‘Los Caminos de la Medicina’: The life of medicinal plants from the Amazonian forest to the urban markets

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I, Hernando Alberto Echeverri-Sanchez, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.
Abstract

This dissertation is a multispecies exploration of the trade of medicinal plants in the Andean-Amazonian region of southern Colombia. It seeks to highlight the complex multi-layered networks of relationships that make up folk medicine in the country by following the medicinal plants as main ethnographic subjects. It explores the roles each medicinal plant plays as it is grown, harvested, transformed, exchanged and used by different people. It also highlights a crucial axis in this region, the lowland highland dynamic, since their trade connects lowland indigenous communities to highland Andean healers and markets, facilitating not only a space for material transformation but also spaces of cultural exchange. This study has focused on six representative botanical species: *Elaeagia pastoensis* L.E. Mora, *Maytenus laevis*, *Brugmansia Sp*, *Cyperus Sp.*, *Banisteropsis caapi* and *Ethryxolyum sp*. All these plants have essential roles in these trade networks being active agents in the way people perceive their health, the environment, their relationships with others, and their own identity. By using material culture methodology, this study explores the techniques in making, using and exchanging these medicines following the cultural rationales, thinking processes, and cosmological understandings that make them possible. This methodology also facilitates an analysis of the ways that the medicines are continually reimagined and reinterpreted by different people as they travel through the commodity chains, being incorporated into different ways of understanding health and the world.
Impact Statement

This study is an exploration of the trade routes that connect lowland Amazonia with the highland cities of Colombia. It was focused on the trade of medicinal plants and in particular of the plants used by shamans and healers of the Ayahuasca tradition. This study was conducted with a distinct methodological approach that offered a new perspective on this trade. By exploring the movement of these plants through the region and through different cultural concepts of health, ecology and alterity, this dissertation analyses how people perceive difference, how they negotiate the world and build new ideas and notions about disease, medicine and the body. By using this approach, this thesis opens the door to a new perspective on this type of trade, allowing for further in-depth analysis of the complex cultural negotiations that happen in folk medicine. This is especially relevant when considering the threats that these medicines are facing as their ecosystems are rapidly disappearing. There is an urgency to understand how these medicines are traded, harvested and grown. Not only to show the deeply intertwined relationship between health and the environment but also possible adaptations to the changing landscape.

I believe that this study will be beneficial for my career as it opens the doors to a whole set of practices and methods that can be used for future research. It is only the beginning of a
much larger project that not only includes plants but other forms of folk medicine such as zootherapy. This study allows us to understand the overall backdrop of this medicinal practice as well as the interconnected world of folk medicine that unites indigenous people with other groups from all over the world.

For the local community, I believe that this study will allow for further recognition of the implications of ecological degradation, as it highlights the deep interconnectivity between the forest and health. It legitimises indigenous knowledge and foments the use of these ritualised practices in politics and on policymaking. At the same time, it is essential to highlight that this dissertation will be continued and is proposed as a much longer commitment to local communities. It will build a network of people who wish to not only share knowledge but also protect the standing forest of the area and the medicines that grow in them.

As part of Colombian anthropology, this dissertation adds to the growing understanding of material semiotics. However, its unique approach facilitates a new perspective on the medicinal markets, one which gives the non-human an active agency much as how shamans and healers in the region believe they do. This unique approach will be beneficial to understand not only the region where this study was carried out but also other areas and territories in the country.
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Glossary

**Colono:** A colonial category in lowland Amazonia of white communities from the highlands who have migrated in search for land.

**Mestizo:** A colonial racial category, built on the national ideology of racial hybrids. Used as a category to describe people who do not define themselves as Indigenous or AfroColombian.

**Afrocolombian:** Communities who identify themselves as descendants of sub-Saharan African slaves. Mostly found in the Pacific and Caribbean coast. Many are descendants of escaped slaves who established small autonomous towns.

**Indigena:** Communities who identify themselves as Native American. They often have their language and tradition.

**Blanco:** A colonial racial category to call people who have paler skin and are descendants of European migrants.

**Medicina popular:** Folk, vernacular or traditional medicine of Colombia

**Taita:** In Quechua this is the word for father. In Putumayo, it is used for Ayahuasca shamans.

**Hierbatero:** Healer who has profound knowledge on medicinal plants

**Yage:** Ayahuasca. A Psychedelic brew made from *B. caapi* and *P. viridis*.

**Mambe:** Amazonian word for Coca powder

**Ambil:** Tobacco paste

**Borrachero:** Vernacular name for plants from the *Brugmansia* and *Datura* genera.

**Chuchuwa:** Quechua name for Maytenus laevis

**Chondur:** Vernacular name for sedges of the *Cyperus* genus

**Yoco:** Local name for *Paullinia yoco*

**Mopa Mopa:** Vernacular name for *Elaeagia pastoensis*

**Waira Sachi:** Quechua words for Wind plant not identified

**Siete esencias:** A common essential oil and perfume sold in folk markets

**New Age:** An agglomeration of different world beliefs a by-product of 20th-century globalism

**Neoshamanism:** Communities who use shamanic practices from a wide set of traditions, in particular groups who adopt American Shamanism.

**Master Plants:** Plants used by indigenous and Neoshamanic groups who consider them to have a complex personhood.
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This dissertation would not be possible without the help of many people. There is no doubt I am extremely grateful with all of them. Firstly, of course, I wish to thank the Taitas, apprentices, patients, healers and merchants who let me tag along while they worked, putting up with all my questions. I am especially thankful to Doña Lola, Taita Jaime Flores, Taita Lucho Flores, Taita Martin Diaz, the Queta family, the Agreda family, Doña Mercedes, Doña Jesusa, Taita Juan, my friends Santiago, Jose and Taita Ramon, all of whom were kind enough to let me learn from them the mysteries of shamanism in the region of Putumayo. Also Don German, who was extremely welcoming in the markets of Pasto, Doña Maria in Bogota and all of the merchants who were happy to give me some of their time for dialogue and conversation. My close friend, Neyda, who was always ready to teach me about the plants, and whose knowledge of gardening and plant medicine first introduced me to this world.

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Introduction

Image 1. The market stall in Mocoa, Putumayo.

In the middle of the Mocoa\(^1\) market, there is a stall that is packed to the brim with medicinal plants, images of saints, charms and shamanic tools. It sells everything related to the healing arts. Stalls like this are common in the Andean foothills, from Colombia to Peru. Their mystical and mysterious character is intriguing; when one visits them, one can appreciate the sheer diversity of medicinal plants that grow in this territory.

These stalls are also a visual tour of centuries of cultural exchange, a map of historical interactions, syncretic transactions and cultural negotiations. The sheer number of products is overwhelming – colourful bottles, soapboxes, images of human organs and plants, plant essences, religious items, beaded necklaces, rattles and other instruments. We can also find deer antlers, saint statues, a maneki-neko cat, a variety of rosaries, books on magic, tarot cards, tiger balm, jaguar fat, and much more. Each item offers a glimpse into the complex social relationships produced by trade and years of colonial interaction.

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\(^1\) Mocoa is the capital city of the region of Putumayo, Colombia.

\(^2\) This was a border war between Peru and Colombia, fought between 1932 and 1933.
Some items found in this particular stall reflect these relationships even more poignantly – objects such as images of Catholic saints that have been adopted by Afro-Colombian spiritualism placed next to indigenous textiles with images of Bengali tigers, and other paraphernalia, charms and medicinal plants. Ingrained in them are historical realities that produced the multiplicity of medicinal practices we see today in this region.

This stall demonstrates the diversity of popular medicine in Colombia. Even though local communities still depend on their traditional network of shamans and healers for their daily needs, new types of medicines are always being negotiated and added to the multiple interpretations of health that make up folk medicine here. They are the product of multiple notions of the body, health and nature that have come together.

The purpose of this dissertation is to try and understand how this diversity of health products comes together and how it reflects the multiple notions of body, health and the nature of Colombian folk medicine in Putumayo. Most importantly, the thesis examines the role of plants found in this region and how different people relate to them, incorporating them into the way they see the world.

**Setting the Scene**
This study is based on data collected during year-long fieldwork in several locations around the department of Putumayo, located in the south-western part of Colombia, just north of Ecuador and east of the department of Nariño. Putumayo is shaped like a rectangle, bordering Ecuador along its length and lying between two of the great Amazonian tributaries in Colombia: the Putumayo River and the Caquetá River (see map). This region has two great axes. The first is formed by the Andean mountains, which define the different ecological thermal floors in the region. The second is constituted by the rivers that flow east, towards the Amazon River. These geographical characteristics form a cultural, ecological and geographic division into three main regions: Upper Putumayo, Middle Putumayo, and Lower Putumayo.

Upper Putumayo or Alto Putumayo is the region at the top of the Andean mountains. This region is where several of the main rivers are born. It consists of steep mountain slopes and valleys, as well as an old lakebed that has become fertile land. This flat plateau is known as the Sibundoy Valley. Together with the neighbouring department of Nariño, this region is what I call the ‘highlands’ in this dissertation.

In this valley, there are some highland towns, mainly Sibundoy, San Francisco, Colón and Santiago, which have profound economic, political and ethnic links with the lowlands. To the west, there is the Lake of La Cocha next to the city of Pasto, the capital of the department of Nariño. To the east, downriver, we find steep mountains that drop from 3,300 metres to 600 MAMSL. Like most of the Andean piedmont, this region is a biodiversity hotspot due to the different temperature layers in tropical mountain slopes; it is also a biological corridor from Amazonia to the Andes.
From 600 to 100 MAMSL is Middle Putumayo or Putumayo Medio, where the mountains become less steep as they give way to the hills and valleys of the foothills or the Andean piedmont. This is the most populated area in the region, encompassing cities such as Mocoa, Villagarzón, Orito and Puerto Asís. This territory has suffered from heavy deforestation; the forest has given way to vast cattle ranches and grassy fields. It is where the main oil fields are located and where illicit cocaine plantations have affected the natural habitat. This region, together with Lower Putumayo described below, is what I call the ‘lowlands’ in this dissertation.

Towards the east, the rivers lose much of their speed and begin to meander. This is Lower Putumayo or Bajo Putumayo, and is the largest extension of the department. It is the heavily forested floodland of Amazonia. A few towns are located in this territory, all of which are connected by rivers to the rest of Colombia. Puerto Leguízamo is the largest town; it is located on the north bank of the Putumayo River and has the only road that connects the rivers Putumayo and Caquetá. It is mostly populated by indigenous people, and is culturally and economically closer to Ecuador and Peru. It has been affected by a history of violence, from the Rubber barons of the early 20th century to the Peruvian war, the recent Colombian civil war, and the cocaine industry. For this ethnography, I chose the department’s capital, Mocoa, as the centre of my investigation. This city lies in the valley of the Mocoa River, encircled by steep mountains that are covered with dense forest. The city is surrounded by smaller towns, hamlets and communities that include several indigenous, campesino and Afro-Colombian groups. It has few flat, fertile areas for cultivation, so most people depend on small-scale agriculture. Even

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2 This was a border war between Peru and Colombia, fought between 1932 and 1933.
with these limitations, the city is quite large. About 35,000 people have their homes in various neighbourhoods in the valleys of the Mocoa River’s many tributaries.

In Puerto Leguízamo’s centre is a large plaza with some palm trees and a few surviving historic houses from before the Peruvian war. However, most of the city is new, built during its population growth in the past 50 years after petroleum was discovered in the nearby areas. The city is important as the seat of government and as the main transportation hub of the region.

As the gateway to Amazonia, Mocoa connects the highland Andean cities with the riverside ports. Its roads link with Pitalito and Bogotá to the north, with Sibundoy, Pasto and Quito to the west and south, and with the lowland towns of Puerto Asís and Orito to the east. Since there is no other way into the highlands, the city has become an obligatory stop for the trucks that transport oil to the centre of the country. Its location has therefore consolidated Mocoa’s role as the political centre of the region, where many governmental and non-governmental institutions have their offices. The main offices of the Zonal Indigenous Organization of Putumayo are in Mocoa, as well as the main environmental management offices, such as the Parques Nacionales Naturales de Colombia (National Parks Institute) and Corpoamazonia.

Due in part to its strategic location, Mocoa has the largest market of medicinal plants in the region. Its stalls have plants from the lowland tropical forest of Putumayo, as well as plants from the highland tundra or paramo around Pasto and Sibundoy.

Map 4: Mocoa. This maps shows the lay out of the city as it goes along the river Mocoa and three tributaries cross the town. The main roads out connect it with different cities in the Andean mountains and the lowlands. Source: Google Maps
People from miles around visit this market when looking for specific plants and medicines.

As a result, this ethnography required constant movement throughout the region. It was conducted in various other areas and towns in the department of Putumayo, such as Orito and Villagarzón in Middle Putumayo, Puerto Leguízamo in the lowlands, and Sibundoy and Santiago in Upper Putumayo. Interviews and participant observation were also conducted in the highland cities of Pasto, Cali, Popayán and Bogotá.

**The People**

During my study, I found myself immersed in a social landscape with a multiplicity of actors, cultures and perspectives from the world. Each group had a different way of relating to ethnic differences, nature and the human body. I worked with several indigenous and mestizo communities found in the lowlands, foothills and highlands of Putumayo. These communities are autonomous and have many ethnic differences, but they also share many similarities.

In particular, all of the different groups and actors explored in this thesis are related through the use of the Ayahuasca or Yagé plant and shamanic healing. They are brought together by common practices, rituals and the use of the medicines found in the foothills of the Andes. In spite of their ethnic differences, they all share the same structured ceremonial use, as well as rituals, practices and tools associated with the consumption of Yagé. The term ‘Cultures of Yagé’ has been used to describe this cultural complex (Zuluaga, 2004; Alhena Caicedo, 2010; 2014), which is made up of Inga, Kitchwa, Kofan, Kametsa and Ziona, in addition to a few mestizo and white communities.

Due to the rapid spread of Ayahuasca among indigenous groups of Amazonia as an effective method of healing (Lenaerts, 2006; 2011; Beyer, 2010; Brabec de Mori, 2011), other indigenous communities actively use it but to a lesser degree. These groups have had their own separate healing practices but have adopted Ayahuasca as their own. Therefore, this study also included participants from the Witoto, Misak, Páez, Secoya and Pasto communities, as well as a large number of non-indigenous people such as
mestizos, *colonos*\(^3\) and Afro-Colombian people who are actively using medicine and rituals associated with Ayahuasca. As this medicinal practice gains more popularity throughout Colombia, more people will become part of this network.

Below, I have summarised the significance of these communities and their main characteristics.

- **Ingas**

  The Ingas are Quechua-speaking people who inhabit several territories around southern Colombia. They speak a dialect of Quechua known as Inga, which is part of the sub-variety Kitchwa or northern Quechua, closely related to Quechua II from the highlands of southern Peru and Bolivia (Levinshon, 1976); however, this is debatable. Kitchwa is divided into two subdialects: highland Inga and lowland Inga. The highland Inga people live primarily in the town of Santiago in the Sibundoy Valley, while the lowland Inga

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\(^3\) Colono is the Spanish term used to refer to people from the highlands who has migrated to the lowlands. This term is widely used by people of the lowlands to classify people who are white and or of a mestizo origin but arrived from the highlands. It is sometimes believed to be mostly people from Antioquia, Nariño and Huila.
people inhabit the towns of Mocoa, Villagarzón and Puerto Asís in Putumayo, as well as several townships and locations in the neighbouring departments of Cauca and Caquetá.

Their origin is debated, as I will show in Chapter 1. They seem to be: part of the early expansion of the Inca Empire into Colombia (Levinshon, 1976); part of secondary migrations from the lowlands (Ramírez de Jara and Urrea Giraldo, 1990); or a result of the colonial use of Quechua as the lingua franca in this territory (Brabec de Mori, 2011). Nevertheless, some Ingas believe that they are descendants of the Incas.

These communities are mostly agricultural; they depend on the fertile soils of the Sibundoy Valley to harvest crops such as Corn and Potatoes or use swidden fallow agricultural systems in the lowlands for survival. They have also established a tight network of merchants who trade medicines throughout the country. With the growing popularity of indigenous shamanism, the Inga traders have become important healers in local markets in Colombia (Ramirez de Jara and Urrea Giraldo, 1990). As they travel through the country, they have become the main advocates of Ayahuasca/Yagé shamanism, spreading its use.

- **Kitchwa**

The Kitchwa are indigenous communities of the lowland regions who speak a dialect of Quechua from the Kitchwa subvariety. They are closely related to other Runa Simi speaking communities of Ecuador and the Peruvian Napo River valley, which makes them Amazonian Runa and not Inga (Gamboa and Muñoz, 2003). They were heavily affected by the Rubber boom of the early 20th century, which probably caused their migration to the Putumayo basin. During the time of my fieldwork, they were undergoing a process of cultural revitalisation.

- **Kofan**

The Kofan live in small reservations around the rivers of San Miguel and Putumayo, as well as in larger territories in Ecuador. They speak the A’i language, the only surviving
language in this linguistic family (Cerón Martínez, 1995; Robinson, 1996). They have probably inhabited these territories since pre-Columbian times, as mentioned in colonial chronicles (Uribe, 1986). They were particularly hard hit by the expanding oil and Coca production in their ancestral territory during the 20th century (Wasserstrom, 2014; Ramirez, 2004). Their shamans are considered to be among the most powerful in the region.

• **Kametsa**

Known historically as the Sibundoy Indians, this ethnic group lives primarily in the highland valley in the towns of Sibundoy and San Francisco. They speak Kametsa, which is also a language isolate (Pinzon and Ramirez, 1992). These communities are well-known craftsmen, famed for their woodwork. Like the Ingas, they depend on agriculture; however, as the land near Sibundoy has been privatised, they have been forced to higher altitudes.

• **Ziona**

The Ziona is a western Tikuna community that lives along the Putumayo riverbank. They concentrate around the city of Puerto Asís, which is the largest urban centre in the region. They have had a long process of acculturation and persecution, first by the Franciscan missionaries and later by the Colombian Government (Langdon, 2014). Known by many neighbouring indigenous people as powerful shamans, by the 1970s, they had lost their shamanic practices. By recently revitalising their cultural beliefs and strengthening their political agenda, they have made a comeback as one of the most influential communities in Putumayo (Langdon, 2014). The Ziona shamans of the 1980s were the most important in the region, and trained many of the shamans I visited during my time in Putumayo.

• **Witoto**

The Muruis or Witotos are an indigenous group that inhabits the Lower Putumayo areas between the Putumayo, Caquetá, Amazon and Napo rivers, as well as territories in
Middle Putumayo, near Orito. They are part of the Bora–Witoto linguistic family and share many similarities with lowland communities. Also known as the children of Tobacco, Coca and sweet Mandioc, they form part of an exogamous cultural group that shares many cultural characteristics (Pineda, 1986). These exogamous and exolinguistic groups\(^4\) make up what is known as the People of the Centre, and include the Barasas, Ocainas, Boras and Andoques (among others) that share similar cultural practices and beliefs (Echeverri and Candre-Kinerai, 2008; Echeverri, 2016; Pineda, 1986). All of these groups are known for their consumption of Mambe, which is a composite of Coca leaves and other plants in the form of a green powder, and Ambil, a Tobacco paste.

- **Other indigenous communities**

I also came across various indigenous people from different ethnic backgrounds who had close contact with Ayahuasca shamanism. These communities shared the particularity of having their own healing techniques and traditions, but had opened up to Ayahuasca. This is the case of communities living in the regions around Putumayo and Cauca who have some form of a relationship with indigenous groups.\(^5\) As this type of shamanism becomes more popular, it has begun to overshadow local practices (Caicedo, 2014).

- **Mestizos, colonos and blancos**

I also worked with several non-indigenous communities throughout the region. In particular, I worked with the colonos (populations that are white) and/or mestizos from the highlands who migrated to Putumayo in the 20th century. The reasons for their migration are complex and multifaceted. Some of the most common causes include difficult access to land in their homelands, the political violence of the 1950s, and the cycle of economic booms that occurred in Putumayo during the past century (Taussig, 1987). Many of these colono populations transform the environment to fit highland

\(^4\) Like the Tukanoans, these groups practise linguistic exogamy while simultaneously creating a strong cultural bond with each other. This has consolidated cultural practices, beliefs and exchange networks through the region the Napo of Peru, Putumayo and Caquetá (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1996).

\(^5\) Such as the Misak, Páez, Coconuco, Barasana and Andaqui, among others.
models of productivity, changing the landscape from forested to a monoculture or to cattle fields.

Today, several healers and shamans are mestizos or white men who arrived in the mid-20th century and established a strong connection with local indigenous communities. These shamans practise many of the indigenous healing rituals, use the same plants and are very knowledgeable in Ayahuasca. Mestizo shamans are very common, usually having someone in the family – a mother, father or godparent – who is indigenous. Yet, generally, they do not speak an indigenous language.

Folk medicine in Colombia is widespread and complex. It is usually based on beliefs in spiritual and environmental relationships that can cause sickness (Taussig, 1986). Most of the markets of Colombia sell a large spectrum of tools and medicines to deal with these illnesses, such as prevention against magic, witchcraft, envy, and bad wind.

Ayahuasca is becoming more popular in urban, highly educated communities. Indeed, neoshamanism has become an important alternative health system in Colombia. These neoshamanic groups have a close link with Ayahuasca shamanism, and play a fundamental role in legitimising its customs around the world. They often use the same tools and practices associated with this ceremonial hallucinogen, but in a new and hybrid context. Neoshamanic practitioners have access to multiple plant medicines and rituals, from Mexican Huichol and Native American Church to Aymara Coca rituals, as well as Asian and Middle East spiritual beliefs (Caicedo Fernandez, 2015; Labate and Cavnar, 2018).

In recent times, the use of Ayahuasca has become a global phenomenon. Journalists such as Pollan (2018) have legitimised psychedelics in the mainstream as an effective tool for healing. An increasing number of scientific studies have further raised awareness about the practice around the world. At the same time, an underground network of psychedelic practitioners and a growing spiritual tourism industry have begun to travel to the Amazonian lowlands to try the famed medicine (Labate and Cavnar, 2018). This has happened mostly in Peru, but more and more people are arriving in Colombia – particularly in Putumayo – seeking the medicine.
• **Western experts**

Local experts who work for the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and academic institutions were also included in this study. They are usually biologists and anthropologists who come to this territory because they are attracted by its cultural and biological importance.

The government runs the National Parks Institute, which controls extensive territories near Mocoa, Orito, and Puerto Leguízamo. They are in charge of the protection and conservation of three main parks: Parque Nacional Natural Serranía de los Churumbelos Auka Wasi, Santuario de Flora y Plantas Medicinales Orito Ingi Ande, and Parque Natural Nacional La Paya. Most of the people who work in the institute are not local, coming from the highlands and living for short periods in the region, either in the parks or in nearby urban centres. They hire guides and experts from the area to help them interact with neighbouring communities.

The other government institution is the Corporation of Sustainable Development of Southern Amazonia or Corpoamazonia. This is the environmental resource management office, which controls the Colombian Amazonian territory. Its leaders are elected during the same elections as for the national and regional governors. For this reason, people jokingly say that they are the second government of Putumayo. They have many specialists from different disciplines, including ecologists, biologists and environmental engineers. Local people and anthropologists are also hired to interact with the different communities. Their main offices are in Mocoa, where they have one of the largest botanical gardens in Colombia, with many living specimens of medicinal plants. They also play an important role in managing the biodiversity trade in the region, with endangered species controls on many roads around Mocoa that often confiscate timber, flora and fauna of different kinds.

Finally, NGOs also play an important role. These include Fundación Gaia Amazonas, Tropenbos International, Rainforest Conservation Trust, and the World Wildlife Fund.
(WWF), among others. They work as middlemen between local communities and global programmes of development, conservation and sustainability. Many of the people who worked for these organisations in Putumayo have small offices, and usually work on their own or in small groups. Most NGO representatives arrive from the highlands. They are well educated and often have an interest in participating in shamanic ceremonies.

In the case of Colombia, indigenous shamanism, especially from Putumayo ethnic groups, has spread far beyond the region. It has established itself as one of the key pillars of Colombian folk medicine (Caicedo-Fernandez, 2015). As a result, many of the medicines that we find in the local forests around Putumayo are being used throughout the country. Shamans and healers from Putumayo have gained notoriety in the world of folk healing, establishing themselves as direct representatives of indigenous medicine in the popular imagination of the country. This role has made them, as well as their practices, tools, and medicines, invaluable for folk healing in Colombia. This type of shamanism has reinforced the notion of Amazonia as a source of health.

Due in part to this, a steady flow of medicinal plants from the lowland forests of Amazonia to the highland cities in the Andes has reinvigorated ancient trading routes. The cultivation and harvest of these plants have become a vital source of income for some local families, and the constant movement and exchange of these products have created and transformed interethnic relationships throughout the region. This trade has accelerated the process of hybridisation – understood here as the mixing of different cultural practices – as trading partners not only exchange goods, but also knowledge and ways of seeing the world. While indigenous medicine is being incorporated into the more extensive folk healing practices of Colombia, local groups are also negotiating and translating notions and knowledge to fit their own needs and practices.

For this dissertation, I spent most of my fieldwork observing medicinal stalls deep in the markets of Colombia. They represent centuries of cultural and biodiversity exchange, pushed into existence by the coming together of the colonial world. These markets are the embodiment of the great American exchange, carrying plants from exotic lands – from the Indian Subcontinent, Africa and Europe – throughout South America. In
general, the great American exchange is usually understood to be the process by which many of the food crops became globalised. Many medicinal plants also became global crop.

In Colombia, traditional herbal markets represent the coming together of three continents: Europe, America and Africa. We can trace the colonial history of the country by the plants sold in these stalls. Herbal medicines that once grew in southern European farms can be found next to plants that travelled across the Atlantic from Africa on slave ships, as well as plants that were of spiritual significance for local indigenous trade systems (Losonzcy, 1993; Voeks and Goldblatt, 1995; Voeks, 2009; Alexiades and Peluso, 2009). Today, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of many of these plants; they have come together to make up the complex pharmacopoeia found in the country.

From the street stalls of Santa Marta on the Caribbean coast and the large herbal market in Bogotá to the indigenous plant markets of Mocoa, each poses a different degree of cultural hybridity. This is due to the particular historical processes of each region, a direct result of the colonial project. These markets supply medicines to a diversity of different approaches to health, which coexist in the urban centres of the country. Some approaches have well-defined structures and ritual practices, while others are closely linked to individual preferences.

Markets here are spaces of interethnic and intercultural exchange, where people construct ways of understanding health by reinforcing their beliefs or building something new. At the same time, medicinal plants are the focal point of this negotiation. These medicines are objects that are continuously restructured and redefined, negotiated between different alterities. They become the means by which people understand the complex relationships that make up health and body. Therefore, as the plants move through the trading network, they move as moderators of alterity.

This mixing and restructuring of alterity is what makes markets and the medicinal plant trade so fascinating. As the plants travel through these trade networks, they are constantly transformed, establishing new webs of relationships and changing shape and
symbolic characteristics while consolidating the power relationships of the colonial rule. In the case of Colombia, these markets have helped the local process of cultural and racial hybridisation, known as *mestizaje*. Yet, *mestizaje* here is not a political postcolonial state-building project but a place where “different racial and ethnic values coexist” (Wade, 2005: 246).

For the indigenous people in and around Putumayo, healing is deeply linked with the ceremonial use of Ayahuasca. This hallucinogenic brew – a compound of two plants, *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis* – has become the key element in the cultural world view of these people. Known in Putumayo as Yagé, it plays a vital role in the diagnostics, healing and treatment of patients. However, the plants that make up the Yagé/Ayahuasca brew are not the only plants that are used to heal (Lenaerts, 2006). This territory is a complex, multilayered landscape of healers and specialists who actively engage with each other. The specialised practitioners of this type of medicine are known as *Taitas* (elders).

Historically, Ayahuasca/Yagé existed in the margins of local health. Yet, recently, it has seen a revitalisation and legitimisation at a rapid pace. Local shamans and healers point out that it was the spirit of Yagé that inspired and encouraged the adoption of the medicinal plant into Western spirituality. Now, as Ayahuasca medicine becomes ever more popular and enters the globalised world as a legitimate alternative medicinal practice, it is producing complex effects on indigenous cultures, local ecosystems and the plants themselves.

**The Plants**

This study will analyse the expansion of the trade in medicinal plants from Putumayo to local, regional and global markets, exploring different scales while showing how the markets function as spaces for cultural exchange. I have chosen to engage with the medicinal plants as the leading actors in these markets, to show us their direct influence on people as they stimulate cultural connections, transformations, political processes, and even ecological changes. In this way, through careful observation and analysis, I expect to offer a new perspective on the lives of these plants.
These plants play a crucial role in the extended web of relationships that make up how people perceive the world in Putumayo. By acknowledging their role as actors in this world – highlighting their capabilities and limitations as botanical and organic beings, as well as medicinal and spiritual agents – this dissertation will seek to legitimise these non-humans as more than mere passive objects that are acted upon. It will seek to explore them as nuanced actors with complicated social lives. In order to observe this massive and complex web of people, cultures and practices that revolve around each plant, I will use a distinct layout that explores the lives of significant plants as they exist in the Andean foothills.

This dissertation is based on fieldwork conducted in 2016–2017. During this time, I came across many plants that could have been included in this dissertation. At first, I thought of only exploring the trade of the famed shamanic plants of the region: Yoco (*Paullinia yoco*), Yagé (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and Coca (*Erythroxylum coca*). I began my research by focusing on the complex networks of shamans who work with these plants, but I soon realised that this would limit my analysis of other processes, such as the exchanges among different cultural groups and the flow of knowledge associated with the trade of other medicinal plants. I thus expanded my study beyond shamanic plants in order to offer a more comprehensive analysis of the different networks that exist in this territory. In the end, the plants in this dissertation were chosen based on their narrative structure: plants that could highlight not only the flow of knowledge, but also the historical, medical and ecological dimensions of these networks.

After choosing the shamanic plants as primary subjects, I had to include other medicinal plants that were closely associated with them, such as Chondur (*Cyperus sp.*) and Borrachero (*Brugmansia sp.*). I also came across other plants that were traded throughout the region, such as Chuchuwaza (*Maytenus laevis*). By dedicating a chapter to this plant, I was able to analyse the overall trade system of folk medicine in Colombia. Finally, as a means to explore the historical characteristics of the regional trade, I selected Mopa Mopa (*Eleaeogia pastoensis*), a non-medicinal plant with a well-documented history of trade that has linked the highlands and lowlands since pre-Columbian times. By exploring these plants through ethnographic and archival
analyses, I was also able to engage in different theoretical discussions and highlight a new perspective on the networks of healers in Putumayo.

**Theoretical Approach**

Like many regions of the lowland territories in South America, Putumayo is a multicultural landscape with multiple ways of conceptualising and relating to the natural world. The different ways of relating to the world coexist in a multicultural pluriverse (Mignolo, 2012; Escobar, 2012). This means that it should not to be viewed as a single universe where different communities exist, but rather as a space where different worlds are woven together by colonial processes (Mignolo, 2012; Escobar, 2012). The constant exchange between different people and cultures creates spaces where difference is negotiated, accelerating the creation of new knowledge and new ways of seeing the world.

While working in the herbal markets of Colombia, I observed how many Amazonian plants commonly used in shamanic healing practices were being used in different systems of health. As the plants were traded, they were given new interpretations, new uses and new healing potential. In these trade networks, even if many of these medicines kept some of their original characteristics, they were often understood in different ways as they were given new contexts. These plants exist in liminal spaces where a multiplicity of world views comes together to interact, as healers and patients continuously negotiate how they understand their bodies and their environment.

While working in the markets, I also took part in this continuous sharing of knowledge and practices. This dissertation is an embodiment of this exchange: an ethnographic account of the exchange of knowledge involving different ways of relating to plants. As a researcher, I have preconceptions built on a scientific and modernist world view. However, through my fieldwork, I approached these plants with an open mind. As a result, this text is an experiment in the fluid boundary between different worlds. To understand what I mean here, we need to first review the theoretical justification for this approach.
For my Master’s dissertation, I explored local trade networks in Putumayo to assess the sustainability of these shamanic medicines (Echeverri-Sanchez, 2015). It was a study about non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in the foothill region – using ethnobotanical methods – with the possibility of applying its outcome for the conservation and protection of biodiversity. During my time in the field, it became clear that these methods tended to ignore the role of plants in the greater framework, as active beings with an agency. The NTFP approach emphasises that forest products are already commodities, ignoring the deep-set cultural processes that make them an integral part of the local cosmology. At the same time, ethnobotanical methodology, as with many classical ethnosciences, has tended to look at local plant use through a naturalist perspective, translating local knowledge to fit Western ideas of nature and productivity (Neves, Fazito and Fernandes, 2014; Descola, 2013). However, as I would soon come to realise, these different ways of conceiving a plant do not necessarily cancel each other out. Instead, as I will explore in this dissertation, it is in this multicultural dialogue that plants gain greater agency and deeper meaning.

I should say that this does not mean I broke away from the ethnosciences. Instead, it means I had to look elsewhere for the proper tools and perspectives to do justice to these plants. Recently, ethnobotany has also begun re-evaluating its approach to human–plant interactions. Daly et al. (2016) highlight some of the key elements that can come from a more nuanced approach, such as showing how ecological knowledge is dynamic, exploring multilayered links between ecosystems and humans, and a more rounded and useful application of ethnobotanical knowledge. Ethnobotany is beginning to offer spaces that acknowledge the limits of Western naturalism. It is beginning to appreciate the relationship between people and plants, and is building on this foundation to create a more inclusive understanding of human–plant relationships (Rival, 2012; Miller, 2016). It is acknowledging that the “frictions between local ethnobotanical classification and ‘post-Linnean taxonomic orthodoxy’ are not only epistemological but also ontological” (Miller, 2016: 105). It is in these frictions, between the different

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6 Cosmology is used here to refer to the way people see the world based on cultural knowledge and understandings. It often includes notions of time, the origin of the world, the basic principles of the material world, and how the body exists in it (Viveridos de Castro, 2012).
ontological and epistemological perspectives, that new knowledge and new ways of relating to the world occur.

I was particularly inspired by the role of the shamans as mediators between the spiritual and the physical beings that inhabit their world (see: Langdon and Baer, 1992). Their capability to adopt multiple perspectives is what gives them their power and knowledge (Hugh-Jones, 1994; Fausto, 2014; Whitehead and Wright, 2004; Langdon, 2014). The ability of shamanism to build relationships with extreme alterities such as non-humans justified and inspired my decision to place the plants as the main ethnographic subjects.

Using the plants as the starting point to explore the networks of interspecies relationalities that make up this territory, I took note of the works by Donna Haraway (2008; 2015), Anna Tsing (2015) and Eduardo Kohn (2013), as well as materialist approaches such as Jane Bennett (2010) and others from the new materialism philosophies (Harman, 2018; DeLanda, 1997). I chose to abandon an anthropocentric focus and instead centre on other beings as the main subjects of analysis, as a multispecies ethnography.

Multispecies ethnography acknowledges the interconnectedness of humans with non-human beings, and extends classical ethnography to include them in the investigation. In the words of Anna Tsing:

“The experiment forms part of a larger argument for critical description, that is, arts of noticing the entwined relations of humans and other species across multiple non-nesting scales. Critical description considers how worlds are made in the intersecting trajectories of many species living in common.” (Tsing, 2014: 223)

Therefore, in a multispecies landscape, social beings of various forms are continuously shaping each other’s lives.

The entangled relationships between humans and non-humans are not new for the inhabitants of Amazonia or the Andean foothills; it is their daily life. Humans cohabit
the complex system of living and non-living beings, and their lives are often deeply tied to the cycles and temporality of the forest. For Amazonian communities, these cycles determine their survival, productivity and livelihood, and define the way in which they understand notions of personhood, kinship, and society. The separation between humans and non-humans is often fuzzy, hence the importance of multispecies ethnographical analysis in order to understand the multiplicity of beinghood (Rival, 2012), especially when it comes to animacy and agency.

Understanding the agency and animacy of the plants became a major focus of my work. For Amazonian anthropology, the personhood, agency and animacy of non-humans have been major subjects of discussion (Viveiros de Castro, 1996; 1998; 2004; Lima, 1996; Descola, 1996; 1986; Rival, 2012; Skrabakova, 2014; Daly et al., 2016). However, most have focused on the more metaphysical approach, which is linked to indigenous world views, especially in relation to the humans, animals and spirits that cohabit the forest. As I worked with the plants in the forest, I needed a more empirical and theoretical perspective that could facilitate a deeper understanding of these plants/artefacts. This is important, since these are not only plants; as medicines, they are also technologies that are dependent on cultural knowledge (Thomas, 1991: 87).

The constructional approach, coined by Fernando Santos-Granero, helps us understand agency, beinghood and personhood as concepts more closely related to materiality (Santos-Granero, 2012). This approach analyses personhood as a social product, made through the relationships with humans and non-humans. Objects, from daily household items to shamanic tools and valued family heirlooms, can oscillate from having an active agency, complex personhood or simple existence. These objects are closely relational, since they are given subjectivity by the people who interact with them on a daily basis (Santos-Granero, 2009a). This type of agency is closely related to the definition of agency explored by the network theory, such as actor-network theory (Latour, 2007; Tsing, 2015), meshwork theory (Ingold, 2014; De Landa, 1997; Escobar,

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7 Not to be confused with either social constructionism or social constructivism. While social constructionism focuses on the creation of an understanding of a world through group interaction, social constructivism focuses primarily on the individual. In this respect, Santos-Granero’s notions are closely related to social constructionism; however, they are more in tune with the profoundly entwined relationship between artefacts and humans.
2008), and other material semiotics. These theories permit a relational approach to objects, in which an “entity counts as an actor if it makes a perceptible difference” (Law and Mol, 2008: 58).

For most of the plants that I will explore, the level of agency and animacy fluctuates according to their relationships to their surroundings (Santos-Granero, 2009b). Therefore, by agency, I mean the effects an object can have on a system (Miller, 2005; Gell, 1998). This definition separates ‘agency’ from ‘intentionality’, and allows me to use agency on multiple levels, such as symbolic, semiotic and material levels.

On the other hand, animacy is an agency that is dependent on the deliberate and sentient quality of the object; similar to notions of animacy, soul and consciousness are often explored in discussions on animism (Bird-David, 1999; Descola, 1996; 1986; Rival, 2012; Skrabakova, 2014; Daly et al., 2016). However, as I will explore in future chapters, the animacy of many plants is much more complex. For many of the local communities, personhood is often nuanced and multilayered, a product of the relation with both other beings and the environment (Londoño, 2012). Personhood is a complex agency that is often similar to that of the human, and, therefore, interactions occur as if with another person (Bird David, 1999).

We must also remember that, in the Andean foothills, these plants not only exist in local indigenous worlds, but also in mestizo and Western worlds, each with distinct ways of relating and existing within both the natural world and conceptions of health. Even indigenous shamanism is not homogenous in the territory. As we saw, there are different indigenous ethnic groups with their own language and unique identity, as well as different supra-ethnic groups linked by trade and traditions. Each one of these networks has practices that enact ‘the non-human’; therefore, to fully know this non-human is to explore these practices (Law and Mol, 2008). Therefore, as biologists, government officials, mestizo shamans, and neoshamanic practitioners interact differently, they manifest their interpretations of what a plant or a medicine is, which in itself defines how they interact with other plants.
Therefore, the constructional approach enables a phenomenological understanding of agency that can be extended into different world views and cosmological understandings of the non-human. In this respect, this dissertation will look at how different people relate to plants, endow them with power, transport them and incorporate them into the way they see the world. By doing this, I can analyse the many forms and roles that a plant might take in the different networks of the healing, cultural and symbolic systems in Putumayo.

However, by doing this, we risk losing sight of the object, as the relationships can be endless. In this relational world, it is often difficult to state what something does or is. In this respect, the discipline of anthropology has historically been preoccupied with the “relation between persons and things” (Gell, 1998: 9). Objects were placed in the centre of anthropological analysis because “they were good to analyse several ideas at the same time” (Coupage, 2013: 18). In particular, the anthropology of art and some strands of material culture have explored the deep relational and reciprocal agencies between objects and people, as well as how we communicate through these objects (Tilley et al., 2006). Others have explored the objectification process in the same way that we would any subject, establishing the periods that make up the history of the object as a commodity (Appadurai, 1986) and the social life of objects in the sense of becoming rather than just existing (Kopitoff, 1986). In any case, the entangled relationships of objects and things allow for added subjectivity, and offer methodological techniques that are applicable to this study. By establishing a phenomenological perspective of the non-human, giving it life by constant reciprocal interaction, and establishing it in complex networks of relationships (Ingold, 2014), we can reconceptualise the medicines in the overall world in which they exist.

Focusing on the different processes that make up these medicines, we can appreciate how dynamic they are. As the different networks overlap, the medicinal plants function as spaces for cultural exchange between different people, traditions, techniques and markets. In this territory, several healing systems can come together through the ceremonial use of key medicines. This has facilitated continuous cultural exchange, as these people negotiate and reform their beliefs. Since medicinal plants function in abstract manners, multiple explanations can be made for their characteristics and for the
agency of each plant. This permits reinterpretation – reforming new understandings by borrowing different beliefs – and even, in some instances, misunderstandings. 8

Therefore, this constructional or relational approach to agency allows a more diverse interpretation of being that not only facilitates an understanding of the non-human, but also of the people who use these plants. It helps us to “rethink the ways in which we deal with technical activities and approach living processes, such as growing, as the combination of a diversity of actions, from a diversity of agents” (Coupaye and Pitrou, 2018: 4). It also permits us to think of being as emerging from different scales and stages in the relational process (Coupaye, 2018).

By placing the plants at the centre of this thesis, I will facilitate a deeper discussion of the role these plants play in the lives of many people in this territory. For this fieldwork, I had to apply several types of methodological practices that enabled the observation of the various networks that permeate the territory in which these multilayered plants exist and come into being.

**Methodology**

This dissertation is based on an ethnography conducted in the markets of medicinal plants in the Andean foothills during 2016–2017. By exploring the trade routes, I had a chance not only to interact with the plants themselves, but also with the various actors that came into contact with them. The fieldwork was conducted as a multisited ethnography, as I followed the process of becoming for each plant as it is harvested, processed and traded. Through this methodological approach, I observed how different practices, traditions and ways of knowing enacted each of these plants, as well as how the interactions facilitated by trade permitted cultural negotiations and the production of mixed notions of health and nature.

8 By looking at how these plants function as mediators, I was also able to analyse their chimeric existences. Their ability to be incorporated into different world views through misunderstandings (Sahlins, 1995; Losonczy and Mesturini, 2010), equivocal compatibility (Pina-Cabral, 2010) and translation (Fausto and De Vienne, 2014; Hanks and Severi, 2014; Carneiro da Cunha, 1998) offered a deeper understanding of hybridisation and syncretic process.
It quickly became apparent that this ethnography would have a massive scope. In order to facilitate the study of such a large field site, I required certain a scaled approach with various levels. By scaling the observation, I was able to look at the micro aspects of each plant (such as materiality and agency) in addition to macro characteristics (such as its biocultural relationships and the different systems of knowledge associated with its use).

To begin, I had to delineate the groups, people and plants that would be included in this fieldwork. Shamanism and traditional healing in this territory exist in a tightly knit network of healers, apprentices and patients who share similar practices yet have varied cultural backgrounds (Caicedo-Fernández, 2015; Zuluaga Ramírez, 1994; Pinzón Castaño, Suárez and Garay, 2004; Chaumeil, 1991; Ramirez de Jara, 1996; Barbira-Freedman, 2014). To explore these networks, I focused on one type of shamanic tradition, Ayahuasca shamanism, and observed the plants that were a fundamental part of this practice. From this starting point, I expanded my observation to include as many informants who used these plants as I could, outlining the reach of these practices. By including different people who were part of the network, I was able to observe different aspects of material and cultural manipulation, as well as how knowledge and notions on health and nature are shared.

Key informants were identified and later contacted by participating in the neoshamanic and shamanic networks. Access was gained through continuous participation in Ayahuasca ceremonies, as well as continual networking with different actors in the trade routes and shamanic ceremonies. Informants were chosen based on their knowledge and capability, as well as accessibility. They include nine experienced shamans, ten apprentices at many levels of initiation, several patients, and eight traders who continuously use these plants. I worked with them to identify potential candidates for this study, characterising their medicinal belief systems, classification systems and cultural practices associated with each plant.

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, the plants in this dissertation were chosen based on the experience of my fieldwork, as well as for narrative purposes. The
shamanic plants such as Yoco, Yagé and Coca were initially chosen due to their central role and importance in the shamanic networks of the Andean foothills. Plants such as Borrachero and Chondur were chosen based on their proximity to shamanic techniques and practices, and their wide availability among different networks. Finally, Chuchuwaza and Mopa Mopa were chosen to explore the overall trade, and to give it a historical and spatial dimension.

Once the plants were identified, a multisited analysis was conducted that explored the different regions and networks where these plants might exist. This required identifying and moving through the trade routes that cross the Putumayo region, while simultaneously visiting those actors who have direct contact with the plants. By doing this, I was able to observe the different types of interactions.

I conducted participatory observation in several key places – in particular, the towns of Mocoa, Villagarzón, Sibundoy and Puerto Asís, in addition to rural areas around Orito, Yunguillo, the Sibundoy Valley and Puerto Leguízamo in the lowlands. This methodology was also executed, to a lesser degree, in the urban markets of Pasto, Bogotá and Cali. I also visited smaller communities and the homes of different shamans. During this time, I participated in many shamanic rituals, healing ceremonies, the harvesting and preparation of these medicines, and transactions such as selling and exchange; I also identified the middlemen between the different merchants in and around Mocoa.

At the same time, I conducted informal and often unstructured interviews with people who have had some contact with shamanic plants. These included casual patients who might take some form of the medicine; shamans who were visiting my main informants; merchants in the different markets throughout the country; and local people from a diversity of backgrounds who have had some contact with the medicinal plants. I also interviewed biologists and local experts who work in environmental services and NGOs.

Moreover, I was led on guided walks around Mocoa, Orito and Valle del Guamuez, where many of the medicinal plants are found in the wild, in gardens or in managed
forests. I visited the guides and followed them as they cultivated and harvested their plants, I later conducted follow-ups in different stages of the plants’ life cycle; however, I was limited by time and access. In particular, I was not able to visit as many Coca plantations and gardens as I would have liked, due to time availability in Lower Putumayo. However, careful observation of the ecological characteristics of the plants was made during these visits.

During the participatory observations, I partook in many shamanic ceremonies and healing rituals, both as a patient and as an assistant. By doing this, I was granted access to some of the more metaphysical and philosophical beliefs of this type of shamanism. It was crucial to participate and consume Ayahuasca, in order to understand their shamanic beliefs on health and medicinal plants.

By consuming some of the plants myself, I was able to conduct a sensory ethnography (Glenn Shepard, 2004), which proved to be an important tool when working with the plants themselves. Considering that shamans and healers use their bodies to experiment and test the medicines, as well as to classify the plants and their efficiency, trying these plants became necessary. This was done with certain care – just enough to taste their bitterness or sweetness and temperature. I also experimented with herbal baths, smudging plants and other preparations.

As mentioned, this dissertation does not seek to compare local knowledge with Western botany. Instead, it seeks to explore how different classificatory and scientific systems produce different versions of the same plant (Mol, 1998). To do this, it is necessary to explore multiple interpretations and the entangled relationships between humans and non-human beings. These plants, as we will see, manifest several dimensions of being – for example, as a medicine, as a food source, as thinking agents, as plants, and as artefacts. To focus on so many different variations, however, proves to be a challenge. Instead, by focusing on how people interact with these plants, I wanted to highlight how they are a result of a multiplicity of relational processes that are constantly reforming and changing. I wanted an understanding of these plants as “processual entities […] Something intrinsically dynamic and changing, with only the appearance of being static” (Coupaye, 2013: 92).
Looking at these plants as technologies and artefacts can be beneficial when observing health and trade, which not only expand through different ontological regimens, but also constantly modify and transform the plants and medicines. As the techniques of transforming matter and the rituals of exchange encourage continuity and repetition, as well as recontextualisation and reconfiguration according to different ontological regimes, a method such as chaîne opératoire or operation sequence (Lemonier, 1992; Coupaye, 2014) can facilitate the analysis of these plants.

Chaîne opératoire establishes a biography of the object by focusing on its making. It offers a narration of its history, which includes transformations and movements, as it takes shape and becomes an artefact (Coupaye, 2013). This methodology was, therefore, a key tool for exploring the processes that profoundly transform these plants – from the constant management of local forests to facilitate their growth, to the selective processes that benefit diversity and their physical transformation into a medicine through distillation and commodification. All these processes are influenced by local ontological relationalities. Keen observation and documentation of the different steps that go into making local medicines are required for a detailed description of the “chain of episodes” that show the sequence, transformation and choices of each agent (Coupaye, 2013: 96). These are tools to allow a more in-depth look at the techniques of modifying matter. They facilitate an analysis of the different scales of action, and how this influences the way in which people might relate to the artefact: at the microscale (such as cutting the plant or understanding the internal combinations when cooking it) or larger scales (such as the power relations that are continuously formed and reinforced in traditional medicine) (Coupaye, 2018).

These methods were important to explore the way in which these plants were exchanged, translated, transformed and remade to fit new world views as they travelled through this meshwork and interacted with people. They were applied not only to the manipulation of matter to create an artefact, but also in the way in which these organisms and spiritual beings manipulate the world around them.
Ethnographic Challenges

The multiple challenges that I faced during the study were directly related to the complexities of the field site. Not only was accessing some of the information difficult, some locations were physically dangerous, and this limited my reaching them. Navigating the complexities of this territory required a deep understanding of the different social processes that were currently affecting it – from the circumstances surrounding illicit cocaine production, to confrontations between guerrilla and military and paramilitary forces, to ecological degradation and even interethnic conflicts.

The Putumayo territory was one of the main fronts of the longstanding internal armed conflict in Colombia. This conflict was multilayered and complex, having a profound impact on the social, ecological and economic reality of the territory. It was a violent war between three main groups: the FARC⁹ guerrilla, paramilitary groups and the government armed forces fighting for the control of key territories in cocaine production and trade. It had a profound and often tragic impact on the communities that are included in this study.

This conflict limited my overall reach; I decided to focus on areas that were far from the contested cocaine trade routes around the border with Ecuador. Similarly, territories around Orito, Puerto Hormiga, and Valle del Guamuez were either not visited or visited less. Cocaine plantations are still quite common in the territory and have significant influence on the surrounding local, social, economic and political power structures. Sadly, many Kofan and Ziona shamans who live in this territory were inaccessible to me. On the other hand, access to many other territories was possible with the proper guides and gatekeepers.

Distrust of non-indigenous people and especially anthropologists also limited my approach and access to many communities. Slowly, however, as I became more aware of the plants and the local folk knowledge, the local experts were willing to share and

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⁹ The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or FARC, were the biggest rebel army in Colombia before the peace process. Now they are a political party also named FARC Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común
discuss their practices in the manner of exchange of knowledge that characterises the network. However, some information was still very complicated to obtain due to this distrust.

Some technical knowledge was also inaccessible. This was particularly the case for many of the mixtures of plants that some shamans have produced after years of constant experimentation; these valuable recipes are kept secret. Fear of biopiracy required that I undertook a careful and diplomatic approach to medicinal plants; I reassured the participants that I would not collect information for this type of practice. Many of the locations of medicinal plants are kept secret, since people often steal them in the wild. This meant that access to the plants themselves was extremely complicated. As this type of shamanism becomes even more popular and more and more young people wish to become shamans, information has become quite valuable, accelerating distrust.

As an educated white male from the capital city, I was also constantly aware of the colonial dynamics that I shared with my informants and friends. This had an important effect on my point of view, as well as the relationships I had with them. I cannot escape this social reality, which defines Colombian interethnic relationships, although I have done my best to limit its effect on this dissertation.

For this reason, I have chosen to include my subjective perspective in my study, offering accounts of my aesthetic and emotional relationships with the plants, especially considering that they do comprise part of my beliefs and relationship with nature. This subjective approach might not offer the proper objectivity of a scientific study but, considering that the main point of this dissertation is to establish and legitimise these plants as active agents, their relationship to me seemed the right place to start. This subjective approach also seeks to highlight the colonial power dynamics in which my subjects and I subsist, defining how we exist in this complex meshwork of relationships and how I understand them. By including my relationship with these plants as just another piece of their ecological and cultural landscape, I seek to limit the hierarchical dynamics of modern science.\(^{10}\)

\(^{10}\) By this, I mean the dynamics where academics possess a degree of power over local communities.
Languages were another significant limitation. Language is, for many of these communities, the last piece of resistance against colonial expansion. Therefore, finding someone who would teach me was difficult. Most of the shamanic practices, however, are shared across ethnic identities, and the philosophical and ontological perspectives could be understood as similar. Spanish is the lingua franca of this network; therefore, I was able to communicate with all my informants. I also managed to learn some Quechua for plant classification purposes.

The Non-Human

For the purpose of this thesis, I use the following plants to anchor each chapter in the overall narrative structure. Every chapter focuses on one plant, giving a few overall details about it while emphasising other more defining characteristics. This means that I use every plant to look at a key characteristic of the field site, exploring history, medicine, cosmology and exchange. Consequently, the structure of this dissertation is as follows.

Chapter 1 focuses on Mopa Mopa (*Elaeagia pastoensis*), used by highland communities in their artisanal woodwork varnishes. Although this plant is not medicinal, it is possibly the best plant to explore the history of trade in the area. This is because there is archaeological evidence of its trade not only between the Andean foothills and the highlands, but also with the Inca Empire and later within the Spanish colonial system.

The second chapter focuses on Chuchuwaza (*Maytenus laevis*). Through this plant, I explore the ongoing inclusion of Amazonian medicinal practices into popular Colombian folk medicine. As one of the most utilised and sold Amazonian plants in the markets of the country, Chuchuwaza has established itself as an essential medicinal plant for people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Through observing how Chuchuwaza is transformed from a local indigenous plant into a highly valued medicine in the urban markets of the country, I highlight processes of cultural and knowledge exchange, as well as the production of cultural hybrids.
In the third chapter, Borrachero (*Brugmansia sp.*) is used to explore the shamanic networks in the highlands of Putumayo. This plant is widely used throughout Amazonia, and has a close connection to humans. People have bred many varieties, which are widely exchanged and bartered. Borrachero offers a window into the shamanic networks in Putumayo in which exchange is not limited to medicines, biodiversity and shamanic tools, but also expands to cultural practices and knowledge.

I then explore Ayahuasca in Chapter 4 by focusing on the main ingredient, *Banisteriopsis caapi*. This is the most important plant in the medicinal repertoire of local shamans and an important master plant. However, in an attempt to offer something different to the vast library on this subject, this chapter will use Ayahuasca as a means to discuss the ways in which different world views perceive the agency of a powerful hallucinogenic. The chapter will look at the borders between different ways of seeing and understanding the world, where knowledge is often negotiated and hybrid beings are created (Descola, 2013). It is also in this chapter that I explore the limitations of my emic perspective, as well as the theoretical shift required to explore these medicinal plants.

Chapter 5 is about Chondur, a sedge of the *Cyperus* genus. This plant is an invaluable ally in fighting sickness, and I use it to explore the medicinal landscape of the region of the Andean foothills. I describe its multiple forms and applications as a tool to fight the different beings that cause disease and illness, as well as the sheer profusion of the medicinal world of the Andean foothills. This chapter gives a general overview of the different relationships that make up health in this territory.

Yoco (*Paullinia yoco*) is analysed in Chapter 6. This plant is, culturally, one of the most important plants for indigenous people in this territory. However, it can only grow in the wild and requires careful spiritual attention when working with it. In Chapter 6, I explore how a plant can manifest different types of agencies, from symbolic and material perspectives to more complex animacy and personhood.

Finally, as a means of scaling up this study, Chapter 7 looks at Coca (*Erythroxylum Coca*). This plant has historically been a major part of local indigenous world views but
it was hijacked into the illegal global trade. This transformation is visible not only in the effect it has on the territory and the social fabric of local communities, but also on the physicality of the plant itself, which has seen severe transformation.

By using this distinct structure to write this dissertation, I risk simplifying the complexities of local cultural practices, as well as the multilayered meshwork of relationships that make up the social fabric of this territory. However, my point here is not to give a detailed analysis of an ethnic group or a traditional practice, but to experiment with the use of non-human ethnography in a territory such as Putumayo to explain what I have observed. I wish to show the reader a more comprehensive picture of the role that these plants have in the local biocultural landscape, while simultaneously exploring the many layers and scales through which they interact with local, regional and global phenomena. These plants have a central place in indigenous world views and, in an effort to legitimise this, I have placed them at the centre of my study.

Chapter 1. Mopa Mopa
On Movement

For many of us city dwellers, plants do not actually move that much. Obviously, most of us know that plants grow vertically and horizontally and that they bloom and change during the year but that they are also static, often staying in the same place for centuries. It seems as if they exist in the background of human social relations, as backdrops for more mobile organisms. However, this is an illusion. For most of our history, knowing how a plant will move, grow and behave has been indispensable for habitation, producing food and existing in our ecosystem.

When I walked through the forests around Mocoa, this insight became even more pronounced. As my sight got used to the temporality of botanical movement, I began to appreciate how Lianas expanded and Hardwoods grew, and to recognise the vast number of symbiotic relationships that facilitated the movement of plants. An example of this movement is *Socratea exorrhiza*, a palm that is believed to walk through the forest. How it walks is a manner of perspective; it is so slow that, for us, the palm seems
static. Yet evidence of its walking path is visible for keen observers; its long root system allows it to be above the soil, growing new roots at the sides while the older roots rot and detach. By growing roots towards one side, the palm can move slightly over a period of time. Botanists consider this locomotion in a different way: they state that the plant’s root system takes advantage of the complex soils and sunlight exposure, and that the plant does not actually walk (Radford, 2009). However, this movement is real for the people who live in this forest. The walking palm is considered a curiosity, and it was often mentioned to me during guided walks through the forest. As I contemplated these movements in botanical life, I actually questioned myself: if plants are alive, why wouldn’t they be able to move around like the rest of us?

Let me be clear: Socratea exorrhiza is a rare case, as it is considered to move by itself. Normally, most plants exist in these forests in a relationship with others. They can have complex relationships with spirits, humans and animals. It is in these relationships that plants are given their capacity to act and move; it is exactly these movements that define entire relationships with the environment and the human social realm.

At the biological level, plants move and spread across the forest floor through growth, pollination, seed dispersal, death and rotting, all of which are tightly linked to other organisms. While the walking palm may not literally move, its seeds are eaten and spread widely by a variety of larger animals – such as peccaries and birds – allowing it to expand its territory in spite of its physical limitations.

So, let us begin with the idea that plant movement is possible through relationships with other beings – with sun, soil, people and spiritual owners – that allow these plants to grow and transform through time. Yet, this is not the only way in which they move, since they can transcend their physical form and become something greater. On few occasions, they themselves are spiritual beings that mediate the complex landscape of health in these territories. In other instances, they can become hybrid beings, such as animal-plants, or part of a web of interconnected organisms that allow them to move through different regions and ecosystems.
In other words, these beings do not “occupy the world, they inhabit it” (Ingold, 2011: 71), threading their existence into the weave of the meshwork that makes up the social-ecological landscape. These meshworks of existence, like vines, spread through the landscape, entangling different beings and often blurring the lines between species.

Indeed, since most of these beings are not individuals but a result of different social relationships, these relationships become increasingly important to know when dealing with these plants. For the people who actively work with these plants, knowing how they connect and interact with different beings is vital to being able to live in these forests. A clear example are the shamans, whose main ability and practice is to know these interactions and relationships in order to understand how they might function to benefit or harm their patients. In this way, I believe, to explore these plants is to explore their relationships with others.

In this chapter, I will explore the movement of plants occurring in trade, with its enormous effect on the day-to-day life of the inhabitants of Putumayo. Plants often move far more than we like to believe when they are traded, bartered, and exchanged. They flow through different places, with different people, and through different cultural and ecological landscapes. They connect people, offering spaces for cultural exchange, bringing people together through the common interest of using these plants. In the case of the Andean foothills, plants have connected the highlands and the lowlands for centuries.

Humans, therefore, play an integral part of plant movement. No doubt, we take advantage of plants for our livelihoods but, by doing this, we enable plants to take advantage of our capacity to move for them to spread out and expand their habitat. In the same way that plants use animals for seed dispersal, they can use humans to disperse their seeds and enable the expansion of botanical material. As we will see, many of the plants that I have chosen for this dissertation depend on humans for their reproduction. Others have moved not as plants but as artefacts; as they grow tied to human practices,

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11 The term ‘meshwork’ here is used in the sense of an organic and human web of life that does not differentiate between cultural and natural connections. It is used by Escobar (2008) and Delanda (1997), and is similar to the term ‘assemblages’ used by Tsing (2015). These meshworks that include all human and non-human beings are not that practical for analytics, due to their massive scope and nearly unlimited connections.
they have spread production techniques far beyond the local areas and their ecological niches.

To explore this type of movement, I will begin with an initial overview of the history of trade in the area. In particular, I will focus on the trade between the highlands and the lowlands that moves many of the plants included in this thesis. This flow of plants and products has caused new biological adaptations and cultural practices among the local people. It is in this corridor, from the lowlands to the highlands, that the exchange of plants has produced Andean/Amazonian syncretism or hybrids, and the expansion of colonial projects from the highlands into the lowlands. Since this verticality is an important axis of this study, further examination of the historical characteristics of the interaction between the two regions is necessary.

**A History of Trade in Putumayo**

Since pre-Columbian times, lowland products have been incorporated into highland markets through a series of commodities that have accelerated colonial expansion. Incentives to trade in the vast region of Amazonia – such as certain Amazonian products – attracted the Spanish, republican Colombia, and the global markets; they also interested Inca and other highland communities. These interests produced trade structures and routes that have been used for centuries. In particular, we find several important botanical products that were vital to the consolidation of these specific trade routes, such as Coca (*Erythroxylum sp.*), Rubber (*Hevea sp.*), Quina (*Cinchona spp.*), Zarzaparrilla (*Dioscorea spp.; Smilax sp.*), and Mopa Mopa (*Elaeagia pastoensis*).

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12 By colonial expansion, I mean the control of a region through administrative, economic, social and ecological power systems, subjugating local communities and incorporating them into the imperial or national state social system.
13 Quina is the bark of the Cinchona tree, used as a medicine against malaria. It does not grow in the Amazonian lowlands. It grows in the mountainous areas in the Andes, and some species of Cinchona are known to grow in the Andean foothills of Putumayo.
14 This smilax became an important plant in early Spanish herbal medicine. It is used to purify the blood and the kidneys. It also is a diuretic.
15 Some of the other botanical products from the region that are commonly used in regional and global markets include Copaiba (*Copaifera officinalis*), Chuchuwaza (*Maytenus laevis*), Uña de Gato (*Uncaria tomentosa*), and several edible fruits and wood.
Mocoa lies at the crossroads between the Amazonian lowlands and the Andean highlands. The flow of people, products and culture has had an enormous effect on the local population and the environment. It is the defining characteristic of the city and, thus, an important part of its history and culture is linked to this trade route. Undeniably, the diversity of communities that live in and around this city have been more interwoven through trade than through colonial and state-building projects.

As we will see, trade between the Andes and Amazonia has flowed since pre-Columbian times. By the time the Spanish arrived, there were already complex networks of trade and exchange that connected vast regions of the continent. In this chapter, I will explore the history of trade by exploring one of the earliest commodities: Mopa Mopa (*Elaeagia pastoensis mora*).

Although many plants have been traded and exchanged in these mountain slopes through the ages, few plants have a historical continuity as rich as Mopa Mopa. I must clarify that Mopa Mopa is not a medicinal plant; however, I have included it in this dissertation because, unlike the other plants explored during the fieldwork, there is archaeological and historical evidence of its trade that can be traced from pre-Hispanic trade networks all the way into modern commodity exchange. It is a luxury item that has been continually exploited and traded from the Andean foothills to the highland markets for centuries. It established an important trading connection between two ecological and cultural regions; this has not only helped the expansion of the Mopa Mopa industry, but also boosted the flow of symbolic and cultural ideas between these regions. This inconspicuous plant will help me explore some of the bibliographical, archaeological and ethnographic evidence on plant trade in the Andean foothills. It will also allow me to provide context for the vast and complex region of the interconnected communities I am trying to describe.
Most of the primary sources on pre-Columbian trade networks in western Amazonia are patchy. Archaeology in the lowlands of Amazonia has always been difficult, due to high humidity that accelerates the degradation of organic evidence. Therefore, Amazonian and lowland archaeology depend on evidence in the form of pottery, ornaments and, more recently, rock art (Riris, 2017). Only limited evidence of trade has reached us today (Echeverria and Uribe, 1995; Ramírez de Jara, 1996; Salomon, 1980; Butt-Colson, 1973). Pieces of lowland ceramics have been found in the highland territories of Cachi, Sibundoy and Ipiales (Bray, 2005); these are believed to be receptacles of certain ceremonial medicinal plants. Yet plant material is more difficult to find since it does not preserve well.

Written historical chronicles from the early and late colonial periods give first-hand accounts of trade in the region, albeit often biased. The early chroniclers were unreliable narrators when describing the full picture of these demographic and cultural transformations; however, they did show complex cultural landscapes where
sophisticated trade happened (Oberem, 1974; Salomon, 1980). When the Spanish conquistadors first contacted the Incas, they were astonished by their complex trade network that guaranteed the supply of food products and luxury goods from all over their empire. As the Spanish consolidated their power, they used these trade networks to conquer the Incas and subdue them under the Spanish Crown. Complex trade routes were not unique to the highlands. In the Amazonian lowlands, such as the Guiana Shield, European explorers documented extensive trade routes as they traversed the river systems in and around the tepuis.\textsuperscript{16} There, they documented barter economies, ritual gift exchanges and interethnic specialisation of products (Butt-Colson, 1973; 1985; Dreyfus, 1992). Yet, they also inadvertently documented a system that was in disarray due to the pressures of colonial transformation.

In the later colonial period, the need to control the trade routes was key to the consolidation of the colonial system, and it required careful documentation. However, unlike the highlands, the Amazonian lowlands were seen as savage and unholy lands during most of colonial history, with few incentives to maintain economic and political control. Those products that were found profitable by the Spanish authorities were quickly exported to territories that were under the political and economic authority of the Crown. For those products that did not travel well or that required local harvesting and foraging, such as Quina, guaranteeing their flow through Spanish trade routes was indispensable for the Crown (Crawford, 2016). Mopa Mopa was also a valued commodity for regional powers; thus, its flow from the lowlands was guaranteed and its trade was well documented. Most of the other plants used in regional folk medicine, however, were not as valuable to the colonial system. Therefore, their trade was barely registered.

It was only in the 18th and 19th centuries that a few of the plants that were used as medicines by indigenous people in Latin America began to pique interest in the West. When biology, botany and medicine, as disciplines, became aware of the importance of many of the medicinal plants, the pharmaceutical societies of Europe began stocking plants from tropical territories (Gänger, 2015). This plant trade became a major part of the North Atlantic trade network: “between 1747 and 1778, Spain imported an annual

\textsuperscript{16} Table-shaped mountains in the Guiana Highlands.
average of 64 tonnes of ‘purges’, 83 tonnes of cinchona, 5 tonnes of copal, 3.9 tonnes of ‘balsams’ and 7kg of contrayerva” (Gänger, 2015: 48). Cinchona, in particular, became a major commodity for the region as it was soon incorporated into global markets due to its surprising effectiveness against malaria (Crawford, 2016). Slowly, many of these plants and their guaranteed extraction became matters of colonial state control.

The true effect of this type of trade in Putumayo is difficult to quantify, since there is little information on the effect of the global plant trade in the area. Colombia in the early 19th century was a poor nation with few exportable products. Putumayo, in particular, was on the periphery of the country’s economy, which focused on its Andean and Caribbean regions (Bushnell, 2003). Moreover, there is not much evidence of the economic extraction of botanical species in the Andean foothills.

None the less, after a trading peak in the early 19th century, European medicine shifted away from medicinal plants (Crawford, 2016). The global herbal trade that connected Colombia with the economic markets in the North Atlantic changed, as these countries began producing their own medicines. Biochemistry and synthetic medicine production brought about the end of this trade network, after which many of the medicinal plants became part of popular markets to satisfy the medical needs of poor and rural communities that had no access to doctors. Then, towards the end of the 19th century and in the early 20th century, a new commodity accelerated the growth of the markets in the Putumayo region: Rubber. Yet, even with the economic bonanza created by the export of quinine and Rubber, the Putumayo region still barely participated in the global market economy.

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17 This massive amount of medicine was destined for the doctors and physicians in Spain and Europe. South American plants provided many of the medicines used during the 18th and 19th centuries.
18 The only real evidence of economic extraction in the area is reports of quinine bioprospection (Casas Aguilar, 1999; Palacio, 2006). There were several quinine booms during the 19th century, as people would find populations of wild Cinchona in the south of the country. This incentivised many poor Colombians to travel around the southern Andes to look for these trees; it also exhausted the different varieties of quinine-producing trees in the country. One of the most famous explorers was the Colombian president Rafael Reyes, who, during his early years, travelled the Andean foothills of Putumayo and Caquetá looking for quinine to exploit (Casas Aguilar, 1999).
For local indigenous communities, however, trade was a common practice. Small-scale commerce and barter networks in Amazonia have been widely documented by anthropologists. Most of them show the complex interethnic relationships that expanded well beyond ecological and regional zones (Oberem, 1974; Uribe, 1985; 1986; 1995; Ramirez, 1992; 1994; Salomon, 1980; Butt-Colson, 1973; 1985; Hugh Jones, 1992; Mansutti Rodriguez, 1986; Dolmatoff, 1986). Often, trade and barter are shown as deeply entwined with war and kinship patterns. Moreover, there is evidence that many communities belonged to extensive networks of exchange (Dolmatoff, 1986; Correa, 1997; Landaburu and Pineda, 1984; Gasché, 2009; Echeverri, 1997; Grotti, 2013) and they shared many cultural practices, myths and certain linguistic characteristics. For example, the Witoto of the People of the Centre in and around the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers are a multi-ethnic and plurilingual community whose members share similar sociocultural practices, history and mythological origin. They have an established barter and ritualised trade network that extends throughout the region (Gasché, 2009; Echeverri, 1997).

Ethnohistorical analyses have shown that the Andaqui, who are known as the People of the Axe, had a vital role in the extensive pre-Hispanic trade networks that exchanged stone axes. Since stone in lowland Amazonia is a rare and coveted item, a trading network based on stone axes integrated many communities around this territory (Landaburu and Pineda, 1984). With the arrival of metal tools in the region, the stone axe networks quickly fizzled out, yet the exchange traditions still bind these communities. Often, people prefer to obtain certain objects by trade even though they are perfectly capable of making them themselves, in order to promote kinship bonds and intracultural exchange (Hugh-Jones, 1992).

As mentioned, in the Andean piedmont, the complex interrelation between the highlands and the lowlands stimulated extended networks that connected these two very different ecological and cultural regions. There has been some research on the interconnection between the lowlands and the highlands in recent years, particularly regarding the middle and southern Andean regions. Interrelation was particularly strong

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19 Throughout Amazonia, trade is often a contraposition to war. Often, it is tied to extended kinship ties that interconnect entire regions.
in the often-fluid frontier between the Inca Empire and the lowlands. The Inca not only established a defined process of military domination but also facilitated cultural exchange between both regions through trade (Platt, 2009; Alconini, 2004). The communities that were at the frontier of the Inca Empire reflected the coming together of two very different spheres: the highland *altiplano* and the lowland forests (Taylor, 1996; Murra, 1972; Dudley, 2011; Ramírez de Jara, 1996; Salomon, 1986). They were the intermediaries between these two worlds. Symbolic and cultural objects from both worlds have been found in their archaeological records, and their identity today is often tied to both the lowlands and the highlands. Examples of this bifocal world are the communities in the Sibundoy Valley. They are highland communities that have a close symbolic relationship with the lowlands, and they acknowledge both their lowland and highland origins and their proximity to highland cultural centres such as Pasto.20

The relationship between the Andean and Amazonian worlds was, and is still, permeable; they continually exchange with each other. Putumayo, being both a part of the Andean piedmont and the lowland basin, has various systems of trade that reflect this interwoven relationship. One of these systems is the complex vertical exchange system that is still part of the lives of many people from Mocoa and Sibundoy. Ethnohistorical and archaeological evidence highlights the roles of many of the indigenous groups still seen today, primarily the indigenous communities of Kofan, Kametsa and Ingas (Echeverría and Uribe, 2018; Uribe, 1986; Ramírez de Jara, 1996; Ramírez de Jara and Urrea Giraldo, 1990).

Like most of the Andean region, different temperature zones – or thermal floors – define the ecological niches of the mountainous regions of Putumayo. John Victor Murra (1972) proposes that these slopes are joined by a vertical exchange system, which allows local communities to control different ecological niches and their products. This system has helped communities take advantage of the different temperatures, soils and environmental characteristics to grow a wide variety of crops throughout the year. Through this system, they have consolidated control over a large number of ecosystems while ensuring frequent exchange between different ethnic and

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20 Pasto is the largest city in the south of Colombia; it is a short three-hour drive from Sibundoy. This route is faster and easier than the road to Mocoa, which is extremely treacherous; however, Sibundoy is under the cultural and administrative control of Mocoa.
linguistic groups. In other words, as they exploited this system, trade and exchange became a necessary practice in the Andean region.

Examples of this system have been reported throughout Colombia, Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia. In Ecuador, the Jibaros and Kofans had a complex trade network with the highlands, accessing mineral salt in the highlands in exchange for slaves, curare poison and animal products (Salomon, 1980). In Colombia, the Muiscas had extensive trade networks with the lowland grasslands where they accessed several of their medicines, most importantly Yopo (*Anadenanthera peregrina*) (Torres and Repke, 2006). The Incas are known to have had an important trade relationship with the lowland forest, and defined their cosmological world view by acknowledging the duality between the lowlands and the highlands (Murra, 1985).

In his book, *Ethnic Lords of Quito in the Age of the Incas*, Frank Salomon (1980) shows how this vertical production system has existed in the Andean region in three main models, for three geographical scales. Each one is woven into webs of interconnected communities of different complexities. In the first model, made up of smaller communities, products are harvested in different temperature zones and people move from one zone to another. In the second model, extended networks of trade are connected by market towns. These market towns emerged in locations where people from different ecological and cultural backgrounds could come together and exchange goods. Finally, the third model consists of a large trade system – often multicultural and multiregional – based on a specific merchant class.

Historically, these systems of trade fluctuated constantly. Archaeological and historical evidence shows how these approaches to trade were, on many occasions, simply part of an overall system. Complex Andean communities would probably partake in a variety of methods to take advantage of the altitudinal zones (Murra, 2002).

In modern times, however, as faster transportation, greater interconnectivity, and cultural and economic transformation have affected the region, only a few original trade networks still exist. One of these networks is the system I observed in the Putumayo foothills.
Vertical Production Systems in Colombia

As mentioned, the vertical production system is found throughout Colombia. In the northern region of Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, indigenous communities move from one temperature zone to another, harvesting a diversity of crops. The Koguis, Ikas and Wiwas have, for centuries, moved throughout the mountain range, inhabiting different thermic floors according to the seasons, taking advantage of different climates and the crops that grow in them (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1951) and moving according to which crop needs to be harvested. This technique is replicated throughout the country to this day, and is an example of Frank Salomon’s first model.

Vertical trade is also dominant in foothill areas in the departments of Putumayo, Caquetá and Cauca. Here, the system has required centres or markets where the different regions connect with each other, usually populated areas at the crossroads of different ecosystems. These are examples of Salomon’s (1980) second model, for which he uses a Nahuatl term, *tianguex*, to denote these market towns where people cross considerable distances to come together and trade their products. A typical example is the town of Silvia in the department of Cauca. Every week, this town receives people from the neighbouring region looking to sell products from both the lowlands and the highlands. In this market, several Inga traders bring medicinal plants from the lowlands and offer healing ceremonies with Ayahuasca and other medicinal plants.

Pre-Columbian trade networks extended well beyond ethnic borders, with sprawling connections that encompassed a variety of ecological and ethnic regions from the

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21 The Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta is a small mountain range in the Caribbean coast near the northern city of Santa Marta. Colonial powers have historically marginalised it, and several indigenous groups still live in its mountains and valleys. Although they are not closely related to the communities of Putumayo, their techniques of taking advantage of thermal floors is a good example of this vertical exchange system.

22 Silvia is in the neighbouring department of Cauca. It is an indigenous marketplace where people from different thermic floors trade their goods. The foothills of Putumayo, Caquetá and Cauca are in its sphere of influence, and indigenous communities such as the Inga and Kametsa travel to its market on Sundays to sell medicines.

23 In a similar way to Taussig (1986), I came into contact with this trade system in the mountains of Cauca. While working in the Puracé National Park, an Inga shaman from Sibundoy came to visit the local Coconuco community. She was giving Ayahuasca to several sick people. After this, she invited me to Sibundoy. However, I was unable to find her again.
Amazonian and Orinoco river basins to the Pacific Coast. These networks had large, populated centres of power, such as Quito, Cusco, Pasto and Zipaquirá (Cárdenas-Arroyo and Bray, 1998). These markets would not only trade agricultural goods and bush meat, but would also trade luxury products such as gold, salt and textiles, as well as medicinal plants from a variety of ecosystems. As is the case of the market in Silvia, some of them still exist today. However, most of them quickly integrated into colonial systems, consolidating their economic and political power over the entire territory. Pasto became a large market centre in the Spanish colonial system, and indigenous products such as Mopa Mopa were quickly adopted by the Spanish.

Larger trade networks depended on more extensive routes connecting the economic and political centres in the highlands with the lowlands. These networks would go through middlemen, which were usually communities in regions between the highlands and the lowlands. According Anne-Christine Taylor (1996), these communities – or the Montaña communities – are still found throughout the Andes. In southern Colombia, Ecuador and Bolivia, where the mountains are steeper, the lack of permanent population limits trade. Yet, some markets towns have sprung up in the valleys, connecting many different communities. In Ecuador, some of these towns connect the lowlands and the highlands, facilitating their trade. These tianguEZ still exist today. In Putumayo, the towns in the Sibundoy and Pitalito could be classified as tianguEZ since they were set up for trading purposes (Ramírez de Jara, 1996).

**The Case of Southern Colombia and the Inca**

In the middle Andes around Peru, access to the lowlands was easier due to paths that traversed the valleys. Communities of traders travelled continuously from the highlands to the lowlands along these paths. The Spanish called these communities Mindales. They crisscrossed the Inca Empire and were still a common feature of the colonial markets up until the 20th century. Spanish sources classified them as a separate ethnic group, landless and nomadic to a certain extent. This Quechan term ‘Mindal’ is used to classify similar trading communities in the Andes (Lorandi, 1983).
These travelling and trading communities comprise the third system of trade in Frank Salomon’s (1980) classification. When the Spanish arrived, they came across a large trading network controlled by this group of merchants. They were known as mitmaqkuna, which means ‘exiled people’ in Quechua. They came from different parts of the empire to relocate at frontier trading posts to guarantee the flow of goods from neighbouring regions into Cusco and other centres of the Inca Empire. As a warrior merchant class, they also helped consolidate the political and military control of these posts (Lorandi, 1983).

In the western slopes of the northern reaches of the empire, these communities would constantly travel from the lowlands to the highlands, bringing luxury goods that were appreciated by the highland communities. They spread throughout the lowland foothills of Peru and Ecuador, and now they comprise part of the Quechua-speaking populations that inhabit the forests (Lorandi, 1983). They are vestiges from the Inca Empire.

In the southern and central Andes, the Incas were the first to establish the Mindal system. The Tahuantinsuyo or the Inca Empire established its military and economic dominance by extending trade networks that were maintained by this warrior/merchant class. During this rapid military and economic expansion, many of the Montaña communities in the Andes were quickly assimilated into the system (Salomon, 1980). Links were also established with the lowland communities that supplied the empire with slaves, medicinal plants and other products from deep in the forest.

By the time the Spanish arrived, the Inca expansion had reached the southern border of Colombia. The Pasto community, which inhabited this region of Colombia, had consolidated its administrative and political power over much of the Colombian Massif, controlling the trade between their highland location and the lowlands of Amazonia and the Pacific coast (Echeverría and Uribe, 1995; Uribe, 1986; Uribe and Lleras, 1985). They exchanged forest goods, as well as symbolical artefacts such as feathers, claws and canines, establishing deep cultural bonds with the lowland communities. Consolidating their power through marriage alliances and kinship

24 This region is formed by a group of mountains in the southern Colombian Andes. It is the source of many of the main rivers in the country, including the Caquetá River and the Putumayo River. To its north, the Andes split into three cordilleras or mountain chains.
exchanges, they exerted their influence on much of the southern region of Colombia (Echeverría and Uribe, 1995; Uribe, 1986).

Although the Incas already had a commercial relationship with the Pastos, who were their Mindales, Huayna Capac (the great Inca conqueror) wanted to dominate them militarily as well (Uribe, 1986). He thus carried out several small-scale but unsuccessful attacks on them. However, it was not the Pastos but the Spanish diseases that stopped the Inca expansion in its tracks. Huayna Capac died of one such disease, plunging the empire into civil war (Echeverría and Uribe, 1995; Uribe, 1986) and frustrating its military ambition in the region.

In much the same way as the Tahuantinsuyo established dominance through trade, the Spanish Empire incorporated the region in its colonial rule by controlling the trade routes. While the tianguez towns were quickly assimilated into the Spanish system, the Mindales continued to exist well beyond the Spanish conquest. Additionally, missionaries – who were one of the main instruments of colonial control – spread to the lowlands by the same routes that were used by the Mindales for generations (Goulet, 2003).

**Vertical Trade in Putumayo**

The interethnic landscape in Putumayo is a direct result of this process of vertical trade. The Ingas and the Kitchwas, the only Quechua-speaking communities in Colombia, trace their origin to the Inca Empire’s merchant/warrior caste. “Venimos del sur, éramos guerreros del Inca que llegamos hasta aquí (We came from the south, we were warriors of the Inca who arrived here),” a man told me while I waited in the main governmental building of the resguardo of Sibundoy. The Colombian state (Ministerio de Cultura, 2010) has also accepted this origin as official, citing local experts. However, I was never truly convinced of this, since other Ingas with whom I spoke did not know

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25 The many indigenous communities in Putumayo may be confusing for some readers. Please refer back to the list in the introduction for clarification.

26 This is the main indigenous administrative building. Each indigenous community has communal land administered by the resguardo office. All legal processes in an indigenous territory must pass through this office. The resguardo office of Sibundoy is located in the town’s central square.
how to answer the question of the Inga origin, and those who did would tell me contradicting stories (such as an origin from the lowlands). In anthropology, this is also widely debated since Quechua was a common vernacular language in the early stage of the Spanish Empire in Amazonia and could explain why so many groups speak it (Gow, 1996; Ramírez de Jara, 1996a; 1996b). Whether or not the Ingas came from the lowlands or from the southern highlands does not matter; they have ended up taking control of trade in the region, much in the same way as the Mindales did in the early colonial period.

On the other hand, their neighbours, the Kamentsas of Sibundoy, are what could be classified as a Montaña community. They are considered to originate from somewhere in the north of the country. However, since they speak a language isolate, this has been difficult to prove. No matter what their origins may be, the Kamentzas were one of the neighbouring communities that facilitated trade between the Pastos, the Incas, and later the Spanish with the lowland forest (Pinzon and Ramírez, 1992). One of the main roads to the Amazonian lowlands, is often called by my informants ‘El Camino de la Medicina’, goes through the Sibundoy Valley and the Kamentzas who inhabit this territory share cultural characteristics with Andean and lowland communities. The importance of this community as intermediaries between the highlands and the lowlands was highlighted when the Capuchin built a large monastery in the valley as a base for future lowland expeditions (Goulet, 2003).

The case of lowland communities, including Mocoa, is much harder to identify. There is evidence of continued exchange with highland markets, especially when it comes to some key products such as certain spices, medicines and luxury items (such as Mopa Mopa). However, the ethnic origin of these communities is difficult to establish since they have changed so much in recent history. The Mocoa ethnicity, which gave the city its name, has ceased to exist due to disease and colonial destruction. The Coreguajes and Andaquis who inhabit certain areas between Caquetá and Putumayo arrived here from the lowlands as a result of the violence created by the Rubber barons27 (Casas Aguilar, 1999). Besides, many of the communities that are mentioned in colonial and

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27 They controlled the Rubber production during the Rubber boom (1879–1912).
early republican documents have changed so much that it is difficult to state with absolute certainty that they are still there.

Those who do have some historical data, such as the Kofans and Zionas, experienced profound transformations during the middle and late colonial period. The first missionaries established townships to convert lowland indigenous populations and these townships later became trade centres, attracting more local indigenous people (Goulet, 2003). These tribes also faced wave after wave of demographic collapse due, in part, to epidemics. Then, slowly, as the people from the highlands migrated into this territory, the mestizo and colono populations grew (Ramírez de Jara and Urrea Giraldo, 1990). Mocoa, Puerto Asís and other modern towns are now populated mostly by mestizos; they went from missionary centres of indigenous indoctrination to colonial towns. As such, these towns became centres of Spanish and state control over the communities around them (Ramírez de Jara and Urrea Giraldo, 1990).

On the other hand, lowland communities continued to trade with Mindales up to the 19th century and, even today, they rely on highland traders to get many products. At the same time, the Ingas still trade in the urban markets of Colombia and Ecuador. Moreover, although the colonial and republican periods extensively transformed the traditional trading systems in Colombia, some of the trading routes are still in use today. The route that goes from Mocoa to Pasto is one of them, and there is still an active exchange of not only medicines and luxury items, but also knowledge, world views and practices that influence the way in which people relate to their world. Lowland resources that have been indispensable for highland communities have guaranteed the resilience of this trade, even when the lowlands became isolated due to changing demographic processes. One of these resources is Ayahuasca, as we will see in future chapters. Additionally, Mopa Mopa is still a special plant for the artisan communities of Pasto.

Mopa Mopa
Mopa Mopa has been, and still is, part of this complex system of trade that expanded throughout southern Colombia since before the Spanish arrived. It is famously known as Barniz de Pasto or Pasto varnish, used on fine artisanal woodwork products. It is extracted from a small tropical plant that grows in the lowland forests of Middle Putumayo, yet the artistic objects decorated with it are part of the identity and culture of the highland city of Pasto. Its continuous use since pre-Columbian times offers us an interesting overview of a localised highland/lowland trade in biodiversity that has influenced Mocoa and Putumayo for centuries. It also provides an excellent example of how colonial powers transformed the trading system and assimilated it into the mestizo world. Although Mopa Mopa is not a medicine, it is an excellent medium to explore the evolution of this vertical trade, which medicinal plants cannot offer due to the lack of reliable information.

The method and technique of harvesting Mopa Mopa seems to have changed little since pre-Columbian times, while the ethnic landscape has completely transformed. Mestizos still harvest and trade Mopa Mopa in a similar fashion to what is observed in archaeological findings and artisans use the same techniques (Freedman, 1985). This continued practice stimulates the interconnectivity between the regions of Sibundoy and Mocoa.

To explore this trade, I found myself searching the markets and forests of Putumayo for the raw Mopa Mopa.

“Toca ir bien adentro, eso se encuentra por montones, lo que le dicen la Mopa Mopa para hacer el barniz (You have to go pretty deep, you will find a lot of what they call Mopa Mopa to make the varnish),” Doña Juaquinda once told me in the market at Mocoa.

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28 Two species of the Rubiaceae are known to be used as Mopa Mopa: *Elaeagia utilis* and *Elaeagia pastoensis* (Newman, Kaplan and Derrick, 2015). The *Elaeagia* genus contains 15 species and is classified as a large bush or small tree with terete or cross-sectional and decussate branches. Its leaves are large, generally opposite, elliptic, oblong and with conspicuous venation. Most species have a resin that covers the young leaves (Mendoza, Ramirez and Jimenez, 2004).
I had decided to casually ask her what products they could find in the forest around Mocoa.

“*Eso van hasta familias enteras para buscar el barniz y se traen kilos* (Whole families go to find this varnish and they bring back kilos of it),” she said, referring to the ongoing exploitation of this ancestral plant.

**Image 4: Eleaeagia Pastoensis**
(Mora-Osejo, 1977)

Mopa Mopa (*Elaeagia pastoensis mora*) is found in the cloud-forest ecosystems on the Andean slopes, between 500 and 1200 MASL, in and around the region of Mocoa. It is an average-looking shrub that sometimes grows somewhat tall. Its characteristic is the gum that covers the leaves, especially its buds, flowers and fruits. This gives the leaves a smooth, shiny look. For the plant, this waxy gum is an effective deterrent against herbivores and protects the young leaves that are easy to digest. The main source of the varnish is this gum, which accumulates on the young leaves and buds. The little reddish buds are shiny, about five centimetres in diameter, and they grow at the end of the
stalks. The leaves grow in decussate patterns – i.e. opposite pattern of leaves with consecutive pairs emerging at right angles to each other, like a cross.

During my time in Putumayo, I did not see many Mopa Mopa plants. Due to their rarity, their accessibility is protected. However, I managed to talk with people who actively harvest or trade the plants, or use them to make crafts. According to many of my interviewees, harvesting is not particularly difficult, although it requires nimble fingers since the young buds break off easily and may be lost in the forest brush. “Eso se arranca con los dedos fácil (It [the varnish buds] can be torn off with ease with your fingers),” I was told by Don Carlos.

When harvesting, it is essential to carry a basket to store the buds, since they can drop off quite easily from the shrub and get lost due to their small size. Only several grams of Mopa Mopa can be harvested from each plant, which is often cut down in order to maximise its yield. This overharvesting has proven to endanger this plant population. Moreover, since most of the gum is still collected from wild plants, their location is guarded and kept a secret to prevent stealing. As Doña Juaquinda explains:

“Está escaso el barniz porque ya no hay casi; toca buscar mucho (It has become scarce, as you can barely find a plant; you need to search a lot).”

Those who have access to the plants protect them by only harvesting during certain times of the year. Recently, more people have become interested in the sustainable use of this resource by actively managing the wild populations, growing seedlings closer to their homes and, in rare cases, trying to grow a farming patch.

Don Carlos, who had land on the road to Pasto, was already on his second trial when I saw the little seedlings growing in the shade. “Son difíciles de crecer, pero ahi vamos tratando (They are hard to grow, but we will keep trying),” he said, adding that he had also gotten recommendations from a local agro-ecologist in his efforts to grow a stable population to supply the highland artisans. However, his attempts to successfully grow the plant on his land had proven difficult. He still had to harvest the gum from a wild population that he knew grew deep in the forest to sell it in the market. “Le gusta la
sombra, y no crece por semilla, toca con esqueje (It likes the shade, and it doesn’t grow from the seed, it has to be through a cutting).” This statement demonstrates the complex relationship that people have with this plant, as knowledge of its botanical and ecological characteristics does not mean having power over it.

Although anybody could do it, it is mostly indigenous people who have land deep in the foothill mountain forests who are able to directly access the plants. Finding the plant is difficult, although foragers say that it likes valleys and flat areas. However, as more and more colonos move into these mountains, they are gaining control over populations of these plants to establish constant availability for further trade.

In the city of Mocoa, where most of the harvesters take the buds to be sold, white colonos are generally the middlemen who control the trade routes to Pasto. These merchants were originally from Pasto, so they have greater access to the artisans in the city. In fact, the merchants with whom I spoke in Mocoa had personal connections to the artisans. They easily send several kilos of the raw resource per season. During my time in the field, I never met an indigenous person who sold Mopa Mopa in bulk.

Once it arrives in Pasto, the raw Mopa Mopa is processed to make Barniz de Pasto. This technique consists of hitting the resin with a club for several minutes to break down natural impurities in the buds. This process is repeated several times (the buds are left to rest in warm water during the pauses) until the resin softens and oozes out. Then the artisans stretch and knead the varnish gum with their fingers to make it even softer. At this point, the gum can be stretched into strings to finalise the purification process. After the strings dry and harden, they are ground until the resin turns into a fine dust, which is later moulded into small balls. By the end of this process, the gum becomes malleable and colour dyes are added. The dyes can be natural – obtained from plants such as Achiote (Bixa orellana) or from the cochineal insect (Dactylopius coccus) – or, recently, industrial. The resin is kneaded until it spreads evenly, after which the artisan holds an end with his teeth and stretches it to form a thin sheet that is then placed directly on the wooden surface. Forms are then carved into the sheet of varnish and the leftovers are removed, leaving intricate patterns of indigenous and/or colonial designs.
Finally, warm water is applied to the varnish to keep it from peeling off (Freedman, 1985).

This craft seems simple but requires a particular technique and knowledge that is highly specialised. Mopa Mopa is unlike any resin I know; it is solid yet malleable. It can be stretched to cover the surface of any wooden craft. It can also be carved to produce elaborate patterns and overlapping colours. The use of this unique material not only demands knowing its distinct materiality, but also specific practices to transform it. Due to the complex specialisation required to produce these objects, the master artisans are highly valued by the small urban elite. The Barniz de Pasto is so unique that it has become a major part of the city’s identity, encouraging the preservation of its techniques and its trade routes.

The origin of this craft is unknown. It most likely started in the lowland forests where the plant grew in the wild, rather than in the highlands, and was traded (along with seashells, coral beads and feathers) by proto-Pasto communities (Jaramillo, 1982). Archaeological evidence of this extended trade network is found in proto-Pasto deposits, since these communities had complex burials with objects from different ecological regions (Uribe and Lleras, 1985).

Like many other highland/lowland trade routes, there were a few syncretic processes evident in Pasto art (Friedman, 1985; Jaramillo, 1982). The importance of the lowlands for local cosmology was evident in many of the artistic motifs in their art, such as jaguars and serpents, as well as other symbolic materials from the lowlands, such as certain tools made from hardwood and animal parts (Jaramillo, 1982). Like for other Andean communities, the forests and jungles of Amazonia were not only places to obtain certain products, but also scenes full of magic and symbolic power (Carpinter, 1992).

By the time the Incas sent their merchant/warrior caste to the southern territories of Colombia, the varnish products were of such good quality that they were quickly traded as luxury items, such as the decorated wooden ceremonial cups or qiru found in Cusco.
(Jaramillo, 1982). Pasto artisans were also sent to Cusco and other political and economic centres of the empire to make these valued artefacts.29

**A Mestizo Craft**

This craft was later incorporated into the Spanish trade system, becoming an important craft for churches and wealthy Spanish landowners trading in objects such as furniture, chests and church altars (Friedmann, 1985). This quick adoption was an incentive for the persistence of its trade. As the Pasto ethnic community was slowly assimilated into urban mestizo populations, the artisans were transformed from an indigenous class to a Spanish artisan class. This gave them a higher social ranking in the strict racial hierarchy of the colony (Friedmann, 1985).

Thus, the craft endured through generations, as it was quickly monopolised by mestizo and white artisan families. This continuous use of indigenous and traditional trade practices is rare in Colombia; yet, in the case of Mopa Mopa, it has flourished. *Elaeagia pastoensis* is still being collected and harvested from the mountains of Mocoa, and the technique of making the varnish has not changed much in centuries. The quality of this

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29 However, recent analysis has concluded that the Inca Mopa Mopa is probably *Elaeagia utilis* (Newman, Kaplan and Derrick, 2015). This proves that the technique was either exported to the south or that it was discovered independently with a different plant.
craft encouraged its quick acceptance by the Spanish elite, and later by modern mestizo and white communities.

It is no surprise that the Barniz de Pasto is widely celebrated as a cultural heritage of Colombia. Its indigenous origin and incorporation into the Spanish world are seen as an example of the ongoing mestizo ideology\(^\text{30}\) that makes up the Colombian identity. It is an interesting example of the mestizaje process of southern Colombia. As the highlands became less indigenous, many of the native trade networks in the region were adopted by the Spanish and Colombian systems.

Mestizaje as a nation-building ideology is common throughout Latin America, often seen as a political process of dominating the lower and subaltern classes that end up included in a homogenous and white mestizo society. If seen like this, the Pasto varnish is an excellent case study, as it shows the gradual process of whitening an indigenous practice. However, as with everything, the simplicity of this ideology is deceiving. The importance of Mopa Mopa’s indigenous origin – not only to local harvesters and artisans who call it milenaria, but also to Colombian academics who constantly cite its pre-Columbian origins – highlights how indigeneity is still a coveted notion in the mestizo ideology. Here, we see that the varnish is far more than a homogeneous mestizo product. It is a mosaic (Wade, 2005) that can permanently reconstitute itself, creating and destroying alterity, mixing while simultaneously reinforcing the white and Indian worlds.

As we can see, the shift from indigenous trade to colono traders is illustrative. It was a gradual phenomenon directly related to changing populations and colonial pressures, producing profound social restructuring. It is important to note that most of the urban population in southern Colombia is now non-indigenous, while the indigenous populations have been reduced to rural areas. The Pastos, who used to live in the areas around the colonial town, have lost their language and almost disappeared.\(^\text{31}\) Ironically,

\(^{30}\) The word ‘mestizaje’ does not have an appropriate translation in English. ‘Miscegenation’, which is commonly quoted in dictionaries, has a pejorative white-supremacist connotation. In Latin America, however, it can now imply strength and adaptability as that gained by plant hybridisation.

\(^{31}\) Although this may be the case for most Pasto communities, some are in the process of cultural revitalisation.
200 years ago, the region faced isolation from the central powers of Quito and Bogotá for its monarchist position during the war of independence. This isolation allowed for further restructuring of their notions of whiteness, indigeneity and mestizaje.

This adds a new dynamic to the lowland/highland duality. As the highlands grow more white and Spanish, the differences with the more indigenous lowlands become more pronounced. The Amazonian lowlands are still considered wild and more indigenous, even if the reality of the territory is quite different. Therefore, Mopa Mopa does not only exist as a representation of an indigenous past in a mestizo present, but also becomes a material representation of the connections between the more indigenous forested lowlands and the urban white highlands.

For the people of Pasto, who see this craft as part of their cultural identity, it is a representation of their history as mixed people. In other words, it functions as a material representation of Colombia as a mestizo nation. As we saw, the techniques and artefacts are built on the coming together of indigenous and Spanish worlds – in particular, the Indian past and the white present. Additionally, this is overlapped by other dualities, such as the idea of the wild forest and the civilised cities.

In a similar way to Mopa Mopa, the trade of medicines has accelerated cultural exchanges between the two regions. However, as I will show in future chapters, the markets of folk medicine are not part of this mestizaje ideology. Instead, the process that produces cultural hybrids in folk medicine is separate from the nation-building project.

**Conclusions**

Mopa Mopa is a thought-provoking example that allows us to explore some of the historical characteristics of the territory, particularly the interaction between the lowlands and the highlands. Throughout this chapter, I have given a general account of
the historical processes of Putumayo. The eastern slopes of the Andes have seen a gradual transformation that has had an enormous impact on local communities. The trade routes that connect the highlands and the lowlands serve as an axis for exchange between two ecological and cultural regions. The availability of a diversity of different ecological niches incentivises this trade, while the ecological limitations of these plants force local communities to travel steep paths to access them.

Although Mopa Mopa is not a medicinal plant, I have included it in this dissertation because it demonstrates the interwoven history of lowland/highland dynamics. It was through this interaction that the cultural particularities of modern-day Putumayo were formed. By this, I mean that the movement of plants and products through this corridor has, through the centuries, shaped the people who inhabit it. The constant movement of people, products and knowledge has created spaces of exchange that go well beyond the markets. In the case of this particular plant, it has legitimised nation-building ideals of mestizo history.

However, mestizaje is not the only process of hybridity found in these markets. Much of the cultural negotiation and mixing found in these markets happened in the shadows of history. It is true that the trade and various cycles of commodity bonanzas in the area have incentivised the interwoven history of Putumayo, but most of the cultural exchange happens in the day-to-day lives of people, in their bodies and in the way they understand the world. To explore this, the best example lies in medicine. In the next chapter, I will explore folk medicine in more detail, analysing the ways in which a lowland plant such as Chuchuwaza has become a common medicine in the highlands.

Chapter 2. Chuchuwaza
During my fieldwork, I always asked about plants from the lowland forest in the markets that I visited. The market vendors would usually show me pieces of bark or dried herbs, often citing their mysterious and exotic origin deep in the Amazonian forest, as if the forest itself gave them their healing power. However, most of these plants were, in fact, brought from tropical regions near the urban centre, such as those found near Bogotá. Only a few were actually from the Putumayo forest. They had

Map 6. The paths of the medicine – a map of the cities and markets visited during this fieldwork.
Source: Author

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32 Bogotá is a highland city, with temperatures that oscillate between 5°C and 19°C. However, a one-hour drive down the mountain and the climate changes dramatically; many plants grow well there, such as the Zarzaparrilla (*Smilax sp.* and *Dioscorea spp.*), Totumo (*Crescencia cujete*), Achiote (*Bixa orellana*), Guaco (*Mikania guaco*), Balsamo (*Myroxylon sp.*), Palo Santo
arrived there through an extensive network of traders that had set up a commodity chain, linking the forest with the highland cities. This was the case of Chuchuwaza (*Maytenus laevis*). In every market I visited, Chuchuwaza was present in some form or another.

Chuchuwaza, Chuchuhuasi or Capinuri has been described as a tall tree – 25 to 30 metres high – with large leaves, small white flowers and hard, dense reddish-brown bark (Taylor, 2005). People in the forest can identify it by its bark, as its reddish colour stands out from the other trees. The bark can be ripped off the tree with ease and is two to three centimetres thick. Uses range from soothing rheumatism and arthritis, as an aphrodisiac and muscle relaxant to the prevention of cancer. This is due to its qualities as a warm plant that has an effect on sexual energy, the muscles, the heart and the blood. The name ‘Chuchuwaza’ is Quechua for ‘trembling back’, which emphasises its effectiveness against back pains and muscle damage. Shultes and Raffauf (1995) classify it as a stimulant, due to a registered amount of caffeine. Whether this is related to its classification as a warm plant, such as Yoco or Coffee, is up for discussion.

*(Bursera graveolens)* and Gualanday (*Jacaranda sp.*). All of them have established trade routes to the urban markets.
Its most outstanding characteristic is that, besides Uña de Gato (*Uncaria tomentosa*), Chuchuwaza is the Amazonian medicinal plant most widely found throughout the country. Unlike other medicinal plants of the Putumayo forest, it is found in every market I visited, from the Caribbean coast to the highland cities (see map). I have been offered Chuchuwaza at the intermunicipal bus station outside Cali, by bus vendors who go from bus to bus selling ointments of different kinds. I have seen Chuchuwaza being sold in naturalist stores in upper-class malls in Medellín, and its extract being used in cocktails of upscale restaurants in Bogotá. Thus, Chuchuwaza has adapted to a number of different medicinal, cultural and ecological settings. It is also found in markets, from Bolivia (Macía, García and Vidaurre, 2005) to Venezuela (Giraldo et al., 2009).

During my fieldwork in Putumayo, Chuchuwaza was casually used as an infusion. It was taken as a refreshing drink after a long day’s work, although its taste was not particularly pleasant. As one of the mestizo healers explained:

“Ah! La Chuchuwaza es bendita... Después de un largo rato paneando oro, uno iba cogía un poco del palo de Chuchuwaza y se tomaba esa infusión y le quitaba todos los Dolores (Oh! Chuchuwaza is blessed... After a long day panning for gold, one would go get a piece of Chuchuwaza and drink its infusion and all your pains would go away).”

Chuchuwaza relieves joint and muscle pains and swelling, making it a very popular drink for manual labourers. For the colonos who came to the forest during the past
century looking for gold or land, it became an increasingly important drink. These people worked hard to survive in this territory, and Chuchuwaza was the beverage that alleviated the hardships of colonial expansion. An elder mestizo healer whom I interviewed associated this plant with his arrival into this territory and the difficulties endured by toiling on this land. Chuchuwaza was the first medicinal plant they learnt about when they arrived and they swear by its benefits.

“Cuando llegó nuestra madre de Nariño, eso era puro bosque, era mucho trabajo y uno vivía muy pobre. El monte estaba lleno de plantas medicinales, como la Chuchuwaza... sí, aquí se usaba mucho, uno la tomaba después de trabajar para los dolores, era buena medicina. Así aprendimos a usarla (When our mother arrived from Nariño, this was all a forest, there was a lot of work, and we were very poor. The mountains were full of medicinal plants like Chuchuwaza... Yes, we would use it all the time, after work for the pain; it was good medicine. That’s how we learnt to prepare it).”

Meanwhile, the indigenous shamans and healers with whom I would talk rarely drink Chuchuwaza as a refreshment. It is a hot plant that should be taken in small doses, as it could irreparably harm your internal organs. Instead, they drink other infusions – drinks made from cool plants such as Ambar/Clavo huasca (*Tynanthus panurensis*), a common vine found in the Putumayo forest. Chuchuwaza is generally used on bruises and sore joints – its scrapings mashed in ointments – and it seems quite effective. Yet, it never stands out. During my conversations with indigenous shamans, Chuchuwaza would never be mentioned in detail.

These two widely opposing interpretations demonstrate the malleability of medicinal plants as artefacts. Different people may use them and understand them in completely differently ways. However, Chuchuwaza’s extended availability and universal incorporation into different ideas of health seem to highlight its intrinsic effectiveness. It is its effectiveness that allows it to be quickly adopted by different medicinal systems, all of which may understand its healing properties in different ways. The agency of the plant – understood here as the effects the plant may have on a patient – has induced its popularity throughout the region. However, this is not as simple as it may seem, as
Chuchuwaza has been profoundly tied to the trade of folk medicine in Latin America for some time, moulding the way in which people understand it even in its place of origin.

In this chapter, I will explore Chuchuwaza’s role in the markets of Colombia; through this, I will describe how different ways of approaching health are brought together by this medicinal plant. I will analyse how the people who visit these markets continuously reimagine the intrinsic healing properties of medicinal plants as they redefine the way in which they understand health. Markets here become spaces of cultural negotiation, where different systems of health are brought together, mixed, translated and/or discarded. Those who live and work in these spaces are constantly experimenting with their plants and their bodies, building on their traditional use and expanding it.

I will begin this exploration with an ethnographic analysis of folk medicinal markets. It is important to emphasise that the hybridisation processes undergone by these markets with the coming together of different worlds may or may not represent a mestizaje process, since (as noted) mestizaje is more of a political discourse. During the pre-Columbian period, this coming together was gradual, as trade between the lowlands and the highlands induced further interaction between two very distinct cultural and ecological regions: the Incas and the lowland communities. Then, after the Spanish Conquista, these markets again offered spaces for new and distinct alterities to come together, particularly the modernist castes produced by the colonial world: the European, Native and African descendants.

**Considerations about Medicinal Markets**

The historical and geographical dynamics of South America produced folk medicine that is hard to separate from the colonial process itself. The overlapping and mixing of different world views produced by the Conquista caused complex social dynamics that induced interactions between different systems of health. Due to these exchanges, folk medicine in Colombia has undergone a continuous transformation process to become one of the most comprehensive examples of cultural hybridisation in Latin America. Although Western medicine is often placed at the centre of national discourse, folk
medicine has always provided a space to exchange knowledge, ideologies and differences. Through the coming together of Spanish ideas about health with those of native populations and African slaves, a complex system of beliefs has been created that functions by borrowing and reinterpreting different concepts of the body and soul, botany, chemistry or alchemy, and healing potential or magic.

However, in my opinion, this coming together should not always be understood as mestizaje. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the mestizo ideology is the main nation-building project of 20th-century Colombia, and has long advocated the homogenisation of the social and racial diversity of the country (Wade, 1997). This ideology is based on the colonial racial categories of early modernism (Mignolo, 2012). These racial categories were used to reduce and simplify the multiplicity of ethnic and cultural universes into three essential divisions: white, Indian and black. Then, during the later republican and state-building period, the mestizaje discourse was advanced to praise the way in which the best ‘virtues’ of each race came together to create genuinely Colombian culture and people33 (Wade, 1997).

This discourse is highly selective. Some day-to-day cultural practices, such as music and food, are often included in the mestizo label, whereas local concepts regarding the body and health are rejected in favour of more modern and scientific ones, often dismissing them as superstitions and uneducated assumptions.34 Notions such as spiritual illnesses and relational wellbeing, as well as the need to purge diseases, are looked down upon by this ideology. In fact, folk medicine has historically been relegated to superstition, and dismissed as a primitive practice that is incompatible with the positivist and modernist notions now used in the mestizo discourse (Wade, 2005). The cultural exchanges that helped create modern folk medicine occurred parallel to the nation-building project, as these were more subjective and personal mixtures produced

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33 Even though this notion is highly controversial, it is still an important part of the identity of the Colombian state and popular culture. Music is a great example of this, as it is often believed that much of the diversity of music in Colombia is due to the mestizo influence.

34 This, however, does not mean that all aspects of folk medicine have been rejected in the mestizo discourse. In fact, folk medicine is often marked as an example of mestizaje, but only the traits that are considered positive; certain aspects such as witchcraft and spiritual illnesses are often rejected.
by the reinterpretation of the different health systems brought together by the discovery of America.

In Colombia, the enormous diversity in the ways of understanding the body, health and medicine is deeply rooted in these exchanges. Markets throughout the country help to introduce new ideas, tools and discourses, while reinforcing the traditional practices and symbolic relationships that are the base of folk medicine. This explains why certain plants from Asia, such as Noni (Morinda citrifolia) and Moringa (Moringa oleifera), have easily entered local pharmacopeia – because they work in terms that can be understood by local people. For example, Noni is often compared to other diuretics and is emphasised as a purging element for the kidneys, a common characteristic of several local medicines that deal with key ailments treated by folk healers. Moreover, markets also highlight their exotic origin, which adds value to their effectiveness.

This demonstrates key aspects of how folk medicine evolves. It accelerates mixture through traditional interpretations of new tools and medicines, while using symbolic power structures to legitimise their efficacy. To understand how Colombian folk medicine is organised and how it works, it is crucial to recognise the importance of colonial racial categories as a source of symbolic and magical power. The use of colonial categories by folk medicine can be observed at various levels, from ritual healing to the efficacy of medicinal plants, as well as in the commodification process. The categories function through a series of social dynamics, definitions and power relationships that are based on structures of othering and belonging (Baumann, 2015). These structures facilitate interactions among diverse people by giving them a superficial understanding of their differences. It is through this superficial understanding that stereotypes are created, romantic notions are discussed, otherness is fetishised, fears are heightened and magic is made.

Taussig (1987) defines this process as ‘epistemic murk’ albeit in a confusing manner. The magic and power of different people, understood in Colombia as the three races, has been built upon the interaction of colonial racial categories with the popular imagination. In other words, due to their otherness, some groups have been given spiritual or mystical power. As such, in a domain full of alterities where the friction of
different worlds coming together creates magic, “the imputation of the otherness enchants the medley of difference in a poetics of place and race that is no less political and economic than it is aesthetic” (Taussig, 1987: 179).

Similar processes are visible throughout Latin America. One does not need to go far from Colombia to see how concepts of health, body and medicine use racial categories to justify their efficacy. Haitian Vodou, Cuban and Venezuelan Santería, Mexican-Mayan shamanism, Afro-Brazilian and Afro-American practices, and many of the new religions in the Amazonian territory illustrate this syncretism. These medicines thrive on alterity; they exist because of the powers produced by the mysterious and often orientalising notions of the other.

The Markets

During my fieldwork, I dedicated a large portion of my time to travelling and visiting many of the main markets in the country. Most of these markets primarily sell foodstuff; sometimes, they also sell crafts and objects for daily life. In the corners, away from the main entrances, one can spot small stalls filled to the brim with plants, resins and objects used for health and spirituality. In Bogotá, the large market of Paloquemao has a few of these stalls. However, a short walk away, the market of Samper Mendoza is shrouded in the overpowering scent

35 There are different types of Santería; however, this dissertation mainly refers to Santería as a Catholic religion based on the power of certain saints to heal and help people. In Afro-Colombian communities, this tradition is often mixed with Orisha from African traditions, where certain attributes of saints are considered to be the same as those of the Gods of Vodun and other African religions. Praying to these saints, doing pilgrimages to sacred sites and evoking them in healing rituals are all part of this system of health.
of hundreds of herbs and medicines that arrive by the truckload. Bogotá is also the home of a small indigenous market, which sells anything related to shamanic arts and magic. It is similar to the great Catholic shrine of 20 de Julio, which is a hub for religious esoteric artefacts.

Other cities have similar markets, albeit on a much smaller scale. Pasto, Popayán and Cali, cities in the south that are closer to Putumayo, are rich in a diversity of stalls, ranging from Afro-Colombian healing to Ayahuasca shamanism. In the north, the cities of Cartagena, Santa Marta and Medellín contain fewer indigenous crafts, yet are full of Santería and medicines from the ecosystems of the region. Smaller towns and cities have markets with simple medicinal stalls that often contain more herbs from the highlands, but if you know how to look, you can usually find Palo Santo (*Bursera graveolens*), Uña de Gato (*Uncaria tomentosa*), Zarzaparrilla (*Smilax sp.*; *Dioscorea sp.*) and Chuchuwaza from the lowland forests of Amazonia.

For a more detailed description, I will now provide the reader with a short ethnographic review of the most representative market stalls I have seen, instructed by my friend Nely, who has had a more personal experience with them. She comes from a small Afro-Colombian town on the Caribbean coast. With the help of Dr Jose Gregorio Hernandez, a modern Venezuelan saint, Nely was miraculously healed from a brain parasite. She has had an interest in medicinal plants ever since her mother took her to a

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36 This is one of the largest religious sites in Bogotá. The church in this area is dedicated to the patron saint of the city, *El Divino Niño*, which is the child form of Jesus Christ. This is often represented as an image of a blonde child in pink robes floating in the sky. It is a fairly recent saint, yet it is widely visited by people from all over the country asking to heal their ailments or for better opportunities.

37 These differences, from north to south, are defined by several regional characteristics and population dynamics that date to colonial times. In particular, northern Colombia and the Caribbean have had large slave populations, and the rapid demographic collapse of indigenous people brought about a stronger African influence. The highlands in the south had an indigenous background, closely related to the Andean culture in South America. These differences can be observed in the markets of each region – in the north with a stronger representation of African medicine, and in the south that reflects a more indigenous past.

38 Dr Jose Gregorio Hernandez was a Venezuelan doctor and scientist who lived in the late 19th century. He lived a life of Catholic devotion, helping many poor people in Venezuela. He is considered a saint, even though he is not officially a saint for the Vatican. In the Santería communities of Venezuela, he is part of the pantheon of folk saints such as María Lionza. His power is often evoked during healing rituals and ceremonies.
Santeros in the north of Colombia, near Panama. From then on, she has been intrigued by the power of plants.

As this curiosity grew, she learnt to love plants and wished she could heal with them. Yet, back in her hometown, healers were considered witches; they were seen with distrust and were believed to be aligned with the devil. She had to look elsewhere to get some training. Due to violence in her hometown, she moved to Cartagena, a major city on the Caribbean coast. In the city, she started going to a healer and shaman she called Don Julio. He was an Afro-Colombian healer who said that he had learnt how to heal from a Zinu indigenous shaman in the department of Sucre, Colombia. Unlike the santero that Nely had met before, Don Julio only focused on medicinal plants and had a good following in the popular neighbourhoods of Cartagena. She learnt about many medicines from him.

Afro-Colombian healers play an

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39 Santeros are practitioners of Santeria, these often focus on one saint which becomes their patron saint. In Afro-American Santeria these are often considered priest and can become the vehicle of the saint through possessions. However, in this case it was more of a healer who uses the saints to help heal patients.

40 This is an indigenous group from the Caribbean coast of Colombia that, due to colonial pressures, has lost most of its language. Their medicine functions through similar temperature concepts and spiritual magic, managed by expert healers (Drexler, 2002).
essential role in the trade of medicinal biodiversity in Colombia, not only through Santería and other Afro-Colombian traditions, but also from selling botanical medicines in regions such as the Caribbean and Pacific coasts.\(^{41}\)

Having migrated to Bogotá,\(^{42}\) Nely quickly discovered the diversity of healing practices found in the city. However, as many people do, she approached them carefully as, although they were known to be beneficial, they could also be dangerous.

While I was working on this study, I would ask Nely about medicinal plants that I came across. On most occasions, she could identify and name them – although sometimes with different names – telling me what they were good for and showing me how to prepare them.

Together, we came up with a classification of the three or four general types of stalls and markets that can be found throughout most of Colombia. (Having said this, I must admit that, between Nely and myself, there are medicinal markets in many cities that we have not seen. Therefore, this generalisation is only an overview of the complex multiplicity of ways in which health is considered in Colombia.) Nely and I believed that one could classify these markets, stalls and shops by observing certain characteristics to obtain categories that follow colonial racial patterns. Like any classification, it is critically oversimplified, yet proved effective to analyse the scene. Our opinions may change with more visits.

We started with the mestizo markets of herbs and medicinal plants, which are probably the most common. These stalls and markets are managed by campesinos,\(^{43}\) colonos and mestizos, and focus primarily on fresh herbs of European origin – such as Basil (\textit{Ocimum basilicum}), Calendula (\textit{Calendula officinalis}) and Chamomile (\textit{Chamaemelum nobile}) – and dried herbs from the region. Families own most of the stalls, and the wife

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\(^{41}\) These regions have a large Afro-Colombian population. Some large \textit{palenques} – towns formed by maroons or escaped slaves – are also found in these territories.

\(^{42}\) Bogotá is a melting pot of all the diversity in the country. It saw a massive population explosion after 1950, as people migrated to the city looking for opportunities and to escape the cycle of violence in rural Colombia.

\(^{43}\) These are highland farmers and rural inhabitants. Recently, these communities have gained more recognition in political and social circles.
or mother of the family manages most of them. Men may be present to help carry the heavy crates and boxes but this is not always the case. These stalls also sell extracts, yet in smaller doses and usually only those that fit the needs of the local costumers.

Mestizo healers and herbal stalls are regional. They continuously trade in medicinal biodiversity but usually with fresh plants that come in from the rural regions around the country. In warmer climates, they might get some of the fresh herbs from the highlands where European plants grow best. Interconnected trade routes provide a constant surplus of these plants. These same trade routes connect to other parts of the country, and plants can come from as far away as Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela, although in small amounts.

In Bogotá, the Plaza Distrital de Mercado Samper Mendoza is a central hub for herbal trade in the country. The market is massive and can comfortably hold 100 to 200 people selling large amounts of different types of herbs. You can smell the fragrance of several tons of aromatic plants from blocks away from the market. This market is nocturnal, since the cold mountain nights of Bogotá preserve the fresh herbs longer. It is one of the main hubs of the medicinal plant trade in the country, and supplies many smaller markets around central Colombia.

The second type of stall is the esoteric shop, which contains a significant amount of different spiritual, supernatural and magical objects. Objects include candles, statuettes and charms, as well as plants and medicines associated with luck and magic. These stalls may also sell medicinal plants, yet they are focused primarily on essences, soaps, creams and extracts. The objects cover a wide range of traditions, such as Orientalism, Gnosticism, Christian medicine, crystal healing, and aromatherapy. They are also quite diverse. You can find them in the local markets, as well as in high-end malls and at religious sites.

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44 Many European herbs grow well in mild and cool temperatures of the highlands. In particular, the fertile lands near Pasto, Medellín and Bogotá produce many of the herbs that are traded in the lowlands. In regions that are farther away from the mountains, such as the Caribbean coast, fresh herbs are less available but they may be found dried instead.
The markets around the 20 de Julio neighbourhood in Bogotá have many of these stalls. This area has one of the principal religious shrines in the city, El Divino Niño, devoted to the Christ Child. Around this shrine, there are many esoteric stalls and shops. Although the main effigy is of the Divino Niño, statuettes of different saints abound, as well as Buddhist texts, books on magic and witchcraft, and many different plants and animals associated with luck and superstition. Like in the mestizo stalls, most of these plants were introduced by the Spanish, while others – such as Uña de Gato (*Uncaria tomentosa*) – are native to the Amazonian lowlands. Still others were originally from the Far East, such as the Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) and Sweet Acacia (*Acacia farnesiana*). The sheer diversity of objects demonstrates the global interconnectedness of alternative medicine and spiritual healing.

The third type of stall is the indigenous shop. These are managed by indigenous merchants, usually of Ingano and, to a lesser degree, Kametsa origin from Putumayo. Unlike the mestizo stores, these are mostly managed by male shamans and *hierbateros* who sell medicinal plants and offer consultations and diagnoses.

By the 1950s, trade routes had been established by Inga and Kametsa to most of the major cities in Colombia (Ramírez de Jara and Urrea Giraldo, 1990). Some of the Inga healers, shamans and merchants whom I interviewed in Mocoa had a history of travelling throughout the country selling medicines and healing patients. This seems to have been happening for some time, as many stated that their parents and grandparents had done the same. One of the shamans bragged about the many times he travelled the country in the 1970s with his brother. His uncle and mentor had done the same. In fact, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, there is evidence of extended networks of Quechua merchants who were trading medicines at a regional level since pre-Columbian times.

Another merchant in Mocoa, when recounting her life story, mentioned she had lived in Cali selling plants and travelling the country. She would sell plants from the lowlands, as well as local plants. Her daughter, joining a new generation of healers, had just opened her shop in the markets of Mocoa and established contact with highland merchants who gave her access to fresh herbs.
In the central market of San Victorino in Bogotá, a small shopping mall called Centro Comercial Caravana is famous for being one of the largest indigenous markets in the country, where many Inga and Kametsa traders have set up shop. On the second floor is an official Inga and Kametsa resguardo, with its communal house and administrative offices. Most of the Ingaros and Kametsa here are from the highlands town of Santiago in the Sibundoy Valley, where they maintain essential kinship and commercial relationships that supply many of the medicines and grant them access to the lowland forests. In Bogotá, they have managed to maintain a certain social cohesion, selling a great diversity of medicines from Amazonia and the mountains around their ancestral home of Sibundoy.

Throughout the country, Inga and Kametsa shamans have become synonymous with indigenous traditional medicine. The particular image of a curandero indio⁴⁵ is commonly presented throughout the public sphere: in markets, consultation spaces, city street advertisements, and even modern communication, such as television and social media. In particular, the image of the Putumayo shaman is the most referenced in popular medicine. This image has several key visual elements, such as the feather crown, rattles, decorations and medicinal plants. The highland Putumayo shaman, with the tall crown made with blue and gold macaw feathers, the typical highland poncho and the jaguar-teeth necklaces, is the stereotypical character. However, this image is

⁴⁵ Or Indigenous Healer or Shaman
constantly changing and shamans are continuously reforming the way in which they project themselves. Whether this image originated from Putumayo or if it is an amalgam produced by constant exchange in the markets of Colombia is hard to say. As Taussig explains: “This magical attraction of the Indian is not only a cunningly wrought colonial objet d’art; it is a refurbished and revitalised one” (1987: 172). As such, the idea of an indigenous shaman has become a key figure in the power relationships of folk medicine.

In neoshamanic circles, the same image is used to legitimise specific practices, such as the use of Ayahuasca. As the indigenous shaman gains power in these circles, this image reflects access to mystical and magical connections to ancestral power preserved in the realms of wilderness and the forests. This figure of the indigenous shaman has been endowed with a symbolic power based on orientalised ideas of the other (Baumann, 2006). This orientalism is not just a simple binary good/bad relationship between alterity and identity, but a complex mirroring process by which the other is given certain characteristics that reflect the desires and fears of a certain group.

For indigenous communities of other ethnic backgrounds, Putumayo shamans have become the main source of indigenous health, due in part to the prevalence of this image. In particular, the highland shamans from Sibundoy have spread and established an extensive network of healers throughout the country (Langdon, 2016). In regions such as the department of Cauca, which has many communities from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and healing traditions, Putumayo shamanism is the main form of traditional medicine. This is the case of the famed Guambiano/Misak market of Silvia in Cauca, where I was surprised to see Ingano shamans had set up shop. When I asked around for Misak healers, the people would often direct me to Inga shamans. This seems to be common throughout Colombia, since even with the wide diversity of ethnic medicinal practices, Ingano and Kametsa shamans have become the go-to indigenous healers.

46 Cauca is just north of Putumayo. Its mountains are home to several indigenous communities, such as the Misak, Naza, Coconuco and Yanacona.
47 The town of Silvia is one hour away from the capital of the Cauca region, Popayán.
48 This is an indigenous community of highland Cauca. They have their own language called wampi-misamerawan o wam. Their healing practices are based on experts called Mutautas and Nutautas, who are constantly mediating with spiritual forces of nature in order to achieve harmonious living.
In spite of the strict ethnic divisions, there are many grey areas. As I explored these markets, there seemed to be much tension caused by shamans and *hierbateros*\(^{49}\) that are not indigenous by birth, yet use indigenous symbolism and tools to advertise their healing powers. I was continuously warned of these phoney shamans – not because of their incapability to heal, but because of their capabilities to harm and kill. Shamanic healing without the indigenous bloodline was seen as potentially dangerous, closer to witchcraft and the devil than to God and health. It seemed that those who do not follow the strict hierarchy of racial categories possess illegitimate magical powers.

The mysterious and powerful origin of the Indian as a timeless being, not tied to present or past, as a link to natural savagery and unmodernised jungles, and as a subversive force against the ongoing globalised world, played into the essentialisation of shamanic practice in popular medicine. The colonial hierarchy, where the black and the Indian are the base of the social pyramid, is inverted in folk medicine. Consequently, by borrowing the visual elements of the Indians, these non-indigenous healers have appropriated their power to both heal and cause harm. This reinforces the importance of performativity in folk health, especially in ritualised healing. In this structure of alterity, the Indian reflects a “self-critique, albeit under the auspices of a self-invented other” (Baumann, 2004: 20).

At the same time, the people who are Indian by blood, who are entitled to shamanic arts due to their ancestral characteristics or to the power that flows in *la sangre india*, feel cheated and resent the appropriation of their trade. We must recognise that the notion of a hereditary shamanic profession is not common in lowland Amazonia. Hugh-Jones (1994) explains that this is due to closer contact with the nation-state and the legal system in the highlands.

Afro-Colombian medicinal stalls follow similar patterns. They can be found in places with large black populations; however, during my time in the field, I worked with very

\(^{49}\) Healers who specialize in hierbas or yerbas, also known as Yerbateros
few Afro-Colombian merchants, as they are not common in Putumayo.\textsuperscript{50} They also perform much of the same orientalising dynamics; their healing, however, is more complex and diverse. It has multiple manifestations and different types of practices. Unlike indigenous shamanism, which has slowly but surely become more homogenised by the popularity of the Putumayo shamans, Afro-Colombian medicine is regional, has many different techniques and practices, and is difficult to generalise (López et al., 2011). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this discussion, I wish to highlight that their role in urban markets is also highly dependent on orientalising characteristics that give them cultural and symbolic power over certain diseases.

In bigger cities, they trade plants from the western Pacific coast and common plants found in most markets, including some Amazonian plants. In the market of Samper Mendoza in Bogotá, the only one that had Chuchuwaza was an Afro-Colombian lady who had direct connections with people in Nariño, Putumayo and Cauca. This proves that this classification is not perfect; additionally, it is constantly reforming itself, especially in larger multicultural cities. However, a key element in most places seemed to be the use of racial categories to benefit their shops.

Other shops and stalls that trade in botanical healing are the homeopathic and naturalist stores. My friend Nely sometimes goes to a naturalist store to buy plants such as the Moringa \textit{(Moringa oleifera)}, a herbaceous plant from the Indo-Tibetan foothills that has quickly established itself as a panacea in the popular markets of Colombia. These medicines, however, are usually sold as extracts and essences, which Nely preferred not to use. As mentioned, the flow of foreign miracle plants is very common, as Noni \textit{(Morinda citrifolia)} and Acacia de la India \textit{(Acacia farnesiana)}, among many others, have been quickly incorporated into medicinal trade. By stating their exotic origins, these merchants also highlight the power of the other, of the realm beyond this one, a place full of magic, where plants have more power. These shops highlight the interconnectedness of Colombian folk medicine with larger global networks of alternative health.

\textsuperscript{50} Most had arrived there as refugees from violence in neighbouring regions, having had to move many times even in Putumayo due to political persecution. These were mostly women who worked as midwives, requiring not only anatomical knowledge, but also knowledge of local medicinal plants. They mostly used small herbaceous plants that they could plant in home gardens and would visit the markets only as a last resort.
Some Characteristics of Folk Medicine Markets

How people negotiate their health in the sheer diversity of markets and medicines is a great example of the versatility of personal pharmacopoeia. It is true that patients generally have a working knowledge of certain plants. Most people know the basic effects and benefits of a multiplicity of plants. Traditional knowledge of medicinal plants reinforces the use of certain medicines that have a historical use and are an important part of the daily life of people. However, as people approach the markets, they may be willing to experiment and incorporate a foreign plant into their personal use, depending on the advice of the local healer and their experience while using it.

Personal beliefs, such as religion, spirituality and notions of the body, define the plants and medicines that each person will use. Spiritual illnesses, witchcraft and the increasingly influential evangelical medicine\textsuperscript{51} require certain magical plants. Concepts about the body, built on interpretations of Western scientific medicine, incentivise the use of plants that can be linked to organs and bodily fluids. During my time in the markets, folk interpretations of Western medicine were the most common. This was true of several patients who visited the market looking for medicines that would help control illnesses diagnosed by doctors. For example, several patients came looking for plants to heal diabetes, which is a relatively new disease for these markets. Healers would then recommend many different plants; recently, *insulina vegetal*, known as Palo Copache (*Hintonia latiflora*), has been becoming increasingly popular.

On one occasion, a patient with some sort of intoxication came looking for plants that would purify his blood. The healer recommended Sauco (*Sambucus sp.*), Ortiga (*Urtica sp.*) and Bardana (*Arctium lappa*), all of which are widely used for this purpose.

Previous knowledge of a particular plant – i.e. what patients might think it is good for – has been a vital part of this negotiation. Some patients often arrive at the markets with

\textsuperscript{51} With the influx of evangelical churches in the country, many people are converting as part of a greater shift away from traditional religions such as the Catholic Church. Many of these evangelical churches also offer healing services, as the pastors are given certain power over spiritual illnesses. Exorcisms and miraculous healing are common activities in these churches.
some sort of knowledge, and test the merchants. Others go to the markets looking for particular plants, which, due to their urban lifestyle, they may not have access to. This is particularly the case for many rural migrants who have arrived at the city with their traditional botanical knowledge but without much land to grow their own plants.

The willingness to experiment – to use and incorporate different practices into their own practice – is peculiar but not unique. I encountered several cases of people who had tried many different techniques and medicines but had limited success. For them, it was worth experimenting with botanical plants and alternative medicine to alleviate certain symptoms.

Examples of this were common during my fieldwork. A devote evangelical man who had gout wanted to be healed by his pastor but was willing to experiment with herbal medicines to reduce the pain. A young mother whose son had an ear infection visited a Western doctor, but also visited the merchant in the market to look for plants such as Verbasco (*Verbascum thapsus*) that were recommended by a family member. Another mother whose son suffered from asthma frequently visited merchants to get the fresh herbs she needed for the traditional treatment, such as Malva (*Malva sp.*), Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus sp.*) and Caña Brava (*Gynerium sagittatum*).

My friend Nely liked to try new herbs in an effort to help counter her thyroid problem, experimenting with plants that were recommended by a number of different people. During one of my visits, she had tried Hierba de San Juan (*Hypericum perforatum*), which was known to counter drowsiness, a common symptom of hypothyroidism; however, she would often turn back to Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*), since this was what worked best for her. She told me how she enjoyed collecting new medicinal plants in her garden, in her hometown. In the city, she tried growing medicinal plants in pots and small gardens but was limited by lack of space.

This constant experimentation is prompted by the confusing and often abstract inner workings of medicinal plants, often compounded by misunderstandings or lack of information about them. I was told that one did not need to understand the inner mechanisms that made a plant an effective medicine. Instead, trusting the collective
experience of folk medicine was enough to risk trying a new plant. My friend would be open to any new medicinal plant that seemed to fit her botanical understanding. She knew that certain plants were dangerous or poisonous and would stay away from them. Her ideas of the body – which were largely influenced by Western medicine, a firm Catholic spiritualism inclined towards Marian devotions, and a strong tradition of botanical medicines – were the starting point for an expanding pharmacopeia that was surprisingly flexible and resilient. Therefore, by using her body as the tool to explore the capabilities of these plants, she was happy to include them in her daily life.

The internal characteristics of these medicinal plants, such as their healing and spiritual efficacy, are often obscure and abstract. Explaining their healing potential is often considered beyond human understanding, attributed to supernatural and religious powers. Medicines in most of the markets I visited were considered not only a mystery, but also a gift of God, proof of the beneficial characteristics of the natural world. “Diosito nos dio todas estas medicinas, la naturaleza está llena de esa plantas benditas (God gave us all of these medicines, nature is full of these blessed plants),” I was told by a merchant in the markets of Pasto.

This idea of the natural world as a place of health was widely discussed during my time in the field. Nature and the ‘natural’ origin of these medicines had an important symbolical power, since their proximity to the natural world as made by God would endow the plants with an uncorrupted power to heal. In a similar fashion, and due to their symbolic proximity to the natural world, medicinal plants and markets would continuously reinforce the orientalising notions of indigenous and African magic.

Other interesting cases include people who will experiment with magical plants while waiting for better opportunities, presuming that the plants will help them deal with witchcraft or a streak of bad luck. These people are willing to try many techniques and plants that are often alien to their daily life, taking the risk in the hope that it will improve their lives.

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52 Marian traditions, or looking for the protection of the Virgin Mary, are common practices in traditional health. There is a strong symbolic association between the Virgin and protection and health – in particular, Our Lady of Lourdes and Our Lady of Sorrows.
This is particularly true when it comes to plants preventing witchcraft or helping with good luck and love. With ongoing globalisation and changing traditional values, these plants have become more important in the life of local people, especially in the complex and multicultural urban lifestyle. Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) highlight how entire economies of obscure and magical items have grown throughout South Africa in response to the postcolonial capitalist contradictions and inequality. Similarly, Taussig (1980) explores these contradictions in his observations of the changing dynamics of traditional belief systems in the expanding capitalist economy. These obscure economies are an important part of Colombian folk medicine. Comaroff and Comaroff explain that this trade system is a result of capitalist expansion and a lack of true economic transformation for the lower classes and the disenfranchised: “Drawing on cultural elements with long indigenous histories, this economy is itself an integral feature of millennial capitalism—that odd fusion of the modern and the postmodern, of hope and hopelessness, of utility and futility, of promise and its perversions” (Camaroff and Camaroff, 1999: 283). It seems that, for some, it is worth returning to tradition to succeed in the ‘mysterious mechanisms of the market’.

The history of violence in Colombia has also had a defining influence on folk medicine. The massive migration into the cities caused by violence in the countryside accelerated the coming together of different communities and added the impact of trauma, violence and lack of social cohesion as threats to the wellbeing, health and bodies of the new urban inhabitants. Decades of violence caused an increasing deterioration in social dynamics, fostering further distrust and the expansion of obscure and magical practices (Lozano Garzón, 2009; Ruiz Eslava, 2015; Uribe, 2003).

All of these characteristics reveal the multilayered complexity of folk medicine. Its flexibility and adaptability has made it increasingly resilient, even as Western medicine becomes the main source of healthcare in the country. Folk medicine has also stimulated the incorporation of different techniques and medicines into different cultural backgrounds. As folk medicine constantly changes, some plants have recently become important in traditional medicine. They are now intrinsically tied to this trade system, prompting interactions among different regions. This is the case of Chuchuwaza.
Trading Chuchuwaza

The tree was quite small and full of scars. Constant use over several years was evident in the cuts all over the lower reaches of the bark. Somehow, the tree was still alive. Around it, the forest seemed quite healthy, yet the Chuchuwaza had been constantly harvested.

An Inga man in his late 40s from the local reservation of Villagarzón had taken us to this particular tree. He guided us through the forest for several hours to reach it and, when we found it, Don Benjamin quickly took his machete to cut several strips of the brown bark. Back in Mocoa, he had called me earlier that week to tell me they had found a Chuchuwaza tree. I asked if I could go with him to harvest some of the medicinal bark.

He cut the bark with his machete. Once it was ripped off the tree, the reddish bark seemed quite bright. With the same machete, he cut several other pieces that were easily stripped from the tree. Cutting some of the larger branches allowed him to get more bark without harming the main trunk too much.

We had about 15 pieces when he decided to head back. As we walked back, he happily talked about the many things he could do with the Chuchuwaza. He seemed content, considering that he only gathered a few pieces. It was enough to cook several litres of the medicines he was later going to sell in the market.

As we reached the town, my friend paid and finalised the transaction of buying and accessing Chuchuwaza. They had agreed about this beforehand, as access to this tree would be impossible without the guide. The tree was not old but it was probably one of the few Chuchuwaza trees left in Middle Putumayo. Allowing us to gather some Chuchuwaza was a good source of money for our guide. However, he had only allowed us to cut a few pieces, since the whole tree would have cost much more.

It had been quite a long time since my friend had found a Chuchuwaza tree to harvest. Gathering pieces from a live tree was one of the only ways of getting enough to meet
his demand. He preferred this to buying Chuchuwaza from other middlemen who might get him another kind of bark.

During the next couple of days, he worked tirelessly. Every time I visited him, he had his stove burning at full power, boiling the Chuchuwaza to retrieve all of its medicinal benefits. He had a whole spectrum of Chuchuwaza products. One of them was a thick, reduced infusion that would be sold to retailers in Cali. Another would be pulverised and sold by the ounce. He made a cream with oils and wax to sell to the herbalist markets of Mocoa, and an extract with alcohol for those patients who knew him personally.

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Several reasons might explain why Chuchuwaza has such prevalence in the multicultural landscape of popular medicines in Latin America. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Incas had extended networks of traders throughout the Andes, which also enabled the exchange of knowledge and medicinal practices. In the Andes, this interconnectedness stimulated the spread of central Andean ideas and beliefs about health (Bussmann and Sharon, 2006). Known as the ‘health axis’ of the old central Andean culture, this traditional health system included many of the medicinal plants, symbolic tools and actual practices that are shared from Bolivia to Ecuador, most of which can be dated back to the first millennium BCE (Camino, 1992).

By the time these routes had been established in southern Colombia, Quechua had become the main trading language in the Andes; thus, the names of many medicinal plants have a Quechua etymology. Chuchuwaza is a Quechua word that links the plant to central Andean markets. However, this link may be a speculation, too difficult to prove. The lack of any mention in colonial archival records makes an in-depth ethnohistorical analysis of the use of this plant more difficult. However, I believe that the lack of local names – its common name is different only in Brazil, where it is called Capinuri (Taylor, 2005) – points to two possible origins of the plant. Either it is a relic of pre-Columbian trade, incorporated into Spanish and mestizo healing systems, or it is a result of colonial processes in Amazonia, where Spanish missionaries used Quechua
as a lingua franca among indigenous communities. Whichever the explanation, it does not justify why Chuchuwaza’s use is so prevalent throughout the region.

Many medicinal plants have gone out of use, while the increasingly globalised trade has incorporated many others into the local pharmacopoeia (Bussmann and Sharon, 2006). In the case of the plants I have explored in this fieldwork, some have stayed localised while others have expanded to regional and even global medicinal networks. Amazonian plants may be widely used in one region, while they may not be available in the neighbouring towns. To use an example found in this thesis, Chondur is widespread in the lowlands of Putumayo and Caquetá but, four hours away in Pasto, it is challenging to find. Meanwhile, Chuchuwaza is used throughout the country. Understanding how and why this phenomenon happened may help us comprehend the commodification process.53

As Igor Kopytoff (1986) stresses, there is much more to the process of commodification than just making an object exchangeable in a system of trade. Being a commodity is not a permanent category; objects go in and out of being commodities continuously. Since it has a liminal existence, being a commodity has several phases that define how it travels through a trade route. In this process, the object is given a value, then distilled from the cultural context it previously existed in, reshaped to fit different value systems, and incorporated into new cosmological notions. The act of trade stimulates intercultural exchange and allows objects to take on many shapes to fit different cultural practices.

For local communities, Chuchuwaza is valuable due to its potential of being a medicinal plant. The knowledge that a plant is medicinal is as valuable as the plant itself. A history of continued use adds value to its traditional use, legitimising it. Without it, Chuchuwaza would probably be just another tree, valued not for its medicinal properties but for other characteristics that are defined by the locals who coexist with these forests. This medicinal potential has defined the destiny of Chuchuwaza, made it universally valuable, and accelerated its introduction into the trade routes of popular medicine in Colombia.

53 The commodification process is the process by which an object becomes a commodity based on supply and demand.
The physical act of stripping the bark off the tree not only strips it away from its original biological and ecological function, but it also strips it away from its previous cultural and social world. It is through this violent act that Chuchuwaza is reborn as a commodity. In other words, this is how Chuchuwaza is alienated (Tsing, 2013).

As Chuchuwaza is separated from the local traditional relationships, we see how it begins to take a new form. It no longer depends on the closeness to the forest to get its vital and healing energy, nor on the mediation of the shamans to grant access to it. It has taken on a new existence, a new life beyond the shamanic world view. For my friend, who is not indigenous, the healing power of the medicine comes from its deepest essence, from the substances that it contains. As he boils and reduces the Chuchuwaza, he is trying to access this intrinsic property. No longer does value depend on the spiritual characteristics of the plant; instead, value lies in the healing substance as an object. He confirms this: “Uno lo hierva hasta sacar la parte medicinal, esa parte es lo que se usa (One boils it to extract the medicinal part, that is what is used).”

The reason why a person might transform an object into a commodity depends on the cultural value given to the object. Consequently, the value we give to an object depends on the social act of exchange. This highlights the almost autonomous existence of commodities, as they are “disengaged from their makers and at the mercy of market transactions” (Tsing, 2013: 24).

In the case of these plants, it is their medicinal qualities that are highly valuable to individuals, to the markets and to other cultures. Yet, people may understand health and the efficacy of medicines in different ways. Accordingly, the plant’s medicinal properties may be due to certain spiritual agency or capability, to a biochemical component, or even to colonial and racial power relationships. Thus, the plant drifts in and out of the state of a commodity as it travels through a network, gaining different values and meanings while losing others. Yet, in its deepest and most distilled form, being beneficial to the body is that universal value that allows a cultural transaction.
The act of commodification also adds more value to these plants. As soon as the plant is harvested, this intervention adds a value to the plant, transforming it from a plant with medicinal potential to a medicinal plant. Most people only know Chuchuwaza as a bark, and are not able to identify the tree; therefore, its intervened form is the commodity. As we saw with my friend, further transformations add value to it. Giving it a new form through labour transforms it from a medicinal plant to a medicine. By this point, the plant is independent of its previous cultural context, made into a commodity that is as ambiguous as possible in order to be used by anyone who is willing to try it, but also reflecting the cultural necessities and ideas of health and body of those who wish to use it. In other words, by making it ambiguous yet reflective of specific cultural values that can be translated and misunderstood by diverse cultural backgrounds, these medicines can be easily incorporated and sold in the diverse practices that make up folk medicine in Colombia.

**Chuchuwaza in the Markets**

During my time in the field, Chuchuwaza was usually found as a bark and as a processed product. It was sold mostly in small pieces – five centimetres long for 2,000 to 5,000 Colombian pesos – and you were able to find it in medicinal stalls throughout Colombia. Those who know Chuchuwaza buy it as a bark. While working in the markets, I witnessed regular customers who never bought ointments or syrups, always preferring to buy fresh plants – in this case, the bark – in bulk to cook at home. When asked, most stated that they would not buy the industrialised products since the essence of the plant was in its freshness. Usually, these people were more knowledgeable, which was quickly noticeable in how they touched and smelt the plants. For example, when offered a bark of black Chuchuwaza, an old lady quickly rejected it, stating that its dark colour meant that it was not the correct plant. Others would take small amounts of resin on their fingers to test the consistency, while many identified the plant by smelling it. This ambiguous relationship with the medicinal plant merchants highlights these plants’ de-regularised trade and the complex sensations they produce.

This also illustrates that the knowledge regarding the plants’ properties and how to process them from their raw state is not restricted to a specific social role – i.e. shamans.
– but is rather more widespread. Indeed, some of the medicinal knowledge, as well as techniques used to transform the plants, were less confined to a clearly defined role than I first imagined. This is generally the case with plants that have been incorporated into the larger trade network, such as Chuchuwaza, which has been separated from its original practice and now integrated into the blurry, fluid knowledge of medicinal plants in folk culture. In other words, plants that require special preparation with their own specific set of techniques in one region are reduced to their most basic characteristics – such as identification, preparation and consumption – when they are absorbed into the overall folk medicinal network.

On the other hand, many patients visited the stalls with a shopping list of plants given to them by their healer, shaman or allopathic physician. This meant that they had arrived at the markets not really knowing what to buy, but trusting the advice of the experts they had consulted. Not surprisingly, the merchants were able to convince many customers to buy the already prepared soaps, creams, infusions and ointments made from the same plants but displayed in a more abstract form. People were willing to pay for these substances, as they were convinced of their efficacy and trusted the knowledge of the merchants, as well as the system as a whole.

There are several components of trust in the trade of medicinal plants. First, there is the trust in plants as benign beings, full of healing potential. The second level of trust is towards the system as a whole, the ancestral, traditional knowledge of medicinal plants to differentiate between good and bad plants. Finally, there is trust towards the merchant or healer, since many medicines are abstract and difficult to identify, even for experienced shoppers. All of these levels of trust manifested in the healing performance, as the merchants would often emphasise their experience in the crafts of magic and health by bragging about their capabilities and skills. These levels are also apparent in the parallel drawn between these healers and indigenous and ancestral shamans, who contained the secrets of the inner essence of plants. These performances increased the product’s value by legitimising the merchant’s knowledge. They also delegitimised Western scientific medicine.  

54 As I travelled through the country exploring the markets, waking up in the early morning and spending days sitting in the stalls trying to stay out of the way, I could sense a distrust towards
The traditional medicines that are now industrially packaged try to reflect this healing performance in order to increase the product’s value. The images and information displayed on the packaging legitimise each medicine by associating it with ancestral practices and indigenous knowledge. Images of pre-Columbian art, indigenous men in traditional headdress and wild forests highlight the product’s close association with indigenous healing and magic.

Processed medicines have become an important product for small artisanal and pharmaceutical companies located in urban areas. They produce many of the extracted solutions we find in the markets. Many of them are located in Ecuador or Peru, while, in Colombia, the main industries lie in the city of Cali near the Pacific coast. Artisanal pharmaceuticals seem to blur the boundaries between medical systems and significantly complicate the picture of the trade of plant medicine in the area. These companies are on the fringe of the global pharmaceutical industry, as they seem to be linked with local concepts of health that are dismissed by Western medical communities. They sell gels, creams and infusions produced from local medicinal plants, often commercialising mixtures that are both traditional and experimental.

I have always been curious about the way in which they work out the formulas to produce these medicines, as they often mix plants from a variety of different backgrounds. Not much has been written on the subject. Most of the literature focuses on the biochemical efficacy of the plants (Bussmann and Sharon, 2015; García Barriga, 1975; Giraldo et al., 2009; Instituto Humboldt, 2011) and does not analyse the emic rationales of the chemistry behind these mixtures.

During this fieldwork, I conducted a few operational sequence observations on the cooking process of some of these plants. Several general aspects can be highlighted. First, there are different types of mixtures: some are cooked, others are placed in cold or Western medicine that has driven a resurgence in traditional medicine. As I talked to the different men and women from a range of social classes and ages who visited these markets, I was struck by their distrust of the biochemical compounds in modern medicine. For instance, the fact that medical products are so distanced from what they understand and relate to provokes a lack of trust that plants (which have benefited their families for centuries) do not. Perhaps it had to do with the aesthetic presentation of a plant as a source of healing.
hot solvents such as water and alcohol, and many are crushed and made into a paste. Most of the mixtures I came across follow traditional recipes, often focusing on a symptom or a particular organ. By grouping and mixing plants that might have an effect on a specific organ, these recipes categorise the effects as similar and, thus, these plants as mixable. These recipes were probably handed down by the healer’s mentors or parents and are usually kept secret. The quantities and proportions of a certain plant may vary, according to the availability or strength of the plant in the mixture. For example, in one of the cooked mixtures that required the native Vanilla (*Vanilla rivasisii*), the plant was added in small quantities since it has an overpowering smell that could render the medicine too ‘hot’ and cause possible side effects. There is also room for experimentation. During the cooking process, the healers and shamans would constantly taste the elixirs to identify whether they had the correct amount of each plant.

For example, in a medicine packaged for asthma attacks, one tablespoon of pulverised Chuchuwaza is mixed with three grams of Uña de Gato (*Uncaria tomentosa*) and 10 grams of Lapacho (*Tubebuia sp.*). It is then set to boil until the liquid turns a dark brown. Each plant is known for its effectiveness against asthma attacks, as well as for being an important soothing agent. Specific quantities were determined according to previous knowledge, a deep-rooted understanding of the qualities and benefits of each of the plants, and constant experimentation. In another example, the locally famous *Jarabe del Indio* – Indian syrup, which contains Zarzaparrilla and 15 other unspecified cool plants – works for bile, one of the four Ancient Greek humours. It can be used for bloating and liver problems, as well as for depression and ‘heaviness’.
Meanwhile, Chuchuwaza (as part of an ointment) can be used for erectile dysfunction, as an anti-inflammatory and for ‘lack of energy’, all of which are associated with blood as one of the humours. Therefore, it has to be mixed with plants that are used for the same health condition. Additionally, Chuchuwaza is also used for the bones and joints, which was its original purpose in the Andean markets, and is used with plants that have similar healing properties.

This type of chemistry follows patterns of indigenous and local tradition based on temperatures and flavours, while drawing on Old World practices such as humourism and herbalism. There is an ongoing debate on the influence of European humourism in American folk medicine, since analyses of the Mesoamerican medicinal system suggest that there are some hot and cold concepts that have a pre-Hispanic origin (Foster, 1994; Messer, 1987).

The pre-Hispanic classification system of temperature is used to understand the body, medicines and other cosmological phenomena (Foster, 1994). It is part of a cosmological duality that defines all things in the world. Most importantly, the notions of temperature offer an effective classification to know the medicines: which ones can be combined and which ones may have contradictory effects on the health of the individual. Food also needs to be taken into account when dealing with these temperatures, as diets can also change the internal temperature of the patients. However, the similarity between the the Spanish and Amerindian systems promoted a quick assimilation and syncretic hybridisation going both ways (Foster, 1994; Gänger, 2014). For this reason, the north Atlantic trade in

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55 Such as hot and cold, bitter and sweet.
56 Lowland indigenous communities also have concepts of hot and cold. The People of the Centre, such as the Witoto and Muinane, consider moods and ethics to depend on the internal temperature of a person (Londoño Sulkin, 2012). These temperatures need to be balanced continuously in order to achieve the proper personality desired by the community. Women who are generally cool need to consume and use cool plants to balance their internal temperature when they get too hot (Londoño Sulkin, 2012).
57 Like humourism, many plants are divided into hot or cold. However, according to Foester (1998), this is more tied to cosmological notions of the duality of the world, such as Female and Male dynamics and Night and Day. Many plants that are cold are considered closely related to the female essence, the moon and water. Hot plants are considered related to the male essence, the sun and dryness.
medicine became a space of intercultural exchange, where multiple systems of health came together.

This transatlantic medicinal plant trade stimulated the flow of medicines throughout the world, opening space for the consolidation of certain Colombian plants in the global market. It was this medicinal system that popularised Chuchuwaza, Quinine (Cinchona sp.), Zarzaparrilla (Smilax sp.) and Uña de gato (Uncaria tomentosa), among others (Gänger, 2014). In the early days of this global trade, the system was in constant reconfiguration as it tried to establish a more inclusive understanding of the various plants and healing systems that came into contact with the Spanish world. As with the fetishised image of the Indian in Colombian folk medicine, there was a need to acknowledge the exotic origin of these plants. As Gänger (2014) notes:

“English, Iberian and French customers alike fetishised and resorted to substances they associated with America in the eighteenth century. The provenance of foreign medicinal plants was part of their commercial appeal in Europe, and ‘Peruvian balsam’, jalap root, tabasco pepper and balsam of Tolu ‘advertised their exotic genealogy through their very names’. So did narratives about their ‘discovery’: the testimonies of ‘indigenous’ healers or European and Creole observations of how the ‘Indians’ identified and collected medicinal plants, how they applied them or prepared compounds, almost by necessity made their appearance in the period’s medical advertisements, advice literature and treatises on American medicinal plants.” (2014: 56)

The Spanish, having faced the complex and highly intricate medicinal knowledge of Latin America, were one of the first European nations to start rethinking their conceptions on health, allowing serious reconfigurations of local medicinal systems. In particular, the transatlantic exchange had an important effect on the colonies, from Chile to Mexico. This helped generate a surprisingly homogeneous concept of health.

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58 Both early Spanish and Andean medicines can be classified as analogisms. Descola (2014) describes how the ontological category of analogism understands the internal and external characteristics of life as made of multiple components, continually shifting and relating to each other in analogous ways. This broad category includes Mesoamerican and Andean concepts of health, as well as humourism and Aristotelian medicine. These systems have many similarities, in spite of their distant origins.
throughout the region (Foster, 1994). In the Andean areas, local indigenous and Afro-American practices had an enormous impact on Ibero-American folk medicine. Even if the European humoural system was the backbone of folk health throughout the colonies, many local plants, rituals and cosmological notions became crucial parts of the way in which people dealt with health. The resilience of the local medical systems allowed them to exist in parallel, continually exchanging and mixing with the larger global markets (Bussmann and Sharon, 2006).

It is interesting to note that, even with added biomedical understanding, the system of health developed in the early 18th century still plays a major part in contemporary folk medicine. Plants that became common medicines during this time still function in similar ways to those conceived during this late colonial period. As modern biomedicine became a major part of global health, the resilience of local traditional practices stimulated a new type of syncretic process, one that is visible in the alternative medicinal industries mentioned above.
Chuchuwaza as a Mediator of Alterity

The markets described above highlight one of the most interesting aspects of Colombian popular medicine: the power of these plants to heal can easily be incorporated into different ways of viewing health, often having beneficial results for the health views involved. Healing – be it through chemical composition, magic, humours or temperature – is the main characteristic of these plants, which allows them to interact with the body, as well as with different ideas of health as they travel through the commodity chains and medicinal markets of the country. How these plants heal requires further research. Yet, as I have been insisting, healing is a value in itself that induces these commodification, misinterpretation and incorporation processes. In this section, I wish to explain how the plant’s properties – and thus its own agency, which is often intensified through cultural techniques – allow it to travel between human cultural settings.

Even though there is a ‘folk medicine of Colombia’, there is no centralised system of knowledge that defines how a medicinal plant should work. Healers and patients are constantly reforming and reinterpreting the system, and defining the efficacy of medicinal plants. In fact, the only centralised information is the anatomical characteristics of each plant, which is accessible through empirical interactions. This is made even more complicated because the internal characteristics of the medicine – which is what make them effective – are often abstract and difficult to interpret.

Although written material on Amazonian medicinal plants is available, it is usually in the form of academic works or books that have no real reach into the Colombian traditional culture. Information on medicinal plants still spreads through word-of-mouth and tradition. Since knowing and using medicinal plants is a technique, it requires constant repetition, teaching and reminding. Additionally, the lack of centralised information allows a reinterpretation of these plants’ properties and applications.

59 I have not done an in-depth biological or medicinal study on this; however, patients who use these plants continuously state that they are effective in most of their forms. It is worth thinking about the value and possible problems of conducting such a study, since, by giving these healing powers a scientific explanation, we might be dismissing indigenous and traditional knowledge.
Therefore, by experimenting and testing the plant, by cooking it and ingesting it, people also produce knowledge.

It is worth emphasising that this is a different form of experimentation from that used to produce modern biomedical knowledge, where a scientific hypothesis regarding a medicine’s effectivity is tested. Instead, this vernacular experimentation not only allows mixtures, it also encourages them. It is through this dialogue – among the sources, the artefact itself and the person who is experimenting with it – that information associated with the plant becomes flexible and malleable, ready to transform through space and time as it travels along the trade networks.

It is through this reinterpretation that different cultural and symbolic properties, which would otherwise be irrelevant in how a medicine is effective, become a major part of the healing system in Colombia. I believe that this is why the colonial hierarchy has become such an important part of health in the country, as people try to interpret not only how they get sick, but also how they can be healed. It is possible to see this in how medicinal plants are often sold by emphasising colonial power structures, underlining their ancestral and mysterious origins as evidence of their efficacy. We can see it when medicinal mixtures with Chuchuwaza are packaged with images of indigenous artefacts; we can see it on the bottles of Jarabe del Indio, which highlight the ancestral origin of this infusion as opposed to its components. It seems that these racial categories are sometimes more important than the internal characteristics of the plant. This might be due to the fact that the abstract efficacy of these medicines might be easier to explain through racial magic than their internal properties.

Indeed, Colombian popular medicine seems to be defined by similar phenomena. The different racial groups that have come together through the Conquista are believed to possess certain symbolic and cultural magic that manifests in the healing efficacy of these plants. In particular, the races that have been conquered and enslaved are believe to have deep and secretive knowledge that gives them the power to heal. As such, plants and techniques associated with these racial categories also possess certain magical characteristics.
Indigenous shamanism and Afro-Colombian healers use these preconceptions and stereotypes to legitimise their roles as healers (Taussig, 1987). It is in these power structures that black and Indian people are believed to possess the magic to heal or to do harm. Urban shamans and healers often reinforce this by performing the part, dressing with a crown of feathers and talking about the forest. In a similar way, the jungles of Amazonia and the Pacific coast are usually evoked when talking about medicinal plants – “Esta es de la selva (this one is from the jungle)”, as if evoking the healing powers of the deep forest. Often, the realms of the wild and savagery are evoked as sources of power, since they lie outside the civilised and non-magical world.

This is what Baumman (2006) identifies as an orientalising grammar, which fetishises the perceived powers of indigenous knowledge and allows previously conquered and subjugated people to gain some status in the day-to-day social politics of the region. However, this does not come without a complex political backlash, since these healers are also widely feared. It is known that, as much as they can heal, they can hurt. Throughout Colombia, it is not uncommon for people to classify healers and shamans as witches and sorcerers, often feared and, in some extreme cases, persecuted.

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60 At the same time, Christianity has established a deep distrust of specific plant medicines, even if it never prevented people from continuously seeking their counsel. Often, witches are believed to be pagan or demonic, yet capable of healing people by supernatural powers derived from an explicit pact with the devil. There is a long colonial history of dealing with the ambiguity of these healers and shamans. The Spanish and local white people would often appreciate the botanical knowledge of local healers, yet look down on them for their pagan beliefs (Crawford, 2016). By classifying these local healers as brujos (sorcerers), they would often enter a paradoxical relationship with them. The white elite would often shun them for their magic and superstitions, but would still seek them when necessary. As part of the push to convert the continent to Christianity, many healers were persecuted for their magical and religious beliefs, yet the medicines and techniques associated with healing were overlooked, surviving to this day (Crawford, 2016).

61 My friend Nely, who is from the northern coast, would describe witches as those who have extensive knowledge of poisonous plants, and would often warn me to be careful when working in the markets: “Toca tener mucho cuidado con los que conocen de plantas (You have to be careful with those who know about plants).” Similarly, the local shamans of Mocoa distrusted any healer who worked in the market. They were looked down upon as dangerously incompetent or capable of doing witchcraft for some quick cash. Association with the devil is not made explicit, yet these shamans and healers are usually described as capable of doing evil things. This is especially true when describing those who know too much about plants, since, it is believed, they can access their poisonous and magical potential. In this world, the line between poison and medicine, between those who can give good luck and take it, is so thin that suspicion often dictates how people see entire populations.
As mentioned, the ambiguity of healing in Colombia might be a result of the abstract effect of some of these medicinal plants. Since the plants are difficult to truly understand, they are also ambiguous. There are plants that can heal and kill, poisons that are medicines and plants that, if used incorrectly, can cause irreparable damage to someone. Some plants are clearly part of the devil’s repertoire, and those who work with them are already cursed. Others, like Ayahuasca and Chuchuwaza, are generally used for good. Magic plants for love, money and luck are used to cheat the system, surging in popularity as a means to improve chances in the unfair urban world. On the other end, there are plants that even botanists fear.

Medicinal plants communicate with us through chemical reactions, albeit in an abstract and ambiguous manner, and we have built entire rational systems to understand them. In Colombia, the magic of certain racial categories has help people understand and conceptualise some of the effects of these medicines. As I showed throughout the chapter, this is not as simple as it looks but a process that has been created by the flow of knowledge between different groups of people. The markets here function as spaces of interaction, where cultural hybrids are produced but also where symbolical systems and knowledge are constantly being experimented on. These markets are constantly changing, transformed by the interactions of three distinct agents: the merchant, the patient and the medicinal plant.

In the next chapter, I will approach one of the most complicated plants in the shamanistic repertoire, full of contradictions and conflicts – the Borrachero. It will guide us through the local trade networks of shamans who live in this territory and show us how it has been incorporated into the folk medicine of Colombia. It will allow us to explore the shamanic trade networks that function throughout Putumayo and beyond, paving the way for the ongoing Ayahuasca phenomenon we see today. It will also give us a general perspective on the historical process that linked the indigenous people with the global capitalist economy, highlighting how this commodification process has transformed widely used plants of power into powerful agents of violence and corruption.
Chapter 3. Borrachero

As we have seen, the trade of medicines in southern Colombia has a long history of regional interaction between the Amazonian lowlands and the Andean highlands. This interwoven relationship promotes the flow of not only products and medicines, but also symbolic and cultural elements that have had a profound influence on how people perceive their bodies and the world. In the previous chapters, I have explored regional and national trade; however, the vertical dynamic between the highlands and the lowlands is also widely visible in local communities, particularly in the region of Sibundoy. The shamans from these highlands, as part of the Culturas del Yagé have an intense relationship to the lowlands, with a corresponding exchange of cultural and symbolic artefacts. However, they also have a history of using another master plant from the highlands, called Borrachero, which has its own exchange network. In this
chapter, I will explore the dynamics of this local trade by healers and shamans, analysing it through the perspective of Borrachero.

**The Floripondio**

Borrachero or Floripondio (*Brugmansia sp.*) has always fascinated me. It is an intriguing looking plant; at first glance, it is beautiful, almost magically so. Its long flowers with their characteristic trumpet-like form have pastel colours that range from white to orange, pink and yellow. They hang gently in the wind, giving out a powerful perfume that fills the air early in the mornings. However, its beauty is misleading, since it is also one of the most powerful shamanic plants and can be extremely dangerous.

This woody bush can grow quite large, often reaching three to four metres. As part of the Solanaceae or nightshade botanical family, it is closely related to Tobacco, Potatoes, Tomatoes and Chillies. Like all plants in this botanical family, it has complex leaves and five-pointed star-shaped flowers. The large flowers, often 20 to 30 centimetres long, emit a powerful perfume that attracts nocturnal moths and bats, their main pollinators; however, *B. sanguinea* also attracts hummingbirds.

You can find two main genera of Borracheros in South America: the *Datura* and the *Brugmansia*. Both of them are widely spread throughout the continent, and are now found in Europe and Asia. *Datura* and *Brugmansia* are often known interchangeably as Borrachero, even though they have very different botanical structures. In North America, *Datura* is known as Hierba del Diablo or Devil’s Trumpet, a plant that Carlos Castañeda (1998) would often include in his books. Brugmansia in Europe and the United States is known as Angel’s Trumpet, and is widely used as an ornamental plant. I will focus on *Brugmansia*, since it is the type of Borrachero most commonly found in Putumayo.

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62 Although Castañeda’s books are controversial, they are often well researched. His use of the different medicinal and hallucinogenic plants is a good indication of this. In his books, Don Juan teaches Carlos how to heal using the power of plants such as Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) and *Datura*. However, the common use of *Datura* is often seen as controversial, since there is little evidence of Yaqui shamans using this plant (Noel, 1976).
In Putumayo, Borrachero is widely used as a medicinal plant. During this study, it was used both externally and internally, although mostly externally due to the danger of ingesting it. Like many other Solanaceae, it has complex biochemical compounds produced as insecticides and deterrents for herbivores, many of which are poisonous for humans. It also contains alkaloids that are harmful for humans in large doses, the most important of which is known as scopolamine or hyoscine. In Europe, the nightshade family is frequently considered highly poisonous, but it is also an essential source of medicines as it has a close association with witches (Schultes, Hofmann and Rätsch, 2006). As can be seen, this is a family full of contradictions, with many of its species used as important food sources, such as Tomatoes, Chillies and Potatoes.

The poisonous character of this plant makes the relationship with humans ambiguous. Many indigenous and mestizo people throughout the country use it medicinally and love its beautiful flowers, knowing that they are highly poisonous. In the department of Cauca, indigenous groups such as the Naza, Coconuco and Guambiano/Mizak have Borracheros planted as live fences and next to their doorways. It is considered a protecting plant; it guards against evil spirits and

Image 12. Borrachero in the entrance of a shaman’s house

63 It is used in a similar way to the Aloe or Sábila (Aloe vera), even though it is not poisonous. While Borrachero is used to scare away dangerous spirits, Aloe is thought to attract them and absorb them into its organism. This means that when the Aloe dies off, it is because it absorbed an evil spirit and protected the household.
unwanted guests. In Amazonia, Borracheros are commonly found near the homes of people who work with magic or shamanism. It is common to find a Borrachero tree near the homes of shamans and healers, as it also protects them from witchcraft and other evil forces. In Mocoa, a Borrachero in front of the door often means the person is a healer, shaman or has some knowledge of the subject.

During my time in the field, I was able to observe how Borrachero was also used as a powerful cleansing or smudging agent. Some highland mestizo shamans cook its leaves and flowers in water and use this brew to clean a space for ceremonial use. Others add it to alcoholic extracts and perfumes that they spray-blow on patients. Baths made with boiled Borrachero leaves help clean out bad luck or evil spirits. As a member of bitter plants, it functions as a soul-cleansing agent when combined with other plants, such as Rue (Ruta graveolens), Rosemary (Rosmarinus officinalis), Garlic (Allium sativum), and Eucalyptus (Eucalyptus sp.). It is also commonly used as a medicinal plant for external bruises; mashed plasters of Borrachero leaves are placed on haematomas, painful joints, or on the forehead and temples for migraines.

Its central role as a powerful hallucinogen, due to its high quantity of scopolamine or hyoscine, makes it an important but dangerous plant. Borrachero is a master plant for some shamans from the highlands, who place it at the pinnacle of their plant cosmological hierarchy. They believe that, when used in certain ritualised ways or for divination, it can be an ally in dealing with sicknesses since it can show the shaman the strategy to use in particularly tricky situations. However, since Ayahuasca is much easier to handle, Borrachero has become marginalised; it is now used less frequently and left to experts or those who want to show off their expertise.

For lowland indigenous communities, Borrachero is seen mostly as a valuable medicinal plant, ranked just below the master plants, and it is rarely used in ritualised settings. It is also widely feared, and many shamans blame each other for using it as an additive in the cooked Ayahuasca brew. For the Jivaros and the highland communities

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64 Unlike hot and cold, bitter and sweet is not necessarily a humoural classification. It is closer to the indigenous classifications from Mesoamerica (Foster, 1993). It is also closely related to the idea of sweet and bitter maniocs that define the diet of the lowland communities.

65 This is an indigenous community of the Andean foothills of Peru.
of Peru and Ecuador, where it is known as huacachaca (Schultes and Plowman, 1979; Descolla, 1996), *Brugmansia* is used in initiation rituals where children are required to drink Borrachero until they pass out (Descolla, 1996).

Due to its high amount of alkaloids, it is known to produce strong hallucinations, loss of consciousness, as well as a disconnection from reality for several days (Schultes, Hofmann and Rätsch, 2006). In higher doses, it can cause longer hallucinogenic trances that are characterised by lack of conscious action, nausea, vomiting, convulsions, amnesia, and death.

For this reason, only a few specialists are willing to use it and, even then, in extremely low dosages. Its flowers can be brewed as tea and, in some cases, its seeds are eaten to produce a powerful effect. As mentioned, there are reports of it being mixed in the Ayahuasca brew. Additives in Ayahuasca are common; however, mixing Borrachero is extremely frowned upon by the local shamanic community. It is considered a practice used only by witches and sorcerers.

Even its local name alludes to its power. *Borrachero* in Spanish means drunkenness or the producer of drunkenness. Its effect, even at a distance, is a cause of concern to parents throughout the country. As a boy, I was told cautionary stories of people who had died after sleeping under the tree, warning me to stay away from its beautiful flowers and their appealing perfume. For the people from the Andean department of Cauca, it is known to take the spiritual form of an eagle, capable of lifting a person into the clouds and of getting women pregnant (Schultes, Hofmann and Rätsch, 2006).

However, even with the apparent risks involved in the use of this plant, it has been part of complex indigenous rituals since before the Spanish arrived. Indigenous communities throughout the country have historically used it for initiation rituals and for dealing with magic, disease and witchcraft. It was widely exchanged through most of the Andean region, spreading from Venezuela to Chile. However, as I will show, the exchange of Borrachero in Putumayo is more akin to a barter, gift or ritualised exchange. This trade transformed it into a species that is completely dependent on human interaction for its
reproduction. *Brugmansia* embodies the traditional trade networks, as constant exchange has domesticated it, transformed it and made it into what it is now.

It is worth noting that the powers of *Brugmansia* have not gone unnoticed and were quickly assimilated into an occult economy of drugs used primarily to do harm to others. In its distilled form, known as scopolamine or *burundanga*, it is known to be a common date rape drug, also used in urban areas of the country to take advantage of people under its influence. As with everything, the complicated relationship of the Western world with this plant is often full of nuance and contradictions. Like most of the plants that have a substantial physical and mental effect, people will experiment with them. Throughout the country, people know that eating the fruit or drinking a tea made of Borraghoro leaves produces a powerful hallucinogenic effect, and some people do it recreationally. Eating *cacao sabanero*, as it is called in Bogotá, might have a severe impact on the person’s health; it can trigger severe mental disorders and cause irreparable damage. In Bogotá, consuming the seeds is one of the most common causes of plant intoxication (Secretaria Distrital de Salud, 2015).

However, the shamans of Putumayo have an intimate relationship with Borraghoro. In the following section, I will explore how local shamanic networks empowered this association, and how the exchange of this plant has caused profound transformations in its biological functions. I shall analyse small, localised networks of healers, apprentices and patients who actively use and trade Borraghoro while they are part of larger networks similar to those that exchange Ayahuasca.

**A Borraghoro Trade Network**

Taita Jaime told me:

“*Para conocer bien el poder de la planta, usted puede acostarse debajo de ella, le pide a un amigo o alguien que lo despierte después de media hora. Esta planta le va a dar sueños muy reales y poderosas visiones. Así puede trabajar*

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66 Borraghoro is the primary source of scopolamine alkaloid and, therefore, the main ingredient for this underground network.
esa planta... Claro, pero yo no lo recomiendo (To know the true power of this plant, you can sleep under it – you have to ask a friend or someone to wake you up after half an hour – and it will give you realistic dreams and powerful visions. That’s how you work with Borrachero… Of course, I don’t recommend using it).”

“Aquellos del alto [Alto Putumayo], ellos usan mucho ese borrachero, ellos tienen tradición en ese uso, es muy peligroso. Lo mezclan en el yagé, ¿puede creerlo?... cuando lo cocinan. Así la gente se tumba y se revuelca, fuera de control. Uno siempre tiene que tener cuidado cuando va por allá (Those from the highlands, they use a lot of Borrachero, they have a long tradition of its use, very dangerous. They mix it with Yagé – can you believe it? – when they cook it. People fall down and wallow, out of control. One always has to be careful when going up into Sibundoy),” he told me while drunk with Ayahuasca. “Yo conozco todos los tipos de borrachero, el Andaquí, el que llaman serpiente, cada color es uno pero yo creo que eso no hay diferencia solo para aquellos que creen que saben... no creo que los prueben (I know all the different types of Borrachero, the Andaqui, the one they call the snake, each colour is different but I think there is no difference, only for those people who think they know, but I don’t think they’ve tried each one).”

I then asked where this strange plant came from. He hesitated.

“Yo creo que eso viene del alto; allá si que hay muchos tipos de Borrachero, aquí en Mocoa hay solo algunos; el que llaman Andaqui que es blanco, pero allá hay mas de siete variedades (I think it comes from the highlands; over there, there are many types of Borrachero, here in Mocoa there are only a few; the white one is the Andaqui, but up there, they have more than seven varieties).”

I then asked him how Borrachero had arrived in Mocoa and the lowland forests if it was from the highlands. He looked at the Borrachero that was growing in the corner of his house and said:
“Ese es el Andaquí [Brugmansia suaveolens]; uno sabe por la flor blanca con tiritas como colas … Lucho [su hermano] me dio una estaca de esta, yo no tenía donde ponerla y la sembré aquí. A Lucho se la dio Taita Pacho [Taita Francisco Pijuae], quien sabe de dónde la consiguió el abuelo, pero lo más posible es que algún tomador del alto le regaló la estaca pues aquí casi no se consigue esta variedad. Los del Sibundoy bajan al bajo a aprender del Yagé y traen sus plantas y se llevan otras, así siempre ha sido (That one over there is Andaquí [Brugmansia suaveolens variety]; it has a white flower with long hanging threads from the edges like tails … Lucho [his brother] gave me the cutting of one they have growing in their maloca [ceremonial house], I didn’t have a place to grow it so I just planted it here. Lucho got it from Tatia Pacho, who knows where the abuelo [grandfather] got it from, maybe an apprentice from the highlands since you can’t really find this variety around here. People from Sibundoy come to the lowlands to learn Yagé and bring their own plants and take other plants, it has always been that way).”

As we have seen, exploring the trade of medicinal plants is often confusing, complex and multilayered. In previous chapters, we observed how pre-Columbian communities had established complex trade routes that expanded well beyond their ecological niches, complementing existing resources throughout the different elevations of the Andean mountain range – a “vertical archipelago” of trade, to use John Murra’s (1980) concept. I have also explored how these trade routes have been incorporated into the colonial and the postcolonial world, functioning in complex political and cultural processes of hybridity that have produced the ongoing negotiations about what people understand as health and body.

However, I have not yet explored the localised systems of medicinal plant trade found in the foothill areas of Putumayo. These smaller and much more intimate networks of healers, shamans and patients define local health and exist at the periphery of regional folk medicine. These local networks of shamans exist independently. Even if they share

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67 A famed Ziona elder, who taught several of the powerful shamans in this region.
many traits with folk medicine, they have their own system of beliefs and use their own cultural tools and distinct forms of medicine.

Amazonia is full of groups that actively participate in similar ceremonial consumption of a powerful plant, use a particular healing technique or specific culturally significant ritual. Although these groups are made up of healers that use similar techniques, they have different cultural backgrounds and often do not even share a common language. However, they share tools, diets, myths, kinship bonds and practices. In an effort to classify this phenomenon, Colombian anthropology has grouped these supra-ethnic networks into ‘groups of communities with a wide set of similarities’ (Caicedo, 2014; Echeverri, 2016; Londoño Sulkin, 2012; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1996; Landaburu and Pineda, 1984; Pinzón Castaño, Suárez and Garay, 2004; Ramírez de Jara, 1996; Bolivar, 2005).

Examples of these categories are exogamic communities who share a ritualised dance, such as the ‘Culturas del Yurupari’ (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1996), communities that have
similar foundation myths, such as the ‘*Culturadas del Hacha*’ (Landaburu and Pineda, 1984), or communities that have an exogamic kinship bond and share similar rituals, such as the ‘*Culturadas del Centro*’ (Echeverri, 2016; Londoño Sulkin, 2012).  

In the Andean foothills, we can find several of these networks, especially when it comes to the ceremonial consumption of master plants – communities who share the use of Ayahuasca or the Culturas del Yagé, those shamans who use Tobacco and Coca or ‘*Gente de la mambe y ambil*’, and those who use Yopo (*Anadenanthera peregrina*), Yoco (*Paullinia yoco*) and Guayusa (*Ilex guayusa*) (Chaumeil, 1992; Barbira-Freedman, 2014; Pinzón Castaño, Suárez and Garay, 2004; Ramírez de Jara, 1996; Bolivar, 2005; Schultes and Plowman, 1979). The techniques associated with the consumption of these plants are shared throughout the region by a diversity of different ethnic and cultural communities with many similarities.

There is a variety of archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence on similar pre-Hispanic networks throughout the country. This evidence shows a complex network of shamans and healers throughout Colombia. Symbolic and ceremonial objects closely associated with shamanic practices have been found from the Caribbean coast in the north to the highlands of Pasto and Nariño in the south. Made of gold or stone, these objects have characteristics that indicate an exchange of shamanic beliefs similar to those in Amazonia today (Rodriguez Cuenca, 2011). Familiar motifs, such as feline and jaguar anthropomorphisms, birds and flying creatures, as well as tools of the trade such as snuff pipes, containers, and musical instruments, are widely available.

Curiously, there is no category for the ‘People of Borrachero’. There is no doubt that, throughout the Andean foothills, from Sibundoy to Mocoa and all through Middle

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68 In a similar fashion, we can find groups of highland healers who specialise in particular techniques and master plants, such the ‘Healing Axis’ of Ecuador and Northern Peru (Camino, 1994; Bussmann and Sharon, 2006). Other networks facilitate a similar exchange of plants with a high cultural and symbolic value. This is the case of *Anadenanthera peregrina* (Yopo), which was used by indigenous communities throughout the northern region of South America, and Tobacco and Peyote in North America (Schultes, Hofmann and Rätsch, 2006).

69 It is also probable that Borrachero flowed through the lowlands with help of these networks. The varieties that grow in the lowlands arrived in these territories by similar networks of shamans and healers who would exchange knowledge and practices, and constantly experiment to produce new varieties. Borrachero expanded among a diversity of ethnic backgrounds and is grown by communities throughout Amazonia.
Putumayo, Borrachero still plays a central role in the complex dynamics of local shamanism. Its use, even if it is varied throughout the region, falls into certain practices and rituals that are similar in every ethnic community. These are practices – such as drinking small quantities to give luck and protection, healing with mashed pulp for bruising, and smudging to cleanse the body or ceremonial and living areas – that are generalised and performed with similar techniques. Why is it, then, that Ayahuasca and other master plants have their own classification while Borrachero is marginalised?

Like Tobacco, *Brugmansia* is one of the most common shamanic plants in South America (Schultes, Hofmann and Rätsch, 2006). Its widespread availability might be explained by its continual use since early pre-Hispanic times. Probably one of the earliest archaeological representations of this plant is a Chimú stele from the central Andean Early Horizon (900–200 BCE) with engraved images of its flowers (Mulvani, 1984). However, there are other more inconclusive records that show a longer tradition (Schultes, Hofmann and Rätsch, 2006). Borrachero seems to have been widely available even before many of the famed shamanic master plants, such as Ayahuasca, San Pedro and Coca, were widespread.

It is also one of the few plants that is continuously described by Europeans, such as Fernandez de Oviedo’s 16th-century book *Historia General y Natural de las Indias* (2010 [1852]: 390). In his travels through the territory around Bogotá, he was told of a plant capable of driving people insane.

“*Hay una hierba, en aquella tierra, que llaman tectec, que enloquesce, y tanta podría comer un hombre della, que lo matase. Y para hacer que uno enloquezca, echan desa hierba en la olla en que guisan de comer, y comiendo después de la hierba que con la carne se coció, quedan locos los convidados o comedores para tres o cuatro días; e según la cantidad que echaren, así es más o menos la locura* (There is a plant in that land, which is called Tectec, that drives men crazy, and can even kill if eaten in excess. And to make people crazy, they cook it with food in a pot, and if they eat the herbs that [are] cooked with the meat, they become crazy for three to four days; and according to the quantity used, so is the intensity of their madness).”
This is a clear reference to the effects of Borrachero. Even Humboldt mentioned this plant, writing about how the Muiscas used Tonga – the Muisca name – in ceremonies of the Temple of the Sun in Sogamozo (Humboldt, 2006 [1819–1829]).

However, shamanic use of Borrachero was widely persecuted by the Spanish, deterring its use in most of the country (Schultes and Plowman, 1979). Meanwhile, other shamanic plants were given different roles in the Spanish colonial system, such as Coca and Tobacco, as early commodities. Others were used in regions far removed from the Spanish sphere of influence, such as Yopo and Yagé in the lowlands. Instead, Borrachero continued to grow in the gardens and fields, in front of homes and near roads, but no longer for ceremonial and shamanic practices. The Spanish seemed to have become tolerant of its beautiful flowers. In Sibundoy, its continual use went under the radar of the Spanish priests and monks.

The shamans from Sibundoy are known experts of Borrachero, as Taita LF told me:

“Antes de que llegara el Yagé al Sibundoy, los Kametzá habían llegado al valle desde lejos... Ellos trajeron el borrachero y el conocimiento de cómo usarlo, desde donde venían (Long before Ayahuasca had came to Sibundoy, the Kametsa had arrived at the valley from far away... They brought the Borrachero and the knowledge to use it).”

As we saw in the vignette, Borrachero is still an important plant that connects the local shamans from the highlands with the shamans from the lowlands. It has moved through the territory with the help of these shamans and their apprentices, who are actively exchanging cuttings while collecting varieties.

Yet, only a few specialists use this plant and only in extreme cases. Drinking Borrachero mixed with Ayahuasca or drinking a brew made with Borrachero is known to happen – however, mostly as a hushed story. Instead, shamans in the highlands prefer to use Ayahuasca, as they consider themselves closer to this network than to the smaller Borrachero community. They travel to the lowlands in search of the Ayahuasca brew.
and to master the techniques to heal with this plant’s spirit. Borrachero, on the other hand, is hardly recognised.

**Borrachero in Sibundoy**

This does not mean that Borrachero is not traded at a smaller scale. During my time in Sibundoy, I accompanied a friend who wished to trade a litre of Ayahuasca with a highland shaman. The trade went well, even though the highland shaman was in a position of power due to the fact that he had been elected as *cabildo* the previous year. We managed to negotiate several plants and objects, due to the high quality of the Ayahuasca. One of the plants – the cabildo promised – was a Borrachero variety, not common in the lowlands. After he tasted the brew, he gave us several other fresh herbs, a harmonica and a pound of glass beads for artisanal crafts to sell at the Mocoa market. My friend was happy, especially about the harmonica, which had the special pitch he wanted but could not find in any store in the lowlands. We then headed to the cabildo’s house and, in his garden, Borrachero grew beautifully with long white flowers. He then proceeded to cut a stalk and give it to us, explaining, “*Póngalo en tierra y ese crece* (Put it in the ground and it will grow).” I was a little doubtful, since I had not seen this variety in the lowlands and I was sceptical of its ability to resist the soils and temperatures of Mocoa.

Like other plants that I explore in this thesis, Borrachero varieties are exchanged through stalk cuttings, meaning that Borrachero has been cultivated and manipulated for centuries to produce complex hybrids that depend on humans for their survival. In this process of domestication – which has created a great variety of colours, leaf sizes and hallucinogenic potency – sexual reproduction has been sacrificed. Only cuttings can be used to grow this plant. There are no known wild specimens of Borrachero, meaning that it has been domesticated to such a degree that it is a species intimately tied to humans (Hay, Gottschalk and Holguín, 2012). The seven different species categorised by different botanical sources do not represent the wide availability of hybrids and varieties found in Putumayo. The continual exchange has been invaluable in producing

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70 The indigenous leader elected in the resguardo. It is a position held for one year and is an important position in the social hierarchy of the region.
new hybrids. Since the seeds are sterile, only cuttings are traded, exchanged and, on many occasions, taken from plants found on neighbours’ land. People who value the diversity of varieties must trade them to obtain more varieties, and this is even more difficult when clones (rather than seeds) are concerned (Rival 2001).

However, the existence of these hybrids means that the production of viable seeds is not impossible. Cross-pollination is a slow and painful process, so these viable seeds are scarce and require a considerable horticultural effort by the shamans. This demonstrates the tight bond between the human and the Borrachero, as well as the pleasure felt by the shamans in their experimentation to produce something new. Due to the difficulty of sexual reproduction, a certain familiarity is required to breed new varieties of Borrachero. Breeding requires careful selection of the different types to plant nearby so that they can pollinate and produce hybrids, collecting the different seeds and testing them, waiting to see if they grow, hoping that a fertile plant is produced and that luck might, after generations, produce new and special hybrids. Although I did not see the shamans actively pollinate the flowers as modern horticulturists do, they have a deep knowledge of the cycles and varieties that should mix to achieve an effective hybridisation.

There are also special varieties that are kept away from the public in private gardens. These varieties are often exchanged with other shamans who have access to unusual breeds. Whether these are bred to have different potencies or if aesthetic characteristics are more important is difficult to say. During my fieldwork, I saw some of these collections of Borrachero growing in their gardens, yet whenever I asked if these plants had different effects, they would change the subject or deny it. However, I have my doubts as to whether these classifications go beyond aesthetic characteristics, as continual experimentation to test their potency is difficult to imagine due to their powerful effects, which could kill those who test them in high enough doses.

In the Sibundoy Valley, Taita Andres once took me to see some of the varieties of Borrachero around his town. It was a short walk in which the beautiful flowers were widely prevalent and the trees grew as living fences or next to many of his neighbours’ doorsteps. While we talked, Taita Andres taught me the main ways to identify each
variety, from the colour of the flowers to the leaf forms, which ranged from ovulated or jagged to thin and long. Culebra (snake), which has long thin leaves, was almost unidentifiable as Borrachero. Schultes and Plowman (1979), Bristol (1966) and Schultes (1955), who worked extensively in the Sibundoy Valley, also mention this fact.

The sheer amount of Borrachero that grew in this highland valley was incredible. During a short walk, Taita Andres showed me five different types of plants, each by name, and the key identifying features in gardens near his house. Upon further exploration of the region, I identified many more. However, as I knew that Borrachero was a sensitive topic, I did not ask about specific uses. Interestingly enough, he also mentioned that these plants did not grow from seeds; Borrachero could only reproduce from cuttings. If this was the case, most of the Borrachero seen in the valley were probably clones of the same varieties domesticated years ago.
The networks of healers and shamans that are part of the People of Yagé assisted the exchange of different varieties of Borrachero in the highlands, as well as in the lowlands. Like most things in the Andean slopes, plants and cultural practices not only flowed to the lowlands, but also flowed to the highlands. We can find plants from the highlands growing in lowland forests, which have slowly adapted to the hot and humid weather; we also get a large number of traded plants from all over the region growing in several ecosystems. Examples of these plants are the Chondur (Cyperus sp.) found in the highlands near Pasto, the main component of Yagé; B. Caapi, from Mocoa, which is known to grow in some gardens in Sibundoy with difficulty; and Coquindo (Aspidosperma album) and Papa China (Colocasia esculenta). Meanwhile, from the
highlands to the lowlands, we find aromatic herbs such as Dill (*Anethum graveolens*), Oregano (*O. vulgare*) and Poleo (*Mentha poleo*). The constant experimentation and desire to collect different varieties (Rival, 2001) stimulated diversity and biological domestication, incorporating plants from different ecosystem into other landscapes.

It is probable that Borrachero flowed to the lowlands with the help of these networks. The varieties that grow in the lowlands arrived by similar networks of shamans and healers who also exchanged knowledge and practices, while constantly experimenting to produce new varieties. Borrachero expanded through a diversity of ethnic groups and is now grown by communities all through Amazonia.

**Ayahuasca Networks**

The small-scale networks of trade described in this chapter make up the larger interregional networks. In this way, the Borrachero network is part of the Ayahuasca networks and these, in turn, are a part of the folk medicine trade of Colombia. Those shamans and indigenous healers explored in this chapter are Putumayo shamans belonging mostly to the Ayahuasca shamanic tradition. They have the same plants and use many of the shamanic tools and techniques associated with Ayahuasca.

The exchange of Borrachero has forged the biology of the plant, as well as the interregional and interethnic networks. As we saw, the extended pre-Hispanic use of this plant endorsed its spread throughout the region, although its traditional trade was limited to reduced areas. In the Sibundoy Valley, the Kamentza and Inga, shamans still commonly use this plant; its varieties are widely exchanged and hybrids are produced. Since the highland shamans have used Ayahuasca for some time as their primary tool to heal patients, their dependency on the lowland shamans promoted the flow of the highland Borrachero to the lowlands, as a medicine and as a talisman to ward off malevolent shamans and evil in general. In other words, the interconnection between the highlands and the lowlands has fostered the spread of populations of Borrachero throughout the region.
In order to understand the larger-scale exchange of Borrachero from the highlands to the lowlands, I must give a description of the overall Ayahuasca networks. These networks are made up of shamans from communities whose ceremonial use of Ayahuasca is the central pillar of their shamanic practices. Therefore, these shamans belong to the class defined by Colombian anthropology as the Culturas del Yagé or the People of Yagé/Ayahuasca.

Jean Pierre Chaumeil (1991) states that these networks are supra-ethnic – that is, they transcend ethnic backgrounds and manifest themselves in multiple forms throughout the region and beyond. The main ethnic groups belonging to the Cultures of Yagé in Colombia are the Cofan, Ziona, Inga, Kitchwa, Kametsa, as well as a growing community of mestizo and blanco shamans who are playing an increasingly significant role in the overall network (Caicedo, 2014). The consumption of Ayahuasca is generalised in these communities and the rituals and ceremonies associated with this brew change very little among the different ethnic backgrounds.

Most of these networks stimulate continual exchange, reinforcing cultural practices and inter-ethnic social relationships between experts. They exchange knowledge on medicinal plants and reinforce techniques that are needed to master this art. Shamans are also keen to interact with others as a means of learning new techniques and testing each other’s capabilities, as well as a way to control against dangerous practices. They also exchange medicinal plants such as Borrachero.

This network functions through three main actors: the established shaman who has a large following and a healing house; the travelling shamans, who regularly travel throughout the country selling their services; and the apprentices who visit shamans in an effort to learn the art of Ayahuasca healing. This is a very general overview of this complex web of relationships, which is also fluid and dynamic. In this group, I have not included other healers who do not use Ayahuasca, even if they are widely and deeply interconnected with the web, as well as patients who visit and casually participate in the ceremonies and are healed by Ayahuasca shamans.
Women healers are an integral part of this network. They are mothers or wives of powerful shamans and the main source of medicinal knowledge beyond the use of Ayahuasca. In most cases, their knowledge of plants stays in the private setting, as a contraposition to shamanic ceremonies with more public healing practices. However, Ayahuasca shamanism is generally a male-dominated practice and most of the interconnections analysed during this fieldwork were based on male relationships.

The first group I wish to describe are the established shamans, who have a long history with expansive experience in Ayahuasca ceremonies. They have an established following of patients and apprentices, as well as a ceremonial house that is often lined with Borrachero shrubs. Their capabilities are well known, often highlighted by strong power in local politics and fame.

These shamans often meet to test each other’s abilities, exchange practices and gossip about other shamans. I believe that, by continually meeting new shamans, they regulate and control the techniques, practices and the ceremonies of Ayahuasca shamanism. They work as an unofficial regulating authority, warning patients about the possible misuse of the sacred brew. During my time in Putumayo, all of my informants would regularly talk about the times they visited other shamans. They would describe the ceremonies in detail, explaining the strength of the brew and the capability of the shaman to sing and maintain a ceremony. This continuous interaction has stimulated exchanges of techniques and medicines. I was also told a number of stories about other shamans, sometimes warning me against some who followed evil ways. In particular, Taita Jaime warned me of the danger of drinking Ayahuasca in the highlands because they sometimes added Borrachero.

The second group that plays an important role in this network are the travelling shamans and healers who continuously move through regions and the country. These shamans do not have a ceremonial house; instead, they visit towns and cities to offer their services. Historically, they were Inga and Kametsa shamans from the highlands, who, as we have seen, have a history of travelling through the territory similar to the Mindales in colonial times (Salomon, 1985). They regularly travel through the country, visiting small towns and cities, as well as visiting shamans from different ethnic backgrounds. They travel
with their medicines, books on magic and ceremonial tools, selling and exchanging them with others. They have established many different contacts in major cities and, through them, Ayahuasca shamanism has become a central figure in folk and alternative medicine in Colombia. They popularised its practice and permitted a number of different ethnic groups access to it.

The last group are the apprentices who travel from shaman to shaman, learning the art of healing. They may be indigenous or of any ethnic background, and seek to learn the trade under the tutelage of a shaman. Depending on their knowledge, they may have minor roles in ceremonies. Most apprentices do not start right away to become a shaman. The long and arduous process starts with a slight interest in the subject. Patients may be part of this group, since, as they start attending more ceremonies, they become more interested and end up as apprentices.

The gradual process from patient to shaman has three distinct stages. First, as pacientes, they go casually to ceremonies out of curiosity or to find a cure for their disease. Then, as tomadores or drinkers, they begin drinking often and gain a greater experience in the subject. Finally, the more advanced apprentices can repartir or give Ayahuasca.

Most of the casual people you meet in these ceremonies are tomadores, who drink Ayahuasca on a regular basis and are knowledgeable on certain aspects of the ritualised practice. Those who are gifted or have a special motivation to become a shaman may continue on to the stage of repartir, to offer Ayahuasca with the permission of the shaman. These apprentices rarely move from one shaman to another, since the power and brew of another may endanger their original master and, consequently, his patients. Only when the apprentice feels that he may learn more from another shaman will he change masters. Meanwhile, the beginners – patients and tomadores – are allowed to experiment. They often travel through a multicultural landscape of shamans, trying brews and ceremonies to find what best works for them.

These apprentices and patients are an essential source of interconnectivity. As they move from one shaman to the next, they also encourage a continual exchange of knowledge and techniques, and as they travel through the territory, they bring and
exchange plants from different ecosystems. As we saw above, these apprentices are constantly giving different varieties of plants, such as Borrachero, to their masters.

This type of network shares several features with organised religions. A small elite of experts on esoteric and magical elements monopolises these practices, forming a sort of priesthood with access to ritualised and ceremonial power. These experts have a more prominent role in dealings with other ethnic groups, since they are tasked with intervening in multi-ethnic exchanges, as well as multispecies negotiations. The outward-looking nature of this type of shamanism stimulates the expansion of these practices among different ethnic groups. This kind of missionarism encourages continual exchange and cultural negotiation. We see this all the time, with the apprentices who go from patients to tomadores quite quickly, with the travelling shamans who establish complex networks of contacts throughout the country, and with the established shamans who have a long-standing following of hundreds of people.

The consumption of Ayahuasca has been a major part of the Kametsa and Inga identity for centuries, a practice that probably came in by way of the mountain trade network. However, neither of the two main ingredients to make Ayahuasca grows locally in the Sibundoy Valley. This fact has forced highland shamans to rely on the lowland counterparts to supply their Ayahuasca. The effect on the spiritual and social hierarchy of highland shamans is enormous, since they must appeal to those in the lowlands for their main source of power. This becomes evident during ceremonies and healing rituals, when shamans from the lowlands, like Taita Andres, are invoked to legitimise the powers of their highland counterparts. As Barbira-Freedman (2014) states:

“The social networks constituted during geographical travels that double as astral or out-of-body travels under the effect of psychotropic plants are crucial for activating the polarities of power that shamans operate with.” (2014: 131)

Taita Andres confirmed this to me when he told me about the time that a famed Kofan shaman visited him in the vision or pinta and gave him the power to heal.
On the other hand, shamans from Sibundoy are looked down upon by lowland shamans because they lack access to the sacred plants. Lowland shamans believe that highland shamans are not capable of controlling the agency of the Ayahuasca brew and can harm people. The fact that they have no direct access to the medicinal plants may mean that they do not know the ingredients or the correct amounts used to cook Ayahuasca. Borrachero is also considered an inferior plant to Ayahuasca. It is widely used as a medicine but it is not a plant of power. This inferior hierarchical position is emphasised by the fear that lowland shamans have about their counterparts – that they might include Borrachero in their Ayahuasca brew, corrupting the essence of the sacred brew.

Some highland shamans whom I visited are constantly trying to grow *P. viridis* and *B. caapi* in the highlands in order to break away from their dependency on the lowland shamans. Growing Ayahuasca in the highlands seems to be a centuries-old challenge, yet due to the difficulty to grow in different altitudes it has effectively guarantees their continued interdependence with the lowlands. In this respect, the shamanic networks continue to function as spaces of creation, experimentation and ethnogenesis, fostering the adaptation of medicinal plants to different ecosystems and reinforcing the production of genetic diversity.

To summarise, constant exchange of practices has stimulated an accelerated hybridity process. Medicines such as Borrachero are exchanged frequently, and the trade networks allow different varieties and techniques associated with these medicines to flow freely. Foreign practices are also incorporated, making the network quite dynamic, capable of adapting to different historical and social processes. As such, one might find a mestizo shaman who sings songs of Ziona origin, as well as indigenous shamans who include the use of Peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*) or yoga in their ceremonies. This is especially the case of new age and neoshamanic healers that have introduced Putumayo shamanism into broader global networks.

Due to the central role of Ayahuasca in this growing network, I consider it vital to spend some time describing and discussing the processes by which Ayahuasca shamanism creates spaces of hybridity and exchange. In the next chapter, I will explore this in more
detail, while I take a theoretical approach to analysing the complex relationship this medicine has with the people who use it.

Chapter 4. Ayahuasca

In the previous chapters, I explored the commercial networks that connected highland mestizo folk medicine with the indigenous communities of the lowlands. People, plants, products and knowledge have flowed through these regions since pre-Columbian times. I have also given an overview of the intimate networks of shamans who have adopted Ayahuasca as their main shamanic tool, while marginalising the use of Borrachero and other plants of power.

These trade routes permitted the highland shamans to establish a close cultural bond with the lowlands and with Ayahuasca shamanism. The ancient trade route between
Sibundoy and Mocoa is, for the highland shamans in Sibundoy and Nariño, profoundly associated with the trade of Ayahuasca. For this reason, the Kamentza and Inga shamans of Sibundoy call it ‘El Camino De La Medicina’\(^{71}\) or ‘the road of the medicine’.

Additionally, these same trade routes have facilitated the expansion of Ayahuasca far beyond Putumayo, western Amazonia and the local networks of the People of Yagé. The use of this medicine has created an even more complex network of people from a wide range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds, expanding its traditional sphere of influence as it becomes a global phenomenon (see: Labate and Cavnar, 2014; 2018).

Ayahuasca, it seems, can be easily adapted to different cultural, medicinal and religious practices. This has accelerated its expansion throughout the region and the world. There is evidence that the use of Ayahuasca spread rapidly throughout indigenous cultures in Amazonia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Beyer, 2010; Gow, 1994) and was quickly adopted by mestizo religions such as Santo Daime and Vegetalismo\(^{72}\) (Dobkin de Rios, 1984; 2011; Dawson, 2013; Luna, 1986; Labate and MacRae, 2016; Beyer, 2010; Gow, 1994). The shamanic use of Ayahuasca has overshadowed other local medicinal and shamanic practices (Lenaerts, 2011; Barbira-Freedman, 2015). Slowly, this expansion has established Ayahuasca shamanism as one of the primary forms of indigenous medicine in Amazonia and Colombia (Caicedo Fernandez, 2014). At the same time, its adoption into global networks, such as alternative spiritualism and psychedelic cultures, has enlarged its use to a plurality of different cultural backgrounds.

Much has been speculated about the origin of the powerful shamanic brew.\(^{73}\) It is a mixture of two widely available and semi-domesticated plants from the Andean foothills: Yagé (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and Chacruna (*Psychotria viridis*). Unlike what

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\(^{71}\) Yagé or Ayahuasca is often called *la medicina* (the medicine) or *el remedio* (the remedy), which highlights the centrality of this practice as the main medicinal practice of these shamans.

\(^{72}\) Vegetalismo and Santo Daime are religions based on the use of Ayahuasca in Brazil.

\(^{73}\) Some early scholars were convinced that this shamanism was part of a surviving Pan-American prehistoric religion (Wasson, 1971). The particularities and possible recent efflorescence of Ayahuasca are compatible with a long-term diffusion or multiple emergences (Gow, 1996).
many of the local shamans state, it seems to be a relatively recent discovery that spread throughout western Amazonia quite rapidly. Peter Gow (1994) and Barbec de Mori (2011) believe that the discovery of Ayahuasca was a result of colonial processes, as missionary and trade centres began bringing people together throughout the Andean foothills. It is difficult to say with certainty if this is the case, since the communities that are now part of the Culturas del Yagé have changed dramatically through recent history. Additionally, the ethnohistory of Ayahuasca is often sensationalised, due in part to the lack of primary sources. At the same time, archaeology and ethnohistorical analysis have shown inconclusive evidence of early Ayahuasca use (Naranjo, 1986; Miller et al., 2019). Even though Miller et al. (2019) have described the use of B. caapi in 1000 CE, this does not mean that the mixture of Ayahuasca was used during this time. B. caapi is also used in Yopo (Anadenanthera peregrine) ceremonies. Local indigenous people consider the use of Ayahuasca as ancestral, to the same degree as other shamanic plants such as Tobacco, Coca, Anadenanthera snuffs, and Borrachero.

Nevertheless, I will not explore its origin any further. Instead, I will focus on how Ayahuasca can facilitate intercultural exchange. It is through intimate, regional and global networks that Ayahuasca has become what it is, transcending the local indigenous worlds and expanding to mestizo and global realms, establishing itself as the central pillar of shamanic practices in Putumayo.

During my fieldwork in Putumayo, every conversation about medicinal plants, biodiversity, ecology and even politics in this territory revolved, in one way or another, around the power of this medicine. As such, in any discussion about the ability of certain plants to build and establish spaces for multicultural exchange, Ayahuasca is a significant case study.

This chapter will discuss the processes by which techniques and practices spread. In particular, it will observe how the use of Ayahuasca flows through this pluricultural landscape as people of distinct backgrounds are drawn to it, and how it redefines their

74 Snuffs made with Anadenanthera peregrine or Yopo are considered to be one of the earliest entheogens in Latin America, and there has been a recent discovery of a container with this type of snuff from 1000 CE. This report also highlights the possible use of the Yagé plant (B. caapi), yet this is commonly used in Yoco ceremonies (Miller et al., 2019)
place in the world along the way. I believe that Ayahuasca has become a space for ethnic interaction, for negotiations, and a space in which hybrid cultures are created. By using Ayahuasca as a case study, I expect to shed light on the role that medicinal plants play as mediators where the different ways of relating to the world are negotiated.

**A Radical Non-Human Agency**

I had been working with a shaman for some time, visiting his home every other day. He, Taita Juan, lived in the middle of the Barrio Jose Borrero in Mocoa. Surrounded by large trees, his small wooden house seemed to be in the middle of a forest, and stood out from its urban surroundings. He was a kind man, of advanced age; with his legs partially paralysed, he walked with difficulty. I grew very fond of him during my time in Mocoa and visited him often, since I felt he was very lonely. Having been a good shaman in his youth, he had become less respectable in the highly hierarchical shamanic networks of Putumayo, and many considered him a witch due to his physical limitations.

As my interest grew, I began drinking Ayahuasca with him. It was during one of these sessions that I saw her. Her face was beautiful, almost bizarrely so. No discernible features – she was deformed and faceless, yet beautiful. Like most spiritual beings in Amazonia, she changed shape. She took the form of a sloth, hanging from the branches of a giant tree, then quickly metamorphosed into a woman who walked slowly between countless plants and trees. Somehow, this faceless being was both sloth and human, shifting from one form to another with ease.

Her presence reminded me of those statues of the Virgin Mary that accumulate dust in old Catholic churches and, as a sloth, she was part plant, part animal. The colours in her garden were beautiful, changing continuously in the light, like mother-of-pearl. She guided me through it, slowly showing me plants that I had not seen before, blurred by the continually changing colours.

She motioned me to look between her hands; she was hiding something small. When she opened her hands, a flower was visible. It was unlike any other flower I had seen,
with an odd elongated shape like a trumpet or a brass horn. The flower had spots, like a jaguar, yet its form was like that of a snake, a cobra with a menacing stare. At first, I did not recognise it; and it was only after several weeks that I learnt what it all meant.

The following day, I went back to the Taita. While we each smoked a cigarette, I told him what I had seen. He seemed surprised. We had talked about what he called the ‘jardín botánico del cielo’ or the ‘botanical garden of heaven’ during my visits and it seemed to shock him that I had seen it. I described my visions to him and he explained that the Virgin and Yagé were owners of these forests and the medicinal plants. When someone was sick, the shaman had to ask Ayahuasca/Yagé to grant him access to the medicines necessary to heal the patient. Once in the realm of Yagé, the Virgin would make them visible to the shaman so that he could heal his patient. It seemed strange that I had visualised the flower. I did not know why; after all, no one I knew was sick.

Only after a few weeks did I come to find the flower I had seen in my trance, growing in the garden of a local healer. When I asked the healer about it, she told me that it was Tigriwasca (*Aristolochia* sp. or Dutchman’s Pipe), a powerful medicine for snakebites and other related hot diseases. I was perplexed; if Taita Juan was right, why did Yagé/Ayahuasca show me this? I had not seen a snake during my time in Mocoa, nor anyone who might have gotten bitten. After some time, however, I was overwhelmed with a realisation of just how much this experience had influenced my research. The idea of an agency beyond humans, which
(as many shamans and psychonauts would say) not only communicates but also teaches you, was overwhelming. At the same time, I thought of the hundreds of people who had similar compelling experiences with this radical non-human source, and how much it had changed them.

As another shaman once said to me:

“Es la única de las plantas de poder que tiene conciencia, que cuando uno la usa uno sabe que la luz lo guía a uno (It is the only plant of power with a conscience, which, when one uses it, one knows that the light guides you).”

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Many authors have described their experiences with Ayahuasca throughout the years (Shanon, 2005; Burrows, 1963; Davis, 1996; Weiskopf, 2002; Harner, 1980; Brown, 2014; Virtanen, 2014; Wilcox, 2003; Narby, 2014; Campos and Overton-Wiese, 2014). For most, it was challenging to describe it in academic terms. Many, if not most of the anthropologists who have worked with or around Ayahuasca, have tried this brew. In Colombia, it has become a rite of passage for young anthropology undergraduates. The experience has had an enormous effect on how people feel and relate to this substance, and they have popularised it throughout the world. As more spiritually oriented tourists flock into regions of western Amazonia, the home of Ayahuasca shamanism, much of what is currently being written about Ayahuasca has shifted towards spiritualism, romanticising indigenous knowledge, as well as the internationalisation of this brew.

During the latter half of the 20th century, anthropology has focused on establishing Ayahuasca and other psychedelics as legitimate parts of indigenous world views and practices (Dobkin de Ríos, 1984; Schultes and Raffauf, 2004; Labate and Cavnar, 2014; 2018; Harner, 1980; Calabrese, 2014). Most of their work has centred on the social processes surrounding Ayahuasca as a ritualised plant. However, not much has been written on this subject from the material culture and network theory perspectives. This
approach opens a discussion about its agency, as well as its role in building spaces for cultural exchange and negotiation.

After my experience, I realised it was important to examine Ayahuasca as one of the few entities having non-human agency and animacy that can be directly experienced by those who consume it. My purpose is not to prove the existence of non-human consciousness but to explore emic notions on agency – especially considering that the idea of an inanimate entity having a complex agency is often dismissed by Western science and even certain Christian beliefs. As such, I will analyse how Ayahuasca confounded this point of view, by causing those who have consumed it to reconceptualise how they see non-human entities. For this purpose, I will give a short analysis on how local people work and deal with Ayahuasca, and its qualities and characteristics, while showing the limitations of Western science in the matter.

**Ayahuasca for Shamans**

Ayahuasca, or Yagé as it is known in Colombia, is a brew made of various plants that produces strong spiritual experiences when consumed (See: Ott, 1994). Most Ayahuasca brews are made from two specific plants: the Yagé plant (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the Chacruna or Pinta plant (*Psychotria viridis*). On their own, neither of these plants can manifest the true power of Ayahuasca and each plant has a unique set of characteristics that require not only different interpretations, but also different approaches. They are considered different substances, but it is believed by the Taitas that, together, they make up one true sacred entity.

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75 See discussion in the introduction.
76 This word is probably one of the most controversial and complex notions in science and philosophy. However, this does not fit emic notions of agency; instead, the animist notion of personhood seems more accurate.
77 This is corroborated by some of the biochemical characteristics of the brew since *B. caapi*, though containing the alkaloid Monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI), would not produce the famed visions by itself. However, when mixed and cooked with *P. viridis* (which contains N,N-dimethyltryptamine), the MAO inhibitors allow a slow ingestion, permitting it to become active in the human brain. Cooked together, they produce the chemical reaction needed for the body to absorb the active alkaloid and cause the powerful experience. Although its recipe varies throughout the region, these two ingredients are essential to make it Ayahuasca.
Let us thus start by describing the Yagé plant, *B. caapi*. This *bejuco* or liana is considered an essential part of the brew, and many of the shamans in Putumayo believe that it contains the spirit of Yagé. It is considered that the plant has not only an intelligence, but also a human form that can have an effect on the world. The plant is known to make noises, glow, and even call people.

“*Hace como un zumbido, eso es que esta lista para cocinar* (It makes a humming noise, that’s when you know it is ready to be cooked),” I was told by a shaman when he showed me the plant that grew in his garden. For the shamans, these sounds are a manifestation of its real form that lies in the invisible world.

Similarly, these lianas are known to move and even change shapes with ease, from a plant to an animal, such as a snake or a jaguar. On rare occasions, the plant can also take the form of a human shaman in the physical world, with a great feather crown. Taita Ramiro told me how this had happened to him while walking in the forest, as he approached an old Ayahuasca growth: “*Ahí lo vi así pasajero; era como un Taita vestido con colmillos y corona de plumas y todo... Cuando miré bien ya no estaba* (I saw him there fleetingly; he was like a shaman, with his canine necklace and feather crown and everything... When I looked again, he was gone).”

Before harvesting Ayahuasca, careful attention is paid towards being considerate of its spiritual form. It is widely accepted that the power and effectiveness of the brew depend on the respect that people have for the plant. Women, especially if they are menstruating or pregnant, are often asked to stay away from the vines and the cooking area. Then, even if the whole plant is harvested, small cuttings are planted all around in an effort to grow its offspring.  

When harvested, the liana is cut into pieces that are 30 to 50 centimetres long and then crushed and cooked with the other plant, the Chacruna, Chagropinta, or Chagropanaga.

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78 This has become increasingly difficult, as overharvesting and environmental degradation has limited the populations of the Yagé vines. Now shamans have to buy Yagé from people who grow it for this purpose. More and more, Yagé is grown to sell to shamans who do not have direct access to this plant. This commerce has been encouraged by the continual trade with the highlands.
Shamans often call it the vision or pinta, and it is this plant that allows them to see into the invisible world, to see the Yagé spirit. Unlike the Yagé plant, Chacruna does not have the same level of agency and does not require the same thorough interaction. When foraging Chacruna, the shaman does not need to ask permission; instead, its leaves are quickly stripped from the bushes and collected in a bundle.

Other plants are sometimes added for further effects or for a certain purpose. However, most of the cooking processes I witnessed were only the Yagé vine and Chacruna. None the less, I was told of the benefits of Chiricaspi (Brunfelsia grandiflora) in the brew, as it is a very cold plant and can help regulate the internal temperature of the brew.

Cooking it is a long and arduous process, and the shaman must always be attentive to the different people and things that come into contact with the brew. It is through this attentiveness that shamans control the quality and potency of the brew. Most of the time, the shaman is constantly tasting it. Cooking Ayahuasca means placing layers upon layers of overlapping crushed Yagé vines and Chacruna leaves into a potful of water and letting it boil for a long time. After an initial cooking period, the hard pieces are removed and the remaining liquid is reduced. The process may take several days of constant boiling to reduce the mixture in the large pot into three or four litres of a thick brown brew. The result is usually dark reddish or greenish brown, and can come in various consistencies depending on the cooking process, additives and concentration. There are also several varieties of B. caapi that can be used for different processes and to deal with specific diseases or cases.

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79 Diplopterys cabrerana, known as Chagropango, can be used instead of P. viridis.

80 Its taste oscillates between sweet and bitter, full of tannins and often very vegetative. My mind seems to have associated this taste with purging and, every time I think of it, my stomach contracts. According to the shamans who cook it, this taste depends on the age of the plant, the variety and the place where it grew.

81 For example, Yagé Cielo (Sky), which is said to help people fly through the sky, or Corona Yagé, Culebra Yagé, Gente Yagé and Yagé Negro, which have their own particular uses and techniques associated with them. Yagé Cielo is said to cause visions of flying, while Corona Yagé is said to show you shamans of old. Culebra Yagé is also said to show many snakes and is sometimes (not all the time) associated with dark shamans. Yagé Negro is used for purging. There were several others that were common throughout the region; however, the varieties changed according to the shaman and the ethnicity they came from. It is widely thought that the Kofan and the Ziona have many other varieties that they do not share.
The brew is often consumed in a ceremonial context that is often managed by a shamanic specialist. For the shamans of this tradition, it is considered to be the most important tool to interact with the various entities – spiritual and physical – that inhabit this world. Ayahuasca allows shamans and patients “ver más allá de lo que pueden los ojos (to see further than their eyes can)”, making the invisible world visible and, with it, all its inhabitants. It is through Ayahuasca that a shaman can communicate with the multiplicity of non-human agents that exist in the world, allowing him to visit them and negotiate the health of his patients. Ayahuasca can shed its animal or spirit’s skin or dress and show its real form. By making the invisible visible, it also reveals the disease in the patient’s body. The shaman then can see the real reason behind an illness, be it witchcraft, an arrow from a neighbouring shaman, the envy of others, or a spiritual attack.

Therefore, Ayahuasca ceremonies must offer the proper cultural setting for dealing with the other. The shamans are constantly aware of this during their ceremonies; they are constantly managing the different spirits through techniques such as songs and smudging. During healing ceremonies, they also use other shamanic medicines and tools, such as Chondur and the Waira fan. To summarise, shamans keep a tight control over their ceremonies, using ritualised techniques to prevent undesired harm from unwelcome variables.

Once the invisible world is visible, the spirit of Ayahuasca itself can be seen or felt. This is the personification of Yagé, the invisible form that has become visible. It is often described as the central consciousness of the plant, formless yet communicative. However, with the pinta (visions), it can take multiple forms ranging from the shape of animals like jaguars, snakes and birds, to the shape of elders, shamans, healers and even children. Yagé is central in the narratives of the shamans whom I worked with, as it is this spirit that guides and gives them advice. Its importance is emphasised by the loving names the many shamans call it, such as Yagecito and abuelo (grandfather), expressed with affection. This fondness has become even more pronounced with the ongoing globalisation of Ayahuasca; it is popular to call it Mama Ayahuasca or Mother

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82 Smudging is a technique of burning aromatic plants to cleanse a space for ceremonial practices. In Amazonia, this is done with Palo Santo and Copal.
83 A shamanic tool, this fan is made of leaves of plants.
Ayahuasca (Jauregui et al., 2011). However, most of the time, the spirit is only a guide. It grants a direct line of access to the Light, the Creator, the Great Spirit, Pachamama, like an ‘umbilical cord’.

For the communities in Putumayo, Ayahuasca plays a significant role as a spiritual agent, as a thinking agent that is not only a powerful ally of shamans, but also a determining entity that defines how people see and relate to the world. It has a profound effect on local religious beliefs, personal choices and even on how people live their daily lives. For the indigenous communities, political and social decisions need to be consultadas or consulted with Ayahuasca. In this respect, many of my contacts’ life choices were influenced by what Ayahuasca had shown or told them. As one of my main informants would say: “Toca consultar con el remedio; el Yagé muestra lo que se debe hacer” (One needs to consult the medicine; Yagé shows you what needs to be done).”

When consumed, the Ayahuasca spirit is said to speak to you internally. According to different people, it seems to have a genuine voice that can be easily understood and which can maintain a profound internal dialogue. Since Ayahuasca can be heard and understood, it is considered to possess an internal spiritual agency that is, in many ways, similar to our own. For local shamans, it is a considered an independent conciencia or consciousness capable of having an effect on the lives of people and the world around it. This animacy is often highly convoluted, and shamans, apprentices and patients establish an intense personal relationship to it. In a sense, Ayahuasca is understood as having a complex personhood, not unlike humans, certain powerful animals and other spiritual beings.

When individuals consume the brew, they incorporate this agency into their own, becoming a vehicle for Ayahuasca to manifest itself. The similarities to the Catholic Communion are not lost to the shamans, as they often call it ‘la comunión con el Yagé’ (‘the communion with Yagé’). The experience of consuming the brew breaks down the boundaries of self, of what humans are and how they understand consciousness. It
creates cyborgs and hybrids, a human and plant mixture in which the line that separates our internal thoughts and that of the other becomes increasingly blurry. These are interwoven semiotic processes that go beyond the reductive explanations of a biochemical reaction in our brain. As a shaman once told me:

“Nos habla y nos muestra todo lo que hay que ver (It speaks to us and it shows us everything that we have to see).”

As another shaman told me:

“Esa voz, que escucha durante la ceremonia, ese es el espíritu del Yagé. Ese le dice lo que tienen que hacer, le muestra la medicina que toca usar, le muestra la enfermedad (That voice, the one you hear during the ceremony, that’s the spirit of Yagé. It tells you what to do, what medicines to use, and it shows you the illness).”

Throughout Amazonia, many plants are understood as having an animacy or some sort of complex agency. This is the case of several plants that have a close relationship with humans, such as certain crops and culturally important plants (Rival, 2012; Descola, 1996; Chaumeil, 1991; Škrabáková, 2014; Daly et al., 2016). There are several that are used for shamanic practices and have an agency that is often unique and multilayered. These are what are known as plantas maestras or master plants in Putumayo and other neoshamanic circles. The agency of master plants is incredibly complex and can manifest itself in different ways. This includes organic animacy (Knappett, 2005), which is defined by the plant’s growing patterns or its ecological and spiritual relationships. As an artefact, the Ayahuasca brew often is thought to have an agency that is a product of its interaction with people; this manifestation is more closely related to a material agency and Santos-Granero’s (2009) constructivist approach. It can also manifest an intimate social agency, which is often conceptualised through human social

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84 For Haraway (1991), cyborgs are a mix between people and technology. If we consider that the Ayahuasca brew is a technology, would this not produce cyborgs as well?

85 Similar to the entity I witnessed in the vignette at the start of the chapter.

86 Primarily, Santos-Granero (2009b) highlights the relational character of this type of agency, similar to “secondary agency” explored by Gell (1998) and some aspects of “relational epistemology” defined by Bird Davis (1999).
experiences, not unlike that described by Viveiros de Castro (2004). Finally, and most exceptionally, it manifests an agency – when consumed – that is often experienced as a thinking entity, which displays a range of intentionality that is reserved for other conscious beings, such as humans. In the case of the Yagé plant and its form as the Ayahuasca brew, it has such a complex agency that it is not only considered a master plant, but also as ‘el rey de todas las plantas’ or ‘the king of all plants’.

**Ayahuasca in the Shamanic networks**

In the previous chapter, we explored some of the shamanic networks found in eastern Amazonia. The use of Ayahuasca in Colombia is intimately tied to the network of healers and shamans in western Amazonia. These shamans actively participate in the similar ceremonial consumption of Ayahuasca brew, use similar techniques and tools, and continuously participate in the exchange of knowledge and practices. This supra-ethnic network expands from the eastern parts of Putumayo to the highland city of Pasto, and includes shamans of a diversity of ethnic backgrounds, such as Inga, Kametsa, Kofan, Ziona, as well as some mestizo and white shamans.\(^{87}\)

One of the key elements of this network is the Ayahuasca ceremony, which creates the proper space for people of different cultural backgrounds to come together and exchange knowledge and beliefs. Ayahuasca ceremonies are already conceived as spaces to deal with alterity, as the shaman will not only negotiate with the agency of the Ayahuasca spirit, but also with the other spirits and beings that are often the causes of disease. These ceremonies are also spaces where shamans, healers, apprentices and patients from a wide variety of backgrounds come together to heal, test each other’s techniques, and experience – as well as exchange – knowledge and stories. I will explore these ceremonies in detail in the next chapter. However, for the purpose of this discussion, I must highlight that these ceremonies stimulate conversations in which patients, shamans and apprentices talk and process their experiences. They facilitate cultural exchanges, as well as the trade of terms and rationales that are needed to understand and relate to this complex psychedelic experience.

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\(^{87}\) The use of Ayahuasca expands well beyond Putumayo and has its own unique practices in lower Amazonia, the Peruvian foothills and new age global spiritualism.
During these exchanges, mixtures and cultural syncretic processes occur. Examples of this are the interwoven relationships between Christianity and indigenous shamanism, which have produced interesting syncretic interpretations such as the ideas that the Virgin is the owner of medicinal plants and that God is the great shaman. This probably happened as a result of reconceptualisations of the Ayahuasca experience by people who have a Christian background. The Virgin Mary is an interesting example, since she is often considered to be closely related to the spirit of Yagé. At the same time, the idea of the devil is also commonly brought up when discussing the Ayahuasca experience, especially when it is a particularly difficult ceremony. On one occasion, Taita Juan described how the devil had arrived to the ceremonial house in a flying car, and to fight him, he had to smudge the entire room in order to cleanse it and turn on the lights.

How or why these syncretic processes happen does not have a straightforward answer. I believe that it is because the psychedelic experience is subjective, giving it the flexibility to be widely interpreted. I acknowledge that this is controversial, since there are themes and experiences that are widely shared by many people who consume psychedelics and particularly Ayahuasca. Nonetheless, there is an underlying vagueness and malleability to the experience, which is often rationalised through personal beliefs, cultural background, and by the wisdom the shaman transmits before, during and after each ceremony. At the same time, the intensity of the experience opens spaces for reflections on what is real. For many, it may confirm their own interpretations of reality; for others, it may induce paradigm shifts that require new vocabulary and ways of relating to the world.

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88 The devil in Latin America has also gone through a process of reinterpretation and reconfiguration throughout colonial history (Cervantes, 1994). In the region of Putumayo, Ayahuasca shamanism is often seen as ambiguous, since for Catholics and Christians, the use of the brew is often dismissed as devil worship. For people who participate in Ayahuasca ceremonies, it is closely related to the Virgin and to God.

89 This was one of the most debated aspects of psychedelic studies, particularly early on with Huxley and Osmond (Pollan, 2018). Some people have explained that Ayahuasca connects people to a higher consciousness and this explains why people experience similar themes and visions. Whether Ayahuasca does this is debatable. Some of these shared experience could be explained by emplotment devices (Calabrese, 2014), or symbolic and ritual techniques that are performed during the ceremonies, such as songs and setting, that make emplot people in the ceremonial healing performance.
This is particularly noticeable with non-indigenous patients, as the powerful experience produced by the brew is often difficult to rationalise. For many people who actively use these substances, thinking of the world as full of spirits and non-human personhoods is often counterintuitive. Most of Western science epistemology and belief systems revolve around the idea of a human monopoly on intelligence (Descola, 2013). Christian traditions have also highlighted the central role of humans, while highlighting non-human beings as inferior in the pyramid of life. To seriously accept the intelligence of a plant is limited by language and by Western ways of understanding the natural world. To accept it, people would not only have to redefine how they see the world, but also how they describe it and relate to it. This would enable a greater acceptance of differences and would allow the malleability needed for cultural exchange.

The Coming Together of Different Worlds

After Ayahuasca ceremonies, I would often hike through the forest around Mocoa with my friend, David. We both agreed that it was the best time to go since we felt more ‘in tune’ with nature. Hikes with him were special since, as a biologist, he was capable of identifying many of the plants, fungi and animals we came across. Anyone who has had the experience of visiting a complex and hyper-diverse territory like the Andean foothills with a biologist can appreciate how interesting this experience is. Their taxonomical eye and understanding of the multiple layers of ecological relationships are astounding. Often, it seems they are reading the forest, like musicians read musical scores. Botanists can identify a plant’s genus and species through a series of physical characteristics and patterns that highlight its evolutionary timeline. This perception facilitates a semiotic understanding of forests in their temporary relationship to the larger meshwork of life.

As Gregory Cajete (2000) mentions, like any other world view, biology depends on the classification of organisms to define and categorise nature. It is a world-building technique, creating the cosmology of evolution through rational classification, by observing the similarities and affinities that embody ecological relations and the passing of time. For a biologist, understanding biological and ecological processes by categorising them produces a way of existing in the world. Descola (2013) describes
this naturalists’ world view as a way to relate to the physicality and interiority of nature. Naturalism was, from its origins, a different way of existing within the world – where humans and non-humans share the same exteriority bounded by physical and biological laws while, internally, all individuals are different (Descola, 2013). Biology – as a discipline in this world view – sees organisms as individuals who belong to complicated webs of relationships, yet are not bonded by internal spiritual ties.

For this reason, biological sciences tend to understand organisms through Cartesian paradigms. This means that these organisms do not have a soul or culture and exist almost mechanically. This is even more pronounced with plants, as they have been considered – for most of history – as nearly inorganic, between the living and the non-living. Limited by their lack of mobility and subjectivity, these organisms are bound to the weather and the temporality of the earth more than animals. For biology, truly understanding the floral world means categorising its individuals by physical attributes that can illuminate the processes by which they have changed and adapted to different ecosystems through time.

Ethnosciences, such as ethnobotany, try to add the human factor that is often forgotten by natural scientists. However, due to the overwhelming universalisation of natural sciences, many of the ethnoscienctific studies tend to fall short of establishing vernacular knowledge on the same footing as scientific knowledge. Ethnobiology, thus, tends to translate emic concepts into the naturalist perspectives (Descola, 2013).

When my friend and I would come across the plot of the local shaman, we would often observe the plants and classify them according to their external characteristics. Looking at the physiology of each plant, we could deduce the family and ecological characteristics to group it into categories that would fit our understanding of the world. By translating these local concepts into scientific ones, we are continuing a totalising attempt to construct meaning from different codes and systems, trying to find points of resonance in which the intention is the same (Carneiro da Cunha, 1998), such as when a sacha (Quechua for ‘plant/forest’) is the same as a biological plant. However, we are caught between different regimens: one that validates the knowledge of different people
on an equal footing (shamanism), and the other that is part of a complex hierarchical power structure validating one form of knowledge (the scientific) as superior.

If we look closely at the two plants that are the main ingredients to prepare Ayahuasca, we can deduce that, as a climbing liana with aggregated inflorescences of zygomorphic (bilaterally symmetrical) five-petaled flowers, *Banisteriopsis caapi* is part of the *Malpighiaceae* family of neotropical flora. Meanwhile, *P. viridis* belongs to the Rubiaceae family, which is easily recognisable by its simple, opposite leaves with a pronounced interpetiolar stipule – and resembles its close relative, the *Coffea* genus.

This information, however, is limiting, as it shows little or no relationality between these two plants other than that they exist in the same ecosystem. If we did not know that cooking them together would create a substance that would give us a powerful spiritual experience, we would not even group them together.
Nonetheless, natural sciences do give us the proper tools to understand the chemical reactions and their effects on our brains. By contemplating the laws that bind all materiality, we can identify the chemical composition of the alkaloids these plants contain, opening the door to a whole set of new dynamics. It was through the process of classification and experimentation that people were able to extract similar molecules from other plants and synthesise them artificially.\textsuperscript{90} Chemistry, and particularly biochemistry, led to a more molecular perspective on nature, breaking away from concepts such as substances and energy. The biochemical revolution from the late 19th and early 20th centuries fundamentally changed how we saw our body and our thinking mind; therefore, it also changed the way in which we understood how these plants functioned.

Here again, we reach an impasse of naturalism and science, since, even if we know the molecular processes that produce these experiences, understanding them has proven quite difficult. These experiences, unlimited by their physical materiality and due to the incomprehensive and overpowering effects on the individual’s personal perception, are extremely challenging to classify or quantify through scientific terms. Indeed, it is true that we can see certain effects on people’s brains, but how this translates into the subjective experience in their minds has been a source of intrigue for psychology and neurological sciences since the start of the psychedelic revolution.

One of the most interesting aspects of chemicals such as those found in Ayahuasca is that they can produce what is known as ego death, which means “experiencing a complete loss of subjective self-identity” (Johnson, Richards and Griffiths, 2008: 613). This has a profound and lasting effect on the individuals who consume the brew.\textsuperscript{91} Often, it can cause awe-inspiring spiritual experiences that can define how people see and relate to the world. It is also known to offer different perspectives – such as seeing the world through the eyes of animals or different people – that have a fundamental

\textsuperscript{90} This process has not stopped here, as these techniques have spread beyond academia since the Internet enables a growing number of people to make their own synthesised mind-altering substances. Knowledge of matter, biochemistry and biology has allowed widespread global use.\textsuperscript{91} Studies on psychedelics have been historically marginalised due, in part, to the war against drugs. However, recent human testing has become increasingly popular, and new approaches to these substances are using lessons learnt in the psychedelic revolution during the 1960s.
effect on how people see their place in the world. How and why these substances produce these effects is not understood, and recent interest in the spiritual qualities of these experiences have shown the limits of a scientific approach to these chemicals (Griffiths et al., 2006). For this reason, more and more psychedelic studies have become open to notions that have historically been marginalised as pseudoscience (Griffiths et al., 2006).

Meanwhile, the agency and intelligence of these plants have also raised a set of new questions. Naturalism has historically limited intelligence to some animals but attributed none to plants. Yet, for many people who use these substances, the plants’ consciousness is unquestionable. The psychedelic experience also opens the door to worlds populated with non-humans that can be interacted with, such as machine elves (Mckenna, 1994), mescalito (Castañeda, 1998), entities, angels, spiritual guides and a whole host of other beings. The act of consuming a psychedelic is such a profound experience that it requires a cognitive shift in the way we deal with the non-human. In other words, it forces the person to establish a relationship with these non-humans that acknowledges their consciousness and intelligence (Mckenna, 1992).

It was with this in mind that my friend David and I arrived at Mocoa. We were motivated by the profound paradox of seeing the natural world through a scientific perspective while having had an overwhelming experience that had forced us to rethink the way in which we relate to the world. Many authors have highlighted this state of incongruity, especially ethnobiologists and psychonauts (Mckenna, 1998; Castañeda, 1998; Davis, 1998; Letcher, 2006; Giraldo Herrera, 2018). They have all advocated adopting a new language to build the necessary bridge between the two worlds. They promote a new episteme, a hybrid between shamanism and science, in order to further understand how these conscious non-human beings exist.

In a sense, the global psychedelic community is already doing this. Collectively, they are creating relationships with these non-human beings in a very animist manner, giving them agency, personhood and intention. While ‘hunting’, people who look for

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92 A friend from Bogotá, he is a botanist and is also a ‘tomador’. I met him in the Mocoa where he had gone to drink Ayahuasca with one of the shamans who I worked with.
psilocybin mushrooms are constantly giving them names, carefully admiring them, talking to them, even singing to them (Letcher, 2006). For many, this is a sacred act, representing not only the agency of the one who harvests, but also the agency of the harvested. By adopting a shamanic discourse, modern ‘shroomers’ have produced techniques to interact with these powerful agents. Andrew Letcher (2006) claims that Terrance McKenna was one of the first to advocate shamanism as a way to deal with psychedelics in his *Archaic Revival: Speculations on Psychedelic Mushrooms, the Amazon, Virtual Reality, UFOs, Evolution, Shamanism, the Rebirth of the Goddess, and the End of History* (1992). As a major influence in the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s, he linked animist and non-Western spiritualism with psychedelia, much in the way of Carlos Castañeda. By creating a set of hybrid beliefs between Western naturalism and non-Western world views, these two authors have opened the door to a more straightforward analysis of these substances, facilitating their assimilation into the modern world.

The Colombian psychedelic culture can also be classified as a hybrid world view. This group – inspired by the hippy movements of the northern hemisphere, as well as popular spiritual literature published around the 1960s and 1970s – began experimenting with different traditional psychedelics and working and meeting local shamans in Putumayo. It was during this time that the Ayahuasca shamans were first popularised, when educated white and mestizo people began flocking to the region of Sibundoy. A shaman friend of mine, who was the son of a Taita of that generation, stated:

“*Comenzaron a llegar, yo era jovencito, así llegaron blancos de Pasto y de Bogotá a tomar remedio. Antes, eran solo de aquí pero de repente llegaron todos estos mechudos, – he laughs – a revolverse con el remedio* (They started arriving, I was young, and they started arriving from Pasto and Bogotá to drink...)

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93 Aldous Huxley and Timothy Leary did it with Asian religions.
94 By the Colombian psychedelic culture, I mean a subculture of educated urban people who are open to indigenous and other alternative modes of being and who are interconnected with the global underground culture produced by the psychedelic revolution of the 1960s. This culture is in constant contact with indigenous and mestizo communities who practise healing with psychedelics and are themselves hybrids of different processes, as well as the growing neoshamanic groups that are common in and around South America.
the medicine. Before, it was only for locals but then all these long-haired hippies arrived and started wallowing, drunk with the medicine.”

These people approached this substance by stressing its complex personhood, calling it by endearing names such as Ayahuasquita, Yagésito, Mama Ayahuasca or abuelo, much like the shamans did. At the same time, they acknowledged that its effects were produced by biochemical ingredients that had evolved through the plant’s biological adaptation.

The relationship of these neoshamanic and psychedelic communities to Ayahuasca is based on an institutionalised scientific perspective, as well as deeply rooted indigenous beliefs and practices. During my time in the field, I was amazed to see how much some of the young spiritual tourists who arrived to Putumayo knew about psychedelics, plant species, and biochemical alkaloids. At the same time, they would use words and notions from shamanic or neoshamanic discourses heavily influenced by McKenna and other psychonauts, as well as the shamans from Putumayo. In Colombia, a romantic appreciation of indigenous people has profoundly influenced this community in much the same way that Eastern philosophy has influence psychedelia in the West. The romantic view of indigenous communities – or indigenismo – has catapulted the popularity of Ayahuasca in Colombian anthropology, as well as in alternative and folk medicine.

An Inhabitant of the Pluriverse

As for David and I, we had established a deep relationship with Ayahuasca on a personal level that could be defined as animist. Unlike any other non-human we had come across, Ayahuasca honestly felt as if it had an intention, a voice, and was a direct link to some greater intelligence. It allowed us to consider that these experiences went beyond scientific and modernism interpretations. It provided a perspective of nature not as a ‘thing’ to be controlled by humans, but as a spiritual essence to be heard and learnt from.

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95 In the case of mushrooms, the name niños is commonly used to convey their mischievous behaviour.
After my experience of hearing the voice of the spirit of Yagé, I was left with more questions than answers. Consolidating these experiences with a scientific rationale became increasingly difficult. In particular, I was left with a nearly unanswerable question. Is the plant producing these nitrogen-based compounds to communicate with us or is it just a coincidence that these substances make us feel as if it is communicating with us? For local shamans and other people who drink the brew, there is no doubt of the plant’s intent. During my time in Putumayo, I was continuously told of the ‘intention of Ayahuasca’ as a force of good in the world.

This was difficult for me to internalise. Like many other naturalists, I assumed that the production of this alkaloid was a result of the relationships of the plant with its natural environment, and that we were just misinterpreting and misunderstanding it as an intention. This dilemma reveals how difficult it is for modernists and naturalists to fully understand something like a psychedelic substance, due to their (myself included) own limitations. As another friend once told me one night as I mentioned my stubbornness to let go of my positivist approach to these substances:

“Estoy decepcionado contigo, después de todo lo que has visto y sigues sin creer (I am disappointed with you, after all you have seen and you still don’t believe).”

As time went by, I was forced to rethink my approach to these plants and substances. At the risk of sounding unscientific, I came to the realisation that they exist at the crossroads of different worlds. As organisms, they can be understood as natural phenomena but, at the same time, they are multifaceted beings with complex personhoods that are similar yet entirely different from ours. These plants are true hybrids, plant and human. Bruno Latour (1993) emphasises that these hybrids invalidate the Cartesian duality of nature, in order to include non-modern beings into the modern world. Therefore, it is important to “use the premodern categories to conceptualise them” (Latour, 1993: 134).

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96 I will try and consolidate these ideas in Chapter 6, where I will look at the plant that produces Caffeine.
Nonetheless, this interpretation of psychedelics enables me to explore the political landscape of Putumayo in a different way – particularly some of the postcolonial schools in Latin America that are legitimising indigenous thought to facilitate a more nuanced approach to certain phenomena (Mignolo, 2011; 2012). These schools consider that naturalism – which had been imposed on Latin America by the colonial power structures, not for the production of knowledge but to control natural resources – is not able to explore the intricacies of the networks of relationships in these territories. As Mignolo states:

“The legacy of the colonial transformation lives today, in our assumption that ‘nature’ is the provider of ‘natural resources’ for daily survival: water as a bottled commodity. The mutation of nature into natural resources in the West was a sign of progress and modernisation and, at the same time, a sign that other civilisations stagnated and were falling behind the West.” (Mignolo, 2011: 10)

By doing this, several postcolonial academics have legitimised indigenous world views as part of a significant political movement for self-determination. Highlighting indigenous world views and epistemology, authors such as Arturo Escobar, Mario Blaser and Buenaventura de Sousa Santo have shown the importance of alternative models for the global south. In particular, Southern Epistemologies (Santos, Meneses and Aguiló, 2016) emphasise the multiplicity of world views and cosmologies that coexist in the world as fully functional and equally valid. These worlds are continually producing knowledge different from that of the naturalist and modernist Western world, and they see shamanism and indigenous people as crucial creators of alternative knowledge (Santos, Meneses and Aguiló, 2016).

Arturo Escobar (2009; 2011) advocates experiencing the world as a pluriverse, where the modern and westernised monopoly over reality is broken. In this respect, psychedelics offer something similar, widening the perspectives of those who consume it to accept a multiplicity of ways of relating to the world. In other words, psychedelics

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97 Although they use ‘ontologies’, which means it is an all-encompassing reality and not just how people see the world.
allow experiencing “the world as a pluriverse in constant movement, a web of always changing interrelationships between humans and non-humans” (Escobar, 2011: 46). Ayahuasca, therefore, could be classified as a postcolonial tool, legitimising multiplicity of agencies, rationalities and existences.

There is no doubt that Ayahuasca is deeply interwoven into the local shamanic world view, defining the way in which shamans see and interact with the world. Having such effective access to the invisible realms opens doors to a whole dimension of relationships with a different set of rules and interactions. For the local shamans, these relationships make sense; they define the way in which the world works and the way in which people interact with other, including human and non-human. These invisible relationships make up the world, the forest and the people who inhabit it. In other words, Ayahuasca helps local indigenous people make sense of the changing and often tumultuous world around them.

During one of the Ayahuasca ceremonies I witnessed in the town of Sibundoy, a colono woman had a powerful experience. She was able to see the curse that had been placed on her house. The next day, she explained how the ceremony had helped consolidate her beliefs. Before, she had been suspicious of witchcraft but now that she had seen it with her own eyes, she was convinced: “Lo vi, en la puerta de mi casa hay una laja suelta, está ahí, estoy segura (I saw it, next to the door of my house in a loose tile, it’s there, I’m sure).” She then added about the power of Ayahuasca: “Tiene mucho poder, ese espíritu, es de cuidado (It has lots of power, that spirit, one has to be careful).”

As modernity, naturalism and late colonialism are fundamentally transforming Putumayo, new ideas, new discourses and new world views are being consulted and incorporated into the Ayahuasca experience. People of a diversity of backgrounds go to the shaman and drink Ayahuasca to fully understand themselves or to get advice about their lives. As the region becomes more mestizo and colona, it is fundamentally changing the way in which people relate to the forest and to health. The rapid urbanisation has added many other risks associated with interwoven urban lifestyles.
Long gone are the spirits of the forest; instead, the ánimas, mal vientos, demonios and witches\textsuperscript{98} populate the world.

At the same time, the influx of foreigners attracted by Ayahuasca has introduced neoshamanic practices into these medicinal networks. Auras, crystals and other master plants are now common in the area, having been introduced and incorporated with relative ease. During several of the ceremonies I participated in, I witnessed much of this process. From mandalas with local flowers and fruits spread out in the centre of the ceremonial house to the cleansing of elementals such as crystals and auras, these ceremonies had incorporated a diversity of foreign practices. In one of the most interesting moments of my fieldwork, a shaman’s wife (who was a healer in her own right) read my Mayan Horoscope. In other instances, post-ceremonial talks would often lead to discussions on karma and angels, as some of the patients swore that Ayahuasca had shown them their past lives and the importance of entities who take care of them. Some of the shamans, particularly those in close proximity to neoshamanic groups, were willing to have an even more fluid relationship with foreign beliefs, creating close personal links to neoshamanic groups throughout the world.

As Ayahuasca spreads throughout the world, an endless number of possibilities are being created. As a result, urban shamans accept a broad range of subjectivities, from the Christian to the indigenous and new age, since Ayahuasca does not reject any of these practices and it has made it easy to adapt to different world views. It does, however, reject the basic principles of modernity, as it shows that intelligence is not a monopoly of humans. As one of the shamans used to say to patients who would show up at his house:

\begin{quote}
\textit{``Si quiere ver lo que es la verdad, venga después a tomar Yagé conmigo (If you want to see the truth, come later to drink Yagé with me).''}
\end{quote}

In the next few chapters, I hope to demonstrate that this is not an exclusive characteristic of Ayahuasca and other master plants, but also of other key medicinal plants. Their hybrid existence permits multiple interpretations, determining the building

\textsuperscript{98} These are the causes of folk illness in the region.
material for new ways of existing with our body and the world. In the next chapter, I will explore how this entangled meshwork of existences defines health, medicine and the body in Putumayo. It is through this exchange of different world views that folk medicine and Ayahuasca shamanism have become interwoven.
Chapter 5. Chondur

I first came into contact with Chondur during my first Ayahuasca ceremony at the outskirts of Bogotá. I had been invited to participate and was nervous about the event. This nervousness became worse when I drank the brew. As I felt overwhelmed by the intense feeling of nausea and disorientation, a young man came to me and made me put my hands out. Placing some drops of liquid on my hands, he told me to smell them. It was a revelation. As soon as I smelt the powerful essence, the nauseating and disorientating feeling passed and I could calmly go back to the ceremony.

The next morning, I woke up and found the young man who had given me the essence. I found him crouching next to the shaman; the cold Bogotá morning had forced these men, who had come from the tropical forest, to huddle together to keep warm. After a quick introduction, I asked him about the essence. He then took out a yellow bottle that looked like a beehive; he passed it to me and I quickly recognised it. It was what in the Santería markets is called the seven essences (siete esencias), a widely used perfume to protect against the evil eye. I smelled it, but it had something else – I was sure there was something different. My new friend smiled and took out another bottle like the first, but this time it had something different inside. “Chondur,” he said smiling, and then repeated, “Tigre Chondur.”

I had not noticed the presence of this plant in the ceremony but soon I saw it everywhere. People carried small bottles of it, some as charms to protect themselves. In the Ayahuasca ceremony, Chondur plays an active role in healing and protecting people from the diversity of problems that may be caused by the sensitive state of the patients. There is more to Chondur than meets the eye.
Chondur, also known as Chundul or Piri Piri in Peru and Priprioca in Brazil, is the name of an inconspicuous group of plants; yet, they are some of the most powerful plants in the arsenal of shamanic tools. A small grass-like plant of the *Cyperus* family, Chondur is closely related to the papyrus and the water chestnut. Botanically, the sedges or *Cyperaceae* are very similar to the *Poaceae* or grasses; they have characteristics similar to herbaceous monocotyledonous (monocots) plants that have an epigeal habit. However, if you look more closely, grasses and sedges are quite different. Unlike the *Poaceae*, whose leaves form several nodes from the stem, sedges grow in culms rarely noded, except for the inflorescence, which grows from a node on the top like a small umbrella. Both grasses and sedges have similar culms – yet, in the sedges, these have a very particular triangular shape. Other characteristics also seem quite similar, such as the flowers and seeds, but they have very specific shapes and morphologies that differentiate them from one another. However, if one does not know these particular characteristics, a sedge looks just like a grass. Shamans who work with Chondur during most of their lives put it in the same category as grasses – *un pastico* (a little grass) – yet Chondur is different from grasses and even from most other sedges.

Like other sedges, Chondur grows well in grasslands, especially in the extremely intervened territory of western Amazonia where most of the forest has been cut down and transformed into grasslands for cattle. Chondur grows quite easily, sprouting from...
its roots in a few days and reaching maturity in a couple of weeks. As I was told by one of the daughters of the merchants in the market, I just need to leave fresh rhizomes in a black bag with a splash of water to make them sprout. The plant can easily be planted in any type of soil, although it prefers wetlands and marshlands.

This lack or malformation of inflorescence and seeds make its pollination and reproduction quite difficult.99 Yet, the Chondur group has been found throughout Amazonia, from the lowland forest of Suriname to the foothills of the Andes (Shephard, 2011). Its lack of biological propagation limits it to home gardens, never too far from reach. Considering this, we can deduce that it has undergone some sort of domestication process that has modified its biological characteristics, although more studies are needed to confirm this. However, in support of this inference, in Putumayo, shamans and healers have their own Chondur strains that they have been reproducing for generations or that they have received in trade. Taita Juan, like some of these shamans, has grown the same Tigre Chondur for several decades, brought to Mocoa by his brother from the Lower Caquetá region.

The fact that it is not capable of biological propagation demonstrates that this is a plant that has been domesticated through a long and arduous process (Tournon, Cauper Pinedo and Urquia Odicio, 1998). Mythical origins of Chondur are often associated with birds, but it is difficult to identify one underlying theme. Conflicting accounts of the origin of this plant are shared by different people in western Amazonia (Tournon, Cauper Pinedo and Urquia Odicio, 1998; Descola, 1986). Thus, the origin of the plant is debatable, and it is just starting to be analysed by the ethnobotanical community.

However, its availability underscores its importance for the indigenous exchange system throughout Amazonia. Transportation and propagation of the rhizome have assisted its spread even beyond its ecological limitations. Some species identified as Chondur have been found in faraway places such as Argentina and even North America. In Putumayo, although other ethnic communities have their own names and particular uses for it, the

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99 Indeed, for the same reason it makes taxonomic identification extremely challenging (Plowman et al., 1990).
generalised Quechua name, Chondur, demonstrates some sort of association with the Inca trade networks explored in the first chapter.

There seems to be no doubt that the word *chondur* is Quechua. Its prefix *chun* or *chunt* can be related with *chuntu*, which is Quechua for ‘palm’, while *dur* – as well as *dura* – seems to be a suffix that comes from Spanish (Musu Runakuna, 1997). This mixture of languages is typical for Inga, the only dialect of Quechua in Colombia and a common language used in medicinal plant trade. According to local Inga sources (Musu Runakuna, 1997), the highland Inga community identifies at least seven different varieties of Chondur (Musu Runakuna, 1997). These are: Jinti (people) Chondur, Kari (man) Chondur, Kuku (devil) Chondur, Wagra (cattle) Chondur, Waira (wind) Chondur, Waraka (sling) Chondur, and Warmi (woman) Chondur. During this fieldwork, I was only able to observe eight types of Chondur, yet with slight variations. In particular, I was able to find some varieties with their Spanish names, such as Trueno (Thunder), Tigre (Jaguar), Danta (Tapir), Ajo (Garlic), and Gente (people). These seemed the most popular and their names in Spanish might be due to the growing importance of mestizo shamans.

Identifying the different types of Chondur proved difficult for me; I was always surprised by how shamans and healers throughout Putumayo could quickly know the varieties by a glance or smell. For anyone who is a novice, all the different varieties of rhizomes look the same, so buying them in the market proves challenging. Some Chondurs, however, are quite easy to identify, like Warmi and Danta Chondur, which look like totally different species altogether. Coco Chondur has smaller rhizomes. The other varieties, however, are much trickier and can only be identified by the smell, taste and spiritual qualities of the plant. Tigre Chondur, for example, is identified by markings on the stalk, while Ajo Chondur can easily be identified by its smell.

Chondur is a popular herb for its aromatic characteristics. Only the rhizomes and tubers are used for medicine, since these are the most aromatic part of the plant. They are small and round, not more than five centimetres in diameter for the larger species, while the smaller ones may be one or two centimetres in diameter. Their round form makes them easy to confuse with bulbs; however, botanically, they are rhizomes. When gathered
from the soil, they come in clusters, and are then separated into the smaller pieces when used. These rhizomes contain essential oils with several compounds that have a proven calming effect on the nervous system (Rakotonirinaa et al., 2001; Couchman et al., 1964; Nyasse et al., 1988; Bum et al., 2001). In other parts of the world, *C. articulatus* is widely used not only in medicine, but also in the perfume industry (da Silva et al., 2014). Some scholars have argued that these plants get infected by the ergot fungus (*Claviceps sp*), which has psychedelic characteristics. This may be a reason why it is such an important plant in the local pharmacopoeia (Plowman et al., 1990; Shephard, 2011; Brown, 2014). Ergot can cause hallucinations and uterus contractions, being a strong abortive and vasoconstrictor (Schultes, Hofmann and Rätsch, 2006). All of these are side effects of Piri Piri and other *Cypreseae* found throughout Amazonia (Shephard, 2011); however, I have not come across this during my fieldwork.

The primary way of using Chondur throughout Putumayo is quite telling of the characteristics of the plant. The shaman or healer crushes the rhizomes on a table using a wooden hammer. The crushed rhizomes are then placed in a bottle of alcohol, usually *aguardiente* (a 29% spirit with a liquorice flavour), to dilute the essential oils of the plant. After standing for a short time in a cool place, the alcohol will take the particular smell of Chondur. Usually, the amounts are about 12 Chondur rhizomes for half a fifth of aguardiente (aguardiente is so popular that it usually comes as a *media* or half a fifth (375 ml)). This new concoction has three main uses: first, as a rubbing alcohol, to smell (placing a small amount on your hands and rubbing it to accentuate the smell of Chondur’s essential oils); second, as a *riego*, to pour on objects that need protection; and third, and most importantly, as a *soplo* or a blow-spray (taking a small sip and spray-blowing it on a patient or object).

As a warm, bitter plant, Chondur falls into the category of plants that are used to cleanse evil spirits. In the Andean foothills of Colombia, shamans depend on Chondur to help manage and control the many evil spirits that can attack a person. At the same time, the

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100 This was made famous by Albert Hoffman as one of the main sources of inspiration for the LSD molecule and was also the cause of the St. Anthony’s fire, the medieval name for Ergotism.
101 In the lowlands of Peru, people use Tobacco in a similar way (Gray, 2004; Chaumeil, 1984).
use of Chondur has been adapted to more mestizo notions of health and illness, such as the multiple spiritual entities that are common in folk medicine in Colombia.

Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to look at the role of these medicines in local health in Putumayo. By exploring how Chondur embodies and represents different cultural processes, we can understand the close relationship between indigenous practices and overall folk medicine in Colombia. As the plant flowed from the highlands into the lowlands, it produced spaces of intercultural exchange and hybridity, which fashioned these relationships.

To examine this process, I will use four varieties of Chondur to explore different aspects of traditional health in Putumayo, from ceremonial and ritual healing to the relations between people and the different invisible beings that cause spiritual diseases. Through Chondur, I will investigate the connections between the jungle and medicinal plants, their spirits and their owners.

I will start with Tigre Chondur, which is a powerful shamanic tool used primarily in Ayahuasca ceremonies. In this case, I will explore how symbolic notions of health have changed over time as the social and environmental characteristics of the territory change. The second Chondur I will explore is Waira Chondur, which is primarily used as a healing tool not only for Ayahuasca shamans, but also for many local healers throughout the region who have seen its advantages and incorporated it into their practices. The third, Trueno Chondur, will allow us to explore the role of shamans in the local cosmology, as the expansion of this practice has attracted many young men to become shamans and made the Ayahuasca network more complex. Finally, I will explore Danta Chondur as a means to understand the relationships between the body, health and the forest.

Most of the fieldwork done for this plant was conducted in Middle Putumayo, although Chondur is widespread in this territory and is used by healers and shamans from a spectrum of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. It is true that some highland shamans prefer to use another plant known as Coquindo (*Aspidosperma album*), and smudging
and *limpiezas* can be done with a wide array of bitter and sweet plants, but Chondur is still the go-to plant in local shamanism.

The trade of Chondur is not as common as that of the other plants examined in this thesis, since it can be grown quite easily. However, as more people are living in the cities and the practice becomes popular there, it is beginning to be sold in many urban markets.

**Tigre Chondur and the Shaman**

For many of the indigenous communities in Putumayo, Chondur is a plant profoundly associated with the Ayahuasca ceremony. Together with the Waira fan and certain smudging resins, it is an essential shamanic instrument to manage the ceremony. Tigre Chondur is one of the varieties closely associated with the shamanic powers, and is the most commonly used in ceremonial contexts due to its symbolic and physical association with the *tigre* or jaguar (*Panthera onca*). It is supposed to increase the hunters’ abilities and to *espantar al tigre* (scare the jaguar) in difficult situations (Cipolletti, 1988).

Shamans share this connection with the jaguar, a spiritual affiliation known throughout Amazonia (Friedemann and Arocha Rodríguez, 1993; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975; Fausto, 2004; Langdon, 2014). Not long ago, the most potent shamans in Putumayo were thought to be able to metamorphose into jaguars whenever they wanted. These beliefs have changed dramatically, as shamans lost their mythical powers to the ongoing colonial project and their contact with the West. As naturalist and modernist

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102 Or Cleansing in Spanish is often associated with healing practices. There are many forms of Cleansing, from spiritual to more physical cleansing; each has a series of techniques that allow the healer to eliminate any impurities, diseases or curses from the body. Limpieza adds a purity connotation and is probably associated with baptism and other Christian practices.

103 The Waira fan is a shamanic tool made with leaves from a small grassy plant. Shamans from the People of Yagé use it as a percussion instrument, to brush their patients and as a fan. I was not able to identify this plant due to its lack inflorescence. It also seems that the shamans use several different but similar plants – probably from different genera, since some Wairas are very different from others. A more informed identification might be a *Pariana stelonemma* or *Olyra latifolia*. 
perspectives on animals have affected people’s relationship to the animals in the forest, shamans have lost their power associations to the hierarchies of forest beings.

In many of the shamanic narratives that I collected during my fieldwork, the jaguar is a transforming entity, a source of danger and awe. The symbolic association with the jaguar is everywhere. Before ceremonial activities, as well as during political acts, the shaman will put on a jaguar-teeth necklace to show his power to protect and to kill. Wearing images of jaguars through glass-beaded chest pieces, shirts and tattoos is also a common sight in shamanic circles. On one occasion, a shaman told me about his encounter with a female jaguar and her cub. As he stared directly into her eyes without flinching, he was able to make the jaguar see him as an equal and not as a potential prey, similar to what Kohn (2014) once witnessed. This capacity to show themselves as equal to the jaguar reveals the shamans’ intimacy with the forest’s primary predator.  

This highlights the fluid physicality of other animals and other beings in indigenous thought. These beings are capable of transforming by changing skin. Jaguars in Amazonia, like most animals, have a human form, live in a human house and have prey to hunt and crops to harvest; in this world, what the jaguar may see as Manioc beer, humans may see as blood (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). The shaman puts on the skin of the jaguar, which includes its tools such as the sharp teeth and claws. 

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During my fieldwork, I attended a complex barter transaction between lowland and highland shamans; part of this barter was a set of jaguar canines. During the discussion, one of the men highlighted the power one gets by wearing these canines in a ceremony, since the shaman has to hunt the patient’s disease during the Ayahuasca ritual. Associating themselves with the jaguar means acquiring the animal’s traits: its strength, its stealth and, most importantly, its capability to hunt in the visible and invisible world.

This symbolic association also plays a vital role in a ceremonial healing, even for many of the mestizo shamans. In the narrative of the sacred Ayahuasca ceremony, the jaguar, the shaman and the Yagé spirit are continually interchangeable. *El Gran Chaman*\(^{105}\) or *el Gran Jaguar*, for some of the mestizo shamans, represents a spirit similar to the Great Spirit of North American neoshamanism (Neihardt, Deloria and DeMallie, 2014). For indigenous shamans, the jaguar is associated with the shaman himself. The shaman hunts down the evil spirits that cause disease, like the jaguar hunts down its prey in the jungle.\(^{106}\)

For Calabrese (2013), leading a patient through different symbolic associations is an essential aspect of healing. Therapeutic emplotment uses various elements of a narrative that are meaningfully placed to support the healing story. Like the travels to Wirikuta\(^{107}\) of the Huichol or the Native American Church\(^{108}\) peyote rituals (Calabrese, 2013), an Ayahuasca ceremony is interwoven with symbolic representations. By following the ceremonial plot, the patients understand their position and the reasons they were hurt, which is necessary to heal successfully with the help of the spirit of Yagé. The role of the shaman, thus, is to guide people through their ceremonial journey using emplotment devices. This emic explanation is important to understand the techniques that shamans

\(^{105}\) *Chamanismo* is the Spanish translation of shamanism. Introduced by anthropology, it is not the original name for local experts (which is Taita) but it has swiftly become popular.

\(^{106}\) The apparent association of the jaguar with the sun, due to its colour, also symbolically represents the path in the sky (Friedemann and Arocha Rodriguez, 1993; Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1975). For many shamans, especially those that are heavily influenced by Andean and Western spiritualism, the sun as Inti or Varicocha is an essential being in their world view. The symbolic presence of the Jaguar in its many forms reinforces the role of the shaman as the person who leads the patients through the various stages of the healing journey.

\(^{107}\) This is the main ceremonial practice of the Huichol, who travel from their hometown to the land of their ancestors and the valley of the blue deer.

\(^{108}\) Native American Church practices Peyote ceremonies throughout the US and Canada.
use in a ceremony. However, as is almost always the case, people do not actually know this is happening. The techniques are subtle, which permits them to be just under the surface of the ceremony. A good shaman makes this process almost intuitive. An excellent shaman will often guide you without you even noticing what he is doing.

The Ayahuasca ceremony is full of underlying details that help add to the wellbeing of the patient, from the smudging effects to the music. The ceremonial house is also essential, as it is usually central to the narrative, especially in the lowland Amazonia (Hugh-Jones, 1988). Subtle mechanisms are used to manifest more pinta (visions) and to help keep the patient from drifting too far from the desired effect. These methods are exceptionally efficient, since they stimulate the auditory and the olfactory senses (Callicott, 2013). Music is a primary tool to lead the patient’s experience and the olfactory sense also has a profound effect.

This is where Tigre Chondur plays an invaluable role. Its aromatic characteristics help calm the patient. Like the vignette at the start of this chapter has shown, its soothing smell calms people and helps them concentrate on their work during a ceremony. The overwhelming effect of Ayahuasca is sometimes too strong and Chondur is an excellent way of helping patients deal with many of the side effects.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Ayahuasca is a spiritual being with an agency that requires careful negotiation. Chondur is an important tool to negotiate with this agency (Callicott, 2013). It allows a constant interaction between the shaman, the patient and the plurality of spirits in the ceremony. The shamans use Chondur to guide their patient through their experience and facilitate a more harmonious ceremony. The use of Chondur in ceremonies and healing rituals is a practical technique that is very effective.

The Ayahuasca Ceremony

In order to observe this technique in more detail, I will describe a typical Ayahuasca ceremony. Like any ceremony, healing with Ayahuasca is a strictly structured ordeal. It is organised in several stages that require actions at specific times, repetitions and a narrative structure. Medicinal plants, shamanic tools and techniques (such as songs) are
used continuously as a way of moving the ceremony along and managing the experience. The shaman’s job is to lead the ceremony, using his tools and techniques to promote a worthy experience. Like many other objects in Amazonian material culture, these shamanic tools also have a degree of agency that requires careful observation. Therefore, as the ceremony progresses, the shaman must be conscious of the multiplicity of agencies that are present.

The ceremony is an all-night activity. It starts early in the evening, around 8 or 9 pm, just after the sun has set. Usually, one notices when the ceremony is about to start when people quietly begin to gather, waiting for the shaman to start blowing into the Yagé brew. Typically, during this time, the ceremonial space is cleansed with either Copal (Dacryodes peruviana) or Palo Santo (Bursera graveolens), two powerful smudging agents that burn with a white aromatic smoke. The shaman offers last-minute advice while giving the final touches to the brew, smudging it and spray-blowing to cleanse it from any contamination. This is when Chondur makes its first significant contribution, as the shaman takes a sip from a bottle that contains Chondur extract in aguardiente, and blows it onto the prepared brew in several short but powerful gusts, giving it the breath of life. He beats his Waira fan rhythmically while singing or praying to the Yagé spirit and/or to God. The powerful scents from the smudge and the Chondur and the rhythmic rustling of the Waira fan now flood the ceremonial space.

The shaman chants to a melodious and rhythmical tune. After this first song, people line up – first the men and then the women – to drink the brew from a small cup; the shaman is the last to drink. It takes about 20 minutes for the brew to take effect. As time is liquefied by the psychedelic experience and each patient has a transcendent moment, the audience quietens. Then the shaman starts to sing again. This is usually the moment when the brew has its emetic effects. As the music maximises the effects of the brew, the pinta or visions peak, as well as the nausea. During this time, the shaman and his apprentices continue to use smudging agents and Chondur to help patients who have a violent reaction to the brew.  

109 As we will see in the discussion of Waira Chondur, breath and wind have a complex symbolic association in the shamanic traditions of western Amazonia.

110 The emetic and laxative effect of Ayahuasca can be intense, especially when the patient does not prepare for the ceremony. In the ceremonial house, there are certain designated areas for...
Here again, Chondur takes another role, not as a cleanser of evil spirits but as a protector, as people are in a very vulnerable state. In this ceremomial context, the senses are inverted: sight and touch become less important, while smell and hearing take a central role. The shaman and his apprentices use music and the smudging agents to lead the patients through the shamanic journey. The shaman sprays the Chondur extract on each patient. The sweet, musky smell of Chondur mixed with the strong, pungent smell of aguardiente produce a soothing feeling.

The shaman must continuously balance the patients’ temperatures. If the body gets too warm, it can harm the liver and cause irreparable damage. Yagé is a very warm plant; it feels warm in the body. Chondur is also a warm plant, yet when mixed with alcohol it becomes cool and helps maintain a balanced temperature. Water and Ambar or Clavo Wasca (*Tynanthus panurensis*) are also offered to the patients for this purpose.

This balancing act is a full-time job, as sometimes people have adverse reactions and need stronger intervention. In a worst-case scenario, the shaman uses Ortiga (*Urera laciniata*) to whip the patient to stop the drunkenness, ‘*quitar la borrachera*’.

Drinking the brew is not an easy task. The borrachera,\(^{111}\) to use a popular Colombian word, is very strong. Some have difficulty standing up and it is better for them to lie down and close their eyes, since nausea and disorientation are difficult to control. Shamans pride themselves on their capacity to withhold the borrachera, as if it were a drinking match. Some asked me how *guapo*\(^{112}\) I was. Others, more sensitive to the capacities of a white man from Bogotá, did not mention it but, surely, they think less of you if you show signs of weakness during the borrachera. For apprentices, resisting the borrachera is almost an act of pride. To show that they are capable of the tough shamanic path to becoming a Taita, they have to show how guapo they truly are.

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\(^{111}\) *Chuma* is also used to describe drunkenness.

\(^{112}\) In Spanish, this means handsome, as well as bold or daring.
It is in this context that Chondur makes its third appearance – mixed in the siete esencias bottles that each apprentice has in their corner. It functions as a rubbing alcohol; apprentices place small quantities on their hands, rub their palms together, and smell the powerful essences so that Chondur can calm the borrachera. It helps apprentices focus on their task and keeps them from wallowing in the effects of the brew. Unlike the previous way of using Chondur, bound by ritualised time, the apprentices can use their own Chondur whenever they feel they need it.

As the night progresses, after several sets of songs, moments of silence for personal reflection, and conversations with the medicine and the shaman, the ceremony begins to quieten. The effects of the brew start dissipating, and the shaman may ask the patients if they wish to have another cup of Ayahuasca. Usually, apprentices and the shaman have another; patients who feel they need to work on their problems may also have a second cup. Again, the shaman uses Chondur and the Waira fan to cleanse the brew and blow away the evil spirits, again inducing the breath of life.

The cleansing wind is an essential concept of Amerindian shamanism, as we will see in the next section. In general, throughout Amazonia, the shaman’s breath is capable of healing, being associated with life and death, as well as with the vital characteristic of spiritual agency. By breathing and making sounds such as sighing, the beings of the forest reveal their existence. Thus, the wind produced by the Waira or wind plant also shows its agency (Hill and Chaumeil, 2011).

As the morning starts to creep up from behind the forest and the gentle blue light invades every corner of the house, the ceremony comes to its closure. The shaman chants some final songs, signalling the end and asking the Yagé spirit to let them sleep. People are usually already fast asleep; only those who are still struggling are awake. By the time the first sunrays appear, the apprentices are back at work; they have to start the healing ritual to close the ceremony. People are permitted to leave only after the healing ritual.

113 Similar to the smelling salts used in traditional European medicine.
Once people leave, they begin a process of internalising what Yagé had shown them or what they have experienced. Some of the people who have been suffering from a disease or illness might feel better. Others who have deeper and more complicated problems are meant to return later.

**Waira Chondur and the Agents of Disease**

During the Ayahuasca ceremony, the shaman used Tigre Chondur; however, as I would soon find out, the Chondur used in healing rituals is very different. For healings, shamans primarily use Waira Chondur. It works as a means to diagnose a patient or as a repellent against evil spirits and witchcraft. It is an important tool to fight one of the most common folk illnesses in Colombia, *mal de viento* or bad wind. All Chondur varieties play an active role in the complex spiritual and medicinal landscape of Putumayo, but Waira Chondur is probably the most commonly used to fight off evil spirits. Throughout Amazonia, Chondur roots are worn as charms to protect people who are at risk of being attacked by the evil eye (Ciopelli, 1988; Shephard, 2011). In the region of Putumayo, it is used primarily as an infusion, crushed and added to the liquorice spirit, aguardiente. This liquid is then blown on the patient and, with the Waira fan, the shaman brushes off disease and cleanses the patient.

Healing with Chondur is used to help the shaman manage different invisible agents that cause sickness. This healing ritual is called a limpieza or cleansing, a literal cleansing of the soul. By cleansing the soul and blowing the breath of health into the patients, the shaman or healer can remove all the evil forces that may be harming them (Hill and Chaumeil, 2011). The healing technique using shamanic breath and blowing is enhanced by using Waira (wind) Chondur, with the shamanic songs and with the aid of a Waira fan.

Cleansing and healing rituals are different from the Ayahuasca ceremonies. The latter are performed in order to work with the complex agency of Ayahuasca. Meanwhile, a cleansing ritual is a simple practice, done in intimate settings and used to deal with the complex landscape of beings that can cause illnesses in the region. Seligman et al.
(2008) show how rituals are a way in which people relate to the religious and sacred other, as in the Ayahuasca ceremonies; they also help people build conceptual mechanisms to deal with the tensions and ambiguities of life. On the other hand, the healing rituals allow patients to understand the predatory nature of illnesses in the region and give them the means to mediate with the alterities that can cause harm. In other words, “This is a function of its peculiar way of mediating difference and parsing boundaries, rather than seeking to overcome and absolutize them” (Seligmanet et al., 2008: 6). By accepting that the world is full of others that are often uncertain, unreliable, dangerous and ambiguous, the ritual provides the necessary rhythms and conventions to create some order and certainty in our lives (Nahum-Claudel, 2018).

Illness in general can manifest itself in a number of ways. However, overall, there are two main forms: physical (organic) and spiritual (inorganic) illnesses (Urea Giraldo and Barreras Montealegre, 1989: 255). Organic illnesses are understood as caused by internal characteristics of the patient, such as problems with the heart, kidneys or other internal organs. Breathing problems are also a common organic illness. These are categorised by their symptoms and can be treated through certain medicines specified for this purpose.

Blood is an important part of traditional medicine and many illnesses can be attributed to blood problems, such mal de sangre, anemia, and infecciones. Blood is important partly because it connects every organ and because it has an effect on emotions (Urea Giraldo and Barreras Montealegre, 1989).

The use of depurative and emetic medicines is a key way to combat organic or physical illnesses in lowland Amazonia (Sanz-Biset and Cañigueral, 2013). This includes fasting, which limits the intake of certain foods that have temperatures that can worsen the illness. Some blood diseases are dealt with purifications that are induced through depurative medicines. By inducing a purga (purging), the healer is aiding the expulsion of the illness to begin the healing process.

On the other hand, spiritual or inorganic illnesses can be attributed to several causes, such as contamination, witchcraft, and envy. The source of the illness may vary, as people adapt to new social-environmental phenomena; however, most diseases are
relational as in other Amazonian communities (Lenaerts, 2006). Health in this territory is defined by the continual interaction with spiritual beings, and the shaman must manage and negotiate with the agencies that can cause or heal diseases. When a shaman is not capable of treating a particular disease, such as the susto, one can go to an Afro-Colombian healer that has more experience with this type of problem. Otherwise, shamans can refer patients to the hospital, acknowledging that they are not able to cure Western diseases.

As Amazonian social life becomes more urban, the magical and spiritual landscape is changing dramatically. Amazonian urban centres have become spaces of multi-ethnic exchange and negotiation, as new – potentially dangerous – interactions are becoming more common. There is distrust towards the other sinners, while ethnic and social tensions are released in an active spiritual war. Consequently, shamans and healers of different ethnic backgrounds must continually struggle to keep their patients healthy.

This is magnified by the history of violence in the region, which not only traumatised entire populations, but also left the region with serious side effects. This manifests in the spiritual world, as dead people who did not have proper burials and areas where terrible things happened can cause disease to those who walk by.

To help against these growing problems, tools that were once used to live in the forest are being used in the cities. In Mocoa, a variety of communities have come together for economic and political reasons. Most share little except the shamanic practices, and, as other ethnic groups arrive, they are quick to incorporate these practices into their healing systems.

The fear of ‘el Taita de la oscuridad’ or ‘the dark shaman’ (Whitehead and Wright, 2004) is commonplace in the Amazonian world; in Putumayo, it is extremely common. Traditionally, these dark shamans could transfigure into jaguars to hunt people; they could send snakes and spiritual arrows to poison and kill, and might still be able to do it (Langdon, 2014; Whitehead and Wright, 2004). Additionally, in urban centres like

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114 One of many spiritual illnesses, it is when the soul is pushed out of the body due to a scare or a traumatic event. It can manifest in multiple ways, from catatonic states to epileptic attacks, as well as fainting and violent behaviour.
Mocoa, shamans are no longer the only ones doing magic. Witchcraft and sorcery is a common source of disease here and blaming a neighbour for an illness or, in some cases, death is quite normal. In fact, sorcerers and witches are considered one of the leading causes of disease and death in this region.

Healers and shamans primarily heal illnesses that happen when the invisible world interacts with the visible world. These illnesses come in five main forms: mal de viento (bad wind), maligno (evil spirit), envidia (envy), susto (scare) and brujeria (witchcraft), all of which are common in the highland regions of Peru, Ecuador and Colombia (Camino, 1992). Mal de viento happens when the body of a person accidentally interacts with a spirit. This spirit influences your inner self or soul, and can cause severe diseases and death, especially in young children and old people. When a spirit is actively stalking a person or seeking revenge, it is called a maligno. These beings are often associated with the devil, and are also found in the highlands and other mestizo regions.

Envidia and susto are common spiritual diseases in Colombian folk medicine. Envy can cause ailments to both the person who causes it and the person who feels it. You may also need the help of a shaman when you have suffered from an intense fright or susto, as your soul may have been scared away from your body, causing anxiety or even paralysis. Brujeria can be caused by an arrow from a dark shaman or by a sorcerer who wants to harm you; there is intentionality to it. Shamans who help heal witchcraft often need to know how to do the witchcraft themselves, to understand how to treat it. This is why people are sometimes suspicious of shamans. Witchcraft can be done by anyone who is knowledgeable in its workings and has an intention to harm. A common practice is to plant soil from a cemetery to contaminate someone’s home.

There is no doubt that Spanish, mestizo, and African notions of magic and witchcraft have influenced the way in which illness is perceived in Putumayo. Like in the rest of the country, the colonial power structures are a clear backdrop to witchcraft and sorcery. People of African descent are considered more prone to black magic, while mestizo people who practise shamanic arts are viewed with suspicion. Shamans have become less ‘dark’ as they gain new political and social recognition. Meanwhile, Afro-
Colombian and mestizo healers are gaining the reputation of being capable and dangerous sorcerers. It seems that while shamans lose their capability to transform into animals, sorcerers become more powerful. The shaman now fears not only the spiritual arrows of the other shamans who inhabit the forest, but also the witches that can attack you in the markets and the city streets.

In this ambiance, Chondur has become an important instrument in mestizo and Afro-Colombian medicine. The ritualised healing techniques using Chondur have become useful against the mal de viento, as well as in a wide array of spiritual illnesses. During my fieldwork, I came across many shamans and healers who actively employ it.

Meanwhile, Western medicine has had a substantial influence on the understandings and beliefs about health and the body. Diseases such as cancer, STDs and infections have become increasingly common. Although they do not fit into the local rationale, shamans and healers have incorporated them into their discourses. Cancer is an excellent example, as it is assimilated into local world views. The word is used interchangeably to explain internal ailments that may be caused by the invisible world, as well as a Western disease. Pollution is often attributed to cause cancer, but whether it is part of the invisible or visible world is hard to discern. Pollution in water, air and trash are visible but their effects on the body are invisible. Often the word suciedad or uncleanliness is used to describe pollution, yet in an ambiguous manner.

Similarly, during epidemics such as the chikungunya epidemic of 2016, shamans use a multifaceted approach, constantly negotiating with the different causes for the disease. However, shamans may have a general knowledge that it is caused by mosquitos, yet healing it with traditional methods has proven challenging. During this epidemic, patients would show up for a consultation, usually due to overcrowded and expensive treatments in the hospitals, and ask the shaman to heal them. The shamans performed a cleansing and their diagnosis relied on identifying symptoms, such as fevers and diarrhoea, but their prescriptions recommended medicinal plants such as warm plants to sweat the fever away or cool plants to soothe it. These generally focused on alleviating, not healing.
In most cases, due to their lack of experience with these diseases, they decide not to help, recommending a visit to the local hospital. Thanks to a government campaign, shamans learnt about chikungunya and incorporated it into their cosmological views by recommending Western medicine to the influx of people who sought their help. On the other hand, shamans who lived in rural communities had a harder time adapting to this epidemic due to the communication delays.

Likewise, when Western medicine is unable to help, shamans are often called to the hospitals to offer alternative solutions. This is the case of the shaman in the following vignette, who is a famed healer and a children’s specialist. Many mothers who are not satisfied with Western medicine visit her.

**The Cleansing Ritual**

Doris is a famed healer in Mocoa; during my time in the field, she was also my neighbour. Before I had even met her, I knew she was a healer. A beautiful Borrachero Andaqui (*Brugmansia suaveolens*) with its white flowers and an Ortiga Morada (*Urera laciniata*) grew in front of her home. These two plants, known to protect from evil spirits, led me to suspect that she was a healer. My suspicions were confirmed when, feeling sick, I asked around and people told me to go to her small house with Borrachero on the doorstep. She was known to be an expert in curing certain diseases that doctors could not. As soon as she saw me, she knew I was bewitched and that she would be able to cure my brujeria.

She told me I had to be more careful when dealing with people who know about plants. The local market with its six different herb stalls was dangerous. Working in areas with so many herbal medicine practitioners and shamans was risky.

This area was not only unsafe due to witchcraft and sorcery, it was also a source of envy. Envidia and brujeria are similar, yet different. As Doris explained: “*La envidia es cuando uno quiere lo que no es de uno, cuando siente que merece más algo de alguien. La brujería es maldad, es odio* (Envy is the yearning for something you do not have, which you feel you deserve. Witchcraft is a pure manifestation of evil and hate).” The
healer knew I was in trouble; she told me to be more discreet as I was calling too much attention to myself. For a 1.86-metre bearded white male asking about magical plants, this was almost impossible. When I asked her what to do, she smiled and said that she would cleanse me with Chondur.

Cleansing rituals are a vital part of Putumayo shamanism. They are prescribed to fight the many agents of disease that are found in the region. These rituals follow a very particular pattern and Chondur has a central role. The healer led me to her office; it had a small rickety chair in the middle and a table full of different religious and indigenous ornaments. She was a member of the Kametsa people from the highlands, having moved down to the lowlands with her late husband, an Inga shaman. She came from a family of shamans and felt sad that her children had not followed in their footsteps in traditional medicine. She would say:

“La medicina sagrada es nuestra cultura, nuestra tradición ancestral, y ellos no quieren nada de eso. Dicen que el Yagé es muy duro que pega muy fuerte. Pero si uno es del camino, él le ayuda a uno (The sacred medicine is our culture, our tradition, and they don’t want any of it. ‘Yagé is too difficult,’ they say, ‘it hits too hard’, but if you are part of the path, it will help you).”

Her deep relationship with Yagé/Ayahuasca was evident; her husband had been a powerful Ayahuasca shaman.

She told me to take off my shirt. I did as I was told and sat on the chair. She took out the Chondur, mashed it up and diluted it in a bottle of liquorice spirit. “Alcohol is a dangerous tool,” she said as she looked at the bottle. “Many shamans who use it as a shamanic tool have the risk of falling into alcoholism, but once the Chondur is added to it, it can be transformed into medicine.” The infusion had the earthy aroma of Chondur. She then asked me to pray and to believe that I would get better. “Only through faith in God and Jesus can one get better.”

She took out a Waira fan. It was a bouquet of long leaves that flowed like a fan. I was quick to ask her if this was the proper Waira; she nodded. Waira Sachis (Quechua for
‘wind plant’) is a notoriously tricky plant to find. A small Poaceae that grows in heavily shaded areas, Waira is not easy to identify.\(^{115}\) The healer rapidly waved the Waira fan and began singing her song. Her tune was a soft melancholic whistle, which I had never heard before. It was quite definitely Kametsa; it was not as fast as a Kofan or Ziona tune, yet not Inga at all. Unlike any healer I had heard, her melody was wordless. Her breath, with the song, was already capable of healing and yet, with the wind plant (Waira Sachis) and the Waira Chondur, it was made more potent.

Like any other ritual, this was a structural process based on repetition. The healer used the Waira fan to brush from the top of my head to my lower body. Blowing\(^{116}\) the Chondur into my head, chest, back, arms and legs, the shaman then brushed these extremities with the Waira fan. The effect was immediate. As the alcohol evaporated, it felt cold against my body, which, combined with the rhythmic sounds of the songs and the overpowering smell, engaged all my senses. This sensorial richness heightened the powerful trance-inducing nature of the ritual.

Why this particular order; why is the head the first to be cleansed? The rhythm of the ritual reveals the importance of the head as the entrance to the soul. During my fieldwork, I had observed this sequence on various occasions, particularly when dealing with mal de aire.\(^{117}\) This spiritual disease can attack anyone who enters a place where spirits congregate or anyone who walks near it. People should wear a hat at night and not immerse their heads in water, since bad wind enters through the head. Children are

\(^{115}\) For shamans and merchants, there are only two types of Wairas: female and male. Usually, the best are the female Wairas, capable of withstanding the constant shaking of the shaman’s wrist, while the longer and thicker leaves of the male Waira will fall off. The proper Wairas, the healer told me, are collected in the wild, and you should choose those with deep shades of purple at the base of the leaf. This clarification may have been due to different species of plants used for Waira fans, such as the Pariana stelonemma or the Olyra latifolia.

\(^{116}\) Sucking the disease is a common technique in Amazonia; however, I never witnessed this in Putumayo. Instead, the blowing with Chondur endorses a more effective approach to these diseases.

\(^{117}\) This spiritual disease has to do with certain types of spirits that are present everywhere. These spirits have many origins: invisibles (invisible forest spirits) from the jungle, spirits of unbaptised children, Aucas (wild Indians) and, on some occasions, spirits of those killed violently.
particularly vulnerable because of the fontanelles on their heads. Always keeping a child’s head protected is an essential practice in popular medicine. Using charms or bathing can also protect from the bad wind; however, even if you are careful, you may get it unknowingly.

The movements involved in cleansing rituals follow certain repetitions that are reminiscent of brushing and sweeping. This is important, since, for shamans, disease is often visualised as an insect or a poisonous animal associated with putrefaction and the cold. By sweeping the patient with the Waira fan, the disease is brushed off as if it were an insect crawling on the skin. The movement is also associated with cleanliness, as sweeping the field next to the house is a necessary activity in Amazonia to deter snakes and other potentially dangerous animals.

At the end of the ritual, patients are in a vulnerable state. Herbal perfumes and essences are used to help patients get better, as they are protected on their way home. An example is siete esencias – seven essences – a perfume mixture of seven sweet plants to give the patient luck and protection.

In extreme cases, cleansing must be done with baths, usually in two stages: a bath of bitter plants, to cleanse; and then a bath of sweet plants, to attract good health. Baths using sweet and bitter plants are widely used in Colombia, as it is a common practice in folk medicine. This means that, throughout the country, healers use the sweet and bitter plants that are ecological available, such as Eucalyptus and Pine in the highlands.

After the cleansing ritual, the shaman or healer can prescribe medicines for specific problems that they notice. In other cases, when the patient feels low in energy or continues to feel sick, the shaman might use Ortiga (Urera laciniata). Ortiga is a
perennial plant of the stinging nettle family that can grow almost two metres high; its most particular characteristics are its thick, sharp urticating hairs, full of histamine, that produce irritation. The sight of the plant is quite intimidating, and in cities and semi-urban areas such as Mocoa, it is used as a living fence to deter thieves from breaking in. For shamans and healers, it is an invaluable tool to help people with rheumatism, muscle pains, low energy, and to sober people drunk from alcohol or Yagé. It is also used to discipline children. Some shamans state that it is an extremely effective and valuable plant. One shaman told me that Ortiga works like acupuncture, hitting the body’s energy (qi) spots to release tensions.

Ortiga is cut along the base of the stem where a handle is cleared of its urticating hairs. A softer stem with several leaves on top is generally preferred. If they do not have their own plant, shamans will tell you exactly where to gather Ortiga, as it grows quite well in urban areas. The Ortiga is swept over the patient, gently moving it to the beat of a song, starting from the top of the head and gently brushing the needles along the upper body. This produces a rash that, if done right, will not itch or hurt. Some shamans have a lighter touch and you barely feel the needles. After a while, the itching will pass, producing a sense of wellness. Whether this is due to the effects of histamine in the immune system or the dopamine produced by the body to counter the pain requires more analysis. For the people in Putumayo, the Ortiga helps espabilar (wake up) the spirit.

To make this therapeutic tool truly effective, the healer also cleanses Ortiga with Chondur, blowing it and praying to it. Most, if not all, medicinal plants that are given by the shaman or healer go through a similar process. It is through this technique that the

118 Unlike the stinging nettle (Urtica dioica) in the UK or the White Ortiga (Urera baccifera) from the highlands, the lowland Ortiga does not produce rashes in the same way. This is because the urticating hairs are thick and do not break off when they come in contact with the skin. This characteristic is the main reason why it is used so widely, since its hairs (like hypodermic needles) will enter the epidermis and deliver the painful histamine compound but will not give the uncomfortable rash of the stinging nettle. Histamine is the active organic compound in Ortiga; it is also found in the body and is involved in immune responses and other physiological functions, causing inflammation and itchiness.

119 The colour is also important, as local people classify two sub-varieties: the male and the female. The female is darker and almost violet, while the male is greener with pinkish hues in the leaves. The male sub-variet y is known to have a stronger punch, which is quite painful.
A shaman accesses the healing potential of the plant. Their songs, prayers and different invocations are a means of managing this potential.

“Cada planta tiene el poder de la sanación ahí adentro. Yo la saco; sin mis oraciones la planta no funciona” (Each plant has the power of healing inside it. I expose it; without my prayers the plant does not work),” said a shaman in the market of Mocoa.

As we have seen, this medicinal world view is a space of predation, where humans are constantly being attacked as prey (Fausto, 2007). The cleansing ritual is an amalgamation of different techniques that help deal with this aggressive world. In particular, the shaman uses these techniques to combat the many agencies that can cause illness. As such, the shaman communicates directly with the beings that are preying on the human. All of the shaman’s tools and techniques in the cleansing ritual are applied for this purpose, and highlight the multisensory dynamics needed to fight these entities. Chondur, the Waira fan, the sweet perfumes, and Ortiga all play a crucial role in this ritual, enabling the communication between the shaman, the patient and the agents of illness.

The different beings that influence health highlight the complex dynamics of the region. To heal is to know the particularities of this multiplicity and the proper techniques to deal with it. For the shamans and healers of Putumayo, the cleansing ritual and the Ayahuasca ceremonies offer the proper spaces and techniques to heal. These ritualised practices give stability and meaning to the healing processes.

**Trueno Chondur and the Power of the Shaman**

I will now digress from the main argument of this chapter to explore the role of the shaman. For this purpose, I will analyse the Trueno (Thunder) Chondur, which is probably the most powerful of all Chondurs. This medicinal plant is hard to find, since it is used only for specific spiritual and magical activities. As such, it is deeply tied to the power of the shaman and often feared. Its connection with thunder reflects its importance, illustrated by the most powerful natural phenomenon in local cosmology.
Thunder is referenced throughout Amazonian mythology as a primordial force, an active force that creates and constructs the universe and yet is also capable of destruction and death\(^\text{120}\) (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1971). The ambiguous power of thunder sanctions its use for evil or for good, in a clear parallel to the shamanic powers.

Shamans are also ambiguous. The dark shaman who can send disease or perform witchcraft is a constant threat to the lives of local people (Whitehead and Wright, 2004; Whitehead, 2002). There are even more ambiguous characters in this world. Known as *Auca* (wild), they are shamans who have not been baptised, do not have Christian morals and, therefore, are beyond local understanding. Whether these shamans are actual people or are part of the spiritual world is open to discussion. In any case, they have an agency that must be dealt with, negotiated or met head-on.

Trueno Chondur is the main weapon to fight this confrontation. Shamans can add spiritual arrows and potency to their breath by using this type of Chondur. The spiritual arrows, *flechas* or *zue* in Ziona (Langdon, 2014), are a common shamanic technique. They are tightly associated with the wind, similar to the arrows of a blowgun; a significant cause of disease, they can easily kill. These arrows can take many forms, such as glass shards, the barb of a stingray, thorns and, in extreme cases, thunder. They can be invoked with or without the Waira or Chondur by blowing in short, powerful bursts that come from the diaphragm. Yet those that possess the power of thunder are the most feared – that is why Trueno Chondur is seen with suspicion.

The spiritual wars are becoming more dangerous with ongoing urbanisation. As more shamans share proximity in the cities, paranoia and resentment have become major issues in the national and global alternative medicine scene. Trueno Chondur has suddenly become more popular, as the necessity to protect against possible spiritual attacks becomes urgent.

**The Power of the Shaman**

\(^{120}\) A direct link between the invisible and visible worlds, thunder is full of sexual energy, capable of destruction as well as creation (Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1971).
I heard this narrative on a rainy afternoon in a town near Orito. It is about a famed Taita who is still alive. The shaman had an interesting youth, having worked as a smuggler, a raspachin (Coca leaf collector) and then as a shaman. His powers were legendary. As one of the last jaguar shamans, he was capable of becoming a jaguar and of travelling through the forest and beyond in his spiritual journeys. Many Taitas evoke him during Yagé ceremonies as a source of their powers, as he visits them during the Yagé visions to help them diagnose. He was one of the first shamans to open the Yagé ceremony to the white and mestizo communities from the highland cities. He then quickly became one of the most powerful shamans of the Kofan community, the master and teacher of many shamans who currently offer the brew in and out of Colombia.

He is also one of the most political shamans in Colombia, continually involved with the national government and international organisations. He was an invaluable protagonist in the creation of the local Plan de vida or life plan. This made him a target for the FARC guerrilla and the paramilitary, as the warring factions fought for the control of the Coca business and the oil fields of Putumayo. It was during this time that a guerrilla commander came to his home to ask him to do witchcraft on the commander’s enemies. The Taita rejected this order, and the commander kicked the pot of Yagé he had been brewing for several days. Threatening such a powerful shaman is not something that can be taken lightly. The Taita gathered Trueno Chondur from his chagra (garden); he mashed it up and diluted it in aguardiente.

With his bottle of Chondur in his hand, he took a mouthful and proceeded to blow it into the sky while violently shaking his Waira. The dramatic scene was set, as thunder rolled. The Taita had thrown a bolt of lightning into the middle of the guerrilla troop, killing several combatants.

Invoking the power of thunder, as they say, is almost like invoking the power of the jungle. The thunder inhabits the mountains, where the invisibles and the forest spirits

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121 This is along with several Ziona Taitas, who also became increasingly important in the network due to the revitalisation of Ayahuasca (Langdon, 2016).
122 This is, in short, the legal system of the community, establishing their desired goals and how to achieve them.
live, and all the energy was suddenly concentrated into this act of justice. The guerrilla would think twice before meddling with him again.

Shamanic narratives are an essential part of the shamanic tradition. In some cases, these narratives are old and mythological, where shamans demonstrate their lineage by talking about old shamans who could transform into jaguars, about their journeys, and about indigenous leaders and heroes. Like the previous narrative, most stories talk about powerful shamans, alive or dead, who still have an impact on the shamanic networks today. Stories about the abuelos (grandfathers), elder shamans who had great power and who taught a whole generation of shamans, are quite common.

Most of the shamanic narratives follow a similar structure: powerful shamans use their power to deal with someone or something that has offended them (Langdon, 2014). They talk about other shamans who may be hurting local people and about different agencies that coexist in this biocultural landscape.

It is interesting to note the emphasis on Trueno Chondur in this narrative. Just saying that the shaman had used Chondur did not suffice; the story had to specify which Chondur he used. Linking it with thunder and lightning shows mastery over the fundamental powers of the forest. This Chondur’s power comes from deep in the forest, from the place ‘donde vive el trueno’ (‘where the thunder lives’). This seems to contrast with the source of the shaman’s own power, which is, in a sense, more complex. Yet, it validates the shaman’s political power and positions him in a place between the visible and invisible world.

In many cases, the narratives are thinly veiled threats, especially as more people interested by the power of Yagé have arrived in the territory. Recent government scandals have influenced the political leverage of this Taita. As a result, many of his followers repeat these stories to highlight his power. Much more is to be said about the political power of the shaman. As Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert (2013) have expertly shown, these shamans’ roles as negotiators with the spiritual world and with human communities have placed them in the centre of indigenous political struggles.
Shamans have a new role as mediators with the nation-state. The changing political landscape has opened a space for shamanism as a political power, as both mediator with the community and institutions and with nature and its spiritual inhabitants. As the mining and agricultural frontier expands into the forest, the shamans will play an even more important role cataloguing the biocultural landscapes that must be protected.

**The Danta and Other Spirits**

As I have been arguing, medicinal plants exist in both the spiritual realm and the physical realm. The power of a plant to heal is not only attributed to its ability to offer *alivio* (relief), it is also directly related to its spiritual qualities.

To understand this concept fully, we must explore the complex spiritual relationships that exist between the medicinal plants and the different agencies that live in the forests and cities of the region – particularly the role of medicinal plants as mediators between the spiritual realm and the physical one. For local communities, the complex assemblage (Tsing, 2013) of relationships that constitute an ecosystem go far beyond biological interactions; it is a space where spiritual and nonspiritual agents coexist. Due to its complexities, the forest is the space where invisible and visible beings interact; deep in the jungle, the border between the visible and the invisible worlds becomes increasingly blurry. As beings of the forest, medicinal plants have an essential role as intermediaries; they are physical beings that have a direct link with the spiritual realm.

Traditionally, these spirits inhabit mountains, creeks, rivers and forests, and when people unintentionally come into contact with them, they can cause illness or death. The lines between the forest and the human realm are continuously being negotiated.
causing all sorts of problems. Medicinal plants assist in the management of these beings and alterities as they clash with the human world.

I will use Danta Chondur to explore the relationships between medicinal plants and the spiritual agencies found in Amazonia. Danta Chondur is the ‘odd one out’ among the Chondurs. It is a sedge but, botanically, it is a different species; unlike the rest of the Chondurs, it has thick leaves and it is quite easy to identify. Its rhizome is used throughout Putumayo for many things, from cleansing to producing powerful purgative effects. However, this Chondur is unique due to its connection to the danta or tapir, the largest mammal in the forest. Danta Chondur is an important source of food for it.

Like the jaguar and the anaconda, the danta is a common theme in Ayahuasca ceremonies due to its spiritual importance. Like many beings in Amazonia, the danta has a double existence in the forest: as an animal, hunted for its meat, and as a spiritual entity with a complex personhood. Previously, in indigenous medicine, danta teeth, bones and fat were widely used for their spiritual and healing qualities, said to have a powerful effect on the patient. These medicinal properties are directly related to its existence in the forest and its capability to exist in multiple worlds. Correspondingly, the medicinal properties of Danta Chondur are associated to its relationship with the danta. This correlated relationship is twofold. Some healers say that when the danta is sick, it eats this Chondur; others also affirm that the danta is the owner of medicinal plants that grow on the jungle floor. Thus, the danta must be taken into consideration as a spiritual owner when using these plants.

The notion of spiritual ownership varies considerably in the region among indigenous people and mestizos. A spiritual owner or spirit master controls and protects a particular place or thing. Owners can be linked to many things, such as landscapes, forests, rocks, rapids, mountains, animals and plants. Plant owners, which can take many forms, are an essential agency when dealing with health. Most shamans and other believers ask the owner of the plant to grant them access to its healing potential. These medicinal properties are directly related to its existence in the forest and its capability to exist in multiple worlds. Correspondingly, the medicinal properties of Danta Chondur are associated to its relationship with the danta. This correlated relationship is twofold. Some healers say that when the danta is sick, it eats this Chondur; others also affirm that the danta is the owner of medicinal plants that grow on the jungle floor. Thus, the danta must be taken into consideration as a spiritual owner when using these plants.

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123 The danta has many uses, such as charms for fertility; its grounded bones are used for heart problems, the dried penis is considered an aphrodisiac, and the blood is often used as medicine.

124 Much has been written about this. See: Fausto (2012; 2004) and Arhem (1996), among others.
(Jauregui et al., 2011). This practice is essential, since cutting down or using a plant without asking permission can prove counter-productive and dangerous. On the other hand, establishing a direct relationship with the spirits of each plant can maximise the efficiency of its medicine. However, the difference between the spirit of the plant and the owner of the plant is quite tricky to identify. From what I could gather during my investigation, these relationships are fluid. For some plants, it is important to ask the spirit directly, while for others it is important to ask their owners.

A shaman once described the spiritual owner he saw during an Ayahuasca ceremony:

“Después de tomar yagesito esa primera vez, se me presentó un tronco grande donde antes había un gran árbol. Un viejito, un abuelo con corona de plumas estaba ahí, yo sentía que lo conocía. Me hizo señas para acercarme, y me puso todas las plantas ahí en el tronco. Me las mostraba una por una, diciéndome para qué servía y para qué no servía (After drinking Yagé for the first time, a large log appeared where a tree had been before. An old man, an elder with his feather crown, asked me to come closer; I felt I knew him from before. He put all the plants before me, explaining one by one what they could be used for and what they could not be used for).”

The similarities to the entity described in the Ayahuasca chapter are surprising. By accessing this spiritual owner, the shaman can diagnose and access the medicinal potential of each of the plants. As one of my informants explains:

“Cuando estoy bien borracho con Yagé, me muestra el jardín botánico del cielo. Me muestra cuáles son las plantas que toca para cada enfermedad, me da un numero como si fuera una farmacia y de ahí busco la planta (When I am very drunk with Yagé, it shows me the botanical garden of heaven. It shows me

125 For the Shipibo-Konibo of Peru, this means a complex and strenuous process of dieta, in which a plant is consumed for a period of time until the shaman knows it profoundly (Jauregui et al., 2011).
126 It is helpful to think of spirits as not necessarily immaterial entities (a spirit may be a kind of vital substance, like blood; souls may be manifested in animal body parts – e.g. the liver – but they may take the form of an image – e.g. a homunculus). Likewise, the spirit master of a given plant, for example, may be a bird; so, what appears to be an animal/bird etc. may in fact be a spirit master.
which plants are needed for each illness, he gives me a number, like in a pharmacy, and then I look up the plant.”

This is quite interesting since it highlights the double existence of medicinal plants. As if evoking Plato’s archetypes, this shaman gives a detailed description of the ‘jardín botánico del cielo’, where all the medicinal plants exist in spiritual form. The idea of archetype in the visible and the invisible world is common in Amazonia. The maloca or communal house has been described as the archetype of the world by the lowland Tukanoans (Hugh-Jones, 1979). Comparing this garden to the Garden of Paradise seems to add a syncretic dimension. Like in the biblical reference, the botanical garden of heaven is a place where all plants are beneficial. All have medicinal properties and are blessed by God.

The botanical garden of heaven is frequently compared to local pharmacies found throughout the city. This comparison highlights how the ideas of health and medicine are continually being made and reinforced, since modern transformations have had a profound impact on the way in which people perceive health. These Western and Christian cosmological beliefs are changing how people perceive the world, especially in urban and semi-urban settings. Incoming evangelic churches have accelerated this process, while the social structures that maintained a deep connection with the forest are shifting.

Like most plants used in Putumayo, Danta Chondur is an interesting cultural overlap. Due to its undeniable connection with the danta, it continues to belong to a spiritual universe deeply entwined with the forest. As new religious and cultural notions enter the spiritual landscape of the Amazonian foothills, they are changing the way in which people understand the healing power of plants. As people lose contact with the forest due to urbanisation, the cosmological notion of spirits also changes. It is here that we come across a critical aspect of Amerindian cosmological universes. They have the capacity to change while continuing to manifest the same internal processes. As Aparecida Vilaça (2010) states:
“Native symbolic systems were able to accommodate these new actors, proving dynamic enough to revise their classifications in accordance with the perception of events.” (2010: 3)

Consecutive waves of colonial influence have transformed the way in which local indigenous people understand the universe. This influence creates new categories for medicinal systems, new power structures, and new ideas about nature. Currently, Christianity, new age and biomedical beliefs have established themselves as systems and world views in which interpretations of health are produced. As a result, healing plants are now being associated with other sources of power and health, such as the Virgin, God, science and the new age spirits.

The Other Chondurs

As we have seen, Chondur is commonly used throughout Putumayo in different cultural and ecological backgrounds. The various ethnic groups that coexist here share not only environmental and social characteristics, but also share a medicinal tradition. In the case of Chondur, it is used by most indigenous communities in Putumayo, including the lowland and highland communities, and some mestizo and white residents. As we saw, colono healers have adopted practices from local traditional medicine, such as the use of the Chondur and Waira.

I have not analysed all the types of Chondur; still, this plant stands out as one of the most diverse in the medicinal repertoire of the shamans of Putumayo and elsewhere (Descola, 1986). Some other varieties are Gente (People) Chondur, Coco (devil) Chondur, Warmi (Cattle) Chondur and Ajo (Garlic) Chondur. All of these have their particular uses, prayers, rituals and their relationships with health and materiality, as well as with the other beings in the forest.
During this chapter, I have highlighted the multidimensional existence of these unique plants. They inhabit a diversity of social and environmental landscapes throughout Putumayo – from the spiritual forest of indigenous cosmology to the Christian ideals of paradise to modern capitalist models. The power and role of medicinal plants depend on their relationship with other beings that coexist here, having a deep connection with the supernatural and spiritual world. This grants them even more agency since, by actively communicating with us through our bodies, they position themselves as essential agents that must be negotiated with to heal successfully.

Traditional medicine in Putumayo works by accessing this invisible world and bringing together the different realms that exist parallel to ours and the different beings that inhabit them. Plants grant access to the invisible world, and enable a multilayered, multisensory communication with it. In the urban landscape of Mocoa, with so many shamans interacting with each other, the spiritual landscape becomes a dangerous place. In it, the importance of Chondur as a tool to negotiate with these powers must not be underestimated.

Chondur, like many other medicinal plants, connects the forest with the body. The complicated existence of Chondur underscores the importance of the forest in traditional medicine. Traditional medicine is still linked to local ecosystems, making the forest indispensable for local urban health, but new forces are changing this relationship. In the following chapter, we will explore the attitudes towards the forest and how these attitudes are connected with traditional medicine.
Chapter 6. Yoco

Throughout this dissertation, we have explored the different cultural networks associated with health and medicinal plants in the Andean foothills of Putumayo. I have given a perspective on the historical and cultural processes that have been fashioned by the interaction between lowland and highland shamanism. I have also described how local networks of shamanic practices are interwoven into the overall folk medicine trade
in Colombia, as they establish intercultural connections. In this respect, in the previous chapter, I analysed the local cosmological and social notions of illness and health in Putumayo.

This chapter will explore how these concepts are intertwined with the local ecosystems of the Andean foothills. I will analyse how the forces that are changing the environment are also changing the attitudes, knowledge and practices of local communities. Connecting to the relevant themes of the previous chapters, I try to understand the role of Yoco (*Paullinia yoco*) in the multilayered network that forms the biocultural landscape of the Andean foothills.

The usage of the term ‘landscape’ here is similar to Tilley and Cameron-Daum’s (2017) usage in their materialist approach. It is a generalising term that designates the culturally established space where non-humans and humans are constantly interacting. According to these authors, “Persons and landscapes are entangled in a network of material and social relations providing both affordances and constraints for the performance of identities that always occur in particular material and cultural contexts” (Tilley and Cameron-Daum, 2017: 6). These relations, as we saw in previous chapters, are defined by local world views and cultural values. In a landscape, we have a multidirectional dynamic in which plants also have a role in determining the landscape’s nature and in contributing to the characteristics of local cultures.

In order to analyse this, I have chosen Yoco, a culturally important plant in Putumayo. One of the principal traits of this plant is that it requires – more than any of the others approached in this dissertation – a healthy forest for it to grow and establish a healthy population. Therefore, Yoco has an ambiguous relationship with humans: it is widely used, yet it exists mostly outside the human sphere of influence. In this chapter, I propose a broader understanding of the central role of Yoco in the biocultural landscape of the region.

Yoco is an excellent example to observe the impact of ecological degradation in the trade and use of medicinal plants. It is not commonly traded in these networks due to its biological and cultural limitations. Environmental and cultural degradation have
threatened and changed how people relate to it, reflecting a changing trend in how people understand the natural world around them. I will use Yoco to explore several themes such as the anthropic landscape and the colonial process, both of which are changing how wild medicinal species are used and harvested.

Yoco belongs to the *Paullinia* genus of the Sapindaceae family. It is closely related to another well-known caffeinated plant, the Guarana (*Paullinia cupana*). Like other species in the genus, Yoco is a climbing vine with elliptic pinnate leaves, milky latex and raceme inflorescence. Like *P. cupana*, it has tiny flowers and red, capsuled seeds that open when matured. It can grow quite large, with a base of up to 12 centimetres wide, and can have many hard, woody branches (Schultes, 1942).

Richard E. Schultes was the first to identify Yoco; however, he was not the first to mention it. Other explorers, missionaries and botanists had previously noted its use by local communities. This reflects the importance of the plant for them, since even Ayahuasca does not inspire the same interest and overall citations as Yoco. Schultes went as far as calling it “the most important non-alimentary plant in the natives’ economy” (1943: 323).

In spite of its central role for indigenous people, Yoco is notoriously difficult to grow in gardens. For indigenous cultures, Yoco belongs to the realm of the forest, something that is reinforced by myths and local world views. While I was in Putumayo, local gardeners and people who lived in the forest stressed how difficult it was to obtain

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127 Widely used in caffeinated beverages worldwide, Guarana is an important Amazonian commodity.
Yoco seeds. Even cuttings pose a particular challenge to grow in gardens; many people who had access to Yoco tried growing cuttings near their homes but very few succeeded. This resistance to domestication has been emphasised as one of the main causes of its population decline. For shamans in and around Mocoa, a sustainable use – understood here as a non-destructive harvesting of the plant – would only be possible if the forests were protected.

Like other plants in this dissertation, the role of Yoco as an agent in this landscape is multifaceted. Therefore, I will take some time to analyse several elements that highlight its agency. This will emphasise its complexity regarding the way in which indigenous cultures relate to it and to the forest around it.

I have divided the chapter into four parts as a means of exploring the plant’s different aspects. First, I consider its internal characteristics. The stimulating effect of the caffeine contained in Yoco makes it a particularly interesting plant for this ethnography, since it differentiates it from the other medicinal plants that are studied. Caffeine is probably the most important stimulant in human history; it has influenced innumerable lives and has been adopted by capitalism for its benefits on productivity and work. It has established itself as the centre of the commodification process for some time (Weinberg and Bealer, 2001).

For local indigenous communities, the internal characteristic of Yoco is its spiritual agency, the quality that gives it its importance in the socio-spiritual framework of shamanism in Putumayo. It is this agency that speaks to us through its effects on the body. If we consider that caffeine is the plant’s evolutionary response to its environment, a semiotic interpretation of the caffeine alkaloid could add value to emic notions of communication. As such, we must understand that caffeine and its effects on the mind and body are interpreted according to each person’s reality, and defined by each one’s cultural relationships.

Secondly, I explore how some people, especially those who have a shamanic tradition, reinforce these relationships. Studying the use of this plant can illuminate several aspects of the interconnection between humans and plants in these forests. It can show
us the link between the forests’ spiritual and healing properties, and the use of these plants. It will serve as an introduction to the local cosmology and how it defines the way in which people manage and coexist with the forests. Additionally, it will highlight the profound transformations that the ethnic communities in Putumayo are living through.

Thirdly, I will explore the ecological and social dynamics of the Yoco plant as it is shaped by the changing world. Due to its unique growing patterns and particularly tricky domestication, Yoco depends on forest ecosystems to exist. Humans who have historically been part of these ecosystems have transformed the forests into anthropic ecosystems. Yoco is an embodiment of the slow process that generated this link between the non-human and the human worlds. Yoco thus plays an interesting role as a liminal agent, representing that space between wilderness and domestication. However, as the agricultural frontier expands and forests are cleared, this link is being threatened and transformed.

Finally, this chapter studies the new roles that Yoco is playing in the social and political sphere of environmentalism. Modernist scientific notions of ecology and ecological conservation are having a remarkable impact on the way in which people relate to the forests, transforming how indigenous, mestizo and colono communities coexist with these ecosystems. Yoco is becoming a source for the region’s identity struggle, and for its land rights and ecological conservation initiatives. Yoco ties together the different stakeholders in the region, becoming a symbol that is constantly being negotiated.

An Ethnography of Caffeine

In order to understand the role of Yoco in the overall ecological and cultural landscape of Middle Putumayo, we must first analyse what makes this particular plant so important, what makes it stand out in the forest from the other medicinal plants that cohabit it. Mostly, it is its stimulant effects on the body due to its high concentration of caffeine.

The concept of stimulants is not as straightforward as one may think. It opens up a debate on interiority, in which the interior qualities of stimulants are perceived relative
to the person’s view of the world and the rules that bind it. The split between the external or physical and the internal or immaterial is a common aspect of the human experience. As Descola states:

“The duality of interiority and physicality, which is present all over the world in various modalities, is thus not simply an ethnocentric projection of an opposition peculiar to the west between, on the one hand, the body and, on the other, the soul or mind.” (2004: 121)

How people understand the interior and exterior qualities of non-humans defines how they interact with them. As we saw in the case of Ayahuasca, understanding its interior qualities also defines how people relate to personhood and non-human agency. For medicinal plants in particular, understanding what makes them effective is vital.

The consumption of caffeinated drinks is a common activity throughout the world. It has created complex trade networks, and motivated a profound relationship between people and the different plants that produce the caffeine molecule (Roberts and Wink, 1998). How different people rationalise the plants’ effect on our minds can illustrate how they understand the natural world.

In the case of Western and modernist societies, there is a long tradition of consuming plants with this alkaloid. For Western science, the effects of the molecule in our body are understood through chemical and physical laws, as the alkaloid disrupts our brain and nervous system. The fact that these plants biosynthesise the molecule is not a spiritual or immaterial process, but a coincidence produced by evolution and physical laws of matter.

On the other hand, indigenous people of western Amazonia, who also consume caffeinated plants, understand the internal qualities of these plants as spiritual phenomena that inspire communication with them, albeit to a much lesser degree than master plants such as Ayahuasca (Zuluaga, 2004). This characteristic of producing caffeine gives them the role of mediating instruments in the landscape of social beings that make up the forests. In the case of the local people who use Yoco, this plant gives
them the power to keep working, hunting, or establishing spaces for communal interaction.

The question arises: how do we reconcile opposing descriptions and understandings of the effect of this stimulating plant? I have approached this question to some degree in the chapter on Ayahuasca. I believe that psychedelics such as the DMT molecule have a nuanced agency that limits cultural comparison. By this, I mean that Western science has few examples similar to a DMT experience, while shamanism has a long tradition of its use. However, with stimulants like caffeine, the effect is much more subtle. This grants it a flexibility that Ayahuasca does not have, permitting a more inclusive interpretation of its qualities.

Reconciling different cultural interpretations of the interior agency of a plant requires acknowledging local understanding and the plant’s ecological characteristics, as these do not cancel out. I believe a semiotic approach will allow this, as the plant might be communicating but to the overall ecosystem. For Eduardo Kohn (2013), life is a sign process much like language. Quoting Pierce, he states that anything that allows a dynamic in which “something stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” is alive (2013: 74). This semiotic approach lets me build a bridge – which borrows from both shamanic and Western knowledge – between the two perspectives on this plant, offering a new way in which we can understand how a plant exists in the forest.

The relationship between humans and this plant is possible through this molecule that affects our nervous system. Therefore, the entwined relationship between plant, environment and human was brought about by a biochemical reaction. From the perspective of the plant, could this be categorised as a type of chemical communication? In this case, the fact that the plant is responding to its environment by producing caffeine, keeping its original form while changing to react to outside influences, is a semiotic process. Its particular form, behaviour or ecological adaptation cannot be understood without considering what it is responding to. Therefore, we can say that caffeine is produced as a response to the pressures of the environment. This back and
forth phenomenon functions as communication, as organisms become symbols that represent this interaction.

Ecologically, alkaloids such as the caffeine molecule are secondary metabolites of plants, which means that they are not necessarily primordial to the plant’s survival. As with other classes and types of secondary metabolites, the plants produce them as the first line of defence against mycological, entomological or other forms of predation. By doing this, these compounds work as chemical deterrents against herbivores. In a way, the plant is communicating to other organisms – through flavour, smell and effects on the nervous system – to stay away.

For plants that have few means of short-term adaptation or acclimatisation, alkaloids such as caffeine play an integral role in giving them certain flexibility in a constantly changing environment (Roberts and Wink, 1998). That so many plants produce this alkaloid in so many places of the world could be a classic case of convergence evolution. This might be due to the alkaloid’s effectiveness as a mycological deterrent, but the reason for its evolution is shrouded in the nearly infinite variables of ecology.

Nonetheless, like in other caffeinated plants, the quantity and quality of caffeine in each plant depends primarily on both ecological variables and the internal biology of the plant, making both quality and quantity entirely mutable and diverse, even if they belong to the same species. In other words, the amount of caffeine in each particular specimen depends on the genetic makeup, mutations and individual plant’s adaptation to its environment. This includes predation and defence, as well as soils, population, climate and a whole set of relationships that make up its ecosystem.

This offers an interesting analysis if we wish to expand agency to this type of non-human, since the social relationships that influence the caffeine produced by the plant are the sum of all the relationships that make up an environment, including humans,

128 As nitrogen-based proteins, alkaloids are also an important by-product of the complex macro-ecological nitrogen cycle that permeates the biosphere. How plants produce these complex molecules is still not well known, yet biochemistry is advancing quickly to understand the process behind this biosynthesis (Roberts and Wink, 1998).

129 This diversity of caffeine might indicate why there are so many different local varieties of Yoco, given that a biologist can only identify one species.
similar to what Kohn calls the “ecology of selves” (2013: 81). In other words, the agency of these plants, and consequently caffeine, is the result of the social relationships that define it.

Therefore, in the semiotics of life, this biochemical substance is originally there to signal something in response to the environment – in this particular case, ‘stay away’. However, it is our misunderstanding of this semiotic relationship that genuinely defines the relationship between the plant and us. In other words, when the plant signals ‘stay away’, we understand ‘this feels good’. It could be stated that, through a working misunderstanding (Sahlins, 1982), we have created an interspecies context to establish a tight and intertwined relationship. It is from this misunderstanding that we have created such a special bond with the several species of caffeinated plants used throughout the world.\textsuperscript{130}

**Caffeine as a Social Agent**

The reason why some caffeinated plants are popular and why others are not has more to do with their historical, cultural and ecological relationships than with the main alkaloid. In Putumayo, their employment depends on their cultural and traditional usage. The caffeine alkaloid is found in six plants commonly used in Putumayo: Yoco (*Paullinia yoco*), Guarana (*Paullinia cupana*), Guayusa (*Ilex guayusa*), Coffee (*Coffee Arabica, Coffee robusta*), Copuaçu (*Theobroma grandiflorum*) and Cacao (*Theobroma cacao*) and, to a lesser degree, Chuchuwaza. However, each one is used differently, belongs to different cultural spaces and establishes a whole set of different relationships with both humans and the environment around it.

Even if the local communities do not group these plants in the same category as I do

\textsuperscript{130} However, even this is bound to specific cultural and ontological paradigms, as each plant might contain many active components. For some cultures, individual molecules and biochemicals are emphasised while others might not...
here, there is a sentiment that these plants have similar effects on the body. For local shamanism, they are all warm and bitter plants, used primarily ‘para dar aliento y quitar la pereza’ (‘to give encouragement and eliminate laziness’). Overall, they are considered their own category, grouped somewhere between the idea of food and medicine. While it is true that all alimentary plants are medicines, not all medicines are food. Stimulants are in the middle, showing how these classifications overlap and are flexible. They are called food and medicine interchangeably, yet they are definitely not refrescos or refreshment drinks.

What they all have in common is that they are taken daily to wake up, work and suppress hunger. Yoco is taken in the morning before the sun is out and, not surprisingly, Coffee and chocolate have also become common in morning rituals throughout the region. Another key aspect of caffeinated drinks is that they are all central pillars of many social rituals. Yoco, as we will see, is still part of a social ritual in communion with the forest in the upper parts of Putumayo, while Guayusa or Huayusa is taken commonly as part of the Kunas’ community building rituals in Ecuador (Kohn, 2013).

As it quickly became apparent after a long day’s work in the fields, I was surprised at how drinking Yoco offered the space for people to laugh and talk about the problems and challenges they were facing during that particular working day. Like the Guayusa (Ilex guayusa) taken by the Kunas of Ecuador, drinking Yoco offered a space for communication in the often-gruelling work of clearing forests, harvesting and planting. Yoco and other caffeinated drinks offer spaces for communication between different people, beings and substances. In the West and many places throughout the world, people do the same with Coffee and Tea.

Urban shamans know the similarity between these substances and plants; they drink them interchangeably according to their availability. Since living in the city means more access to stores and cooperatives that sell Coffee and chocolate, these have become popular daily drinks. Taita JM once said about Yoco:
‘Mis abuelos lo tomaban todos los días, era como tomar café’ (My grandparents would drink it every day, it was like their Coffee)."

Therefore, Yoco’s use depends primarily on the traditional practices of each ethnic group. The colonos, who arrived from the highlands and have a long tradition of Coffee drinking, have little relation with Yoco and classify it as ‘bebida de indios’ ‘the drink of Indians’. As indigenous people move into the cities and abandon many of their traditional practices, drinking Coffee has become much more popular. Yoco has become less of an indispensable stimulant and is now associated with traditional life.

‘Yo que voy a hacer en el monte, ir a tomar yoco? (What am I going to do in the forest, drink Yoco)?’ asked a young mestizo man as we talked about his life in the city.

Caffeine also plays a vital role in the lives of the people of Middle Putumayo as a source of livelihood. Caffeinated plants are the main source of revenue for many small farmers, including indigenous people, connecting them to global trade routes. Chocolate is an excellent example, as families depend on the production of small amounts of Cacao beans to add an income to their household economy. Most of my informants had a Coffee or Cacao plantation and were part of a collective or cooperative. Their lives were tied to the global trade of these caffeinated plants.

This adds a whole set of complexities. The exponential adaptation of these incoming plants into the ritual life of local indigenous people is indisputably tied to their incorporation into the global markets. Throughout the world, the popularity and adoption of these caffeinated drinks among local cultures are closely related to foreign influence and market consolidation (Weinberg and Bealer, 2002). Traditional stimulants are often at a disadvantage, especially in urban areas, due to market and power

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131 As Amazonian chocolate becomes more popular due to the importance of Ecuador in this global market, more families are growing Cacao on their land. This has created an important ecological and economic transformation in the region, as Cacao plantations are growing everywhere.
dynamics. Coffee in Colombia has become such an important economic force that it has defined entire agricultural regions, while Guayusa and Yoco have been marginalised.\textsuperscript{132}

The ecological and biological anatomies of each plant also shape their popularity and marketability – particularly, Coffee, Tea and Cacao have been defined by their proximity and dependency to humans through centuries of transformation. For these plants, we humans have subverted their ecosystems to become their main ecological relationship. In other words, by becoming the main organism with which these plants communicate, the plants have come to represent our cultural needs and wants. Artificial selection, therefore, is a process of semiotic communication in which a domesticated plant becomes an embodiment of its relationship with us. Due to the semiotic essence of life, the selves – in this case, each species of plant – have, through generations, gradually learnt to respond to the pressures of human selection by changing their anatomy (Kohn, 2013).

On the other hand, Yoco is still considered a wild plant by the local people. This is due to its ecological relationships, as it grows best in forested areas that have had little intervention. The reason for this is unknown but, consequently, Yoco is still defined by the multiplicity of relationships in forest ecosystems and not so much by human manipulation. If the caffeine it produces is a response to the environment where humans are only another form of ecological interaction, then it must reflect this in its anatomy.

This may be one of the reasons why there are so many varieties of Yoco in the lowlands. As we saw with Chondur, local indigenous communities have their own classification systems that are based on the plant’s key physical characteristics. In the case of Yoco, as I will explain further on, one of the main ways of identifying varieties is by their effects when consumed and the amount of caffeine they contain (Echeverri et al., 2004). For Yoco, the uncontrolled variables and complex relationships of the ecosystem influence its caffeine quantity and quality.

\textsuperscript{132} The discredit of being associated with ‘bebida de indios’, due in part to the colonial hierarchy, shows the influence of these dynamics on local consumption.
However, this does not mean human interaction has not had an important effect on these plants. Yoco and its close relatives – including *Ilex Guayusa* – are anthropic plants by way of landscape domestication. They have a close relationship to humans and, therefore, have slowly been manipulated to change their anatomical characteristics. As Clement (1999) states, these plants have been domesticated by “a co-evolutionary process by which human selection on the phenotypes of promoted, managed or cultivated plant populations results in changes in the population’s genotypes that make them more useful to humans and better adapted to human intervention in the landscape” (1999: 189). In this relationship, humans have less control over variability and change but, in time, they had enough influence to have had a substantial effect on the anatomy of the plant.

In conclusion, caffeine plays a more nuanced role in our lives. Its effects on our bodies offer spaces for interaction, negotiation and society, building connections. By establishing a deep interspecies relationship, we have become a major ecological pressure on these plants, changing them profoundly. Although the use of caffeine could have been initiated through a working misunderstanding of its ecological role, the relationship we have built with it is now mutual. Meanwhile, Yoco’s stubbornness in resisting domestication has only accelerated its slow disappearance. Its links to the forest have made it difficult to use commercially, while tying its fate to the dwindling forests of Middle Putumayo.

**The Market of Yoco**

Finding a living specimen of the Yoco plant was not easy. I travelled throughout the territory actively interviewing people in the different markets, asking about the plant. I felt frustrated by not being able to truly interact with the plant. During my time in Putumayo, I actually came into contact with Yoco several times; however, these encounters were superficial, often with dried specimens in the markets, as part of people’s anecdotes or casually observing it during certain political ceremonies.
The highland territory of Sibundoy, in spite of its close relationship with the lowland medicine, does not use Yoco. This was surprising because, as I have been showing, highland shamanism shares a long list of lowland plants traded through the tightly knit shamanic network that linked the two different regions.

Shamans who had spent some time in the lowlands and worked with lowland masters would often know about Yoco, although they had no access to it. The shamans who had never gone to the lowlands could barely recognise the plant. For example, Taita Juan, who was taught by his father (a highland shaman) about the art of healing, did not know how to use Yoco. On the other hand, Taita Florentino, who had lived in Puerto Asís for some time, had tried it and knew about different varieties and diverse uses.

Yoco was practically unknown in the herbal markets of larger cities such as Pasto and Cali. As I enquired further in these markets, I was told that many of the merchants saw Yoco as unsellable. Thus, slowly, I realised that Yoco had no value for the market.

Surprisingly, the only man who recognised the plant was a white healer in the markets of Pasto, who had lived and travelled the forests of Putumayo years before. He travelled this territory in search of luck and riches and discovered his poder de curación or healing power soon after. Due to his white complexion, as he explained, he was not allowed to learn from shamans. However, he had spent some time with Inga, Ziona and Kofan Indians from the middle lands. This is where he learnt to drink Yagé, as well as Yoco. However, he had no Yoco in his stall and I was not able to get any detailed description on its use.
In the markets of Middle Putumayo and the lowlands, Yoco is available and it is easy to get some small pieces of dry bark. However, whenever I enquired about this plant, the local merchants were surprised. They explained that only indigenous people use it. Those who had some Yoco stems had received them by chance, as they often did with many other medicines. Strangers sometimes approach these markets with medicines they find in the forest, selling them for extra cash. Moreover, people who have access to the forest and recognise the plants supply merchants with small amounts of this plant.

However, many shamans advised against buying dried Yoco in the market, as it was considered to have lost its main qualities. They considered it wasted. One of the shamans told me that the only way to possibly use it was to allow it to rest in the topsoil of the forest for some time; however, this was only possible if the Yoco was fresh. During the interviews, most urban shamans said they would hardly use Yoco and would never buy it. If they did drink Yoco, it was usually a gift from a friend or a family member who visited from the forest, bringing fresh cuttings to share with them. The fact that when dried it loses most of its qualities means that it does not travel well, limiting its trade.

Yoco is somewhat widespread throughout Middle Putumayo. However, as the forest has retreated, its use has been increasingly marginalised. Only in specific areas is Yoco harvested and used continuously. These are areas where forests are still stable and healthy. Indigenous communities generally manage these healthy territories, and the use of Yoco is somewhat common. Territories owned and administered by colonos have seen quick ecological degradation and much of the old growth where Yoco thrived has been cleared for pastures. Land conversion, from forest ecosystems to large plantations and pastures, bears the greatest responsibility for the diminished use of Yoco.

Nonetheless, some white and mestizo people who have access to the forest also know how to use Yoco but choose not to. On one occasion, an old white colono told me about some specimens in the mountains near Mocoa. He was famous in town for his eccentricity, since he lived deep in the forest, but he had a profound knowledge of the plants found there.
“Yo conozco sobre el Yoco... En el monte hay varios tallos pero a mi no me gusta, yo no lo tomo, eso es de indios (I know about Yoco... In the forest there are several stalks but I don’t like it, I don’t drink that, it’s for Indians).”

On the other hand, in the lowlands, near Puerto Leguízamo, indigenous communities continually use Yoco. The forests there are much healthier and Yoco is common; yet, it is never sold in the markets. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to use Yoco without having direct access to the forest. During several of my interviews, I was able to gather that Yoco was still taken daily, yet only on-site or from fresh stalks in intimate settings. Juan Alvaro Echeverri (2004) shows that some indigenous communities regularly use Yoco in the early hours of the morning to start the day.

As for a more commercial point of view, Eduardo Bolivar (2005) outlines some surprising industrial uses of Yoco in the lowlands of Colombia, near Puerto Leguízamo. According to him, the region supplies a small but growing demand in the food supplement industry. Yoco’s properties as an appetite suppressant have made it attractive for small pharmaceutical companies in the Andean cities. I have not come into contact with these products; however, if Bolivar is right, it would be a challenge to supply any type of demand due to a lack of stable Yoco populations.

Nevertheless, as indigenous political legitimisation processes are starting to have a significant impact on young people, traditional plants are gaining sway. Like some of the other plants of power, Yoco is taking a new political role in the defence and legitimisation of traditional practices. To publicise their proximity to tradition, some politically motivated indigenous people of the Kofan and Witoto groups – whom I met in a conference – were sharing Yoco, Mambe and Tobacco/Ambil.

**Drinking Yoco**
The following vignette is an example of the use of Yoco in an Ingano family. Practices associated with using this plant depend on its availability, the person’s ethnic background and local traditions associated with the plant. Its use, as with any stimulating plant, oscillates from daily and regular to more sporadic and ceremonial use.

On a wet afternoon in early July, my friend Jose asked me to go to his home in Mandiyaco. He was from a family of shamans and had decided to start learning to drink Yagé and heal. However, his father was not a shaman. Therefore, he had to look for someone else to teach him about the shamanic arts. Soon after, misfortunes began to happen, since, as he told me, his neighbour was genuinely jealous of his family and began practising witchcraft on them.

Recently, things had begun to look better, the source of the witchcraft had passed away, and the sickness and misfortunes had begun to change for the better. Consequently, he resumed attending Yagé ceremonies with a mestizo shaman who had learnt from the Ziona. This mestizo, Taita Oviedo, loved to drink Yoco and my friend would often bring him cuttings as gifts.

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133 Jose lives in an indigenous territory to the northwest of Mocoa, deep in the rainy valleys of the Andean foothills. He came from a long line of Inga Taitas from Yunguillo and had recently become an apprentice, learning to become a shaman. I had met him during one of my first shamanic experiences in Mocoa, back in 2015. We soon established a friendship due in part to the intense and challenging ceremony we had shared. However, during our conversations, we never really talked about medicinal plants. Instead, we would share our experiences with shamanism, and he would comment on his apprenticeship.

134 His relationship with Yagé shamanism was quite intense, and his story is an excellent example of the ambiguous and dangerous nature of this practice. He had been attacked by witchcraft that had caused him an illness, which he constantly battled.
The day we went to Mandiyaco, Taita Oviedo was going to conduct a spiritual cleansing. Jose realised it would probably be the best moment to visit the Yoco plant. We would drink Yagé that night and (he suggested) we should go to the forest the following morning to drink Yoco. This, he said, was the proper way of doing it.

We headed out to the mountains, about an hour away from Mocoa and a couple of kilometres from the Caquetá River. We were dropped off in what seemed like the middle of the road. My friend then quickly jumped into the forest to change out of his city clothes, changing his city shoes for Rubber boots. The path was hidden almost out of sight; only a large rock marked what seemed to be the entrance to the forest. As we walked down the forested valley, clouds gently brushed the mountains, signalling that it had rained the night before. The path became muddier as we descended into the valley until we reached a rickety bridge that crossed the river.

Soon, we were at Jose’s house. His father received us; he sat next to his fishing net as he welcomed us. The shaman and his apprentices quickly started setting up the preparation for the ceremony. As the Taita worked, I ask my friend’s father about how he had migrated to this territory. He explained:

“Mi abuelo llegó aquí de Yunguillo; allá no había tierra y aquí estaba vacío. Pero aquí antes vivían los Andaquíes; este no era territorio Inga. Donde está la casa había una casa antigua y unas guacas. Antes enterraban a los cuerpos debajo de la casa, por eso toca limpiar la casa pues yo creo que hay una guaca debajo pues yo vi una bola de fuego (My grandfather arrived here from Yunguillo. Over there, we had no land and it was empty over here. This was ancient Andaqui territory. Where the house was built, there was an ancient house and some burial grounds. Before they used to bury the bodies underneath the house and that is why we need to cleanse it. I think there are several remains under the house because I have seen a fireball come out of the soil).”
One of the primary jobs of a shaman is to cleanse a space from evil spirits. Doing this requires a practice similar to the healing and cleansing rituals described above. Managing the spiritual entities that cohabit a forest or a home is vital for the health of the community.

When my friend told his father about my interest in several of his plants, he was quick to point out that many of the plants found in these forests were always there and that his father, my friend’s grandfather, had taken care of them, harvesting and propagating them. Yoco, Borrachero (*Brugmansia* sp.), Leche de Sandi (*Brosimum utile*), and other fruiting trees had been around since before they arrived.

The next morning, as the sun came out from behind the cloudy mountains, we were already packing the ceremonial instruments and getting ready to have some food. Jose, who had worked all night long with the shaman, was already wearing his boots and was waiting for us to get ready to head into the forest. We quickly followed him. After about 30 minutes uphill, we reached a part of the forest that had been cleared for agriculture. This field was an old one, left to rest for a while. Soon we reached the first Yoco plant. My friend then explained that there were several others; however, this one was near his house, probably planted by his grandfather. It was here that I realised that the assertion that Yoco only grew in complete wilderness was not exactly true; instead, Yoco had a much closer anthropic relationship than I previously thought.

Jose pulled on a piece of liana that seemed separated from the main branch and, with a quick flick of his machete, cut a piece about one metre long and five centimetres thick. The liana had a thick yellowish-orange colour and a yellowish sap slowly oozed out,

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135 See the chapter on Chondur.
emanating a bitter odour. He then proceeded to cut it into 30-centimetre-long pieces and collected them into a pile. The shaman, who knew Yoco well, then dug under some leaves and placed the pieces under the ground so that they would stay fresh longer. Someone went to the nearest stream to fetch water, while Jose scraped the bark from a piece of Yoco, producing yellowish shavings with a characteristic bitter smell. Collecting these shavings in a cup-shaped gourd, he filled it with water and pressed the shavings with his hand to extract a yellowish liquid. He then passed a gourd-full to each one of us, which we had to gulp down. The taste was bitter, tart and intense.

The effect was immediate. As the caffeine rushed through my body, my heart began to beat rapidly. I felt nauseated with a cold sweat coming on, while Jose and Taita Oviedo drank more Yoco. I felt faint and had to sit down; I was unable to contain the nausea and had to go vomit to the side. The other men laughed at my reaction, commenting that the next time I should just sip it.

I was exhausted from the ceremony of the previous night, and the hike had made it worse. However, as soon as I drank the Yoco, I felt a surge of energy and I no longer felt tired. After the Yoco, Jose took us to see the other medicinal plants that were growing on his family’s land, saying:

“Ahora que estamos bendecidos vamos a ver las plantas sagradas (Now that we are blessed, let’s go see the sacred plants).”

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In his seminal paper on Yoco, Schultes (1943) classifies several indigenous groups that drank Yoco back in the early 20th century:

 “[T]he only communities who drink yoco are the Ingas of Mocoa, Umbria, Puerto Limón and other places in Putumayo; the Sionas of Putumayo; the Kofanes of San Antonio, Guamués, Puerto Conejo, Santa Rosa and Puerto  

136 This also helps the plant reproduce, as those forgotten pieces will sometimes sprout and grow.
Ospina in Putumayo and Aguarico in Ecuador, as well as the Coreguajes of Caquetá.” (Schultes, 1943: 74)

Bolivar (2005) calls these ethnic communities, including several other groups in Lower Putumayo, the People of Yoco. They are similar to other inter-ethnic groups discussed in previous chapters; these groups often overlap, as techniques and practices associated with their powerful plants are shared by the different communities.

The cultural and ecological transformations of the past 60 years in the foothill territories have dramatically changed the communities mentioned by Schultes and their use of Yoco. Among the Inga communities named by him, I was only able to find Yoco in Yunguillo and Umbria. Mocoa and Puerto Limon have seen harsh ecological transformations, limiting the plant’s availability and, therefore, modifying its use. Something similar has happened to Ziona and Kofan communities throughout Middle Putumayo. They have seen severe pressures from colonial forces that transformed both the local environment and the communities themselves. The Zionas of Puerto Asís, as described by Langdon (2014), faced a ruthless cultural disaster when they lost most of their elders in the mid-20th century. Meanwhile, during the 20th century, the Coreguajes of Putumayo lost their language and most of their cultural practices due to colonial processes. More recently, the Kofanes in Orito were forcefully removed from their territory by the oil industry in the 1960s.

The Zionas were one of several indigenous groups affected by the Rubber boom of the early 20th century. In general, cultural erosion and missionary influence had a huge impact on the social fabric of the lowland communities.
This desolate picture was luckily different in the lowlands, near Puerto Leguízamo. The indigenous groups here experienced profound colonial pressures earlier in the 20th century. However, they later had a period of autonomy that left them isolated for the rest of the century. The use of Yoco here is much more common due, in part, to its availability and accessibility to the forest. This has been described by several anthropologists (see: Paz, Balslev and Valencia, 1995; Echeverri et al., 2004; 2008; Bolivar, 2005). Continual use of Yoco is still seen in Secoya, Kitchwa and some Witoto communities from Lower Putumayo. Additionally, all of these communities share the same techniques and practices associated with consuming Yoco.

An essential part of using Yoco is figuring out which is the best, since some varieties contain more caffeine than others, as Jose said. There is a surprising diversity of Yoco varieties that can be identified. The problem is that, like other large liana of the *Paullinia* genus, the stems start losing the lower leaves once they reach the canopy. In the canopy, botanical identification is practically impossible, so most of the local indigenous people classify the plant by its stem, colour, smell and taste. When I asked Jose how he knew that it was Yoco, he showed me by cutting a piece that oozed yellow sap. Afterwards, he showed me a young Yoco plant, which had the composite elliptic leaf, which I recognised as *Paullinia*. However, I did not see any inflorescence or fruit. When I asked him how he knew it was definitely Yoco, he said that he had seen it grow from a stem he had collected from the same liana we had just used.

During his travels in the 18th century, Fray Juan de Santa Gertrudis came upon two lianas or *bejucos* used by the indigenous populations of Lower Putumayo. It is possible that the two types of lianas described by Gertrudis were different varieties of Yoco. Most of the people interviewed in and around Middle Putumayo explained that you could find several kinds of Yoco, such as Amarillo (Yellow Yoco), Rojo (Red Yoco), and Blanco (White Yoco). However, when Richard E. Schultes collected Yoco for its identification, he said that the Airo-Pai Secoyas classified at least five different varieties. In 1950, Schultes described Verde Yoco, Blanco Yoco, Huarmi Yoco, Taruco Yoco, and Yagé Yoco, among others. A few decades later, Jean Langdon (1973) also described several types of Yoco, each with its particular use by the Zionas. Of these
varieties, Juan A. Echeverri (2008) classifies four types of Yoco that are used to drink and three varieties that are not, all of them classified as Yoco by the Secoyas.

I was able to observe this form of identification by colour and by potency. As an Inga merchant in the market of Orito explained: “Yoco Rojo es mucho más fuerte, el mejor es el blanco que sabe menos amargo y se siente mejor” (Red Yoco is much stronger, but the White Yoco is less bitter and feels better).” As I mentioned before, one of the reasons why there may be so many varieties is ecological variables, such as soil, sunlight and rain, which affect the amount of caffeine produced. I also suspect that there may be misidentifications, since many of the *Paullinias* have similar-looking stems and all contain caffeine.

According to several of the authors who worked with Yoco in the lowland communities, each type has a use and a time (Bolivar, 2005; Paz, Balslev and Valencia, 1995; Echeverri et al., 2004; 2008). White Yoco is the most commonly used, yet some of the other Yoco varieties might be used on certain occasions, such as hunting or working with Chambira (*Astrocaryum jauari*), a plant used for rope and basket production (Echeverri et al., 2004). As with most other beings in the forest, these varieties could have the same spiritual composition, yet the physical form, such as colour and smell, may change. The use of a particular type of Yoco corresponds to the situation, spiritual characteristics of the area, and the internal qualities of each plant.

On one occasion, Jose – who is Inga and thus comes from a long tradition of Yoco users – was surprised to find a type of Yoco that excreted a white sap. He asked around his territory for information on it and his master shaman, Taita Oviedo (who had lived and worked with lowland Ziona), classified it as a Yoco Amargo or bitter Yoco, a variety that is not used by humans but by other beings in the forest.

Due to the scarcity of Yoco in certain places in the foothill areas, many varieties are no longer used. Consequently, people may know of the different types, but no longer have access to them. In the markets, merchants rarely know what varieties they are selling. Their plants are dry, which meant that the plant sap, often the primary form of visual identification, has dried out. Many Western and mestizo shamans also told me that they
would stay clear of Yoco due to the lack of know-how on the plant: “eso tiene mucho poder, solo los indios saben usarlo (that has a lot of power, only the Indians know how to use it).” Very few mestizo shamans, like Jose’s teacher, had a mastery over Yoco.

The technique to extract Yoco, as described in the previous vignette, is common throughout the indigenous communities of Putumayo. Apparently, the extraction of Yoco from its scrapings is a widespread method from the earliest recording by Fray Juan de Santa Gertrudis in 1758. He details the use of Yoco while he was travelling through the southern regions of Colombia.

“Cogen un trozo y con una concha o con el filo del machete van raspando la corteza, que es de color atabacado. Todo lo raspado lo ponen en un mate o medio calabazo con agua, y a fuerza de refregones y de estrujarlo con las manos, le hacen largar toda la sustanci", que se vuelve el agua casi colorada, y este jugo se lo beben (They take a piece and with a shell or a machete, they scrape the bark, which is of a brownish colour. All this scraping is then placed in the gourd with water and, after squeezing and pressing it with their hands, they extract the liquid, which makes the water red and they drink this juice” (Santa Gertrudis, 1994 [1760]: 170).

As the active component of Yoco is in the sap, scraping exposes the greatest surface area to extract it. Unlike other lianas used by shamans, which require boiling the pieces for some time until the internal components are diluted in the water, Yoco is soluble in cold water. It is also thought that cooking Yoco breaks down the active ingredient;
therefore, it is best when extracted from fresh stalks in the traditional way. Unlike other *Paullinia* species, such as the Guarana (*Paullinia cupana*) that produces large red fruits from which most of the extract is obtained, Yoco seeds are small, scarce and are not consumed at all.

After drinking Yoco, Jose gathered the remaining pieces and carried them home. He later explained that his father enjoyed drinking Yoco and he wanted to take some back for him. In his home, we drank some more. However, in the house, the preparation required more care; the utensils and Yoco were cleaned thoroughly. The outer layer of the bark was separated and grated until the scrapings filled the gourd. We drank it sitting in the communal area of the house, passing the gourd around and refilling it every time it was empty. Everyone had some, including the women of the house. The remaining Yoco pieces were left in the garden under some leaves to keep them fresh. Several months later, when I returned, these Yoco pieces had started to sprout.

**Different Uses of Yoco**

For indigenous people in and around Mocoa, Yoco is still used for several purposes. Its primary use has always been to wake up, work and ‘*botar pereza*’ or ‘throw away the laziness’ (Echeverri et al., 2004; Belaunde and Echeverri, 2008). For the Secoya (Airo Pai) and Ziona, as well as other upper Tukano cultures, Yoco is associated with making palm rope. In the early hours of the morning, men wake up first, drink some Yoco and start cutting and twisting the Chambira fibres. As the morning progresses, the women and children also wake up and participate in drinking Yoco. What remains in the gourd can be taken later to help endure the daily chores (Echeverri et al., 2004). Unlike the way modernism understands tiredness, for the local communities, it is something that invades the body and can be expelled (Londoño Sulkin, 2012).

I later witnessed Yoco’s use during chores. In the fields some months later, Jose invited me to his home to help him clear out an area that he had cut down several days earlier, mostly medium-sized trunks and brushes. It was hard work and his father and brothers were there. We began working early in the morning; towards mid-morning, his father had gathered several Yoco sticks to make our beverage. When we took a well-deserved
break from work to have a drink of Yoco, it became a space for interaction, laughter and camaraderie. Having learnt the power of Yoco, I took smaller sips, which felt quite nice and helped appease my appetite. In this respect, its use is similar to that of other caffeinated plants of western Amazonia, Guayus in particular (Kohn, 2014).

Due to its scarcity, some shamans around Mocoa have it only on special occasions or sometimes after Ayahuasca ceremonies. After a long and strenuous night under the effects of the potent Ayahuasca brew, drinking Yoco helps patients focus on daily routines. It gives them a boost of energy, clarity of mind and confidence to work on the different processes that result from the Ayahuasca ceremony. As one shaman stated, “lo proteje a uno de que lo ataquen”, meaning that it will prevent your soul from being attacked on the way home when one is spiritually weak. This use is similar to Langdon’s description of Ziona shamans using Yoco near Puerto Asís in the 1970s (Langdon, 2014).

In rare cases – I was told – Yoco can concede access to the spiritual world. In other words, it can produce some kind of pinta or vision. As with other master plants, ingesting large amounts of Yoco is said to help you see, smell or feel the invisible world. Apparently, it possesses an agency or voice that gives advice to people who drink it. Beluande and Echeverri (2008) have registered this in lowland communities from the upper Tikuna linguistic family. If this is true, the similarities between the effects of Yagé and Yoco, such as altered states of consciousness and depuration, are enough to classify it as a master plant. Jean Langdon states that, used with specific techniques, Yoco is the second-most used plant to contact the ‘other world’ (Langdon, 1974). I was told of this particular use on many occasions, but I have never seen it. From my experience with Yoco, it seems plausible; however, classifying Yoco as a master plant is questionable since its manifestations are much more subtle, unlike the voices and visions caused by Ayahuasca and other medicinal plants. Perhaps for this reason and due to its inaccessibility, Yoco has become less attractive to many shamanic specialists.

Its ranking in the category of medicinal plant is also difficult to delimit. As we know, purga or purging is a common form of dealing with diseases in Amazonia, and many
medicinal plants are used for this purpose (Sanz-Biset and Cañigueral, 2013). Such cleansing techniques are meant to counter spiritual attacks or pollution of some sort in the patient’s internal system. Thus, Yoco’s emetic qualities make it an invaluable tool for shamans and local healers. Additionally, purging with Yoco is specifically done to help patients improve their mood or animos. As a local healer explained:

“Yoco se usaba tomado, se tomaba bastante hasta que uno se emborracha y purga. Pero se purga en las manos, se lavan manos con la purga y con eso se coge el machete para trabajar (Yoco was drunk liberally until you felt drunk and vomited. You have vomit in your hands, you wash your hands with the vomit, and then you grab the machete and get to work).”

This shows us how purging and depuration are not only used to get rid of illnesses, but also to improve moods and animos associated with laziness and lethargy.

During my time in the Mocoa markets, I heard of a young Norwegian man who was also asking about Yoco. He was seeking someone to teach him how to use it as a shamanic plant. There is a growing interest from spiritual tourists for authentic shamanic experiences and the use of traditional medicines. However, I had not seen it in reference to Yoco.

**The Multidimensional Ecology of Yoco**

For many local indigenous people of Putumayo, certain plants play an essential role in the complex relationships of the beings and selves that make up the local forest. These plants exist both in this realm and in the invisible world. ‘Invisible’ is not necessarily being invisible as we understand it; instead, it is a term used to refer to the hidden characteristics, selves and beings that populate this world. Therefore, for these shamans, the forests are spaces where multiple and different spiritual and physical beings are always interacting with each other. If we use the vocabulary used by Kohn (2014), the semiotic nature of these forests transcends physical relationships and includes a whole

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138 This word is a catchall term to describe the general demeanour of someone who is sick.
set of different spiritual actors who are also continually affecting one another. Therefore, a local understanding of ecology would include not only those biological beings that facilitate the growth of a plant, but also the multiplicity of beings not quantified or classified by biology that protect it, propagate it and harvest it.

As we have seen in the previous chapters, the dual form of plants as both spiritual agents and physical beings is often fluid. The access to the invisible world offered by Ayahuasca allows shamans to see the spiritual form of these plants and the roles they have in the overall landscape. In this world view, the forest is a realm that is separate from our human realm, where the line between visible and invisible worlds is often difficult to perceive. As a shaman once told me:

“Yo volaba bien profundo, bellísimos bosques de oro llenos de colores y llegaba ahí bien adentro a conocer ese reino y ahí estaba lleno de Taitas con sus coronas, shush shush hacían sonar sus warias cuando llegaba (I flew deep inside, to beautiful forests made of gold and full of colour, and I arrived deep inside where the other shamans were with their crowns, and shush shush the sound made by their Waira fans when I arrived).”

Yoco is a great example of this multilayered existence; it has a spiritual agency and form but, at the same time, it is a plant in an ecosystem, part of the multiplicity of relationships in a forest. As we know, agency is complex for Ayahuasca shamanism in Putumayo; it is a relational multilayered phenomenon that is continuously changing according to time and place – from the owners to all the other beings that coexist in the invisible realm of the forest, to the visible plants and animals. All of them have an active agency and personhood that defines how a forest exists.

Beluande and Echeverri (2008) explore this quite well. For the Airo Pai, Yoco is considered to have a community of its own, the People of Yoco, who inhabit the invisible world accessible through Ayahuasca (Beluande and Echeverri, 2008). These invisible People of Yoco do the same daily activities as the Airo Pai. In fact:
“Según ellos, la vida diaria en sus poblados se inspira en la imitación de las actividades llevadas a cabo por los seres espirituales protectores. O sea, según los airo-pai, el original está en el ‘otro lado’ en el cielo, y la copia en ‘este lado’ (According to them, the daily life of their people is inspired by the imitation of the daily activities done by the spiritual owners. In other words, according to the Airo Pai, the original is on the other side, in the heavens, and the copy is on this side).” (Beluande and Echeverri, 2008: 98)

Therefore, when the invisible world is accessed, and the different plants and fruit trees that exist alongside the Yoco are seen, the Airo Pai must plant the trees and plants of the physical world in a similar order. This idea of an archetype is similar to the ones explored in previous chapters, such as the ‘jardín botánico del cielo’ or the ‘botanical garden of the heavens’.

For many shamans, Yoco is considered outside human influence. Yoco is a delicate plant to grow, as it is celosa or jealous, prefers to exist in the forest and dries out when planted in areas without the proper sunlight, soils and companion plants.139 This characteristic makes Yoco closer to the forest than to human gardens. Instead of trying to grow Yoco in their gardens, people like Jose actively protect the places where Yoco is already growing, preserving the companion trees and plants that have produced the right setting for its growth. Jose also replicates the way in which the plant might reproduce on its own, leaving stalks in places that might help it grow. Knowing where to find Yoco throughout the territory means being able to access it when he needs it; however, it has grown there almost without human interference.

The lack of human management is apparent to such a degree that Yoco is thought to have its own masters, or Dueños, owners who need to be negotiated with when harvesting. For the people I interviewed in the town of Mocoa, the owners of plants take many forms and are referenced continuously. However, for urban communities that have little access to the forest, these beings are often shrouded in mystery. The forest represents a symbolic realm outside the human experience that has all sorts of mystical

139 These companions are usually large hardwood trees; however, it is known that some trees actively deter the growth of lianas such as Palo Negro. Sadly, I was not able to identify this species.
and spiritual powers. This distance and otherness is the source of the healing power of the forest. In other words, for urban communities, the deep jungles represent an extreme alterity, an unrelatable experience so distant to their lives that it can easily give and take life.

However, these relationships are changing, and much of what I witnessed demonstrates shifting attitudes towards plants and the forest. This transformation is having an observable effect on the landscape, as modern ideals pushed by capitalism, Western evangelical religions and even by notions of conservation are changing the complex relationships that make up the biocultural system.

**The Changing Forest**

In my search for Yoco, I came across an elderly Inga female shaman, Doña Maria, who gave me a clear and desolate picture of the medicinal forest in Middle Putumayo. Doña Maria was recommended to me by neighbours for her ability to heal. We had talked extensively before about healing and the Inga tradition but had never talked about her territory. When I asked for more information, she invited me to visit her in the resguardo. I soon discovered why. The two-hour-long walk from the road to her home was through extensive pastures with barely any trees. The forests no longer existed, cut down long ago and transformed into grasslands and pastures. The transformation was slow, but it was definitive. Ancient forests had been transformed into what reminded me of the Llanos Orientales, the grassy planes to the north.

When I arrived, we began to talk about her medicine. She was the rare type of female shaman who was able to lead Yagé ceremonies; yet she was more concentrated on the medicinal plant aspect of healing, as are most women healers of Putumayo. She had been taught by her grandmother to heal and later by a Kofan shaman, who authorised her to offer Yagé. Coming from a long tradition of healers, her relationship to plants derived from personally experimenting with each one and from a deep spiritual connection to them. She used Yagé to focus on the spiritual quality of plants, using the brew to access their invisible healing qualities and learning through their owners what they are for and how they have to be used. Through a robust spiritual negotiation with
the beings of the forest, and with those who coexist in this world and the invisible one, she managed to heal her patients.

Her territory has suffered from constant ecological degradation, and the forests have retreated. Colonos who arrived with specific methods and notions of productivity have transformed the soils and the vegetation of the area around her territory. As she says:

“Llegaron ellos y los bosques fueron desapareciendo, primero que plantaran piña luego que plantaran maíz, luego que disque palma. Cuando los suelos quedaron limpios, les toco poner ganado (They arrived, and the forest began to disappear. First, they started growing pineapple, then corn, then palm, finally when the soils were barren they had to put cattle to graze).” She also emphasised the impact of Coca: “…uy esto estaba lleno de Coca, pero esas las fumigaron, quedó seco el suelo, nada crece (this was full of Coca, but it was fumigated, then the soil became dry, and nothing grows).”

The medicines she used required constant contact with the spiritual masters of the plants and other invisible hosts from the forest, which became ever more difficult to access. Diseases became more common, and misfortune took hold of the area in the darkest days of the Colombian conflict. She now depended on the market to buy medicinal plants to supply her needs, but these plants were not the same as those found in the wild. She then complained:

“Aquí viene cualquiera, las arranca y las usa, ellos saben para que sirven, por eso las arrancan, no tienen respeto (Here, anyone comes to pluck them out to use them, they know what they are for, and that is why they cut them, there is no respect).”

This has been the case of many of the large trees in the forest that produce medicinal resins. They have been cut so many times to access these liquids that they have dried up; only a few individual ones are left. Now her garden only holds the most important plants, as well as some that grow in prairies. As a result, she has started asking the spirit of Ayahuasca for substitutes of plants she no longer finds in the wild.
I knew that Yoco needed a healthy forest to grow and I wondered about the effects of deforestation on the populations of these plants. I was curious to see if she still used Yoco and how she had access to it. I asked her about it and she replied:

“Aquí antes había mucho, mucho Yoco, lo usaban mi padre y mi abuelo y mis hermanos cuando eran jóvenes. Lo sacaban del monte, Yoco salvaje, del bueno que crece en la selva. Eso tocaba con mucho cuidado pues tenía sus dueños poderosos. El yoco era muy sagrado, lo cuidaban bien... Los colonos no sabían muy bien para qué era pero la gente llegaba y tumbaba el monte sin saber, la medicina sagrada que crecía, la tumbaban y se perdía... Ya no lo encuentra nadie, toca ir a la montaña para buscarlo... Era bueno ese Yoco (Before, there was a lot of Yoco; my father and grandfather and my brothers used it when they were young. They took it out of the jungle, the wild Yoco, the good one that grows in the jungle. You needed to be careful because it had powerful owners; the Yoco was very sacred, it was well looked after... The colonos didn’t really know what it is for; they just cut it all when they were cleaning the forest brush. They didn’t know it was sacred medicine, they cut it down and it was lost... Nobody finds it anymore; you have to go to the mountains to look for it... That Yoco was good).”

With this assertion, the shaman made an important connection, acknowledging the link between the colonial process and the loss of the medicines. She was worried about further degradation and illness that the loss of her medicines would bring to her people. The disappearance of Yoco is a common theme throughout Middle Putumayo. As the forests retreat, the sacred medicines that grow in the wild vanish. Yagé seems to have escaped this fate; as its popularity becomes global, its two main ingredients are grown frequently. On the other hand, Yoco, which is not nearly as easy to grow, seems destined to disappear.

The transformation of the relationship between indigenous people and Yoco goes hand in hand with the ecological degradation seen in the last few decades. The changing ecosystem in this territory has disconnected people from the primary forms of
subsistence, such as swidden agriculture. It has also cut their access to the spiritual relationships and medicinal plants that have been the basis for their traditional ideas of health.

During my work in Putumayo, I realised that most of the standing forests are still seen as a collective resource by the local communities, both indigenous people and colonos. In other words, they are places that are open for anyone to access for hunting or foraging, yet restricted and limited by the non-human ‘owners’. It is the realm of animals and spirits, and therefore one must ask for permission to access it. The deep forest is understood as bound by laws mostly made up by non-humans (owners and spirits). Some colonos whom I met during my treks through the forests around Mocoa could tell me what to expect along my path. They had spent days deep in the jungle, hunting and sleeping in rudimentary shelters; they were andariegos, people who roam the forest. They spent days without seeing other people, encountering the different animals that inhabit the forests. For them, this territory was not owned by anyone: “es el territorio de los animals (it is the animals’ territory).”
As the population changes and the government consolidates its power, this has changed dramatically. What used to be seen as communal territories have become baldios\textsuperscript{140} or unused land. These baldios are there to be claimed as homesteads; anyone who is willing to live in them for a period of time is able to obtain ownership titles.

Indigenous territories, on the other hand, enforce the commonality of the forests – to a certain extent – through legal institutions such as the resguardo,\textsuperscript{141} protecting them from transforming forces. The resguardo is a legally recognised system of collective land use. It is a legacy from the colonial system of ‘tierras de indios’ or Indian lands, and is now used by most indigenous communities in Colombia to protect and legitimise their land claims and territories. Each indigenous individual may have some land to grow their crops, but they share the resguardo for hunting, foraging and establishing deep spiritual bonds with the forest. An example of this would be the land owned by the Kofanes in Orito that, I was told, was the place where they would collectively spend several days out of the month cooking Ayahuasca, having ceremonies, hunting and foraging for medicinal plants.

Campesinos and colonos who do not have the legal system to protect their public land are being fenced out of these territories. As we saw, colonos cut entire forests to grow crops such as Corn, Mandioc and, more recently, Cacao. However, this method of farming, in which forests are completely cut down and crops are grown in annual cycles, is not very productive in this region. Most importantly, due to erosion and to the thin organic surface layer of soil, this method can exhaust the soils quite rapidly. Highland agricultural systems rarely work in these forests; yet, for many colonos, evangelised Indians and highland entrepreneurs, this system of agriculture is seen as the only way to make the forests more productive. Soils are particularly tricky, and the crops harvested in the highlands will have problems growing consecutively every year. This limitation was made evident by local colono communities’ increasing need for

\textsuperscript{140}A term used by the Colombian state to classify territory with no owner. This land can be accessed and used by people who are willing to change and improve it.

\textsuperscript{141}This is the legal term for indigenous territory administration, and these territories are managed by the cabildo.
fertilisers in Yunguillo during the time I was there. Soil exhaustion is a serious problem for the agricultural livelihood of these people, especially in territories that have been poisoned by continuous Coca plantations and glyphosate fumigation (Lyons, 2016). The only way to make the land productive seems to be cattle grazing. Sadly, cattle also exhaust local soils, and fallow periods are becoming longer. Cutting down more forests becomes the final solution, and the cause of the expanding agricultural frontier. In this transformed landscape, cattle ranching has become an important industry that fences out indigenous territories.

Only extremely inaccessible areas, such as the steep valleys of the Andean foothills, still contain healthy forests. These mountain slopes are not productive, either for large-scale plantations or for raising cattle. The guerrilla forces, who used these forests for 50 years to hide from government forces, also helped restrain colonos immigration and forest degradation with their violent methods.

Recently, as the agricultural frontier expands, the government is finally taking limited action with legal measures to protect standing forests; yet, it is not properly enforcing them. Around Mocoa and in Middle Putumayo, the remaining healthy forests are now being segregated into protected areas, such as national parks and indigenous reservations. Although some colonos still consider them communal areas that can be used for agriculture, these areas are actually becoming more inaccessible to them.

Nevertheless, wild medicinal plant populations have been seriously depleted due to these demographic transformations. Inga shaman, Taita Ramiro, complained that the plants that he had started managing in the forest, such as Yoco and Ambar, had been recently cut down by colonos clearing lots on his territory. Referring to the colonos, he said:

“Ellos no saben qué están cortando, todo se lo bajan (They do not know what they are cutting, so they cut everything).”

Growing population density and ethnic changes in Middle Putumayo are having a harmful effect on the availability of certain plants. I also consider that the
commodification of shamanic practices is also playing a part. One of the main complaints during my fieldwork was stealing: “Se las llevan (People just take our plants).”

As a result, local indigenous people are devising strategies to prevent the loss of their culturally important plants. In the lowlands, where the Kitchwa community have their land, I met shamans who were hiding their plants to protect their products from being stolen. Others, like Jose, are managing their plant populations, keeping them close to their sphere of influence. An Inga shaman and merchant, Taita Miguel, has his plot of land not far from Mocoa where he grows the plants he uses or sells in order to guarantee a constant supply for his business.

To restrain these changes, new ethnic and political forces are pressing to revitalise and protect the traditional use of medicinal plants. Yoco has a new role in the forefront of indigenous politics as a way to control these destructive colonial forces. Dynamic indigenous movements are using the forest and the medicinal plants in it to fight for land tenure, human rights and cultural continuity.

**Yoco as a Tool for Policymaking**

When I arrived in the town of Orito, a three-hour drive from Mocoa, it was another universe, entirely different from what I had seen in Mocoa. It is an oil town that has attracted many colonos who arrived looking for work, either in the extractive economy or in the booming Coca plantations of the 1980s. The local indigenous people, the Kofanes, have been relegated to small territories around Orito. Unlike Mocoa, where the forest has endured due to its steep terrain, Orito is flat, ideal for Coca plantations and cattle ranches. Soon the Kofán territory was broken up into islands. Pushed out by growing cattle farms, their medicines began to disappear.

Seeing the severe ecological pressure caused by the expanding agricultural frontier in their territory, these communities were the first to try new alternatives to protect their land. By sacrificing some of their land tenure to the national government, they were hoping that their territory would be protected with the full strength of the law. In this
context, Kofan elders met with the National Parks Institute to come up with a strategy. In 2008, they began an experiment called Santuario de Flora y Plantas Medicinales Orito Ingi Ande (Orito Ingi Ande Sanctuary of Flora and Medicinal Plants (SFPMOIA)). Unlike other national parks, the SFPMOIA was dedicated to the indigenous cultural concepts of health, territory and botany.

Furthermore, the decree that created the SFPMOIA cited the expertise of German Zuluaga and his 2004 book, El Yoco (Paullinia yoco): La savia de la selva. Zuluaga, a white doctor from Bogotá, had spent many years with shamans in Putumayo and soon became a major figure in the local indigenous politics, advocating Ayahuasca shamanism in the universities and government institutions of Colombia. His book emphasises the importance of this plant for local cosmologies, while stressing the importance of its conservation and the need to take urgent action in protecting the forests that it inhabits. In a later book, Zuluaga, along with other researchers, mentions Yoco as an indicator of ecological degradation in a very accurate portrayal of the situation of this plant in and around Mocoa and Middle Putumayo (Giraldo et al., 2005). The Humboldt Institute – the main research institution on biological diversity in Colombia – also highlighted Yoco as intrinsically bound to the continuity of the Culturas del Yagé (Instituto de Investigación de Recursos Biológicos Alexander von Humboldt, 2011).

In Mocoa, local park rangers, botanists and researchers repeatedly mention Yoco with great interest, although they rarely have direct access to it. On one occasion, the curator of the Mocoa Botanical Garden became very excited when I told her I was looking for Yoco. She said that they would love to have a specimen in the botanical garden. She knew that finding it, getting a seed and planting it was extremely difficult. She highlighted this by saying:

“Es muy celosa. Toca sacar el Yoco en luna nueva y sembrarlo en luna creciente. No le puede dar sol y toca que tenga mucho cuidado bajo que árbol

142 Local scientists in Putumayo had direct contact with Ayahuasca shamanism; it was not rare to see them drinking Ayahuasca or sharing with a shaman or local elder. Due to this close proximity, most of the scientists and biologists I came across had come to understand the impact of deforestation on the population of certain plants. In particular, there was an interest in Yoco, even though there was no rigorous study on the vulnerability of Paullinia yoco.
se pone pues no le gustan sino algunos (It is very fastidious. You have to take the Yoco stalk during the new moon and plant it in the waxing phases. You cannot give it too much sun and you have to be careful of the tree you are planting it under, as it does not like just any tree).”

The Centro de Experimental Amazónico (Centre of Amazonian Studies) in Mocoa had established this botanical garden tasked with producing stable populations of medicinal plants. However, this type of ex-situ conservation had failed to accommodate several plant species due to their singular ecological characteristics. Yoco was one of them, and one of grave concern. It was particularly frustrating that all these efforts to produce a stable population of the plant near the city failed. As a result, the SFPMOIA attempted to offer an in-situ alternative for many medicinal plants of the shamanic pharmacopeia.

The legal resolution of 2008 that created the SFPMOIA clearly states the importance of Yoco for the communities that practise Ayahuasca shamanism. This resolution is very explicit about the significance of Yoco as an invaluable species for the local conservationist. Establishing the protection of medicinal plants as central to protecting ethnic identity and traditional practices is seen as a breakthrough in biological and cultural conservation. It links the protection of an ecosystem to the defence of the indigenous communities who inhabit it. The following is a quote from this document.

“Que el riesgo de extinción del yoco y otras plantas medicinales, y la posibilidad, cada vez más reducida de contar con áreas naturales que les permita a los pueblos indígenas desarrollar sus tradiciones, son elementos que impactan la conservación de la biodiversidad medicinal, al tiempo que favorecen la erosión cultural de estas comunidades indígenas (That the risk of extinction of Yoco and other medicinal plants, and the possibility of having less available natural spaces for indigenous communities to develop their traditions, will detrimentally affect the conservation of medicinal biodiversity, while

143 A biologist who is convinced of the agency of Yoco, as well as the importance of the moon stages, proves that they have an interesting syncretic concept of plant management. The hybrid notions produced by the exchange between naturalism and shamanism support these multilayered approaches to plants.
eroding critical cultural aspects of these communities.” (Ministerio de Ambiente, Vivienda y desarrollo territorial, 2008:3)

Meanwhile, many Colombian scientists supported these measures, considering the Andean foothills as biological hotspots, the refuge of the Holocene, and the source of vast biodiversity (WWF Colombia, 2017; Giraldo et al., 2005; Instituto de Investigación de Recursos Biológicos Alexander von Humboldt, 2011). As a corridor between Amazonia, the Andes and the Pacific coast, it is a vital place for biodiversity conservation.

I believe that this protected area was also possible due to the growing popularity of Ayahuasca medicine and the deep-set romantic notions of indigeneity in Colombian popular culture. The political power of Ayahuasca shamanism, especially of the Kofans and Zionas, grew exponentially as people from the Colombian elite tried the brew and were convinced of its spiritual power and connection with the forest. Colombian anthropology departments also support this idea, as many young anthropologists have taken Ayahuasca and generations of anthropologists have gone out to work in the public sector. As a result, Kofan and Ziona shamans were able to negotiate with the government in equal standing, establishing a protected area that benefited their interests.

In hindsight, the creation of the park accelerated other complicated social processes in and around Orito.144 Most importantly, it did not take into consideration the internal politics of the indigenous communities and the tensions between the different ethnicities that cohabit this territory. Many younger people have expressed serious doubts about the creation of the park. The son of an important shaman told me:

“Les dimos nuestra tierra, es nuestra para trabajar y ahora es del gobierno (We gave them our land, it was ours to work but now it belongs to the government).”

At the same time, the Awas, who arrived from the highlands and the Pacific coast in recent years, have also expressed their disappointment of this multicultural approach to

144 In recent years, the elders of the Kofan community have been ousted due to serious allegations of corruption.
conservation. They have indicated their lack of power in the whole process and, most importantly, their limited access to these forests and the resources they may need. They resent that some indigenous groups have been given priority over others. Since many of the Kofan shamans have a wide following of Western and urban tomadores, this does not surprise me. Similarly, there are other groups of people who have been outdone by indigenous groups, such as the colono and mestizo populations. These communities also need access to the forest, but have been kept out.

**A Discussion of the SFPMOIA**

In theory, the SFPMOIA is a novel way of applying approaches to conservation that have long been at the forefront of anthropological and ecological fields. However, in practice, it also has contradictory aspects that are worth exploring in more detail.

The SFPMOIA is the result of many different modernist projects that include an abstraction of nature, as well as the creation of local identity based on the colonial tension. These narratives produce idealised nature-scapes in which indigenous people are established as stewards, protectors of the forest and the only ones who could live in harmony in the protected forests, if done appropriately (West, 2016; Ulloa, 2004). These narratives, which are based on long-established colonial discourses, benefit from uneven development since the communities that live in this idealised nature live in a state of premodernity (Redford, 1991; Ellingson, 2001; Hames, 2007). In this case, these conservation narratives have built an idea of a virginal forest full of potentially useful biodiversity to justify the creation of a protected area (Biermann and Mansfield, 2014). At the same time, there is perception of indigenous people as idealised savages who inhabit and protect it. This romantic discourse influences the images and descriptions found in many of the brochures defending the consolidation of the SFPMOIA.
As a result, the SFPMOIA has envisioned interrelated modern actors, among which I include non-humans such as the Yoco plant. By the implementation of national parks to protect local ecosystems, the state is expanding its control to the non-human beings that exist in this territory, while simultaneously regulating the interactions between non-Western communities and the natural world.

“That is, extending biopower to consider human–non-human relations allows us to understand the preservationist and capitalist logics not merely as opposing forces but as connected through the vast networks in which power circulates.” (Biermann and Mansfield, 2014: 260)

In this discourse, the lives of the plants are regulated not by those who have a use for them but by the state. Their use has to be traditional, not because it is an effective way of consuming Yoco, but because it is the idealised form of biodiversity use.

For Colombian policymakers who work on a basis of modernist and colonial ideals, Yoco is part of an invaluable but abstract biodiversity resource. The idea of biodiversity was introduced as part of the environmental movements in the 1970s that were interested in genetic diversity as a means to mitigate the global environmental crisis (Escobar, 2008; Western, 1992). As the 20th century came to a close and the 21st century began, the idea of biodiversity was reinforced by the global ecological conscience and legitimised by international politics: the loss of biodiversity has become an issue of global proportions, encouraging international agreements on the subject (Ulloa, 2004).

In Colombia, biodiversity is a matter of national pride and is always thought of as an important resource, highlighting the country’s rank in the global scene. Much in the same way as water, minerals and hydrocarbons, biodiversity is seen as a public resource that must be classified, categorised, abstracted and then repackaged into a valuable ‘product’ that
can be sold and commodified (Escobar, 2008). This was made painfully clear during the socialisation of the 2016 Bioexpedition in Putumayo organised by one of the top investigation institutes of Colombia, Colciencias. This institution explained that their future biological investigations would serve to create bioproductos for global markets. At the same time, the government established the control of the local ecosystem through the consolidation of conservation programmes, protected areas, and the management of trade at multiple levels. Many of the medicinal plants explored in this dissertation have been categorised as vulnerable and their trade restricted. This is the case of Chuchuwaza, which is probably one of the most threatened by overharvesting. However, this restriction does not mean that the trade does not happen; instead, it shows the extent of the discourse in which the different organisms are placed under the control of the state.

Biodiversity in this region becomes an abstract notion, valued for its traditional use or future potential, which is quickly subverted by the power structures to reinforce the colonial system. As Yoco loses its spiritual and relational qualities, it becomes an agent of the state’s power dynamics of control (Biermann and Mansfield, 2014; Foucault, 2004). By placing importance on biodiversity, the state is trying to establish dominance over the different living beings in its territory. Paullinia yoco, as biodiversity, is part of a discourse of systematisation, classification and categorisation, and as a policy, it is part of an initiative to control the local communities that interact with it, establishing political control over their relationship with the forest ecosystems (Youatt, 2008). As Youatt states:

“Once biodiversity discourses help conserve an area as a biodiversity reserve which is made valuable in terms of code-commodity, it also becomes part of a political system of global environmental governance that continues to manage it for capitalism.” (Youatt, 2008: 399)

It is also no longer associated with the indigenous world; instead this discourse highlights how medicines are now part of a common resource, a resource that should be protected by the state.
Nonetheless, Yoco is an undeniably weird plant. It has no proven value in the market, and classification through botanical data has created more questions than answers. Yoco, as the species *Paullinia yoco*, does not accommodate the different varieties that indigenous people have tallied for it. As scientists try to grow it in their botanical gardens and fail, it seems that we have had to accommodate its agency. Consequently, to protect it, we have created a national sanctuary, which also defends the natural and anthropic relationships that it has built through time.

Moreover, for the indigenous communities, the sanctuary has become an instrument to legitimise their land and ethnic rights (Ulloa, 2004). By using the conservation discourse, they have achieved greater autonomy and land tenure, regaining the role as stewards of nature. Using Western stereotypes as a means to advance in the Colombian political landscape, these communities have incorporated these ideas to fit anticolonial and resistance discourses. By allowing the protection of their plants inside this national park, they are also guaranteeing the protection of the forest against more destructive forces.

For the indigenous people of Putumayo, traditional medicine is the central pillar of their cultures, the source of their identity and the intrinsic connection with their territory and their history. The protection of these plants is a vital part of their foremost ideals, as a means for the continuity of their cultures. At the same time, the rest of the world considers the plants significant biodiversity that should be conserved. Therefore, by emphasising their protection, indigenous communities have found in them a negotiating argument. By stressing biodiversity in the Western sense and sacred medicine in the local sense, they have positioned the plants at the centre of the two ideologies. This discourse has become especially successful in Putumayo, as both local and national governments are actively pushing for biodiversity conservation through community-based systems.

Yoco, thus, has gained a central position in the indigenous political struggle, while non-indigenous individuals are becoming more interested in it and willing to use it. Along with Yagé and Coca, it has become a symbol of the resurgence of indigenous identity in the postcolonial discourse of the subaltern communities of Putumayo. Its use is still
mostly indigenous, tightly controlled by tradition and by the biological limitations of the plant. The fact that it is unable to survive without healthy forests means that the communities that want to continue using it must protect its ecosystems with practices that promote healthy vegetation.

The politicisation of Yoco brings us back to the discussion on control and agency. The plant is now facing attempts to control it by modernist processes and economic forces. As these processes continue, indigenous people are pushing back to reclaim their role as the plant’s protectors. However, as we have seen in this chapter, Yoco has not really been under their control either. It is an agent that defies categorisation on the part of the conservationist project and yet is also beyond the control of indigenous people, existing in liminal space between the domesticated and the wild. Thus, Yoco demonstrates that there are plants that do not fully tolerate human social relationships, constantly escaping attempts to govern them.

**Chapter 7. Coca**
Throughout this dissertation, I have explored the multifaceted existence of culturally significant plants found in the Andean foothills, highlighting their entwined relationship with social processes and local ecosystems. By reviewing these characteristics, I sought to emphasise the role of plants in these networks, exploring not only how we influence their lives, but also how they influence ours. I have also analysed how trade accelerates hybridisation by establishing these plants as spaces for cultural exchange. These processes have defined folk medicine in Putumayo, constantly restructuring the power dynamics, spiritual practices and techniques that are vital for healing.

In this chapter, I will take this approach one step further. I will use it to explore Coca, a plant that is not part of the Ayahuasca shamanic network, yet is deeply ingrained into the lives of the local people. By doing this, I wish to show how this methodological approach can be expanded to other plants, medicines and techniques. I have also chosen Coca because few organisms have had such an impact on the Andean foothill as this small, woody bush.

However, I approach this chapter with apprehension, since to talk about Coca without falling into the clichés that commonly surround it seems difficult – especially because cocaine is an often ambiguous and contradictory part of the Colombian national discourse and identity.

The multilayered existence of Coca is, no doubt, complex. It plays a significant part in the globalised trade, and is also a dominant force in regional politics and indigenous world views and ritual practices. To explore these complexities is not to trivialise the wake of blood and death that has come with them.

Coca is the generic term used to describe several species of the *Erythroxylum* genus that contain the cocaine alkaloid, which include *E. coca*, *E. coca var. ipudu*, and *E. novogranatense*. These are all small, woody plants from the neotropics that can grow up to two metres high, with bright green elliptic leaves and small hermaphrodite white flowers. They all produce small red seeds whose viability is relative to the species and individuals. A few subtle differences can help identify each species. For example, *E.*
*Erythroxylum novogranatense* may grow larger if left on its own and has narrow oblong leaves. Meanwhile, *E. coca* has wider leaves and is sometimes a darker green colour. *E. novogranatense*’s leaves have two parallel lines that exist on either side of the central vein (Plowman, 1986).

I will begin this analysis by exploring the role of these plants as centres for cultural dialogue, observing the local understanding of the power and agency of Coca as a source of interspecies dialogue. Secondly, I will seek to highlight some of the tensions that occur as different interpretations of the world collide. Finally, I believe that Coca is a key subject to explore themes such as the integral role of plants in the history of Putumayo. It is through this chapter that I will approach the final aspect of trade in Putumayo, the cycle of commodity booms that have not only shaped the people that live in this territory, but also shaped the entire ecosystem.¹⁴⁵

For this purpose, this chapter will explore the lives of three very different forms of *Erythroxylum coca*. These forms are not necessarily different species, but each one inhabits different cultural worlds and webs of relationships that are continuously overlapping. By exploring each version, I will highlight the networks of relationships that favour each of their existences.

I will begin by exploring Coca as a master plant that is deeply entwined with indigenous beliefs and personhood, as it is an integral part of their world view. I will analyse how the ritualised consumption of Coca is meant to deal with alterity and how it has facilitated new dynamics and multicultural dialogues.

Secondly, I will explore Coca in Colombian folk medicine, which evolved during colonial times, highlighting its ambiguous role in the rest of the country. Finally, I will analyse Coca as a globalised commodity that is mass-produced yet illegal. I will show how this version of Coca has become a complex commodity and compare it to the other commodity bonanzas in the recent history of Putumayo.

¹⁴⁵ In the first chapter, I explored certain aspects of these cycles; however, no commodity boom has affected more lives than that of the cocaine industry of recent times.
By giving a general overview of these existences, I wish to demonstrate how the same being can take multiple roles and forms in this region – existing in parallel, yet continuously converging, flowing into each other and then separating. In other words, by examining the nuances of the ambiguity of Coca in Putumayo, I will seek to highlight how it is a source of multiple overlapping interpretations and cultural negotiations.

As such, Coca is an excellent subject to study the complex colonial history of trade in Putumayo. It has facilitated and accelerated the integration of the Amazonian lowlands into the world economy, while establishing spaces of resistance and ethnogenesis that have stayed separate from the colonial project. What is interesting here is that Coca already belonged to a complex network of healers, shamans and practitioners who have been using Coca for generations. The stigma and persecution of Coca have not stopped the traditional use of this plant; instead, using it has become an act of resistance, subverting the one-sided discussion on this plant by reclaiming it as part of indigenous identity and survival.
An Ambiguous Role

My friend Andres,\textsuperscript{146} who worked for an NGO, invited me to Lower Putumayo to learn about the experience of local Witoto people in the final stages of the five-year Peace Process.\textsuperscript{147} Puerto Leguízamo was one of the main epicentres of the war. As an important trading town due to its connection between the two main rivers, Caquetá and Putumayo, it is one of the largest urban settlements in the lowlands. For this reason, it was brutally contested. Many of its 15,000 inhabitants were affected one way or another by its violent history. Similarly, the Witoto people that arrived from the surrounding regions had been displaced by violent groups. They had established an active community and built a large maloca or ceremonial house in the centre of town. This structure was easily seen when arriving at Puerto Leguízamo; it was directly opposite to the gigantic Ceiba (\textit{Ceiba sp.}) growing on the other bank. We were invited to a Mambe ceremony and arrived just before sunset. Several elderly men were already in full-blown discussion. Their mouths were green with Coca, and they were continuously licking a small, smooth stick covered with a viscous brown paste.

As we sat with the Witoto elders in the maloca, they began passing the Coca around before starting the conversation. In Puerto Leguízamo, as well as most of lowland Amazonia, Coca is very different from that found in the Andes. Known as Mambe, it is a bright green powder, as fine as dust. We were supposed to take a spoonful and put it in our mouths. For the uninitiated, the technique of consuming Mambe is challenging; many accidentally breathe in the fine green powder, which causes them to cough violently. The trick is to place the powder on your tongue while breathing through your nose, gently roll it into a ball and put it towards the side of your mouth, between your teeth and your cheek. The ball of Coca will slowly dissolve, while one swallows its juices at a slow but constant pace.

\textsuperscript{146} Name has been changed.

\textsuperscript{147} The Colombian Peace Process was a five-year negotiation between the government and the FARC Marxist group to end a 50-year-old conflict. During my fieldwork, there were many different NGOs in the area as part of the negotiation, since it was necessary to include a wide diversity of voices, including local indigenous communities. This friend worked for one of these NGOs. He was a white person from Bogotá, like most NGO experts.
Little by little, people started to fill their mouths with the powder, which turned their mouths green. Meanwhile, the elders had taken out the other main substance to be used in the Mambe ceremony, the Ambil. This they would not share. Instead, each man had a container full of this sticky brown substance, which they would proceed to lick from a small plastic stick or bone. Ambil is made by boiling Tobacco with several other plants until it reaches this viscous appearance. For the Mambe ritual to be effective, both plants of power have to be used simultaneously. As one of the Witoto elders said: “mambeando sin ambil es mitad del trabajo (mambeando without an ambil is half the task).” Most of the elder men had their own bottle of Ambil. The women and I had to do without it.

Once everyone had Mambe in their mouths, the first elders began to speak. Their mouths were full with Mambe and Ambil, which made it difficult for them to vocalise. But it did not matter since, for them, mambear\textsuperscript{148} is to start focusing on the palabra or the word. We were there to focus on the conversation and the knowledge being shared with all of us, including the master plants. For the Witoto, once you have Coca in your mouth, your words are not only yours; they also belong to the Mambe. Two beings speaking through the same mouth. For them, it is often unclear who is talking, the Mambe or the person.

As the elders spoke, they would often go on long tangents and stories, highlighting the importance of the ancestral ways of life, of the constant negotiation with the world spirits, and of the benefits of Mambe and Tobacco. History, myths and life stories often fused together. However, due to the particular complex theme of the night, the air was heavy with uncertainty and worry.

The Mambe ceremony offers a ritualised space for dialogue. It is a space where human and non-human voices can be heard, where history and mythology are both told and re-enacted. It is a conversation space where one thinks with the mind and with the body, communicating with non-human agencies through the effects of Coca and Tobacco. As

\textsuperscript{148} Mambear is the ritualized consumption of Coca. The word has its origin in the Northern part of the Country were communities chew coca in Mambe practices, however the term has now become widely used in the Amazon as well to describe the ritual use of coca powder.
such, with Coca in their mouths, people are expected to talk truthfully with the help of the spirits.

Often, these Mambe ceremonies take all night long as the participants share Coca freely. The dizzying effect of the two plants is overwhelming. However, I have the impression that it was not the plants but the stories of war that made me uneasy. As the night progressed, it became clear that many of the elders still recalled the Rubber exploitation of the early 20th century.\footnote{149} However, due to the urgency of the peace process, they tried to focus on the violence caused by the guerrilla, state-sponsored paramilitary groups, drug lords and the army. In a way, the two historical moments – the recent desolation caused by the civil war and the brutal violence of the Rubber barons – became confused and tangled.

Most interesting for me was how they would talk about the role of Coca in the conflict as they conversed with the spirit of Coca. I wondered how these two worlds had merged so violently. This ambiguous relationship regarding the same plant – simultaneously respected, feared and loathed – was intricate and full of contradictions. It made the tensions overlapping these ontological worlds tangible.

Coca has been widely studied and analysed by a range of different authors from all sorts of disciplines. In particular, there are several ethnobotanical and anthropological studies on Coca, analysing its role in the culture of many indigenous people from the highlands of Bolivia to the lowlands of Caquetá (See: Plowman, 1981; Pineda Camacho, 1986; Allen, 1986; Echeverri and Candre, 1993; Hugh Jones, 1979; Londoño Sulkin, 2012). There are also several studies on the complex historical and political processes that have abetted the modern trade of Coca and cocaine in South America (Lopez Restrepo, 2016; Gootenburg, 2003; 2006; 2012; Murra, 1995). However, there are few comparative studies that give a broader look into the different versions of Coca.

**Mambe as a Mediator of Alterity**

\footnote{149} I will explore the violence caused by the Rubber barons further ahead in this thesis.
Coca is central to the world view of the several local indigenous communities in western Amazonia. It is the main cultural plant of the *Gente del Centro* (People of the Centre). The People of the Centre is a category of loosely interconnected ethnic groups that share similar practices, languages and myths. They are constantly interacting with each other and participating in ceremonial dances to support their cohesion. The main indigenous communities that make part of this interethnic group are Witoto, Andoque, Nonuya, Miraña, Bora, and Ocaina (Londoño Sulkin, 2012).

For the men of the People of the Centre, mambear is a key part of their identity and the notion of personhood. However, it is only one part of a more intricate process of multiple substances that are constantly interacting in the body. Complete personhood is only achieved through the consumption of multiple substances, such as Cassava starch, Cassava beer, Chilli paste, Ayahuasca and (for men) Mambe and Ambil. As Londoño Sulkin (2012) states:

> “These substances were the main components of well-made persons’ flesh and bodily fluids; being agents in themselves, the substances ‘spoke’, and their speeches constituted persons’ thoughts/emotions.” (2012: 277)

As such, the act of mambear is a very sociable practice. It requires the active ingestion of several plant agencies, particularly Coca and Tobacco. As we saw in the previous vignette, during a Mambe ritual, men consume Mambe powder and Ambil to attain the voices of these substances and establish the proper moral personhood to deal with other people and communities.

Tobacco is an extremely important shamanic and spiritual plant in the American continent. In Amazonia, Ambil is just one of the multiple forms that Tobacco is ingested in. It is also smoked, inhaled as a snuff, drunk as an infusion and consumed as a thick paste. For the People of the Centre, who have a complex cosmology of substances and personhoods, Tobacco (especially Ambil) represents the original substance, the semen of the creator.  

150 Like many of the other processes that make culturally important substances such as Ayahuasca, Curare and Mambe, making Ambil is a complex process. Simply put, Ambil is
Much has been written about the complex interaction of both plants in the world view of lowland indigenous people (Londoño, 2004; 2012; Echeverri and Candre-Kinerai, 2008; Hugh Jones, 1992). In most cases, Tobacco and Coca are understood as male and female essences, contra-positioned and yet complementary. Coca is sometimes understood as la palabra (the word) and Tobacco is known as el pensamiento (the thought or intention) (Echeverri and Candre, 1993). Put together, the two substances complement each other.

These substances and the voices they produce have a much more subtle effect than that of Ayahuasca. For the Witotos, Ayahuasca is a powerful agency that must only be used in extreme cases. As a Witoto healer told me in Puerto Leguízamo: “Se deja el Yagé solo para las enfermedades más difíciles (We leave Yagé only for the worst diseases).”151 Ayahuasca is seen as effective and, in general, positive substance but under the control of specialist, unlike Coca and Tobacco.

produced by cooking Tobacco leaves with vegetable salts. These vegetable salts are obtained by burning several plants to produce ash, which is later filtered and crystallised. As a result, it produces several potassium-based salts. The ash of many plants species can generate these valuable salts – especially several species of spiny palms from the genera Astro Caryum and Bactris. However, many other species can be used, and it seems that each different species produces a different salt with different qualities and properties. Once mixed with the boiling Tobacco leaves, the salt will endow the Am bil with these properties (Echeverri, Jitdutijaño and Román, 2001). Therefore, Ambil can be highly personalised with symbolical characteristics or flavours. However, the symbolic and chemical complexity requires further exploration.

151 This is interesting since this is how Borrachero is seen by the shamans of the highlands and Middle Putumayo.
Due to the very social nature of consuming Mambe, the ritual of mambear offers the proper cultural space to dialogue with alterity. Those who consume Mambe not only entertain a dialogue with other people, but also – through the consumption of Mambe and Ambil – invite the spirit and agency of these plants to participate. Like the Ayahuasca ceremonies or (to a lesser degree) the drinking of Yoco, the spaces produced by the ritual consumption of Mambe allow other non-human agencies to participate, as forest spirits and ancestors are often evoked. Due to this characteristic, it is also a space to deal with other indigenous or non-indigenous groups, often allowing foreigners to participate and consume the Mambe powder.

As such, Mambe plays a fundamental role as a mediator of interaction, establishing the proper ritualised settings to interact with others (Fontaine, 2003). The ritual consumption of Mambe establishes the proper rules for communication, negotiation and exchange. When used in a ritual setting, Mambe is offered by the head of the house and passed around. It strengthens the social bonds of the community by allowing everyone a space to communicate and dialogue. When guests visit, the ritual use of Mambe allows
mediations between different perspectives and world views. This dialogue can be extended to non-humans, since spirits, animals and other plants are welcome to interact during the ritual.

For this reason, sharing Mambe is considered indispensable for the continuation of social life. The owner of the house is required to have enough Coca to share with his guest. Exchanging Mambe is common when people from the same ethnic group attend ceremonial dances, political reunions and ceremonial healings. Mambe is expected to be shared, and the person who receives it is expected to stay and engage in the dialogue, listen and be heard. It is through these spaces of conversation with the other that knowledge and techniques are shared, political strategies are interchanged, and the trade of material goods is established. It is possible that Mambe rituals spread through the lowland territory through this type of exchange systems, as other communities saw the advantages of Mambe ceremonies and adopted them into their own practices (Plowman, 1986).

The preparation and use of Coca require alkaline lime, which is needed to change the pH of the mouth that enables a better absorption into the gums. The lack of mineral lime in Amazonia requires a special technique to add this alkaline compound. Thus, Coca requires a particular ritualised transformation to produce Mambe. For this process, the Coca leaves are carefully harvested, toasted in a large pan and pulverised in a deep hollow mortar while adding a mixture of ashes from a variety of trees, especially the Yorumo (Cecropia sp.). The ashes provide the alkaline compound, and the thinly powdered Coca is absorbed much faster (Plowman, 1986).

It appears that this technique to produce Mambe accelerated the exchange and spread of these substances in lowland Amazonia. It is surprisingly similar to the method for cooking Cassava, which is widespread in the region. Cassava flour is toasted in the same large pan as the Coca leaves and requires similar motions and rhythms. While Mambe and Ambil preparation is strictly a male activity and practice, women

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152 Throughout Colombia, this lime is derived from burnt rocks or shells. The ashes are stored in lime containers known as poporos, which are an important complementing tool in the chewing of Coca. These poporos have been found in many archaeological records throughout the country (García Hoyos, 2002; López Restrepo, 2016).
exclusively prepare Cassava and Chilli paste. The similarity between the two techniques illustrates the interwoven relationships between multiple plants and indigenous world views. Echeverri and Candre-Kinerai (2008) propose that since the female Cassava flour production was already a common practice in Amazonia, that ritualised technique was used to fit the characteristics of the Coca leaf. Whatever its origin, it seems that the ritualised practice for Coca consumption probably assisted its spread through lowland Amazonia.

This technique spread quickly through the region. Much like the other shamanic networks explored in the previous chapters, the People of the Centre have strong supra-ethnic bonds with other groups through which they exchange everything from language, ritualised practices and kinship bonds to crafts and medicinal plants. These networks facilitated the spread of useful plants and the techniques associated with them (Lenaerts, 2006). Similar to how shamans in the highlands travel to different ethnic communities who share the use of Ayahuasca, lowland communities are continuously exchanging ritualised techniques.

Coca is another example of the porous frontier between the lowlands and the highlands, which permitted the exchange of a variety of plants from both eco-cultural landscapes. According to Echeverri and Candre (1993), botanical and linguistic features demonstrate its recent introduction into the lowlands from the Andean highlands. Like Borrachero and several other plants described in this thesis, the Amazonian Coca or *E. Coca var. ipadu* is only propagated through cuttings. This limits feral populations and genetic manipulation, as sexual reproduction diminishes with cloning. This means that people have established an intimate relationship with the plant and, through this relationship, they have fundamentally transformed its physical characteristics.

It also means that the entire population of this plant might be a single genetic clone that has passed through generations unchanged. *Ipado* is a variety of the southern Andean *Erythroxylum coca* (Plowman, 1981; 1986), which means that, out of the four different

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153 Russel and Rahman (2015) compare the gender dynamics of Mambe and Ambil to those of Cassava and Chilli paste. In the same way that Cassava is complemented with Chilli paste, Coca is complemented with Tobacco paste.

154 Similarly, the sound of the mortar replicates the sound of drums, highlighting how producing Mambe is a vital ceremonial and ritualised practice.
species of Coca, the Amazonian Coca is closely related to that found in Peru and Bolivia, arriving in Colombia from the south. This is surprising when you consider that the first species of *Erythroxylum* was first domesticated in the mountains of Colombia (Plowman, 1986). Other species of Coca, such as *E. novogranatense* (which is widespread in the highlands), did not arrive in the lowlands of Colombia until very recently.

However, the actual date of the introduction of Coca is unknown and a source of extensive discussion (Plowman, 1981). The movement of plants through these networks is often murky and unclear, due to constant interaction and mingling between different ethnic communities and due to recent acceleration of migrations caused by colonial processes. In particular, the Spanish conquest and the Rubber boom of the 20th century had a lasting effect on local communities, shifting entire groups and reshuffling the indigenous world of lowland Amazonia.

Nowadays, Coca is so prevalent that most indigenous men have some working knowledge of how to prepare Mambe. Many Witoto men take their own Coca powder through the towns in containers that anyone can see.\(^{155}\) When visiting in Puerto Leguízamo, I was offered Mambe several times and I was able to buy it easily. Due to these characteristics, the extensive networks of neoshamanic practices have adopted Coca, and Ambil and Mambe ceremonies are widespread in cities around the country. These practices are being incorporated into modern ideas of spiritualism, causing a profound transformation in how local people relate to these sacred plants. They have transformed the ritualised Mambe ceremony by adding new elements that give it the flexibility to be used in different contexts.

**Mambe in the Alternative Circle**

Mambe, like other master plants and indigenous technologies, is becoming popular in urban settings. The same network of people that organise Ayahuasca ceremonies in the cities are also arranging Mambe ceremonies (Caicedo-Fernández, 2015). It is not hard to

\(^{155}\) Unlike other medicines, such as Ayahuasca and Ambil, Mambe seems to be impervious to dangerous forces such as envy and menstruation.
find these types of ceremonies in highland cities. In fact, it was in this context that I first tried Coca leaves.

Like the Mambeadas of the lowlands in Putumayo, these ceremonies focus on the palabra (or the word), often lasting the whole night while people talk and discuss myths and stories that highlight ethical and moral values. These ceremonies are often advertised in online platforms as mind-opening ‘círculos de palabra’ or ‘circles of the word’. Unlike Ayahuasca, an indigenous guide is preferred but not always required, since anyone can preside and conduct a Mambe ceremony. Nonetheless, there is an important effort to legitimise this practice by featuring traditional techniques and methods. Many symbolic elements and techniques from the lowland communities are being used in these ceremonies, such as the ceremonial house or maloca and ritual tools that support a successful performance. Like the Mambe ceremonies in the lowlands, these become spaces for dialogue, negotiation and incorporation of new practices.

It was in this context that my friend Sergio from Bogotá called me to join him in a Mambe ceremony. A Witoto shaman, Don Juan, was leading a ceremony in a residential home in Bogotá to establish a multidisciplinary team that could solicit funding for his community. I believed that I could help. When I arrived, many other people were already there; all had their mouths green with Coca. Some were talking with each other while others were trying to accommodate the Mambe between their cheek and their teeth, a feat that required some concentration. As soon as I sat down, Don Juan offered me some of his Mambe. As I accommodated the Mambe, Don Juan began talking about the different problems that the Witoto community in Puerto Leguizamo were facing.

It became clear that this was not their first meeting. Don Juan had begun offering Ayahuasca for some time and my friend Sergio had met him at a previous Ayahuasca ceremony in Bogotá. I was under the impression that the Witoto rarely conducted
Ayahuasca ceremonies, since it was reserved for severe diseases. However, as I found out later, Don Juan was one of the few Witoto shamans who were opening up Ayahuasca ceremonies to non-indigenous people. This made him popular in the neoshamanic groups in Bogotá.

Don Juan was well known in Puerto Leguízamo as an accomplished healer. However, when he began expanding into the neoshamanic networks of highland cities, it produced tension in his hometown. Nonetheless, it had given him access to an extensive network of people with some economic and political power in Bogotá. Don Juan provided Mambe to many of these people, while directing several Mambe ceremonies in the malocas that dotted the city and its outskirts.

Against this political backdrop, these networks offer interesting multi-ethnic dynamics that are full of complex contradictions and juxtapositions. For example, there is a significant element of indigenismo in these neoshamanic groups. Often, people experiment with Mambe due to its indigenous background, fetishising the mysterious and spiritual elements of these plants. These circles often homogenise what it means to be Native American, flattening complex and nuanced ethnic groups with different ideologies, personhoods and power relationships into stereotypes.

This stereotype of the indio as wise and spiritual with a direct link to nature promotes these plants, which gain symbolic power and added cultural value. Coca, as a medicina ancestral, is often viewed as one of the most important master plants in the continent.

As a spiritual tool, Coca has spread beyond the indigenous communities; many non-indigenous urban dwellers are now conducting Mambe ceremonies. They have learnt the proper etiquette in its consumption. They have also incorporated political ideology,
as well as foreign spiritual elements such as codes of ethics and values. As a neoshamanism practitioner once told me:

“El Mambecito sirve para todo tipo de problemas, es como una línea directa al Gran Espíritu. Lo ayuda a hacer el trabajo necesario para resolver sus problemas (The Mambecito works for all types of problems, it’s like a direct line to the Great Spirit.\textsuperscript{158} It helps you do the necessary work to deal with your problems).”

However, these non-indigenous shamans rely on a close bond with the indigenous healers from Amazonia. This provides them with a higher status in their ceremonies, since they have a direct link to people who produce Mambe in the lowland forests. It also enables them to distribute Coca to their friends and acquaintances (Sanchez, 2011). These relationships facilitate the access to this plant, and promote dialogues that foster further transformation of the Mambe practice.

However, this is not a one-way relationship. As we saw in the vignette, the indigenous shamans who are in constant contact with the white urban populations have gained a new political position. They can persuade these urban populations to join their political causes while simultaneously legitimising their social status in their own territory. Being in itself a very political ritual (since it promotes dialogue), the Mambe ceremony has become a significant outlet for indigenous frustration caused by subjugation, ecological degradation and cultural erosion suffered in most of the lowland territories. As Don Juan said as he introduced the Mambe ceremony:

“Aquí estamos reunidos para sanar los daños de siglos de explotación. Con los abuelos Tabaco y Coca, vamos a trabajar para ayudar a la gente de mi comunidad (Here, we come together to heal centuries of exploitation. With the help of our ancestors, Tobacco and Coca, we will work to help the people of my community).”

\textsuperscript{158} The notion of the Great Spirit was inspired by North American native mythology. In particular, this Great Spirit was popularised by the book \textit{Black Elk Speaks}, written by John Neihardt in 1932. It is an important part of neoshamanic lore and key in the notions of a Pan-American shamanic religion that is now becoming increasingly popular.
As a result, there is a movement to transform Coca into a postcolonial agent. Mambe is being reclaimed and reimagined as the ‘ancestral medicine of Coca’. This reclamation is especially pressing considering the reputation created by the cocaine industry. Mambe is taking a subversive position, brought on by the contraposition of the cocaine industry that has ravaged the nation for the last 40 years. This is the argument of many neoshamanic groups that advocate reclaiming the powerful agent from the corrupting essence of the capitalist model. There is a drive to vindicated Coca from the drug stereotypes, even if it means using other stereotypes – such as the wise Indian – to reclaim it.

**Coca as Medicine**

Most of the Ayahuasca shamans whom I interviewed did not partake in the Mambe ceremonies, keeping their distance from this plant of power. They would ask patients who might have gone to the lowlands not to bring it to their ceremonial houses, and disapproved of its use during or after the Ayahuasca ceremonies. Most of them stress that it is an agency that should not be mixed with Ayahuasca.

“Se deja afuera cualquier otro elemental, aquí en la maloca lo que es del Yagé solamente (Leave anything that is of another master plant outside; here, in the maloca, only what pertains to Yagé),” a Taita said as he scolded a couple of young men who were *mambeando* in the early morning of the Ayahuasca ceremony. Therefore, Mambe is considered an agency that has its own time, space and ceremonial practices that might interfere with the intentions of the Ayahuasca ceremony.

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159 The act of mambear.
The Coca that I observed in Upper and Middle Putumayo was primarily used as a medicine. Ayahuasca shamans prefer maintaining a distance from Coca as Mambe, instead using this plant as a medicine without focusing on the spiritual qualities it might have in other cultures. Many different shamans often prescribe Coca for toothaches, bajadez (fatigue) and falta de energía (lack of energy). There is a sharp distinction between the medicinal and spiritual Coca, manifested in how it is manipulated and used.

As medicine, Coca has a very different form compared to the green powder from the lowlands. In particular, it is only found in small bundles of dried leaves, and it is never mixed with the alkaline additives. This Coca is left to dry in the sun for several days and is not toasted. This method of preparation implies simple harvesting and commercialising. However, dry Coca is hard to keep and will go bad with humidity.

There is also a large market for Coca as an additive in creams, gels and some medicinal infusions. Marihuana and Coca creams are a common medicine for muscle pains and arthritis. Meanwhile, medicinal infusions contain Coca for stomach aches, as an anaesthetic for throat issues and to calm nerves.

Recently, Coca tea is gaining popularity in Colombia. For highland cities where altitude sickness is common, drinking Coca is becoming more fashionable. It is now available in trendy urban restaurants and café shops as an alternative to Coffee. Young cosmopolitan urbanites are more open to drinking Coca tea. This use is similar to that of Peru and Bolivia, but to a lesser degree. In the Andean highlands of those countries, Coca is widely consumed as a mild stimulant. It is also an important plant to help with altitude sickness, which is often cured with a mate de Coca (Coca tea).

There is evidence that Coca was used as a stimulant by many communities in the Colombian mountains (Gootenburg, 2009). However, as Colombia became more European, the taste for Coca diminished and other stimulants became popular, such as Coffee, hot chocolate and Tea (García Hoyos, 2002; López Restrepo, 2016).
In Peru and Bolivia where Coca stimulated the mining industry workers during the late colonial period, its use was advocated by the colonial power structures. It was one of the first crops to be monopolised and controlled by Spanish authorities, and its trade was incorporated into the economic system imported from Spain (Murra, 1995). In Colombia, however, its use is reserved for indigenous people; it is frowned upon by the elite and the mestizo middle classes. As the indigenous communities were marginalised in smaller and smaller territories, Coca lost most of its cultural and spiritual significance. Today, it is only used as medicine in the Colombian highlands.

Most of the Coca found in Colombian markets is *Erythroxylum novogranatense*, which is the same species used in the illegal Coca trade. These plants grow well in altitudes from 500 to 1500 metres; this represents a substantial ecological availability (Plowman, 1986). However, although Coca is widely accessible due to this illegal trade, people stay away from leaves originating from this trade. They are afraid it might be tainted with dangerous herbicides and fertilisers used to improve the yields in Coca plantations. When asked, merchants make a point of disassociating their Coca from the cocaine plantations; they consider those plants to have been polluted.

“No, no, esta la crecen orgánica para medicina, la que se usa para la cocaína ya está muy dañada, con todo ese herbicida que le ponen (No, no, this one is grown for medicine, the one that they grow for cocaine is already too damaged, with all the herbicide that they add),” said a merchant to a young lady who was curious about the Coca leaves.

The growing demand for organic Coca has motivated people to grow their own plants. I have met people who sell Coca to these markets who own two or three plants that can be continuously harvested throughout the year.

Yet, the legal ambiguity of Coca has left those who grow it and use it for medicinal practices under the same legal and social classification as those who produce cocaine. Often, Coca is demonised, and media campaigns against ‘la mata que mata’ (the plant that kills) are continuously broadcasted on the radio. In the highland urban markets, many curious people stop and ask about the dried Coca leaves; however, they are soon
put off due to its reputation. After decades of relentless persecution and delegitimization, it seems that Coca as a mild stimulant and cocaine as a hard drug are perceived to be one and the same by many urban inhabitants. Due to the stigma of the cocaine industry, casual consumption of Coca is still rare.

Recently, I came across a store that sold Mambe powder in the Pasto city centre. During my fieldwork, I had rarely seen Mambe in the powdered form in markets. Mambe powder has stayed in the alternative and neoshamanic networks because it requires a special technique to consume. The visible characteristics of consuming Mambe are often cited as a reason why people do not try it.

“Uy a mis esos grupos no me gustan, siempre con la boca así verde, se ve bien feo (I don’t like those groups, they always have their mouths so green, it looks ugly),” a friend of mine said when we were talking about shamanic groups.

This powder was neatly packed. On the front, there is an image of a Quechua Indian wearing a chullo (peruvian wool hat) and performing the Coca offering to Pachamama. The package was marked in golden letters: ‘Mambe de la tradición Witoto del Putumayo’ (‘Mambe of the Putumayo Witoto tradition’). As I asked the owner of the shop about it, we talked about the benefits of Coca, as well as the origins in the sacred malocas of the jungles of Putumayo. The young man behind the counter told me:

“Queremos reclamar la Coca sagrada y ayudar a las comunidades del Amazonas (We want to reclaim the sacred Coca and help the communities of the Amazon).”

The new wave of Coca products are packed and commercialised as an ancestral remedy, using the same discourse that highlights the often romantic link between ancestrality, indigenous communities, and health. As I had explored previously, the relationship between indigenous people and health is a recurring theme in the alternative health markets. Pre-industrialised medicine is given the added value of romantic and mysterious magic, evoking colonial relationships and otherness. The stereotype of wise
Indians and their secret knowledge have facilitated the reintroduction of Coca in the highland markets of Colombia.

**Coca in Putumayo**

While waiting for a bus on a dirt road that leads from Orito to Puerto Asís, I began talking to several young men who were waiting there as well. We had been there for a while, and the bus was not even close to arriving. They appeared to be between 20 and 30 years old and had the look of people who had worked under the powerful equatorial sun for some time. As they talked, they seemed to be suspicious of me; I was not surprised, since I looked like a foreigner and this was a highly complex territory.

One of the men asked me for a smoke and quickly figured out that I was from Bogotá due to my accent. He laughed. “Pensábamos que era gringo (We thought you were a gringo),” he said almost jokingly, knowing fully well what a gringo\(^{160}\) could be doing in this part of the country. He asked me what I was doing there, and I told him I was visiting a Kofan Taita a couple of miles off. He laughed, as he said:

> “*Muy peligroso por allá, eso está lleno de cultivos* (Very dangerous over there, it’s full of Coca plantations).”

I nodded, as I had seen the extensive areas used for Coca plantations, fumigated by government aeroplanes and left barren from overuse and exhausted soils. As we continued talking, it became obvious that all of them had worked directly or indirectly with the Coca plantations. They mentioned their hopelessness, since the only employment available was as day labourers on other people’s land. Working as a peon in the Coca fields meant a significant amount of money in a short period of time, enough to start other possible ventures. In the lowlands, the limited opportunities for work were in a Coca plantation or in a cattle ranch. The only realistic option was to raspar or collect Coca leaves. Yet, they all told me that staying as a Coca collector was not sustainable. The only other occupation in this commodity chain was transportation.

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\(^{160}\) This is not necessarily a pejorative term, but it can be. It is usually used to talk about foreigners.
But being a transporter was a hazardous activity. As one of the men told me while we kept waiting for the bus: “o uno lo deja o se lo lleva a la tumba (either you leave it or it takes you to the grave).”

As the transport arrived, a modified Hilux pickup, we hopped on in the back. Nobody else was sitting with us in the truck bed and they felt comfortable with continuing the conversation. It quickly turned to the topic of violence, as it usually does when talking about the cocaine industry. They talked about how, back in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the war had become even more gruesome as the government pushed for complete control of the territory. As the government fought the FARC, the paramilitary groups initiated a reign of terror with a number of massacres, of which the most infamous was ‘El Tigre’ in 1999. It was hard to distinguish who was ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in those times, since even the government was involved in extra-judicial killings. The men’s graphic accounts of violence reminded me of the Casement report that I had read recently, about the abuses endured by indigenous people during the Rubber boom in the early 20th century.

It is difficult to talk about how plants move in Putumayo without talking about the cocaine commodity chain. It seems that wherever you look, the cocaine industry has had a significant effect on the local communities and their environment. As more people grow Coca in small plots, transform it into cocaine paste and then sell it to supply the vast global demand, the plant moves and changes accordingly. It is in this constant state of transformation that one can see how Coca becomes the ideal commodity. The plant’s own agency becomes a force of nature that adapts to different pressures and guarantees its own flow.

The cocaine industry arrived in Colombia in the late 20th century. Unlike Bolivia and Peru, which had a continuous and regulated Coca trade to supply the mountain mining communities, use of Coca in Colombia had been marginalised and limited to isolated indigenous communities by constant Spanish persecution (García Hoyos, 2002; López Restrepo, 2016). It was not until the second half of the 20th century that Coca as a commodity suddenly bloomed in the territory where it had been domesticated many centuries before.
By the mid-19th century, the technology to extract the alkaloid in large quantities became available and Coca plantations became a vast business in the Andean foothills of Peru and Bolivia (Gootenburg, 2008). Industrially, cocaine was legal and quite profitable, requiring a constant production of the leaves and cocaine paste to supply global demand for a medicine, tonic and a mild stimulant that was highly praised. By the 1930s, the US gained absolute control of the cocaine commodity chains in the Americas, blocking the European and Asian pharmaceutical companies and monopolising the product. During this period, cocaine was a common medicine and stimulant used for products such as Coca Cola. Although there were some attempts to harvest cocaine in Southeast Asia, most were abandoned after the Second World War (Gootenburg, 2008).

The process of its criminalisation has been intensely debated, and I will not go into the details here. However, before it became illegal, most of the cocaine production had a complex trade route that extended all the way to the global north. The problem with making this commodity illegal was that it made this trade network impervious to state regulation and bound entirely to free market dynamics driven by intense demand and supplied by a very resilient product (García Hoyos, 2002; López Restrepo, 2016). Cocaine production thrived in Colombia due to its complex geography, scarcely controlled rural areas, a history of war and a thriving smuggling industry that established the right settings for this trade to flourish. Ironically, it was the war on drugs that, instead of eradicating the production, thrust it into the Andean foothills and the Amazonian lowlands (Gootenburg, 2006). This was when cocaine production finally arrived in Putumayo. As prices soared, more poor farmers began growing Coca in the region and the large drug lords consolidated their trade links to supply the demand in the northern hemisphere. Soon, cocaine was fuelling every aspect of the underground economy of the country.

During this fieldwork, I was not able to visit a processing camp, as none of the farmers would take me there. Therefore, I was not able to arrange a chaîne opératoire analysis with as much detail as I wished. However, I had witnessed the process first-hand in another region years before, during undergraduate fieldwork in the northern Colombian
region of Santa Marta. There, I learnt that cocaine production is a decentralised process. Large drug dealers are usually not involved in the initial production of the cocaine paste. Instead, most of the cocaine is made in small-scale production labs, owned by the same small landowners who grow the plants.

In a general overview, the process for making cocaine requires kilos of Coca leaves, as well as several chemicals. It may take a few hours for people to add and filter several of the solvents used, which include chlorine, cement, kerosene, gasoline, caustic soda and sulphuric acid, all of which are widely available in agrochemical stores.

In the beginning, the distilling process would require the help of illegal groups to guarantee access to some of the more difficult chemicals, like many of the industrial solvents, especially ether. However, due to the constant pressure of authorities, the process has been simplified and has become quick and straightforward to facilitate production without the need for complex infrastructure. Ether has been replaced with gasoline or kerosene, which, though much less effective, is widely available. The process has changed during the past few years and many people may have different recipes, yet the basic steps are the same. These steps have been perfected to be effectively undertaken in rural areas and to produce as much as possible with little effort.

At the same time, the plants have gone through similar transformations in order to adapt to the dizzying speeds required to supply the demand. The Coca plants have been transformed into this idealised form, valued by a capitalist world. This drastic commodification is unique to Coca, as it was through this mixture of plantation methods, artisanal chemistry, constant experimentation, and external pressure – which includes market dynamics and state enforcement – that cocaine was able to adapt to changing dynamics and evade the control of the modern state. In particular, the biological characteristics of this plant, such as its high yield of leaves, easy germination and few limitations of soil and temperature, make it a high performance product.

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161 During my time in the field, there was a rumour that many new plants had a higher cocaine percentage that facilitated a more productive extraction. This would not surprise me, as these plants are continuously being manipulated.
Cocaine replicated patterns of other global commodity booms that had an enormous impact on the local cultural and ecological landscape of Putumayo. It abetted the colonial processes and stimulated the dynamics between the periphery and the centre. It was not very different from other commodity booms, especially those that were beyond the control of the modern state, such as the Rubber boom. The cocaine commodity bonanza is just one of multiple waves interwoven with the colonial process that have profoundly transformed this territory. Every time a new product from Putumayo was incorporated into the global trade network, it transformed the cultural and ecological landscape irreversibly and shifted the colonial frontier deeper into the lowlands. This was the case of gold that initiated the colonial projects (Ramirez de Jara, 1996).

Yet, as we saw with Mopa Mopa, the cycle of commodity expansion in the Putumayo region has a pre-Columbian history that defined many of the current forms of trade. Altogether, the Putumayo region has endured four bonanzas after Colombia’s independence from Spain: that of Cinchona in the mid-19th century (Crawford, 2016); the Rubber booms of the late 19th century (Taussig, 1987; Steiner, Páramo and Pineda, 2014); the cocaine boom in the 1980s (Gootenburg, 2008); and the oil industry escalation of the past 60 years (Fontaine, 2007).

**Cocaine and Rubber**

To understand the role of commodities in this colonisation process, it is necessary to treat the commodities not only as objects acted upon, but also as agents. This is especially true of plants, such as Rubber and Coca, both of which had a significant effect on the way in which the commodity chain worked and on the social realities of the people who have lived through those times.

Putumayo, unlike most of the Colombian interior and the Caribbean coastal region, was painstakingly incorporated into the globalised world through a process that is still ongoing. During the early Conquista, the Andean foothills were never truly integrated into the colonial sphere. The first waves of colonial exploration in the lowlands were driven by the prospect of immense riches in the form of gold, land and spices. However, difficult access and lack of exploitable goods discouraged further consolidation of the
region by the colonial powers (Casas Aguilar, 1999; Ramirez de Jara, 1996). Although the area was technically part of the colonial administration, the only manifestations of its influence were a few early missions and trade towns. The missionary centres of Sibundoy, Mocoa, Sucumbíos and Puerto Asís were founded with the main purpose of integrating the local indigenous population into the Catholic faith (Sanchez, 2003). The existence of these centres was irregular and came much later during the colonial period. The subsequent centuries were not that different. However, the labour crisis in the highlands, due to the considerable mortality caused by disease and violence, encouraged stricter control of the lowlands to supply the demand of indigenous slaves (Steiner, Páramo and Pineda, 2014). Yet, due to an even greater mortality in Amazonia, this human trafficking was abandoned and replaced by the newly established African slave trade.

By the late colonial and early republican periods, botanical extraction of spices, medicines, and stimulants promoted a new thrust for colonial control of the lowlands. Expeditions by European scientists in the lowlands occurred more frequently, and they were in search of the next fashionable product for commercial exploitation (Casas Aguilar, 1999). These forests became a source of botanical potentiality, increasing the interest of entrepreneurs to control them. It was at this time that Cinchona became a global commodity, when the Spanish discovered its potential and effectiveness against malaria (Crawford, 2016). Although Colombia was never a significant producer of quinine, which is extracted from Cinchona, the discovery of this tree in its territory encouraged the colonisation of the cloud forests where it grows best (Pérez Pinzón, 2015; Sandoval and Echandía, 1986). Consequently, colonos travelled through Putumayo looking for quinine-producing species. One of the most famed quineros that explored the Putumayo region was Rafael Reyes Prieto, who later became president of Colombia (Sandoval and Echandía, 1986).

162 Quinine extraction occurred in the regions of Santander, Cundinamarca and Cauca. Although Colombia had an important population of Cinchona species, difficult terrain, lack of infrastructure and politics limited the extraction of these products.

163 This refers to quinine tappers. Usually white men who were looking for riches would move to the different regions within the cloud forest where quinine-producing species grew best.

164 His biography is very interesting and highlights a key period in the history of Colombia. At a young age, he became an explorer and travelled through the lowlands of Putumayo and Caquetá looking for Rubber and quinine. He then joined the military and was a Conservative general during the Thousand Days’ War, finally becoming president with dictatorial powers in the 1904.
Other botanical products such as Vanilla, Cacao and Coca also entered the global markets during the 19th century; however, these markets did not transform the Putumayo landscape as they did in other lowland territories of Colombia (Palacio, 2006). The lack of infrastructure and interconnectivity limited large-scale extraction, and only regions near navigable rivers had the proper access routes to connect the produce to the global markets.

It was only with the Rubber bonanza of the 19th and early 20th centuries that the region saw extensive transformations, which opened it up to the central authorities. This bonanza accelerated the state-building project of the recently independent Colombia, which consolidated its power in the region and stimulated migrations of non-indigenous communities from the Andean highlands. This trade was simpler, since the network followed the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers towards the already established market in Manaus on the Amazon River. Nevertheless, the region’s lack of communication with the rest of the country accelerated a series of developments in which the Peruvian Government tried to establish its control over the territory. These events culminated in the Colombo-Peruvian war of 1932–1933 (Taussig, 1987; Steiner, Páramo and Pineda, 2014; Casas Aguilar, 1999; Palacio, 2006).

Although commodity trade was fundamental to the colonial project, equating cocaine to other commodities risks oversimplifying its processes. However, exploring their similarities can help to reveal how these commodities transformed the Putumayo landscape. Both the Rubber and cocaine industries required better access roads and trade routes; they encouraged the migration of highland populations to the lowlands, and transformed the power dynamics between the local communities and the central government.

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During this time, Panama gained its independence from Colombia with the help of the Americans. His chronicles of his trips to Putumayo (Reyes, 1902) are part of the literary movement of the early 20th century that depicted the vast jungles of Amazonia. Among the great novels of the times is *The Vortex* or *La Vorágine* by José Eustasio Rivera, about the Colombian Rubber boom seen as a green hell and a natural paradise (Wylie, 2013).

165 The largest city in Amazonia, it was the main hub of the Rubber boom during the 19th and early 20th centuries.
As socio-political processes, both the cocaine and Rubber booms had an enormous impact on local communities, causing havoc on the local native populations. They consolidated the geopolitical national borders with a military presence of the Colombian central government, linking the central powers in highland cities with the lowlands, both physically and politically. Additionally, the consolidation of power served other groups and power structures, such as the Rubber barons in the earlier case, and the guerrilla and the drug traffickers in the case of cocaine.

Rubber accelerated the incoming migration of white Rubber tappers and merchants, as well as the presence of the state. The path that connected the lowlands with the highlands in Putumayo – ‘El Camino de la Medicina’ – was expanded and a road was built for larger motor vehicles (Sanchez, 2003). Similarly, the cocaine industry has been a significant force in lowland Amazonia that has consolidated the market system and expanded the access routes, becoming a major source of ecological and cultural change.

The production in both cases has been a decentralised practice dominated by market dynamics. Rubber production depended on the local labour of campesinos and caucheros, indigenous Rubber tappers, to collect large amounts of latex. Cocaine also depends on the local labour of collectors, or raspachines, to collect the basic ingredient. They required then – and still now require – complex trade networks to further transform the product into a commodity by supplying it to international markets. Now, as in the past, powerful men with strong political and social control coordinate the subsequent links in the commodity chain.

Finally, both cases have triggered complex violent processes – first to control the supply lines, and then to guarantee the trade routes. When the local tensions have been unsustainable, these cases triggered snowball effects of violence and terror, with their devastating effects on local communities. The decentralised nature of both industries supported this violence.

In spite of the similarities, each industry has its specific characteristics. Like many Amazonian plants, the Hevea Rubber tree was deeply integrated into complex ecological relationships that limited its role as a commodity. Rubber trees could not be
domesticated to grow in a plantation because they were susceptible to fungi or leaf blight epidemics (Taussig, 1987; Steiner, Páramo and Pineda, 2014). Therefore, the caucheros had to move through vast territories, accessing small patches of Rubber trees. The process was labour intensive, requiring a large labour force to tap into extensive territories.

The ecological limits of the Hevea is key to understanding the violence that affected the region in the early 20th century, setting it apart from the cocaine-induced violence today. In those years, in Colombia (which had long abolished slavery), cheap labour could be obtained from the lowland indigenous communities of Putumayo who were treated as serfs. However, the region was scarcely populated and the possible workforce did not have the capacity to collect the amount of latex that the Rubber barons required to satisfy investors. When the overseers resorted to violent recruitment and abusive forced labour, the result was a decreasing labour force. The indigenous serfs fled into the jungle or died from disease, starvation, severe physical abuse and even murder. A report by a British consul in Brazil, known as the Roger Casement Report on Putumayo, exposed the abuses performed by the Anglo-Peruvian Amazon Rubber Company, which was eventually forced to end its operations.

When the seeds of the Rubber tree were successfully smuggled to Asia, they were separated from their ecological context, limiting the effects of leaf blight. Plantations began growing all over Southeast Asia, which completed Hevea’s transformation into a commodified organism. As the Amazonian monopoly dissipated, the overseers’ large houses disappeared and the local populations were left on their own. State control began to wane and the towns that were once important Rubber trade centres were abandoned by the central powers (Casas Aguilar, 1999). It was not until oil was discovered in the Andean foothills around 1960 that a new commodity boom attracted a further wave of migration and state intervention.

166 However, as Taussig (1987) puts it in his analysis of Casement’s report, the lack of labour seemed more like an excuse than the main reason for the violent attitude towards the native populations. Feeding on the myths and fears of colonial interaction, what was a tense situation between native people and the foreigners manifested itself in the horrors seen by Casement.

167 Oil accelerated state control of the lowlands of the Llanos areas and the Amazonian foothills. Many highland migrants arrived in the region attracted by this oil rush, permanently changing the population dynamics of Putumayo (Fontaine, 2007). Roads and ports were built to facilitate
On the other hand, the Coca for cocaine plantations was not native to the Amazonian lowlands when it was introduced in the 1950s; it had few natural predators and diseases. Its sturdiness and adaptability, both of which were painstakingly produced by centuries of human–plant interaction, had already transformed it into a commodified organism, facilitating its integration into the globalised markets. Unlike Rubber, Coca was easily grown in plantations; it had a strong defence against natural diseases, it was widely adaptable and grew quite quickly, all of which are preferred characteristics for this type of intensive production. Selective breeding has accelerated its transformation into a commodified being and, as I have shown, even the extraction process has been simplified to guarantee constant supply. As a plantation, it requires much less labour to produce high yields, which were needed to produce considerable amounts of the alkaloid.

As the war on drugs intensified, this adaptability and sturdiness allowed farmers to move deeper into lowland forest or mountainous regions, making it hard for state control and reduction efforts. This phenomenon was also augmented by the traditional way of using land in Putumayo. Due to the acidic soil of these territories, agriculture has always been mobile; thus when the soil se agota (is exhausted), one moves to other parts, making eradication nearly impossible (Lyons, 2014).

Like the other commodity booms, Coca has become a central agent in the global system. Not only has it been transforming the local biocultural landscape to fit the global markets and ideals of commodity extraction, but it has also been physically modified to be a globalised commodity. It also has been an effective tool in the consolidation of power structures, both from state and extra-state agents. Control over the commodity production and trade routes have been central in the war on drugs so eagerly proposed by the global north. However, as the demand for cocaine is guaranteed and supply is ensured by the biological characteristics of the plant, it seems that the only limitations for this commodity are land availability and control over trade routes. No...
wonder that these are the main sources of violence in the region, as people are expelled from their land in order to grow more Coca and trade routes are violently fought over.

Due to the risk of reductionism, it is crucial to understand that this functionalist approach to the commodity cycles allows us to explore these phenomena and compare them. This must be carefully proposed, as it could point to determinist arguments on the relationships between Coca plants and violence, and these are all complex and multifaceted phenomena. A simplified explanation of the violence in Putumayo, based on the commodity booms, would ignore different types of social tensions that are rife in this region. However, it is an intriguing thought experiment and allows us to give Coca an agency when talking about the colonial process in Putumayo.

Coca has generally been considered a passive agent, which – as I have been stating from the beginning of this dissertation – is not the case. There is no doubt that the complex interactions between colonial categories of people (Taussig, 1986), from the social tensions caused by inequality and lack of opportunities (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1999) to fundamental characteristics of Colombian society, as well as socioeconomic factors, all play a major role in accelerating the cycle of violence in the region. Here, I argue to include the role of materiality when exploring the colonial process of the Andean foothills.

A Multidimensional Being

As we have seen, a plant such as Coca exists in multiple forms in the cultural pluriverse of the Putumayo region. How people consolidate the parallel existence of one plant is complex and multilayered. Although these plants may be of the same botanical species or at least categorised as the same plant by local classifications, they exist in a web of social relationships that define their existence. Reconciling the capitalist version with the traditional and animistic approach to spiritual and medicinal plants seems to be very difficult even for my informants, a contradiction that Taussig (1980) explores:

“The fetishism that is found in the economics of precapitalist societies arises from the sense of organic unity between persons and their products, and this
stands in stark contrast to the fetishism of commodities in capitalist societies, which results from the split between persons and the thing they produce and exchange. The result of this split is the subordination of men to things they produce, which seems independent and self-empowered.” (1980: 37)

For the Witoto who use it for ceremonial purposes, harvesting Coca for the cocaine industry seems to be a paradox. The sacred nature of Coca as Mambe appears to contradict its value as a commodity. However, many people continuously chew Mambe while participating in the industrial cocaine system. Since the end of the Rubber boom, indigenous people from western Amazonia have depended on the collection of Coca to gain the income necessary to participate in the merchandised economy of urban Amazonia.

Hugh Jones (1992) states that for the Barana of Caquetá, this paradox is often dealt with by separating both the plants and the leaves, indicating that selling only leaves to the white man would prevent them from controlling the plants. This, however, is not what I saw. Instead, I believe that this situation has changed dramatically. To maintain a steady production of Coca leaves, the drug barons have encouraged anyone with land to grow the crop. They have also introduced a breed of *E. novogranatense* into lowland Amazonia, adapting it to lowland weather and soils. Since this species produces much more yield than the *E. coca*, it has become the preferred species for the cocaine industry.

This seems to highlight the distinction between the Coca used for personal ceremonial practices and that used as a source of income. The Coca used for Mambe is still grown in the garden, kept, harvested, processed and exchanged through strict ritual practice.\(^{168}\) The variety they have used for generations, often cutting and growing the same plant of their ancestors, is grown in polycultural plots, as most of the crops in the swidden system. Meanwhile, most of the Coca utilised to supply the cocaine industry is

\(^{168}\) Coca often takes a year to grow and is part of a larger swidden polycultural garden. It is often planted with other slow-growing trees and crops. It is particularly interesting since it can be continuously harvested years after the garden is abandoned. Its use is sporadic and does not require stripping the leaves off its tree. Harvesting and growing Coca requires constant care of the spirit of the Coca, prayers and songs that incentivise its growth (Urbina Rangel, 2011). It is, however, starting to be grown separately, on its own.
harvested in small and medium-sized monocultural plantations deep in the forests of the foothills. Chemical fertilisers and pesticides are regularly used to achieve maximum yield, and labourers are invited to come from various places and backgrounds to work in these fields.

The methods of preparing Mambe and cocaine also highlight their extreme differences. The techniques used for each are highly representative of the cosmological concepts produced by the way in which people interpret the world.

For the indigenous people of the lowlands, Mambe is tied to the perception of personhood and substances. The ritualised making and consuming of Mambe powder enhances the idea of multiple agencies making up a moral human being (Londoño Sulkin, 2012).

In other words, personhood was “intentionally and materially fashioned by their parents and other kin out of key substances of divine origin” (Londoño Sulkin, 2012: 277). Therefore, the voices and consciousness of the different substances were the ones that made a human being into a moral person, a person who was capable of sustaining tradition, planting crops and continuing kinship relationships. The production of Mambe and Ambil meant staying on the right path to being a real person. Consequently, “processes of producing and consuming these substances are analogous to the processes of reproducing both individuals and the social structure” (Hugh Jones, 1979: 169).

On the other hand, the history of cocaine as a commodity shows how this highly industrialised production is capable of adapting to constantly changing dynamics. Its production is only possible through Western and naturalist notions of chemistry that have been untethered to become replicable in mass and with little effort. The actual chemical reactions do not really matter as much as the concepts, such as solutions, cohesion, evaporation and fractional distillation, all of which are needed to separate the alkaloid from the plant, and yet seem abstract and difficult to fathom.

As a young mestizo man told me when I asked him about the process:
“Uno machaca las hojas, y eso se llena de químicos. El químico saca la base de las hojas... Cuando se tiene la base se pone a secar y esos químicos se evaporan y esa base queda tiesa (One crushes the leaves, and then puts all the chemicals. These chemicals will take out the cocaine base from the leaves... once you have the base, you let it dry and the chemicals evaporate, then the base will be hard).”

These plants and substances exist in parallel – one a truly commodified organism, the base for the capitalist markets of cocaine; and the other, the sacred agency, an inalienable part of the indigenous world view. Thus, Coca for the cocaine industry and Coca for Mambe are entirely different ontological beings and require distinct attitudes, practices and negotiations. Therefore, it seems that Coca exists simultaneously in two ontological worlds, the capitalist and the animists. Nonetheless, there are interesting similarities. Both of these processes are there to maximise the interior potential of the plant, be it chemical or spiritual. Both of them highlight the interior voice of the plant, how it speaks to us.

For those who work with it, these two different beings intersect. They are both sacred and powerful beings. It is not the plant that is potentiality evil; it is the polluting nature of the illegal capitalist system, which distils the spiritual essence of this plant to make one addicted to it. Its transformation, with all the added chemicals, is extremely symbolic.

Tobacco was often used as a comparison, as it is also a sacred plant; yet once capitalism took over, the same qualities that made it spiritual made it destructive. There is a widespread fear that Ayahuasca is also in danger, since it is beginning to be sold to foreigners and there is an ongoing process of marketing. As one shaman said to me:

“para que la vuelvan destructiva en vez de constructive (to make it destructive instead of constructive).”

In a very interesting case, an apprentice of a mestizo shaman told me how he tried the processed component of Ayahuasca, DMT. It had caused severe damage to his relationship with the plant. He asked me if DMT was common in the northern countries.
When I told him that it was beginning to become popular, he warned me that it was not the true spirit of the plant; it was deformed and horrible. “*Eso es pura corrupción* (That is pure corruption),” he said angrily.

Yet for those Witotos whom I talked to, there is a resignation to the idea that their sacred Coca is being used to fuel violence. Many even participate in it, due to the lack of genuine income opportunities in this territory. However, it seems that Coca, as an integral part of the indigenous cultures, has also been at the centre of the indigenous cultural revival. Like all of the plants that I have mentioned, Coca has a new political role, a role that can easily be adapted to a semi-urban lifestyle to facilitate a revival of traditional practices and knowledge. As we saw, the ceremonial use of Mambe is already quite political by promoting dialogue, so it is no surprise that it has become popular in regional politics. It offers spaces of legitimisation through tradition, cultural exchange and reconceptualisation of the notions of identity and the power dynamics of the region. In this manner, Coca is political in more ways than one, since it is also the basis of a ritual that favours political dialogue. This is perhaps ironic given the violence – a breakdown of dialogue – that has been associated with cocaine.

I attended several political rallies, advocating the use of traditional practices such as healing, spiritualism and forest management, as well as advocating an indigenous way of making treaties and conducting politics. Mambe was ideal for these spaces of political negotiation. These meetings – attended by men and women of different ethnic backgrounds, as well as politicians and NGOs – would often go on long tangents as everyone was given the opportunity to speak their mind. Mambe was the catalyst for these conversations and, as the night progressed and more of the powder was consumed, the conversation often turned into highlighting the spiritual relations and the personal experiences that were contextually crucial for the discussion.

The political significance of what was happening there is not to be taken lightly, as all external agencies were allowed to participate in the negotiation. The different agencies that inhabited the forest around them were a central aspect of this negotiation. The receptiveness to different points of view, due to the cosmological openness of the
Mambe ceremony and the Amerindian world views to the perspectives of others (Viveiros de Castro, 1998), enables this multilevel negotiation.

I believe this is the notable role of the Mambe ceremony, as it highlights the effectiveness of the indigenous world view. People who live in cities and towns, now separated from the forest, will have to use the same strategies to deal with the complexities of urban living. It has proven beneficial for the political movements of local indigenous revivalism, as it legitimises their heritage and their cultural way of seeing the world, and promotes tolerance and acceptance of the diversity of cultures, political motivations and perspectives in regional and national politics. As more and more people attend these ceremonies, including mayors, administrators, and government employees, Mambe ceremonies are becoming even more important as spaces for negotiation between perspectives and alterities.
Conclusion

I began this dissertation describing the impressive diversity found in the markets of Mocoa. As I explored the trade networks in the region, I would often come back to the markets and stalls, trying to observe them through a more informed perspective. As such, these stalls functioned as a guide to the vast network of relationships that entangle the Putumayo region. The different plants, tools and items that they sell, tell a story of colonial interactions, cultural exchange and flows of knowledge. They represent the intimate relationship between these communities, the medicinal plants, and their environment, as these plants are not merely medicines; they are a crucial part of the communities’ identity and daily life.

The stalls also mirror the history of the region, highlighting the different cycles of trade that enabled the expansion of the colonial project deeper into the forest. The dazzling diversity found here not only represent the expansion of pre-Hispanic and Christian beliefs into the lowlands; they also exemplify the influence of transatlantic and New Age ideas in the trade of the region. They represent the waves of colonial expansion that have shifted the power structures from the lowlands to the highlands, for centuries. As the Inca, Spanish and Republican attempted to control the lowlands, they slowly but steadily changed the ecological and social dynamics of the territory linking it to regional and global trade.

The markets, therefore, become spaces of exchange not only of products but also of knowledge and ideas. They facilitate this flow of knowledge between groups of people, by connecting different concepts of health and nature, as well as material and empirical experiences produced by the use of these medicines. Indeed, knowledge here is exchanged not only by verbal communication but also by self-experience.

These stalls are also windows into the biocultural landscape of Putumayo. As we have seen, the plants found here show the deeply intertwined relationship between people and their landscape. It shows how as we become the main ecological relationship of these plants, they are transformed to fit our cultural needs and desires; embodying this relationship. As such their physical and anatomical characteristics change to adapt to a
world where humans become the main source of ecological pressure. It is not surprising to see how many of the medicinal plants found in these markets have undergone some sort of domestication. These plants are the result of centuries of interactions, as humans constantly experiment with them, taste and try them while changing their anatomical and environmental characteristics to benefit the human way of living.

The plants sold in these stalls not only represent a long history of trade in the region and centuries of human-plant interactions but also represent how these relationships have shaped the way we interpret and understand the world. In fact, as I have demonstrated, the material agencies of the plants have had a profound impact on local cultural practices of health, their intercultural exchanges, and their interaction with the overall environment. They have shaped the way the indigenous people, as well as mestizo and white communities, see and relate to their bodies, nature and each other.

The stalls were the best way to start as they foreshadowed the complexities that I wanted to explore in this thesis. In particular, the stalls personified the narrative I wanted to project, that of medicinal plants as dynamic social beings. If I wanted to observe the often complex and multi-layered social life of these plants, I had to start here.

The initial problem of this dissertation was how to illustrate the social lives of these plants. I first began this study by exploring the trade of medicinal plants in western Amazonia. This is one of the clearest examples of the sociability of non-humans, especially when analysed as commodities through production chains. This analysis not only highlights the process by which these plants are harvested, transformed, and moved through the territory by different people; it also adds a historical and social element to the narrative.

Through it, I was able to analyse some of the supra-ethnic networks of shamans that dominate health in the region. As we saw in these networks, shamans, apprentices and patients are continuously travelling and exchanging medicines and techniques. These shamanic networks have a particular way of relating to the medicinal plants, which highlights their central role in the daily lives of people, as well as their agency and
animacy. For them, these plants are not passive agents; they are important players that have a pivotal role in the cosmological understanding of the world.

Therefore, for this study, choosing the plants as primary ethnographic subjects felt natural. Yet, to show how they affect these networks, I needed an anthropological theory that could be conciliated with the indigenous cosmology. I chose Network theory, which emphasises the importance of non-humans in the overall web of social connections that make up a biocultural landscape. By analysing the networks that interconnect different people and places, I was able to explore the social life of these beings using a more flexible approach. This was also facilitated by a growing theoretical movement which looks at non-humans in Amazonia, in particular the growing themes of material culture in Amazonian communities. In particular, Santos-Graneros’ (2009) constructivist materiality approach, in particular, gave this study the theoretical framework to observe these plants as having fluid agency, depending on their different roles, forms and interpretations.

Approaching the diversity of medicinal plants in this dissertation was not simple. I needed to show the vast richness, the complexities and the reality of modern-day shamanism in a region such as Putumayo, through a small number of specimens. The seven plants that were chosen for this dissertation not only represented the local biodiversity; but they also represented entire trade systems, health notions, cosmological interpretations, and current political processes. As we saw, each of the plants represented some aspect of the Putumayo region, be it its history, trade, politics, ecology or health.

With this approach, certain key themes have come up repeatedly in this dissertation that require some final reflections. These themes range from discussions on domestication and ecological semiotics, to topics on trade, such as commodity cycles, cultural exchange, and the dynamics of regional verticality. All of these themes were approached to some degree in each chapter.

To explore key aspects of the trade networks, let us start with the cycles of commodity booms in Putumayo, which highlight the region’s history.
As we saw throughout this dissertation, the control over certain commodities was a key element of the colonial expansion, both by the pre-Columbian Incas and by the Spanish colonial empire. The history of Putumayo and of the people who inhabit the territory is tied to the waves of commodity exports that have connected certain of its plants to different markets.

The trade of Mopa Mopa motivated one of the first waves of colonial expansion, establishing the Quechua presence in the region and the Andean healing tradition. Chuchuwaza and other medicinal plants revolutionised the medicinal system of the early transAtlantic world, accelerating the expansion of the colonial project into the Andean foothills and connecting the region with the rest of the world. Finally, Coca, like Rubber not only helped establish control over the territory by state-like power systems but also accelerated a violent crisis, which defined the social and environmental characteristics of Putumayo.

The anatomy and intrinsic characteristics of each of these plants enhanced their trade, but also limited and defined their reach, and impact on the overall landscape. We have seen this with several of the plants in this thesis, as their biological characteristics define the way they become commodities and how they are harvested and traded. This material approach demonstrated why certain plants enabled their own inclusion into global commodity trade networks, while others were more problematic and required more labour intensive practices, with dire consequences for the local people and their environment.

There is no doubt that we are attracted to these plants because they have some sort of property that is highly valued. We grow them near us to protect them from predation, modify their habitat to promote their growth, and transform them through selective breeding, because we are interested in what they can do. Their internal properties define our relationship to them, giving them significance in our lives.

Yet as I demonstrated, this is not as simple as it seems. As non-humans, their internal characteristics are often ambiguous and difficult to understand. To interpret them may
require a deep knowledge of the fundamental laws of the natural world, which are often culturally defined and prone to change. The abstract internal characteristics of these plants admit multiple interpretations that are often built on traditional knowledge. Besides, these interpretations can be transformed by the constant interaction and flow of knowledge produced by trade and colonial systems. As I explained, individuals test different plants to see if they fit into their worldview and empirical experiences. This experimentation means that medicinal systems are constantly changing, adapting to new knowledge and beliefs about the body and nature.

In certain cases, we can experience effects caused by these plants that are difficult to rationalise in our cultural worldview. They sometimes require a profound restructuring of how we understand the body and the natural world, and can cause us to adopt different cultural beliefs and alternative ways of seeing the world. This encourages cultural exchanges and hybridisation, as we borrow terms and concepts from systems that have a pre-established understanding of these effects.

To take one of the examples used in this dissertation, for us Westerners, rationalising the medicinal effect of plants like Ayahuasca falls into the parameters of how we see the physical world. We describe it in chemical and biochemical terms, describing the effectiveness through our preconception of the body as a system of automated processes that can be altered. This is a very abstract explanation, using terminology that is monopolised by specialists. However, the experience generated by Yagé is so profoundly different and beyond our scientific understanding, that it may cause us to adopt terms and beliefs from shamanic discourses to fully comprehend it. Similarly, several New World plants posed epistemological challenges to the Spanish colonial worldview, which had to adapt its system of health to include them.

Such a hybridisation is observable in the vertical exchange systems of Putumayo, which not only catalyse the flow of plants from the lowlands into the highlands but also facilitated the flow of knowledge and cosmological notions between the two regions. The Sibundoy Valley is a clear example. Its indigenous communities define their identity in this hybridity, in which Amazonian ideas are tightly entwined with Andean cosmology. I believe that the adoption of Ayahuasca shamanism as the main form of
medicine in the region facilitated this exchange, as the highland inhabitants adopted terminologies and concepts from the lowlands, in order to rationalise its practice.

For the indigenous people, these non-humans undeniably play a significant role in their networks, especially the master plants. For shamans these plants are important social actors that not only have strong spiritual agencies, but also define how people relate to the world. They are more than just plants and medicines; they are spiritual beings that have a multidimensional personhood that requires constant ‘consulta’ or consultation, through a complex ritual dialogue.

Ayahuasca is a special example of this type of spiritual agency and personhood. The agency is experienced through the body and often feels like a being that communicates with the individual. This being is considered to possess some degree of personhood, which needs to be constantly negotiated with through ritual techniques. Shamanic tools such as Chondur, the Waira, and musical instruments are used for this purpose. This agency not only helps shamans diagnose disease; it stimulates self-reflection.

Healing ceremonies and rituals offer the proper spaces for cultural negotiation, as they build a controlled setting for dialogue between alterities. As is demonstrated in the case of Coca, which offers spaces for cultural exchange through ceremonial practices, in which different people—and non-humans— are encouraged to interact and negotiate.

As shown in this dissertation, several other plants possess complex agencies. Yoco and Borrachero are known to possess some sort of personhood that can be conversed with. Borrachero’s agency is often considered evil and dangerous. In this pantheon of plants, Borrachero is probably the trickster, capable of not only healing but also of harming people. I purposefully approached each of these master plants with full consideration of their animacy and power, highlighting not only their cultural roles but also how they can change the minds of people and motivate cultural exchange.

By exploring these networks, this dissertation allowed me to study the agency of the non-human in a nuanced way. By analysing the multiplicity of these plants’ roles and
their different levels of agency and animacy, I was able to offer a more dynamic perspective, inclusive of non-human agents.

To conclude, as I explored these multispecies landscapes, I was struck by how much of these plants’ agencies had affected my work. How I approached the plants’ agencies throughout this dissertation meant not only discussing them through network theory or semiotics, but also meant a challenge to my own personal interpretation and beliefs. I believe that I was able to reconcile some theoretical perspectives with indigenous and etic cosmology. However, there remain a number of open questions for future exploration. For this reason, I hope I have done justice to these plants.
Epilogue

I found myself in a fields that had been used for Cocaine plantation, where the soils, the vegetation and the water all showed signs of degradation and pollution. They grew in the old patties of the cattle that lived in this field, little bright yellow almost golden caps that poked out like shy children from the field. We jumped the fence to reach them and quickly spread out around to pick as many sporocarps as possible. After we picked several handfuls we jumped back into the road.

Psilocybin Cubensis was first identified in Cuba, however, it probably originated from some savannah in the old world. It is one of those cosmopolitan organisms, unintended passengers of human expansion. The mushrooms only grow on cow dung; their life cycle requires the animal’s digestive system for the initial gestation period.
As soon as it associated itself to the *Bovinae* it had guaranteed its success. Cows had become a mayor part of the Anthropocene, and as we humans sent cows to the furthest reach of the world the little mushrooms followed in their footsteps. Slowly the mushrooms arrived in the Amazon. Their existence is thus directly related to the colonial project, as ecosystems are domesticated to fit the modern world.

These mushrooms were foreign, almost immensely so, like the cows or those motorcycles that had brought us there. They arrived form other worlds, often far removed from the indigenous people who live here; making part of a different web of relationships and different ways of relating to the world. Like the matsutake (Tsing, 2014) these little fellows grew from the desolation caused by the capitalist system. They were growing there only because the forest had been cut down, the Coca plants fumigated and the little vegetation permitted some thin looking cows to survive. They were the result of the capitalist landscape, however, they grew in the discarded remains and in the literal faeces of this world.

For the young men who had brought me here, these organisms were considered more than mere mushrooms, they had a complex personhood closely related to the other powerful master plants. They were capable of ‘pinta’ visions, of a ‘voz’ or voice, and to heal. This was surprising since like the rest of the Country fungi are still considered dangerous. Colombia has a strong aversion towards fungi. These organisms do not have a place in our tables or our medicines. Folk medicine does not have any recorded Fungi and wild mushroom foraging is extremely rare.

Nonetheless those young apprentices had begun experimenting with the little mushrooms to see if they could incorporate them into their pharmacopoeia. By experimenting with them and “consulting” with the Ayahuasca spirit they had reached the conclusion that these could be used as an ally in their fight against illness. As we know experimentation is a common practice and encouraged by those who are knowledgeable in plant medicines. Shamans, apprentices and other members of this web or relationships are continually experimenting with these medicines and master plants to see what they can learn from them.
However, these young men did not learn of these *honguitos* little mushrooms from experimenting with all the mushrooms available in the region. They had to learn how to use them and, maybe more importantly, how to identify them, from someone else.

Unlike some of those other master plants, mushrooms have limited shamanic use worldwide. It is true that in the mountains of Oaxaca and Chiapas of Mexico the use of mushroom is practised in healing ceremonies, for the most part, the shamanic use of these mushrooms is relatively new. Instead they have become increasingly popular in new age and psychedelic groups who have adopted and modified it to make it their own, often separating it from the guidelines and dogma of Mexican shamanic use (Letcher, 2006)\(^{169}\). At the same time, these groups have a close link to the psychedelic movement of the 20th century who created a deep know-how and relationship with the sacred mushrooms, as well as a diversity of spiritual and shamanic practices throughout the world.

Therefore, in a similar way to the spread of Ayahuasca throughout the world, these mushrooms arrived to lowland Amazonia through new age and neoshamans groups who established close links with Amazonian shamanism. Neoshamanic groups facilitated the integration of Ayahuasca shamans into this larger network of new age spiritualism. As part of this network, the Putumayo shamans were able to interact with a diversity of different shamanic practices from the US, Peru, Chile and Mexico. Practices such as the lunar and solar dances, sweat lodges, and other entheogens like San Pedro, Peyote and Psilocybin mushrooms are now a common practice in lowland shamanism.

The young apprentices learned to use these mushrooms from foreigners, quickly incorporating and adopting them into their worldview. Since all of these entheogens have similar characteristics and effects, they were not only easy to associate with the plant medicine of their ancestors but also had pre-established techniques for there

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\(^{169}\) This could be due to a number of reasons. For one, most of the mushrooms are consumed as soon as they are harvested, as they do not stay fresh long especially in humid areas, which limits the transportability. Secondly, mushrooms do not need the preparation or the guidance of an expert shaman and can easily be used by individuals. I believe this has facilitated its rapid popularity in the second half of the XXth century. Finally, the abundance of these active mushrooms throughout the world has allowed many people to experience them personally without the need for shamans or specialist.
ritualised use. For them it was without a doubt sacred medicine, which could be used to heal people if used correctly.

Here I was, gathering psilocybin mushrooms with the young apprentices of the shaman. Many of these young apprentices had extensive knowledge of the other master plants that coexisted in this territory. Many were actively using them, having gained permission either from other shamans or from the plants themselves. Some had gone so far as to travel to other countries to learn to use these substances, extending their networks beyond international borders, connecting shamans from different ethnic and cultural traditions.

Even thought these mushrooms represent the end of the Amazonian forests, folk medicine and shamanic arts are becoming ever more popular. It seems that in the end of the world, shamanisms has come back into fashion. People have flocked to the upper Putumayo, Napo and Marañon in search of vegetable illumination and more foreigners are learning the shamanic arts, as Ayahuasca becomes an international phenomenon. The Yagé vines are now growing in faraway places such as Florida, Central America, Hawaii and even Asia, each with their own complex communities of healers and practitioners.

In Putumayo, profound transformations are happening in alarming rates. The Path of the Medicine that used to connect the lowlands and the highlands in Putumayo is getting paved and becoming a major international trading route; connecting the Atlantic, the Amazon basin, the Andes and the Pacific. At the same time, Coca fields are growing like wildfire throughout the forest of Latin America, while European rivers are slowly being contaminated by cocaine from so much use (Capaldo et al., 2018; Zuccato et al., 2008). Glyphosate is making a comeback as the government desperately tries to eradicate it, pushing the Coca deeper into the forest. As the forest retreats so will many of its medicines. Wild populations of Chuchuwaza and other plants will suffer even more from overuse, while only those that can grow as crops or weeds become more relevant in folk medicine.
In this anthropogenic world, forests become islands, protected by the state. Yoco, with its unique link to the forest, is relegated to national parks, might just become another plant in the catalogue of university herbariums and an interesting anecdote in doctoral dissertations.

Others like Chondur and Borrachero grow well in the expanding urban landscape. They have become important tools in the spiritual war, where illness, pollution, envy and witchcraft are increasing more dangerous. Meanwhile, European herbs, brought here by the Spanish, are thriving as crops and have already become the main source of folk medicine in Colombia.

As we walked the fields looking for the mushrooms, I kept thinking that this was how the new Amazon shamanism looks like. My friend yelled and signalled with excitement that he had found another “familia de honguitos” family of mushrooms. They grow from decay, growing from the remnants of the modernist world where the disenfranchised make their homes. It seemed like the obvious next step, since these mushrooms are the waste of this world they cannot be commoditised, prosecuted, destroyed or overharvested.
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