates that the Siona and Kofan were more involved in extractive activities than previously assumed (Wasserstrom and Bustamente 2015), and Siona oral history confirms missionary archives that document the forced removal of members from the Montepa community by rubber *patrones* to be sold as slaves in Peru (Kuan Bahamón 2013). By the mid-19th Century, the Siona, Kofan and Quichua of Ecuador were dependent upon missionaries, traders and others for axes, machetes

and other goods, often trading their labor for such goods and thus were familiar with a broad number of labor arrangements, such as debt peonage (Wasserstrom 2014; Muratorio1991).

As a response to the presence of rubber and quinine *patrones*, Capuchin missionaries took responsibility and authority for the Putumayo region on the Colombian side of the border in the “name of the patria and Church”. They made several excursions to Indigenous communities, establishing intensive relations with them, and a number of Siona came to live near the recently founded mission settlement of Puerto Asis. In 1914, with the proposed border change, the Capuchin priests relocated Kofan and Siona communities in territory that would remain Colombian, angering Ecuadorian rubber and quinine *patrones* with the loss of their laborers (Wasserstrom 2014). In the 1920’s they founded an *internado* in Puerto Asis. Siona children were forced into boarding school, and once again epidemics took a major toll. Siona elders remembered the horrors when measles or other diseases hit the school and then spread up and down rivers to the native settlements. By the mid-1920’s, several Siona communities had disappeared and their population was reduced to 300, a third of what it had been in 1900. This number remained stable up until the 1980s (Chaves Chamorro e Vieco Albarracín 1987).

Although access to the region was difficult during the first half of the 20th century, settlers continued to arrive. The Siona established trading and *compadrio* relations with the local businesses in Puerto Asis and their colonist neighbors. Several Colombian youth participated in the Colombian-Peruvian conflict in the 1930s on the lower Putumayo River. In the 1950’s, oil was discovered in the region and a road from the highlands to Puerto Asis was finally completed in 1968. With construction of the road from the highlands, thousands of settlers migrated to the Putumayo and virtually surrounded the last few Siona communities.

There are few references to shamans and their roles in Colonial documents, but historical sources from the 19th to the mid-20th Century make frequent mention of the exotic leader of *cacique curaca*, a shamanic role combining religious and political powers gained from yajé to mediate internal and external relations. The Capuchin missionaries of the early 20th Century, many of whom took on the task of recording language and customs, established friendly relations with those living near Puerto Asis (Mongua Calderón 2015), and Siona elders told me narratives about how these Capuchins, sought out their *curacas* for healing.

Research in the Capuchin archives in Bogotá, the Centro de Investigaciones Lingüísticas y Etnográficas de la Amazonia Colombiana, revealed that along with the linguistic work, these priests also recorded yajé songs and gathered ethnographic information from the *curacas* (Langdon 2014, 271-276). One Capuchin ethnographer, Frey Plácido de Calella (1940-41), opens his article in the journal *Anthropos* with three photos: Siona *curacas* with ceremonial feather crowns and jaguar teeth necklaces; an assemblage of ritual paraphernalia including the yajé vine, flutes, chalice and base for the yajé pot; and geometric designs inspired by the yajé visions.

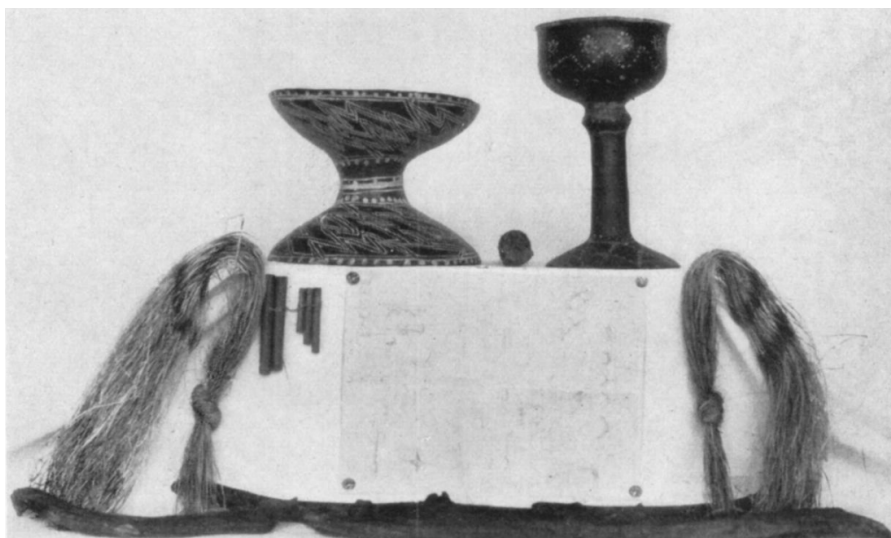
figure 1

Siona shamans of Orito, 1930s.



figure 2

Assemblage of yajé ritual implements.²



2. See Langdon (2000) for a discussion of these designs.

Colombian Anthropologists associated with the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología y Historia also took great interest in the *curaca*'s activities (Chaves 1958). Carlos Garibello, responsible for the video and audio documentation of the Instituto for many years, recorded yajé songs from the 1950s and filmed shamanic healing rituals.

figura 3

Ricardo Yaiguaje
performing
healing ceremony in 1950s
(Photo taken
from film strip of
Carlos Garibello).



In the 1960s, two important articles were published describing their shamanic practices, both containing pictures drawn by Felinto Piaguaie, a Siona youth (Mallol de Recasens 1963; Mallol de Recasens y Recasens 1964-5). Paradoxically, while practicing *curacas* were disappearing in the mid-20th Century, scholars and others were interested in capturing shamanic performances of art and music.

Shamanic narratives referring to this period reveal important events that include relations with Capuchin priests, rubber collectors and other colonists in the area. The cacique *curaca* is presented as the shaman considered most powerful in the village with a role went beyond the resolution of serious illnesses or misfortune. He was protector of his community in all senses, responsible for the collective well-being, leading yajé ceremonies in order to guarantee hunting and fishing success, good harvests, and harmonic relations in general with the invisible beings that influence events on “this side”. His power extended to the political and social realms. He organized communal work activities, festive gatherings, performed marriage and naming ceremonies, and punished or reprimanded individuals whose deviant activities were socially disruptive. According to the Siona, his leadership role was analogous of that of the priest for the whites.

As in Colonial oral history, *curacas* appear as “star figures” (Turner 1981) in narratives about this period, retaliating for injustices to their group and causing critical events, such as epidemics that wiped out two-thirds of the native population and caused the disappearance of entire villages in the early 20th Century. Shamanic vengeance is

primarily attributed to intergroup and interethnic conflict occurring with the extractive activities. Siona, working as tappers and transporters of rubber and quinine, left their villages and travelled throughout the region. Their arrival at other villages generated suspicion, envy and conflict in the form of sorcery. Sorcery perpetrated by these visitors, or attacks upon them, generated shamanic retaliations, and the narratives argue that the *curacas* were behind the epidemics that passed from one village to another. Although conflicts with the Huitotos, living further downstream, are present in some of the narratives and there is recognition that rubber collectors transmitted the diseases, the groups most commonly accused of causing epidemics are attributed to shamanic figures of other Western Tucanoan speakers – primarily the Oyo and Macaguaje's, but also the Angutere, Tetete, Tama, and Correguaje.

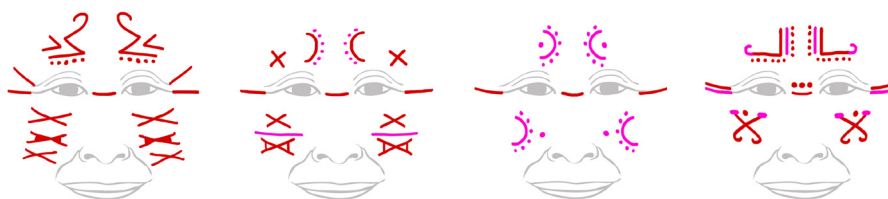
Years spent under the vigilance of the priests in the *internado* discouraged undertaking shamanic apprenticeship, and Siona elders remember the Capuchin's severe repression of their language, traditional dress and shamanic activities. However, they explain the demise of the last of their shamans in the 1940s and 50s as a result of retaliations among themselves. Narratives relating the deaths of the last Siona *curacas* detail rivalries and battles between them until none were left. These conflicts are still remembered today as the "great battle of the shamans" (personal communication Pedro Musalem), and constitute one of the paradoxes in shamanism. While Siona associate shamanism as the mark of their ethnic identification and view their shamans as protectors, they also affirm that shamans were responsible for their own demise through envy and rivalry in the 20th Century.

With the absence of *curacas* and regular community yajé rituals in the 1970s, the Siona expressed lamentation and a great sense of loss and abandonment both in the narratives I collected and in discussions about the importance of the shamans for the well being of the community. Frequently I heard remarks attributing poor hunting or fishing results to the absence of yajé rituals. Others mourned the absence of the *cacique curaca*'s maintenance of social control or loss of practices that established harmony between community members and the invisible forces. Those elected as "governor"³ of Buenavista were inevitably criticized for not speaking and leading as a *cacique curaca*. In the case of serious illnesses, families journeyed to other groups to seek shamanic treatment, trips that often resulted in conflict and suspicion.

3. The Indian Affairs Office instituted the position of governor in the late 1960s to facilitate mediation between the State and indigenous communities.

Besides shamanic narratives, geometric designs inspired by yajé rituals were still evident in face paintings, pots and other implements. The production of these designs should be seen as a performative mode, since they invoke and heighten the experience of the artist. The production of such designs was reduced to a few elders in the 1970s, and Ricardo Yaiguaje was the only who continued to paint his face inspired by ritual yajé experience (Langdon 2013b; 2015).

figure 4
Example of
face designs
of Ricardo
Yaiguaje, 1970s.



When he began to produce spears, crowns and other implements to sell or give to me, he decorated them with designs.

figure 5
Yajé designs
on spears made
by Ricardo.

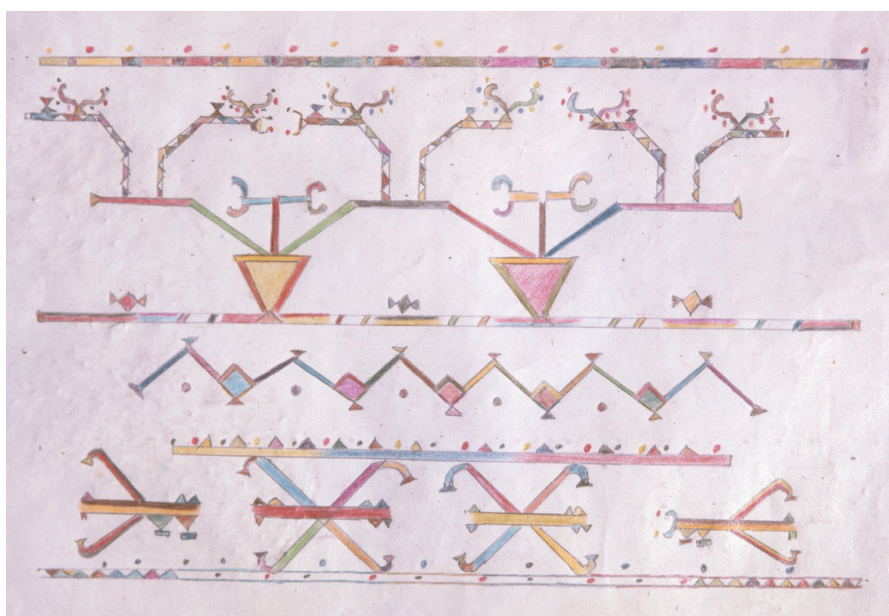


figure 6
Shamanic
crown with
yajé designs.



Such designs were spontaneously produced, but he refused to produce any on paper for me,⁴ alleging that he did not know how to handle a pencil. Having been told that his brother, Estanislao, had drawn beautiful designs for the Capuchins when in the *inter-nado*⁵, I requested drawings from him, giving him colored pencils and paper. After several weeks, he returned the paper with eight elaborated designs that he had seen in his yajé experiences.

figura 7
Yajé design
by Estanislao
Yaiguaje.



Another example of spontaneous designs can be found on the pottery made at my request.

figure 8
Yajé chalice
made by
Sinforosa
Maniguaje.



4. See Langdon (2000) for those he spontaneously drew for himself.

5. I often have wondered if he did the designs that Padre Calella published (1940-1).

Despite the many hours I spent recording, transcribing and dialoguing with the elders, the Siona of my generation, the young adults who were my good friends and *compadres*, seemed to take little interest in our work. They spoke Spanish in most social interactions and no longer observed the practices designed to avoid pollution of shamanic power and yajé rituals. With increased river transportation and a growing colonist population, the Siona were selling corn and rice in the bustling town of Puerto Asis, some 8 to 12 hours upstream by cargo canoe. In their interactions with colonists and traders, younger generations sought to assimilate into the mestizo population around them. Food habits, clothing and housing increasingly resembled those of the non-indigenous population. Because of friendships and commercial relations, mestizo neighbors were frequently present on the reserve and attended most community festivities. The Siona experienced discrimination and deceit when identified as Indians in commercial and other interactions with traders in Puerto Asis. Several young people told me that they were ashamed to speak the native language.

Ricardo was the only elder at that time wearing full ceremonial dress with face paintings inspired by the yajé experience.

figure 9

Ricardo Yaiguaje
with grandson
in 1971.



His brother wore the traditional cusma, but only Ricardo continued to adorn himself in the elegance inspired by the heavenly people who descend in yajé rituals to lead the novice on his journey. However, he did not receive the honor and respect due to an elder with shamanic knowledge, and the community jokingly referred to him as “Father Chucula,” after the plantain drink associated with traditional daily diet and identity. Although expected to assume the *cacique curaca* role after the last one, his brother, died, he proved unable to do so. Political leadership of the community was in the hands of the “governor,” who was elected among the younger men more familiar and at ease with non-indigenous society.

In retrospect, I realize that I failed to understand Siona identity as irreducible. Mimesis of colonist ways was a performative strategy of survival in a contact zone in which Indians had little power and suffered from discrimination (Chaves Chamorro 2003), characterized as ignorant, savage and a sign of an uncivilized past (Pineda Camacho 2010). My own shortsightedness prevented me from understanding the depth of indigenous identity and the value they placed on their shamanism as a diacritical sign of cultural distinctiveness. I failed to fully appreciate the ethnographic experiences that contradicted my perspective at the time and demonstrated that younger generations still associated their distinctiveness with performative expressions of shamanism. Most of these experiences originated from one family, that of Francisco Piaguaje.

Francisco, or Pacho, was in his mid-50s and appeared to be the vanguard of assimilation (Langdon 2010). In comparison to most men his age, Pacho had more commercial and social relations with the non-Indians, seemed to travel outside the reserve more and was a gregarious and entertaining figure. His sons, who were my age, reflected the same characteristics, spending extended time off the reserve for purposes of education or commercial activities. They were among the few Siona who married non-Indians wives, and Spanish predominated in Pacho’s household, in spite of the presence of the aging grandmother who was monolingual in Siona and widow of the last *cacique curaca*.

Felinto, one of his older sons, worked with a linguist in Bogotá for a number of years during the 1960s. He served not only as an informant for the linguist and for anthropologists, providing information and drawings for publications on shamanic practices (Mallol de Recasens 1963; Mallol de Recasens and Recasens 1964-5), but he also took active interest in this collaboration, learning to write his language. Upon his

return to Buenavista, he registered some 45 narratives told to him by elders in Siona, including traditional tales, histories of migrations, cultural practices and social organization under the *cacique curaca*. These narratives convey deep sorrow caused by absence of shamans and rapid changes occurring in their lives. Never encountering the linguist again, he shared his texts with me, dedicating hours to dictating his notes while I copied them. On a return trip in the 1980s, I discussed the possibility of a publication with him as author and in honor of the linguist, but the growing violence in the region prevented such a project from becoming reality.

Another event expressing the depth of ethnic identity came from his younger brother Pacheco, who was finishing high school in Puerto Asis during my initial fieldwork. Since I served as the village photographer taking pictures of birthday parties and other family festivities, Pacheco requested that I photograph him with his grandmother (the widow of the last *cacique curaca*) and his uncle, Estanslao Yai-guaje. Pacheco wore the traditional *cusma* and posed with them and his cousin, who wore the miniskirt in style in Puerto Asis. This was the first and only time I saw the *cusma* used by a man under 60.

figure 10

Pacheco
Piaguaje with
Estanslao,
cousin and
grandmother.



After high school, Pacheco taught school in a rural community. In 1978 he attended a course at the Summer Institute of Linguistics headquarters, learning to type and print with a mimeo machine. In 1980, I found him in Buenavista collaborating with Bible translations. Since Pacheco demonstrated both artistic and poetic capacities, the missionary had asked him to create a crest to represent the Siona. Pacheco showed me his painting, which captured clearly Siona identity as shamanic practice. Like Calella's photo published in 1940–41 (see Photo 2), it consisted

of an assemblage portraying the *curaca*'s crown, yajé chalice and vine and the jaguar and anaconda, key figures for shamanic transformations. He told me that the painting was a result of several discussions with others as to how to represent their heritage.⁶ He also showed me a poem that he had written while at the SIL headquarters, showing extreme pride in his indigenous identity.

AMO MI TERRUÑO

1
*Nativo soy del Putumayo
tierra de grandeza hospitalaria
cuna de mi adolescencia
donde nacen los hombres del mañana*

2
*Oh terruño de mi pueblo
que siempre lleva en tu seno
la sonrisa alegre y cautivadora
de aquella noble criatura*

3
*Te quiero para amarte
pedazos de mis sueños
celador de tus dones y riquezas
compañero inseparable de las fieras*

4
*Quiero soñar en ti selva amada
es la antorcha que ilumina
el camino de mi vida
esperanza del noble indigena*

5
*Mis padres testigos de mi pobreza
que juntos en la chacra compartía
el morir de un atardecer brillante
que acariciaba los rostros sudorosos*

6
*De regreso a la maloca
mis paternos en sus brazos me llevaban
compartiendo la dura jornada
juntos en la boca me besaban.*

7
*El río camino de la selva
la quilla transporte del humilde el pan
casabe y la fariña
alimento del cuerpo del nativo*

8
*El blanco ansioso de la ciudad
el indio hijo de la soledad
contempla dos culturas diferentes
de una raza de pueblos hermanos*

9
*El cielo es puro como el agua
fiel testigo de nuestra pureza
el indio amable siempre con el visitante
pobrementemente comparte su lecho*

10
*El misionero la luz de la manigua
que entregó su noble espíritu
para luchar por un pueblo oculto
descubre al hombre sin pecado*

Lomalinda (Meta) 4 de noviembre 1/78
J. F. P.

6. Unfortunately I have lost the 1980 photo of his painting, but similar ones were hanging in his house when I visited him in 2013 in Puerto Asis, where he currently resides (see photo 17).


On another occasion, a third brother, my compadre Humberto, together with Juan Yaiguaje, another youth in his mid-20s and son of a renowned curaca, offered to sell me small spears painted with yajé designs mimicking those that Ricardo was producing. Juan also made a crown with his representation of yajé designs. Ricardo's family criticized the designs, saying that they were not authentic yajé designs, that they were "only pictures". Assuming their perspective about the loss of traditional shamanic art, I failed to see that these young men of my age had interest, identity and pride as descendants of the last Siona curacas.

Pacho's generation had no members who seriously embarked on shamanic apprenticeship when young, possibly because of their schooling experience or impossibility of maintaining the necessary taboos and prescriptions. It was from his generation that the first governors were chosen when the Colombian government implemented the policy of electing such leaders in the 1960s. Pacho, who had been instrumental in the creation of the Buenavista reserve, was the first to be elected. For me he was the very model of what anthropology called the "cultural broker". Because of his extensive economic and social activities with the colonists in the regions, I did not consult him for shamanic narratives (Langdon 2010).

Contrary to my opinion, Pacho demonstrated a strong ethnic consciousness in a speech made during a communal work group (*minga*) organized by him in 1972 to clean the schoolyard. As usual, the women had prepared food and *chicha*, the traditional fermented beverage made from manioc. After the work was finished, we were sitting on the veranda of the palm school drinking and eating. By this time Pacho was inebriated and he made a long speech in Spanish about the need to maintain traditional practices and language. At one point he praised me, saying that I was there learning the language and customs that most were abandoning. When he finished his long monologue spoken entirely in Spanish, he broke down and cried. My interpretation at the time was that he cried because he was conscious that he was the one heralding the adoption of Spanish and non-indigenous practices. In retrospect and recognizing his leadership in the shamanic revitalization in the 1980s and 1990s, his sorrow had more affinity with the loss and mourning expressed by the elders who told narratives to his son Felinto.

SHAMANIC PERFORMANCE AND REVITALIZATION

I left the Putumayo in 1974 predicting that the Siona would soon assimilate into mestizo society, never imagining the extraordinary



revitalization in ethnic identity and shamanism in the 1990s. Siona shamanism has not only revived within the regional *curanderismo* networks composed of mestizo and indigenous shamans who serve as healers in Colombia's popular medical system, but is highly visible on the national and global level as part of the association of the "ecological Indian" with Indigenous movements (Ulloa 2005) and neo-shamanic circuits that have grown over the last three decades (Langdon 2012). Neo-shamanic interests and State discourse on the value of indigenous culture, ecological wisdom and spirituality combine to influence the revival of shamanism, and, in the case of the Siona, the shaman has become the primary expression of performance of cultural distinctiveness for the group. Shamanic performances are once again part of the secular as well as the spiritual well-being of the group.

Although cocaine and guerilla activities began in the late 1970s, the 1990s was marked by increased cocaine production and a new wave of immigrants. The decade was extremely violent, as new actors arrived to dispute of control of the region, among them paramilitaries and drug lords from Medellin and Cali. The guerillas, controlling much of the region in the 1990s, became known as a "third drug cartel" (Ramírez 2011, 54) and managed to hinder expansion of petroleum extraction. With coca production diminishing in Bolivia and Peru because of US intervention, Colombia became the largest producer by 2000, and coca cultivation was criminalized and violently repressed (Ramírez 2011, 56). In 1994, areal fumigation of coca plantations with the toxic herbicide glyphosate began and increased significantly during the next 10 years. It was an important strategy of the Plan Colombia implemented in 1999, originally defined as a policy of investment for social development, deactivation of violence and the construction of peace. However, it became a counterinsurgency strategy in which fumigation was central to efforts to drive out the guerillas and take control of the region so that petroleum extraction could progress. In spite of the adverse health and environmental impacts, spraying has continued until the present, including the fumigation of indigenous reserves.

The situation in the Putumayo remains critical, in spite of data indicating the reduction of coca production and also of guerrilla activities. However, the Siona have survived and have grown as a political force due to the new Constitution of 1991 and engagement of Siona political and spiritual leaders in the regional and national indigenous movement. The Constitution recognizes the pluriethnic and multicultural character of the State, granting indigenous peoples increased rights and autonomy. It confirms collective ownership of indigenous territories, called *resguardos*, and they have the right to

use them as they see fit, including prior informed consent for development projects proposed for their lands.⁷ In addition, the Constitution recognizes the *cabildo* as the form of indigenous governance, and the formation of a *cabildo* may be requested by a group of Indians independently of association with a particular *resguardo*.

In comparison to the one existing reserve in 1970, today there are six Siona resguardos and 12 cabildos. The most recent census reports a total of 2,578 Siona (ACIPS 2011, 40). This growth is not due to increased birthrate, but to the “re-indigenization” process among mestizos in the region in the face of the heightened status of the indigenous peoples (Chaves Chamorro 2002). While at one time mestizo identity received a higher status than that of the indigenous, the new constitution has caused a reversal, and many people are rediscovering and identifying with their indigenous roots. Buenavista has grown from the 27 families in 1972 to 161 (ACIPS 2011, 40). Although the original families of Buenavista internally distinguish between themselves as ancestral occupants of their *resguardo* and the “recently arrived”, the recognition of these newcomers as Siona is an important political strategy for the group. Two of the more recent *cabildos* are found in Puerto Asis and Mocoa, created by dislocated families from the rural areas because of the violence and environmental destruction. Dislocation because of the violence initiated in the late 1990s and has continued until the present.⁸ Some 28 families live in Mocoa and another 45 in Puerto Asis (ACIPS 2011, 40). They have not lost ties with their home territories, and there is constant movement between the indigenous rural communities and urban areas.

The Constitution gives a positive value to indigenous identity not seen before in State documents and associates it with the ecological Indian:

..... the new Constitution recognized the native’s territorial difference and autonomy relying largely on their role as keepers of the ancestral knowledge that allows the continuity of the biological diversity contained within their territories. *Los territorios indígenas* (indigenous territories) were finally recognized as the spaces of custom and tradition but also of preserved ‘ecological places’. (Carrizosa 2015, 24)

7. Contradictorily, this does not include sub-soil resources, which belong to the government.

8. For instance, in 2013 the guerrillas broke an accord they had with the Siona of Buenavista and invaded the *resguardo*, forcing several families to leave.

These rights are based on the success of demonstrating cultural distinctiveness in the form of customs and practices and scholars have observed that in Colombia, as well as other countries, Indians must be recognized as different in order to become citizens with ethnic rights (Jackson 2002; 2007; Ulloa 2005). Gros (2000) has called this situation the “paradox of Indian identity”, one in which indigenous peoples must claim a collective identity expressing cultural differences based on unique tradition, law, language, collective territory and particular relations to their environment. In this sense, “claiming and successfully securing these rights requires a performance on the part of Colombian pueblos that powerfully indexes such isolation and marginality, geographical and otherwise,” (Jackson 2007, 210). As Chaves Chamorro observes (2003, 122), indigenous identity has become associated with a set of fixed traits, customs, practices and meanings, and among which fixed expressions of shamanism are central.

Although the 1991 Constitution is considered to be one of the most advanced in Latin American, granting “collective rights” for “collective subjects” for indigenous peoples that gives specific rights to land, education, health, culture, jurisdictional autonomy, language (Jimeno 2012), indigenous organizations and communities must seek external financial resources in order to secure their rights and goals. One step for this has been the development of Comprehensive Life Plans (*Planes de Vida*) by the National Organization of Colombian Indians (ONIC) in the late 1990s. These plans have been instituted as a participatory strategy for indigenous communities to express their demands regarding these rights, and they are considered to represent the collective, unified and political position of the group (Carrizosa 2015, 15). With the aid of external consultants, they are constructed through a participatory process of community reflection and identification of cultural goals. However, in order to achieve the goals defined in their Life Plan, the communities must seek governmental and non-governmental funding through the development of specific projects.

In 2003, the pan-Siona association, *Asociación de Cabildos Indígenas de los Pueblos Siona* (ACIPS), with headquarters in Mocoa, was created and recognized by the Minister of Interior (ACIPS 2014). Its primary goals are those of promoting culture, values and traditional norms outlined in the Life Plan and to represent the interests of the communities whose *cabildos* belong to the Association. It serves as an important mediator between communities and Government and non-governmental organizations, and its survival is dependent upon the harnessing of governmental and non-governmental

funding (Musalem 2015). Since their beginning, they have gained funding for a number of projects, initiating with the first Life Plan (Portela Guarín, et. al 2003), financed under the *Plan Nacional de Rehabilitación* – PNR. Subsequent projects funded by national and international agencies have aimed to revitalize traditional agriculture practices, food habits, family and community organization, indigenous leaders, and ethnoeducation (ACIPS 2014). ACIPS’ seal that represents their Siona identity is a portrait of Ricardo with his painted face, feather earrings and shamanic necklaces.

figure 11

Portrait of Ricardo used as Seal of ACIPS (Summer Insititute of Linguistics).



The Life Plan outlines seven “pillars of community well-being” as goals for recuperation: traditional medicine, native language, subsistence, territory, environment, collective control, and thought (*pensamiento*) (Portella Guarín, et. al 2003). A central role in the search for funding as well as for community organizational activities is that played by the *taitas*, or shamans, as “Traditional Authorities”:

Within the system of Self-Government, the Jaguar People or Traditional Authorities, are considered as a transversal body for the resolution of conflicts. This means for the Siona People that the maximum figure of authority is found in the Jaguar People, who, with his orientation and counsel, is present in the most important decision making and resolution of conflicts when these occur within the community. As spiritual guides and traditional doctors, they posses the capacity to guide the people and lead us to the understanding of our realities. Their example teaches us and with the

diets that they maintain, they always are purifying their relation with the spirits and equilibrating the energies that can affect us. (ACIPS 2011, 74, translation by author)

Although the *cabildos* are governed by an elected group of officers led by a governor and comprising the local council (*governador, alcalde mayor, aguaciles, treasurer, fiscal*), there are a number of *taitas* recognized as traditional authorities and responsible for the group's well-being. Most of them have originated from Buenavista, and Pacho's sons are among them as traditional leaders who have carried on his collaboration with neo-shamanic groups in the highlands since his death.

figure 12

Felinto as taita preparing yajé
(Photo by Pedro Musalem).



Other practicing *taitas* from Buenavista trace their ancestors to the *curacas* present in the oral histories. Following the popular neo-shamanic designation for lowland shamans, they are now called *taitas* and known for their yajé ceremonies; however, the role attributed to them in the Life Plan draws upon the traditional role of *cacique curaca* as protector of Siona communities.

The presence of shamans in decision-making processes and development projects is evident. As is common for other groups in the region, they conduct yajé rituals following community meetings to continue the discussions and deliberations (Carrizosa 2015; Pedro Musalem personal communication). Juan Yaiguaje, the father in law of ACIPS' president, is a powerful and respected *taita* who participates in meetings with *cabildo* representatives as well as with governmental and non-governmental participants.

figure 13
Juan Yaiguaje and
wife. (Photo by
Pedro Musalem).



He often conducts yajé ceremonies for these officials once the formal meetings are over. The coordinated political action between the President of ACIPS and his father-in-law demonstrates the way in which shamans play a political role as spiritual authorities. *Taitas* are given an important voice in community meetings and interethnic political encounters. The latest ACIPS participatory project assessing the situation of its communities and collective goals was conducted through visits to all Siona *cabildos* accompanied by the *taitas* as traditional authorities. The central photo of the cover of the final document of the two year process (2011-2012) presents 6 *taitas* dressed in *cusmas* and shamanic necklaces with jaguar teeth and is entitled “Our Protection. Cabildo Jai Ziaya Bain (Buenavista) Meeting of *Taitas* and Elders, December 7, 2011, Mocoa” (ACIPS 2011).

figure 14
Our Protection.
Cabildo Jai Ziaya
Bain (Buenavista)
Meeting of *Taitas*
and Elders,
December 7,
2011, Mocoa.



Ethnoeducation projects carried out with funding from the Minister of Education from 2010 to 2013 carried out in Siona communities were accompanied by *taitas*, who participated in the workshops during the day and conducted yajé ceremonies at night.

Although *taita* leadership of yajé rituals for community, governmental and non- governmental officials to gain support for collective projects falls within their responsibility as traditional authorities, general interest in shamanic powers in the last three decades has also allowed them to develop individual networks with non-Indians that bring them financial benefit and national recognition. In the 1980s, Amazonian shamans, highly valued for their great wisdom and knowledge began to lead yajé rituals, or “*tomas de yajé*”, organized by psychologists or others for urban middle class professionals in the highland cities (Caicedo Fernández 2009). Shamanic networks between lowland Indigenous shamans and non-indigenous apprentices have resulted in the establishment of several ritual centers, or *malocas*, in major cities such as Bogotá, Cali, Medellín and Pasto. Lead by a non-indigenous new-age shamans and collaborating *taitas* from the lowlands, hundreds of people gather to participate in yajé rituals (Caicedo Fernández 2013). In the late 1990s, the *Unión de Médicos Indígenas Yagaceros de Colombia/UMIYAC* was founded as a result of a meeting organized by the NGO Amazonian Conservation Team and a Quichua indigenous organization that gathered together the *taitas* of the regional ethnic groups (UMIYAC 1999). Several Siona *taitas* participated, including Pacho, his sons, and Juan Yaiguaje.

Pacho was an early pioneer in participating such networks, conducting yajé ceremonies for local mestizos and highland professional groups (including anthropologists) in the 1980s, and by the end of the century, he was extremely well known nationally and recognized as patrimony. For example, in 2013 I picked up a State tourist brochure with his photograph, wearing the shamanic crown, among a number of others advertising the state’s attractions and a tribute to him can be found on the wall of the Bank of Colombia in Puerto Asís.

figure 15

Tribute to Pacho
on bank wall
(photo by Pedro
Musalem).



His portrait and other new age representations of shamanic powers are accompanied by the caption:

Shamanism is the path that each Pueblo has been able to find toward the ineffable, toward the depth of the human being, his sacred essence. In the Centenary of Puerto Asis, I pay homage to Pacho Piaguaje, Jaguar curaca from the margins of the Putumayo River. J. Chavez

His sons continue to provide yajé and lead ceremonies for a group of followers associated with the highland *maloca Cruz del Sur* near Pasto and its artist and shamanic leader Javier Lasso (Caicedo Fernández 2013). Juan Yaiguaje established a relation with a well-known mestizo shaman in the highlands, and conducted rituals for groups who travelled from Bogotá to drink yajé in his *maloca* for a number of years.

figure 16

Juan Yaiguaje in front of maloca.



Pacheco, now living in Puerto Asis, continues to write poetry and paint shamanic motifs.

figura 17
Painting by
Pacheco Piagua-
je capturing
the shamanic
assemblage.



Several Siona shamans, including Felinto, have travelled to Spain, Brazil, Canada, and other countries to conduct yajé ceremonies in association with the non-governmental organization UMIYAC. Not only have these networks resulted in national and international recognition, but they also generate financial gain and have come to represent an important source of individual income.

FINAL COMMENTS

Siona shamanic revitalization as a performative mode is a result of forces on the local, national and global level. As argued above, Siona have historically identified themselves with their shamanic performative expressions, and this identification was still present in the 1970s, in spite of the absence of shamans. It was a situation of shamanism without shamans (Brunelli 1996). The impressive revitalization and reconfiguration of their shamanism, which became consolidated in the 1990s, is due both to the popular and political representations of the “ecological Indian”. The association of indigenous spirituality and environmentalism has become an important reference in the struggle for indigenous rights throughout Latin America (Ulloa 2005; Conklin 2002; Conklin and Graham 1995) and also for the globalized neo-shamanic movement, which seeks a return to primordial knowledge and

equilibrium through participation in shamanic performances. In the case of the Putumayo, that has suffered from armed conflict for the last 30 years, all evidence indicates that they are not only mediators between the community and governmental and non-governmental interests, but that also they work for the survival of their people through mediation with the armed actors and other interest groups in the region (Carrizosa 2015).

In some ways, my reflections on Siona shamanism parallel anthropological thinking reflected in Geertz's two articles on religion that were separated by some 30 years (Geertz 1966; 2000). His early article, "Religion as a Cultural System", was written in a time when culture still figured as a major concept for American Anthropology and we tended to imagine it as having clear-cut frontiers. The symbolic process of ritual was seen as enacting reality with such force that it served as a model for action. My analysis led me to interpret Siona shamanism as a religious system and the experience provoked by the performance of shamanic narratives as analogous to that of ritual. Oral performances of these narratives enact important existential questions about the nature of misfortune and its causes. They are concerned with the perception between different "sides of reality" and how to distinguish them in daily experience in order to discover the nature of the misfortune and what action to take. Although my historical analysis recognized the transformation of the shamanic role during the colonial period and shamanism as a dynamic and flexible phenomenon, my anthropological thickness failed to recognize its expression in daily praxis in the 1970s with the absence of rituals.

Viewed as a performative mode, we can perceive in shamanism the multiplicity of dimensions that Geertz recognizes for religion in his 1999 article. Shamanism is much more than the producer of meaning and practice through the ritual process. Performing shamanism enables the Siona to articulate the spiritual, political and economic dimensions of the complex situation that has impacted upon their lives during the last 3 decades. They struggle for autonomy and citizenship in a context of armed actors and extractive activities (coca and petroleum) that limits the full exercise of their rights. Their traditional means of subsistence has been destroyed and dependency upon extractive and economic activities of the region is almost total. ACIPS' political power and cultural revitalization projects depend upon its capacity to mobilize economic resources. Shamanic performance, as embodied knowledge, has become the principal means for the engagement of outside

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resources and alliances, creating and transmitting knowledge while expressing identity in a post-Colonial violent setting. It is the central pillar of the ongoing ethno-political movement that has allowed the Siona to survive as a collective group in the face of the last thirty years of violence and growing economic importance of the region. In this process of dialogue with global and national discourses of the ecological Indian, Siona shamanism as a performative mode has undergone a transfiguration, and its performances reflect the incorporation of traits that have come to be nationally identified as authentic (Conklin 1997). As Miguel Bartolomé points out, cultural transfigurations are adaptive strategies that subordinated societies generate in order to survive and in which they transform their cultural profile, in order for them to continue to be who they believe themselves to be (Bartolomé 2006). As I have attempted to demonstrate in this article, the performance of shamanism has been an important strategy for the survival of the Siona.

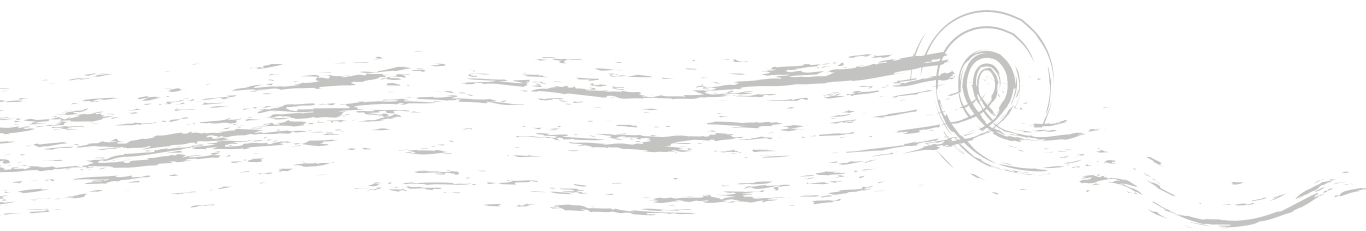
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