

**Living with Medicines:
Drawing Healing Correspondences on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia**

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Abstract

While the use of psychedelics in biomedicine has generated a new momentum, many communities worldwide have always maintained practices and correspondences with powerful master plants (Doyle, 2012; Langlitz, 2013). Often sprouting within “third nature” spaces, ancestral medicine communities and practices offer much broader ways of addressing cosmological, environmental, and medical issues (Tsing, 2015). Amidst global health concerns and ongoing climate crises, ancestral healing practices and medicines provide crucial insights into healing processes with and through the land, with a focus on respect, permission, harmony, and paying the land.

Situated on the outskirts of the Caribbean port city of Barranquilla, Colombia, Casa Zindulí emerges as a prosperous yet informal ancestral healing site for friends, families, and inhabitants of Barranquilla to learn and live with the medicines of the Colombian territories. Through a labour of love and patience, Casa Zindulí has established itself as the host of numerous events, ceremonies, and gatherings with trusted Awá, Sikuani, Uitoto and Arhuaco traditional healers and Elders from both Colombia and Ecuador.

Drawing from Tim Ingold’s “correspondences” (2015; 2021), this thesis attends to the myriad of healing correspondences in a world of becoming, of the in-between, or “the very medium in which our lives are mixed and stirred” (Ingold, 2015, p. 147; 149). Employing a combination of fieldnote drawings, fictional methods and imagination inspired by the graphic ethnography boom in anthropology (Theodossopoulos, 2022) and the imaginative logic of discovery (Taussig, 2011), this thesis adds nuance to the understanding and storytelling of how people and plants come together in healing ways on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia, contributing to the growing discourse on human-environment relations and the potential of ancestral healing practices, and creative methods in anthropology, in addressing contemporary global challenges.

Resumen

Aunque el uso de psicodélicos en la biomedicina ha generado un nuevo impulso, muchas comunidades de todo el mundo siempre han mantenido prácticas y correspondencias con poderosas plantas maestras (Doyle, 2012; Langlitz, 2013). A menudo surgidas en espacios de la "tercera naturaleza", las comunidades y prácticas de medicina ancestral ofrecen formas mucho más amplias de abordar cuestiones cosmológicas, medioambientales y médicas (Tsing, 2015). En medio de las preocupaciones mundiales por la salud y las crisis climáticas actuales, las prácticas y medicinas ancestrales de sanación ofrecen perspectivas cruciales sobre los procesos de sanación con y a través de la tierra, centrándose en el respeto, el permiso, la armonía y el pago a la tierra.

Situada en las afueras de la ciudad portuaria caribeña de Barranquilla, Colombia, Casa Zindulí surge como un lugar de sanación ancestral próspero pero informal para que amigos, familias y habitantes de Barranquilla aprendan y convivan con las medicinas de los territorios colombianos. A través de un trabajo de amor y paciencia, Casa Zindulí se ha establecido como el anfitrión de numerosos eventos, ceremonias y reuniones con curanderos y ancianos Awá, Sikuani, Uitoto y Arhuaco tanto de Colombia como de Ecuador.

Partiendo de las "correspondencias" de Tim Ingold (2015; 2021), esta tesis atiende a la diversas correspondencias curativas en un mundo de devenir, de lo intermedio, o "el medio mismo en el que se mezclan y agitan nuestras vidas" (Ingold, 2015, p. 147; 149). Empleando una combinación de dibujos de notas de campo, métodos ficticios e imaginación inspirada en el auge de la etnografía gráfica en la antropología (Theodossopoulos, 2022) y la lógica imaginativa del descubrimiento (Taussig 2011), esta tesis añade matices a la comprensión y la narración de cómo las personas y las plantas se unen en formas de sanación en la Costa Caribe de Colombia, contribuyendo al creciente discurso sobre las relaciones humano-medio ambiente y el potencial de

las prácticas ancestrales, y los métodos creativos en la antropología, para hacer frente a los desafíos globales contemporáneos.

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Las medicinas tienen unos principios rectores que son las leyes de origen, o sea, para el control y desarrollo biológico del hombre. La medicina también ha servido para la convivencia en armonía con los demás seres de la naturaleza y para el control y el equilibrio de los estados del hombre: el amor, el dolor, la ira, el afecto, lo que uno siente como persona. El hombre está compuesto de todas esas manifestaciones y la medicina tiene la cura para estos males.

—Rosalba Jiménez, *Lidersa Sikuani*

Chapter 1

Memorias de Mambe y Ambil

1.1 *Mambear para Empezar*

A fresh snowfall coats the hills, glistening under the streetlights and squeaking beneath my boots with every step. The willow branches are enrobed in a thin layer of ice; shinning crystals hanging from the tree and swaying in the arctic wind. These northern winds will travel south, steadily warming yet maintaining their cool and refreshing quality as they reach the tropics, and the Caribbean Coast of Colombia. I wonder how the ceremony is going.

Back inside, my desk is overtaken by bits and piece of notes and sketches, tangled cables, reading glasses, stacks of books resting half opened and jammed with more looseleaf papers, and a chocolate peppermint tea that has gone cold. I glance over the landscape I've created until my eyes fall on a small glass jar of fine green powder.

“¿Porque no mambeas un poco, para acordarte y conectarte?” a voice asks softly, urging me to take some *mambe* to help me remember.

I reach for a small plastic pot on my desk, one with a hand-woven blue and yellow sleeve. I unscrew the lid that has nearly dried shut from the sticky black residue collected around the rim. A whiff of peppery richness of the semiliquid tobacco makes my palms tingle. At the bottom of the pot, a semi-defined reflection glistens over the black goo. I lick my finger and dip it in the pot—the *ambil* is dry and I must wet my finger multiple times before I finally begin *chupando ambil*, collecting and licking the tobacco residue off my pinky. The heat of the tobacco hits the back of my throat, making my eyes water. I dip my finger back into the tub, this time picking up more *ambil*. After a moment, I pick up the

small hand-carved wooden spoon resting carefully on the lid of green powder. I reach for the jar of mambe, pulverized toasted coca leaves and ashes of *yarumo*, and scoop out a spoonful. Taking care not to let the spoon touch the inside of my cheeks, or spill any green powder on my shirt, I deposit the mambe on the right side of my tongue. Even though these are my personal pots and spoon and that I am consuming mambe alone right now, I honour the first tips shared with me during *los mambaderos*, or word sharing circles in Colombia. Giving a moment for the mambe to settle in my mouth, I maneuver it into a quid and comfortably hold it pressed against my right cheek.

In the mambaderos in Colombia, I learned that everything is recorded in this little jar of tobacco and that dipping one's finger in the pot during a mambadero is a way of writing and registering what is being said during the night. When you are taking mambe you are remembering and working *la memoria ancestral y el pensamiento de oro* (ancestral



memory and clear, positive thinking), and *mambear* is to listen, remember and share stories, myths, and conversations. In *Magic of the State*, upon coming across carriers of *ambil* who solely enjoyed the feeling of intoxication it induced, Taussig (1997) was left under the impression that all traditional use of the medicine had been lost (p. 29). While it is entirely possible for medicines to be used outside of a traditional context and reduced to substances for intoxication, more than 20 years later, medicine music such as the song *La Planta Sagrada* by Colombian guitarist and singer-songwriter Gustavo Adolfo Renjifo (2021) is a testament to the great respect and honour still held towards *la coca* and the process of *mambear*. Now miles away from Colombia and these *mambeaderos*, the ancestral medicines of *mambe* and *ambil* keep me good company in the evenings as the darkest night of the year in the northern hemisphere is fast approaching. Apart from assisting me in curbing hunger, fatigue and developing resilience, these medicines create a pathway to working on memory and writing, but not only— “*porque me llenas el alma, cuando te llevo conmigo, porque me calmas el hambre y haces mas corto el camino*” (Renjifo, 2021, 02:08 -02:16).

Beginning to consider fieldwork and the modes of writing in anthropology, my mind wanders as I ask myself when I should leave the field; when is the best time for the writing to take place, and whether there is such a moment at all? I wonder if the writing and drawing should take place during my fieldwork, in the heart of it all and where I feel most alive, or if it is something to take on once I leave, in a period of reflection on my time in Colombia. To think about writing in anthropology and the experience in the field as one that lives on beyond the time spent doing fieldwork—as an experience that shapes and

changes the researcher—suggests that a different writing is produced immediately in the field, in a compilation of short-term memory and notes, as opposed to a long-term memory accompanying a longer period of contemplation once the researcher returns home. In the *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown*, Taussig (2020) speaks of “tremor writing” in reference to Marcel Proust’s « mémoire involontaire »; he says that tremor writing is “after-effect writing,” the effect being a “corporeal tumult evoked by remembering” (p. 152). Tremor writing sounds like opening floodgates onto a page; words pouring out with feelings, smells, tastes, and scenes or memories— “it seems unstoppable,” and probably is (ibid.). Perhaps this is the same momentum and unstoppable force that propels authors, such as M.N. Srinivas and David Jaclin, to complete their work from memory after countless hours of notes and research is accidentally lost or deleted (Srinivas, 1980 in Taussig, 2011, p. 113; Jaclin, 2022, p. 234).

This loss of research notes and writing, and even more so the writing from this loss would be unfathomable for those set on working solely from the observable and the measurable—the principles that shape the sciences and the discipline of anthropology into a “harsh discipline of proof,” which Taussig (2011) argues does not correspond to studies of humans since the “social nexus is not a laboratory” (p. xi). These principles mark the limits of what anthropology does, which is why Taussig leans into the use of fieldwork notebooks and drawings as a kindling of, and return to, the “imaginative logic of discovery” in anthropological research (ibid.). With the notebook as his loyal companion, Taussig is inspired by the possibility of blending outer worlds with the inner worlds that so often evade the observations or attention of scientists and anthropologists (ibid.). Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) shares a similar critique of the scientific approach stating that « la

science manipule les choses et renonce à les habiter, » seeing everything in the world as if it was solely created to be studied or brought into the laboratory (pp. 7, 9). In art, on the other hand, the artist feels, sees, and approaches the world differently, recognizing that the world and people are not objects or subjects of study placed in front of us, but rather they surround us and pass through us (p. 42). Where the scientists or anthropologist are set on objectively observing the world, the artists, such as a painter studying a landscape is in turn observed by the forest and the trees that they are painting (p. 23). In turn, the approach of the painter, and what we might also do in anthropology, is « [d'] être transpercé par l'univers et non vouloir le transpercer » (ibid.); that is to be attuned to the world and correspondences, embracing outer and inner worlds which might then be sketched, drawn, painted, noted, lost, and written.

While the term ethnography, meaning “writing about the people,” is used to define the base of scientific knowledge and a collection of findings produced by anthropologists following their time ‘gathering data’ in the field, Ingold (2014) argues that the discipline of anthropology, and the work of anthropologists, is, and should be distinguished by its participant observation, or as he calls it, the “practice of correspondence” (pp. 385-387, 389; Ingold, 2021). According to Ingold (2019), anthropological research is a form of correspondence by which we experience the world, “for in experience, things are *with* us in our thoughts, dreams, and imaginings, and we with them” (p. 666). To write from a place of correspondence with people, plants, and places, differs from writing about them in the goals of producing knowledge that “elucidate [their] lifeworld” (Ingold, 2014, p. 388). In other words, Ingold argues for a return to doing anthropology, as opposed to doing ethnographic writing and research, firstly as a return to honouring an “ontological

commitment,” that is “to attend to persons and things, to learn from them and to follow in precept and practice,” and to regard doing anthropology as a “practice of education” by which the anthropologist explores and is changed by their time in the ‘field’ (pp. 387-388). In this sense, the emphasis on the role of the anthropologist as one of apprenticeship, as a novice to the experiences in the field, sets the tone for the kind of writing or drawing that emerges as the result of staying open and attentive to the myriad of correspondences that take place in the field and beyond, remembering that “knowledge grows from the crucible of lives lived with others,” (ibid.), in a process which Ingold describes as “knowing from the inside” (Ingold, 2018, pp. 2-3; Ingold, 2024).

When considering the knowledge produced in ethnobotany, it is evident that ethnobotanists have excelled at taxonomy, identifying, and classifying plants, their parts and their healing properties or benefits. Such is the case in *Plants of the Gods: Origins of Hallucinogenic Use* (1979), written by the greatest names in ethnobotany—the famous ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes and Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann. This book brings together drawings and knowledge on over 97 species of hallucinogenic plants known to man. To name a few, plant species such as the *San Pedro* cactus, also known as *Aguacolla* or *Huachuma*, and *Ayahuasca* or *Banisteriopsis caapi*—referred to as *yagé* (ya-hé) in Colombia—can be found in this psychedelic compendium. They are meticulously classified by their Latin names, followed by an ethnobotanical illustration and a limited description of their traditional use and origin. Botanical lexicons, such as this one, can certainly be considered as the forerunners of medicinal plant studies in western science, ethnobiology, ethnomedicine and anthropology. They enable us to know plants first and

foremost through their physical aspects, discerning the patterns in their petals, roots, and foliage, assisting us in quickly and effectively recognize them in the field while understanding their beneficial, or even dangerous, properties.

Plants are at the root of much inspiration amongst anthropologists, artists and philosophers who found their theories, art, philosophies and life's work from and with plants (and mushrooms)—one of them, and most notably the theory of the rhizome from French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and French psychoanalyst and philosopher Félix Guattari (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), but also Chinese American anthropologist Anna Tsing who draws on the matsutake mushroom in her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015). With the rising interest in plants and their healing properties in biomedicine, plants increasingly make their way into clinics and laboratories where they are thoroughly studied through a range of tests, observations, and extractions, most commonly in the making of biopharmaceuticals and (psychedelic) psychotherapies which have shown pronounced interest in using hallucinogenic plants, or at least their extracted psychoactive compounds such as DMT, but also MDMA, LSD, etc., in formalized treatments capable of curing addiction, trauma and many other ailments in humans (Laplante, 2015; Bragazzi et al., 2018, p. 150; Langlitz, 2013; Doyle, 2012; Dumit & Sanabria, 2022).

While undoubtably beneficial in its own sense, botanical lexicons, and clinical trials on plants, however, can often omit the complex relationships between plants and humans notably present out in the field or amongst the numerous local and indigenous communities around the world who have always maintained such relationships with plants (animals, and the more-than-human) for millennia as part of their cultures, ways of life and ancestral knowledges. That which cannot be seen or carefully measured using scientific tools have

the tendency to escape Western sciences reductionist and functionalist approaches (Sanabria, 2017, as cited in Goldstein, 2019, p. 21); the lens adopted in biomedicine, ethnobotany, and psychedelic psychotherapy explore one of the many facets possible in the ways of knowing and doing research with and from plants, and the people collaborating in said research.

Adding nuance to the ways in which we come to know and understand plants and healing, this thesis draws on the myriad of correspondences of people and plants coming together in healing ways on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia in an anthropology in suspension (Laplante, 2023), one that is inspired by “obviating the subject-object dichotomy,” turning our attention to the in-between—the air we breathe, not as what lies between us “but [as] the very medium in which our lives are mixed and stirred” (Ingold, 2024, as cited in Laplante & Helmesi, manuscript submitted for publication; Ingold 2015, pp. 147, 149).

Sprouting from a central node of healing correspondences on the outskirts of the coastal city of Barranquilla, at the mouth of the powerful Magdalena River, lines extend and entangle in a mesh of healing correspondences that takes us from the western Andean cordillera, to the foothills of the Putumayo Amazon, the northern most point of the eastern Andean cordillera—the Sierra Nevada of Santa Marta—and the eastern plains, in a series of healing correspondences with and through plants and the Land.

Writing comes together with drawings in a dance with plants, but is it possible to write like a painter? Or paint with words? Artists, even if their dominant expression and perception are through drawing and painting, often accompany their masterpieces with a description of the picture. According to Cézanne, the artist, or the painter such as himself

« pense en peinture » (Cézanne, 1904, as cited in Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 42). They do more than simply describe things, space, light, etc., but rather « [ils font] parler l'espace et la lumière qui sont là » (ibid.). Whether in words or through painting, the painter or artist's attention to the world is different from that of the scientist or the objective view of things and people. In her text « *Du Dessin au Dessein des Plantes Sauvages* » (2002), Florence Brunois draws inspiration from the way in which French anthropologist and botanist Jacques Barrau uses art, specifically drawing, as an "ethnographic tool" in his ethnobotany ventures – enabling him to take a more "objective," more "detailed" look at the plants under ethnobotanical study, and yet one that is more "in harmony" with them (p. 24). Although described as "objective," Barrau's personal accounts, fieldwork notes, description, and attention on the "shadows of the palm trees," falls much closer to a perception, or a way of seeing and expressing the world akin to that of painters, artists, and anthropologists (ibid.).

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964) describes a similar scene in his work « *L'œil et l'esprit*, » when his attention is turned to « [les] zébrures de soleil [...] [il] lève les yeux vers l'écran des cyprès où joue le réseau des reflets [...] l'eau le visite aussi, ou du moins y envoie son essence active et vivante » (p. 48), assuring us that « c'est cette animation interne, ce rayonnement du visible que le peintre cherche sous les noms de profondeur, d'espace, de couleur » (p. 49). The English writer Aldous Huxley describes in his book *The Doors of Perception* (1954), the same attention to a bouquet of flowers, light filtering through the windowpane, and colours dancing on the walls during an experience with a dose of mescaline (p. 5). Evidently, some are very well capable of painting with words, such as Huxley and Merleau-Ponty, provided they adopt the painters' ability to see and be

in the world. According to Tim Ingold (2018), most of those who do anthropology these days are in fact artists (p. 1).

Yet painting, and the artist's gaze, is much more than a gaze on the world; it is also the world's gaze towards the artist, just as many painters have described the sensation that « les choses les regardent » (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 23). The French painter André Marchand, following in the footsteps of the German painter Paul Klee, describes that during his time in the forest « ce n'était pas [lui] qui regardait la forêt, », but that some days « c'étaient les arbres qui [le] regardaient, qui [lui] parlaient » as he listened to them (ibid.).

Inspired by Tim Ingold and the artist way of seeing the world, this thesis sets off from the fieldnote drawings, from which writing emerges in a process of remembering and an imaginative discovery of the world. *Grapho* is the Greek root of the word graphic, meaning "to write or draw," or the combination of the two (Taussig, 2011, p. 36). Indeed, drawing and writing have been combined since medieval times, but it is the combination of drawing and fieldwork notes that gives rise to a new genre dubbed graphic ethnography, also referred to as the graphic boom or the graphic turn in anthropology (p. 38; 13; Tondeur, 2018). Drawing and graphics have appeared in a wide variety of research on topics ranging from love, health, the environment, law and many more, as both a widely accessible format and decolonial approach to doing and sharing research (Atalay et al., 2019). Art, drawings and visual or graphic storytelling are also largely incorporated in several cultural and environmental conservation documents produced by indigenous communities in efforts to preserve, teach and share traditional knowledge, while governments seek to better incorporate Indigenous and local knowledges with Western science (Organizacion

Gonawindúa Tayrona [OGT] y Parque Nacionale Naturale Tayrona [PNN Tayrona, 2022; Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2015; Reed et al., 2024).

Graphic medicine, from the *Graphic Medicine Manifesto* (Czerwiec et al., 2015), is another current of ethno/graphic storytelling that has emerged in the last decade and has benefited from the use of visual storytelling in exploring sensitive and moving topics of illness and health, predominantly or even exclusively in the realm of biomedicine. On the other hand, drawings in research and storytelling relating to traditional healing practices or healing with and from plants, is less explicitly utilized in anthropology or ethnobotany although certainly existing in outside the discipline, such as in the case of the graphic novel *Mambe: novela gráfica: basado en el relato oral de Manuî, mamo de Tungeka, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta* (Milán, 2021). While not a graphic novel per se, this thesis draws inspiration on graphic movements within and outside anthropology, to explore healing correspondences, in part through fieldwork drawings, to tell a story from a place of correspondence with people and plants.

Mambeando, I touch my cheek to feel the quid of coca slowly reducing to nothing. I close my eyes swallowing the last clumps of the fine green powder, eyelids falling heavily while the blue glow of the screen illuminates the room.

1.2 *La Finca*

“¿Me puedes pasar el ambil en mi *mochila*?” asks Andrés.

I gently open my eyes and reach for the circular woven bag on the floor of the backseat; its striking pattern of light and dark wool create a distinct design of *el camino de la vida*, the path of life, from the Arhuacos of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. I slip my

hand inside and pull out the small plastic tub, handing it to Andrés. He begins licking ambil from his fingertip as two male figures approach the truck and open the back doors.



“¡Hola *Taita!* How was the flight?” exclaims Andrés making eye contact with his old friend through the rearview mirror.

The word *taita* comes from the old Spanish and overlaps with the word *yaya* or father in Quechua (Gómez Rendón & Adelaar, 2009, p. 955). In Colombia, *taita* is

frequently used as a term of respect towards *curacas* o *medicos tradicionales*, traditional doctors, healing through the ancestral medicine and science of yagé (ayahuasca).

“Todo muy bien,” replies El Taita, resting his hand on Andrés’s shoulder, then on mine.

In the passenger seat, I scroll through the long list of audio files under *musica medicina*, medicine music on the Andrés phone. I finally find the recording I’m looking for and press play on *La Chumita - Zinduli sessions*.

“¡Escucha Taita! It’s the recording we made during the last ceremony,” I say, shifting in my seat to get a better look at his reaction only to notice him calm and composed as ever while Friedel is smiling, eager to hear the recording together for the first time.

Friedel is a young man in his early 20s and one of the youngest *ayudantes* or helpers. For the past three to four years, he has been closely following in the footsteps of El Taita, assisting him in ceremonies both nationally and internationally while also completing several trips to the Putumayo in support of the laborious preparations of the *remedio*, the ancestral medicine of yagé.

A few verses begin to sound when the tires suddenly dip into a pothole, causing the radio to shift out of place, just enough to bother Andrés with its slight rattling sound.

“Sorry,” he says slamming his hand on the dash and suddenly adjusting the radio back in place. “This thing is always shifting around.”

Not a moment later, I grab the handle above the passenger window, bracing myself for the swift right turn Andrés is about to make. In my peripheral vision I spot a motorcycle zooming by, illegally overtaking us on the right.

“¡Cuidado!” I shout.

Andrés slows down just enough to miss colliding with the back wheel of the motorcycle. I exhale in relief, thankful for Andrés' reflex and experience with sharing the roads with such unpredictable drivers. I could never comfortably drive here on the coast of Colombia where cars share the road with an overwhelming number of motorcycles, heavily loaded horse carts and other improvised transportation methods. The rules of the road that I'm familiar with rarely apply here, leaving most vehicles swerving between imaginary lanes to make headway in the traffic. Avoiding collisions becomes like an adrenaline spiking video game, peaking when passing under the pedestrian bridge crossing that no one seems to use, or while driving through a small town where (with its booming stray dog populations) furry bodies suddenly dash out onto the road and often fail to dodge or get dodged by the oncoming vehicles.

As we reach the traffic lights at the entrance of a rural neighbourhood, men, women, and children, mostly Venezuelans, with spray bottles swarm around the vehicles slowly halting to a stop. In a matter of seconds, our windshield has been targeted and sprayed with watered down soapy liquid. Two sets of arms work swiftly to leave the glass pristine and streak-free before the traffic light countdown reaches zero. Andrés reaches into the cup holder, filled to the brim with coins saved for this exact purpose. No trip out of *la Finca* (country house) would be complete without giving out a few hundred pesos while on the road. Since 2018, Colombia has seen a great deal of Venezuelan migrants due to the political and economic situation in Venezuela, making these traffic light windshield cleanings that much more prevalent across the country, and most of all along the Caribbean coast (Peñaloza-Pacheco, 2022).

“It's Colombia,” says Andrés with a shrug and smiles at me.

We finally make it back on la Cordialidad, the more scenic part of the route leading back home. That is, until we reach the petrol zone where dozens of large steel tanks occupy either side of the road—gasoline storage facilities from Terpel, Texaco and other competitors. The gasoline storing extends into la Vereda de Megua, where small wooden shacks pop up like mushrooms along the right side of the road, spanning over 100 metres. Several motorbikes are awaiting to have their tanks filled by *los pimpineros* holding 2 L Coca-Cola bottles, and other colourful containers of fuel. Sitting on makeshift tables and chairs, locals are throwing back cold *cervezas* while others are seen enjoying the renown dish of the area—*los Pasteles de Pital*. I discreetly count the number of shacks that come after the one tagged with the name Diana, always expecting to count one more than I did some time before. Sure enough, preparations for a new shack have begun and etchings are visible in the hillside that rests directly behind the wooden structures.

“*Mira*, it just keeps growing, they’ll make it to our gate one day.”

Andrés keeps his gaze on the dirt road, not very amused at my overused remark.

“Let’s hope not, but I wouldn’t be surprised. I’ve seen many of the kids of those who first set up a shack here, grown up and now work alongside their parents,” he says.

It is the innate hopefulness and entrepreneurial spirit that millions of Colombians possess that allows them to strive in otherwise despairing economic and political situations, ones that for over 30 years have inspired these gasoline traders to collect the residual fuel from the tanker trucks making deliveries to the multinational corporations next door, and sell it back for a profit to motorists, including the occasional police squad (Davis, 2020, p. 10).

A stumpy middle-aged man grinning under a baseball cap throws a thumbs up. Andrés honks back, returning the gesture. A *machete*, strapped at the waist of his ripped denim cutoffs, sways with every step of his muddy rubber boots as he approaches us on the driver's side.

“André, ya la leña está lista. Hay que ir a cargarla al monte,” he says letting us know that he has found some firewood out in the forest.

“Ah listo Fabio, ahorita vamos todos,” exclaims Andrés as the tires start rolling, assuring him that we will be there to help shortly.

Fabio is a *campesino*, a farmer of Malibú descent and one of thousands to have been displaced by the violence of armed conflicts that unleashed in El Carmen de Bolívar, Colombia, over 20 years ago (Amaya, 2013, p. 2). Relocating further east on the Caribbean coast, he now works and lives on the lot with Andrés. Having grown up with a machete in his hand, he poses brute strength that allows him to rapidly plant trees, yuca, and confidently lugging heavy timber through the uneven forest floor; he provides some much-needed expertise and security in this rural area. At first, the *pimpineros* or gas sellers were cause for concern, but since Fabio maintains cordial relations with them, they know not to cause any trouble.

“Andrés, es bravo no creen,” he teases them about Andrés' supposedly dangerous nature. “¡Donde se metan a La Finca, le saca una escopeta!” says Fabio, *mamando gallo*, pulling their leg. Of course, none of it is true, but nevertheless it effectively ensures that everyone keeps to their own business.

We pull up in front of a blue steel gate, *el portón azul*; Andrés jumps out and pushes open the gate, giving sight to a rocky driveway bordered by blooming *trinitarias*, *lirios*,

and a variety of foliage, lush from the abundant rainfall. Ahead, the canopy of young neems has rendered the house almost invisible from the road; the new shade providing some much-needed relief from the unbearable coastal heat.

1.3 Drawing Correspondences

Back in the studio, I reach for a stack paper to be recycled, mostly old documents from Andrés' family company or old consent forms from previous yagé ceremonies. Folding them in half and into quarters, I tear them along the folded edge until I have a whole pile. Sweat beads form on my forehead, dripping down my eyebrow and onto my hand. The rusted fan is set to the highest speed, blaring like a small airplane propeller with its exposed blades yet only providing the slightest relief from the humidity. The best fans are quietly humming in the guest bedrooms where El Taita Giovanni and his helpers are resting after a long weekend of drinking yagé.

I scribble away on the loose-leaf paper, capturing the moments and memories from this weekend, pausing to jot down some notes alongside the drawings before resuming my sketching. Fieldnote drawings help to register the experiences from the field while also allowing descriptions and stories to emerge vividly. Initially embracing Taussig's particularly urgent and abbreviated drawing style, sometimes drawing with ink others with carbon, I am less concerned with the realistic details of the drawing but rather focused on the practice of keeping and sketching fieldnote drawings (Taussig, 2011, pp. 19, 113). Confronted with the inability to effectively translate what is experienced or seen in the field, Taussig turns to drawing in his fieldwork notebooks, not because the drawings are able to provide more "realness" to the events but because they can lead to new possibilities altogether (2011, p. 13). The fieldwork sketchbook becomes much more than a tool to

fieldwork but a character in the story, capable of “incorporate[ing] other [invisible] worlds into one’s own” (pp. 27, 105).

Seeing the sketches spread out across the tabletop, the stories begin to shape, the sequences and the narrative joining one sketch to the other—much like the process of utilizing mind maps described by Kristen Anne Walsh (2016) as “allow[ing] for themes and concepts to emerge” in her visualization of the writing of a thesis (p. 42). Similarly, in *Aerial Imagination in Cuba: stories from above the rooftops*, Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier (2019) collaborates alongside Cuban illustrator José Manuel Fernández Lavado to bring together a collection of graphic ethno-fictions, also initially informed by drawings and followed by writing. For British artist and thinker John Berger, “drawing is an activity much older than writing” (Berger cited in Taussig 2011, p. 22), recalling ochre paintings that cover the rocky interior of caves around the world, and yet drawing is still considered a “secondary-rate activity” in society, or even a “prehistoric stage in one’s evolution” in the transition from childhood into adulthood (pp. 34-35).

The appearance of art and drawing in anthropological work can be tied back to as early as the famous Polish-English anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, who often used drawings to accompany his writings and his field research amongst Indigenous Peoples (Tondeur, 2018, p. 706). Others, like Boudreault-Fournier, partner with artists to inspire their research and writing, and some to complement and present their research through visual mediums. Another example of such collaboration between anthropologist and artist is observed in work by anthropologist David Efron (student of anthropologist Franz Boas), who completed a collaborative project entitled *Gesture and Environment* (1941), with artist Stuyvesant Van Veen (ibid.).

Andrés quietly steps into the studio, places a few of his own sketches on the table.

“Here, some sketches I thought you might want to use in your thesis,” he says.

“I quickly flip through the drawings; a scene of Andrés cooking *ambil*, a *poporo* resting against a rock, and scene of *Liwaisibo, la casa de pensamiento* or the ceremonial house in *los Llanos Orientales de Colombia*, Colombia’s Eastern Plains.

“Thank you so much Andrés, these are perfect,” I exclaim with excitement to be working with and from Andrés’ sketches.

We’ve both taken a liking to sketching during our travels and fieldwork while also exploring digital retouching of the sketches to create new strokes and textures.

While the initial sketches may take on this quick and abbreviated quality, the process of revisiting the sketches, perhaps by drawing them more carefully or in greater detail, adding colour, textures, and contrast, marks a return to the memory of the scene on the page from which words and writing continuously to emerge. For American poet W.S. Di Piero, “remembering is an act of imagination” (W.S. Di Piero cited in Le Guin 2004, p. 134), and in this drawing of and revisiting of one’s fieldnote sketches, a process of imagination and creation unfolds. Drawing, here, “takes the role of an aide-memoire, helping render visible implicit meanings abstracted by [more objective methods]” (Taussig, 2011, p. 1). For Taussig, drawing in fieldwork notebooks is the discovery of a new genre of ethnography, one that has been explored only by a handful of writers and anthropologists, most famously by Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Michael Taussig himself, amongst others (Taussig, 2011, p. 13).

The use of imagination, fictional elements, and drawings or illustrations in anthropology has often been criticized as having little to no place in academia as they stray

too far from the objective reality of things or are deemed an insufficiently scientific method to research, leaving the controversial work of some authors shunned from the discipline, such as in the case of Peruvian anthropologist and writer Carlos Castaneda (1968). Others may be pushed to extensively justify highly illustrative work or have it accompanied by more academically acceptable forms of writing such as supplementary essays, numerous appendixes, teaching guides, etc., such as in the case of the graphic novel *Lissa* (Hamdy et al., 2017). Such ethnographers find themselves “work[ing] for the academy, and so they must explain rather than show, tell rather than narrate, cite rather than imagine, justify rather than dream and most tragically, turn vigorous flesh-and-blood people into ponderous slugs of theory” (Behar, 1999, p. 438). The form of writing or language used in such production of knowledge, where the author seeks to embody the most “neutral, authoritative, and scientific voice,” tends to reduce “experience to its component parts” and as a result, the sense of “lyricism and even magic” is lost (Ellis and Bochner, 1996, as cited in Rinehart, 1998, p. 200).

In a plea to “humanize ethnography and imaginatively [create] emic realities in ethnographies” (Schmidt, 1984, p.14) anthropologists that turn to drawing, illustrations and the creative storytelling evoke the lives lived with others in an imaginative discovery of the world (Taussig, 2011). Dozens of anthropologists have employed fictional methods in the writing of ethnography such as Michael Taussig, Adolf Bandelier, Ralph Linton, Elsie Clews, Robert Brain, Rosamond Vanderburgh, to name a few (Schmidt, 1984). The proximity of the anthropologist with those they study with provokes discomfort to those who treat methods as “the guarantors of objectivity, put in place to ensure that research results should not be contaminated by too close or affective involvement of the

researcher...For anthropology however, such involvement is of the essence” (Ingold, 2018 as cited in Laplante et al., 2020, p. 1). Works of anthropology that draw from these imaginative and affective qualities inspire the use of illustrations, drawings and a creative weaving of words and worlds—bringing magic into the discipline of anthropology and the very writing of ethnography, for the “truth in this type of writing is not a realist narrative but rather a sensual, magical, lyrical truth...the feel of the experience is what the writer is after (Rinehart, 1998, p. 202). Drawing accompanies this magical narrative as a “mode of anthropological inquiry” and even more so as “an important and creative tool for interacting with and relating to human beings,” and the more-than-human (Nye, 2021; Ramos 2004 as cited in Hodson, 2021, p. 1).

The rise of the graphic moment in anthropology in the last decade, also nicknamed "the graphic turning point" or the “graphic turn,” has welcomed a wave of anthropological works that embrace drawings, as well as imagination, to make visible several aspects of field research and the narration of lived experiences that would otherwise go unnoticed, or hold a different meaning, without graphic illustrations (Tondeur, 2018, pp. 708, 710). This graphic turn “represents an artful liberation of ethnography” and “challenges the hegemony of text in the production of knowledge” (Theodossopoulos, 2022). One example of such is Joe Sacco’s *Paying the Land* (2020) and most notably, Alexandrine Boudreault-Fournier’s *Aerial Imaginations in Cuba* (2019), where Boudreault-Fournier makes use of both fiction and drawings, through fictional elements such as composite characters and a collaboration with Cuban artist in the making of graphic ethno-fictions that pieces together stories told, lived and imagined in and above Santiago, Cuba.

El Taita walks past the studio and stops, peering his head through the door frame.

“Y cómo está Dariel, cómo va la tesis del yagé,” he says, encouragingly monitoring the progress on my thesis.

“Va bien Taita, ya tengo varios dibujitos hechos y ahora voy por la parte más metodológica y teórica, pero va bien, gracias,” I reply, reporting the status of my fieldnote drawings and the progress made on the methodological and theoretical section of the thesis.

“Ah muy bien, en la tarde hablamos más sobre lo del yagé,” he says.

“Bueno, muchas gracias Taita,” I respond as he starts walking away, leaving me to resume my sketching.

1.4 *The Origins of Casa Zindulí*

Over an hour must have gone by, I look up from my drawing and vigorously rub my eyes, dry and bloodshot from the sleepless yagé nights. I gaze out the window and admire the late afternoon sunrays kissing the banana palm and surrounding fruit trees. A hummingbird zooms by and flutters around the heart-shaped banana blossom. I follow it with my eyes as it makes its way from bloom to bloom before hovering over to a hibiscus flower and rejoicing in its sweet, succulent nectar. *Zindulí*—that is the name for hummingbird in the Kogi language; it is also the name that came to be for this place, Casa Zindulí, during the morning of a San Pedro ceremony, one of the many ceremonies organized and hosted here.



I watch as the hummingbird lands on the clothesline and for a brief second, fluff its iridescent feathers with its toes. The bright white markings around his eyes give him the appearance of having far larger pupils in proportion to his body, making for this rare spectacle of a hummingbird at rest incredibly endearing. Despite the encroaching industrialization of these rural areas by petroleum, chemical, and mining companies, Casa Zindulí (while affected by these industrial and extractive sectors) remains as a small slice of refuge and abundance for wildlife, and people.

Andrés, an industrial engineer, ceremonial musician, and the resident of Zindulí, alongside Fabio and his family, have taken good care to reforest these 6 acres on traditional Mokaná territory with native species that constitute the tropical dry forest, tropical fruit trees, and edible roots typical to the Caribbean regions of Colombia. Through the narrow foot trails in the woods surrounding the lot, medicinal vines from *la contra capitana*, a cure against the venom of local snakes, to *yagé cielo*, a type of ayahuasca vine from the

Putumayo region of Colombia can be found winding and extending its tendrils towards the towering and gleaming canopy. What was at first a run-down concrete building with an adjacent hog pen on a bald hill has now become a quaint country home surrounded by towering trees, bearing an abundance of fruit year-round and populated by the songs of migratory and resident birds. Located a few hundred metres from the main road, along a bus route a little over a half hour from the coastal city of Barranquilla, Casa Zindulí regularly welcomes family, friends, patients, and healers, each of whom admire and rejoice in the tranquility of this place. I too have become enchanted with Casa Zindulí ever since my first visit in 2018 and have frequently returned to what has become a second home. Apart from the beauty of its surrounding greenery and biodiversity, Casa Zindulí is in a unique position to host ceremonies, as a node of ancestral healing practices—a prosperous yet informal site for living and learning with ancestral plant medicines on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia. Located in the bajo Magdalena region, at the mouth of the powerful 1,528-kilometre-long Magdalena River, this node of ancestral healing welcome medicines from the Andean foothills of the Putumayo region of Colombia, to the Ecuadorian and Colombian Andean *cordilleras*, and costal snowy peaks of *la Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta*—*el Corazon del Mundo*, the Heart of the World (World Atlas, 2019; Davis, 2009, p. 216). Over the years, dozens of ceremonies have been organized at Casa Zindulí—yagé (ayahuasca) ceremonies being the most frequent and consistent with visits from El Taita Giovanni four to five times a year, along with mambeaderos, sweat lodges, and sporadic visits from Sikuaní and Chachi. Much of it is owed to Andrés for opening his home, and for his service in organizing and hosting these ceremonies, alongside the Barranquilla Family, a tight-knit group of friends and families who, for over 15 years, have shared the

common goal of learning to live with the ancestral medicines of these territories—a family which I’ve been lucky enough to be welcomed into, and for that I’m eternally grateful.

“You know, at the beginning we would mostly gather to sweat in the *inpi*. That’s how it all started. This finca was in my family, unused, and we needed somewhere to build a sweat lodge, and this was the perfect place to do just that,” says Andrés turning on the gas stove to warm a large pot of dark fragrant water—*un baño de plantas*, a plant bath.

He likes to prepare one whenever he feels the need to cleanse heavy thoughts and energies that keep us stagnant, worried, and confused, such as the energies left after this weekend’s particularly heavy and intense yagé ceremony. El Taita’s dominion only extends so far during the ceremony and the house, being uphill from *la maloca*, the place of ceremony, is sometimes left harbouring energies or spirits of the people who come carrying them and that are released during the night. It is one of the risks of opening one’s space to receiving so many people for ceremonies, one that Andrés manages carefully with a set of protective measures, such as the plant baths or smudging with *copal*, but most importantly by only receiving a handful of trusted healers, such as El Taita Giovanni with whom Andrés has been drinking yagé for over 10 years.

Andrés organizes and hosts these ceremonies as a service to the community, part of his dedication to El Taita Giovanni and the ancestral medicines of these territories. Any monetary gains are symbolic and with help from volunteers, such as I, the members of the Barranquilla Family, Fabio, and along with Andrés’ personal investments, help to maintain and repair the ceremonial spaces, the dry bathrooms, the rotting thatched roof of the kiosk, in addition to landscaping to save soil from further erosion, and to support healers and their helpers during their extended stays at Casa Zindulí.

“¿Baño amargo o baño dulce?” I ask him playfully to confirm my suspicion that the bath was made with bitter plants rather than sweet ones.

“Amargo,” he says staring at the pot of swirling parts and leaves of tobacco, borrachero, artemisia, and *ruda*, this last one producing a distinguishable and delectable buttery scent.



“Jesus and *El Abuleo* were the first to come here. Being Uitoto, they taught us a lot about the medicine of tobacco, ambil, and coca, while showing us how to live differently and to work and support each other as a community. As city people we were sick, confused, and bored, and these medicines helped us to improve our relationships not only with each other but with the territory we live on in a more conscious way, one that was inspired by ancestral ways of living and corresponding with sacred plants and the land. At first, we did a lot of purges, sometimes by mixing ambil in water to make a potent tobacco drink and other times with litres of *agua de albahaca*, water infused with the sweetness of basil

leaves. We also grew tobacco on this lot, specifically for cooking ambil. During the preparation of ambil we would spend many sleepless nights, mambeando and carefully watching *la olla* while sharing, remembering, and listening to the myths and stories told by El Abuelo and his son, Jesus. They instructed us to put everything into that cauldron of brewing tobacco, all our fears, worries, regrets, and negative thoughts. There would come a point in the night where El Abuelo would call on the darkness and evil in the world, condemning it to the bubbling cauldron in what is referred to as *la olla de la justicia*, the cauldron of justice—only done by great and powerful Uitoto Elders.”

The Uitotos, children of coca, tobacco, and sweet cassava, are a formidable force in the depths of the Amazon—feared by those who entered in search of white gold during the Amazon Rubbed Boom from 1870-1915 (Taussig, 1986; Medd & Guyot, 2019). The Uitotos were known to be powerful sorcerers, capable of conspiring with the devil, “discern[ing] the future and overturn[ing] evil” (Taussig, 1986, p. 104). Despite their malefic reputation, their population was said to be abundant and made for a cheap supply of labouring arms, ensuring higher profits margins in the Igaraparana-Caraparana region of the Putumayo where rubber was of poor quality (p. 58).



Cooking ambil – Mixed media drawing by Andrés Galeano (2023)

Andrés reaches into a plastic bag and pulls out 3 colourful bottles tagged with catchy phrases, *7x7 contra todo*, *saca saca* and *despojo*—plant essences to dispel curses and evil energies that we got from a Venezuelan vendor in little wooden kiosk that line the streets of *el centro*, downtown Barranquilla. These shacks have overtaken the city streets and despite the measures to remove them or displace them, people return and rebuild on what little space is available to make a living selling whatever they can. For some its cell phone cases, shoes, bags, knickknacks, and plant essences such as the ones we got prepared by what Andrés jokingly refers to as *los brujos del centro*, the sorcerers.

“¿Te aviso cuando este listo el baño, vale?” he says.

“Vale, I’ll be in the studio,” I respond walking out of the kitchen.

I pass the gallery wall in the hallway and look up at a photo of Jesus. The one where he’s holding a colourful fabric across his shoulders, his arms wide open as if he’s about to

embrace you. I never had the pleasure of knowing Jesus, but I know he was a very close friend of Andrés' and an integral part of the lives of *La Familia de Barranquilla* and the making of Casa Zindulí as a node of healing correspondences.

Back at my desk, I hear the distant rustling of *la waira* and harmonica *rondin* as Andrés chants over the plant bath. He sings *icacros* (songs of yagé) to give strength and healing potential to the brew before we use it to bathe ourselves and the house. This is an important step to set the intention behind the healing of the bath, but not only.

Unlike Andrés and some of the other members of the Barranquilla Family, I was not initiated into the medicines of mambe and ambil through purges and mambaderos alongside a powerful Uitoto Elder and his son (or at least not so officially), rather I came to know these medicines through participation in small word sharing circle, mambaderos, and knowing the ways in which these medicines emerge in the everyday outside of these circles. I remember the first time I joined La Familia de Barranquilla during a mambadero at a time when gatherings were more frequent; we were simultaneously preparing the sweet tobacco that would be presented to Ecuadorian Elder during their visit for the San Pedro ceremony—ancestral plant medicine and cactus of the Andes. The purpose of this gathering was to show support and raise a prayer for a family facing hardship and concern for the health of their young child. The medicine of mambe and ambil accompanied this process, encouraging attentiveness, openness, and the flow of words within the group as people begin to share their concerns and fears. In doing so, the story behind what keeps us sick emerges as if teased out by the heat of the ambil (Cure, 2015, p.38).

The mother of the child, Paola, shreds the tobacco leaves by hand while adding flowers into the blend—elements of sweetness, until it becomes fine enough to be rolled in a husk of corn. I sit back and listen for the most part, fiddling with the hem of my skirt and blotting the humidity of my palms as I am caught between listening and rehearsing what I might say when it gets to be my turn. Thankfully, this is my first time in the circle, and no one truly expects me to say anything although it is customary for everyone to speak in the circle. I finally only let out a timid *gracias*, my usual shyness aggravated by my inability to speak Spanish fluently at the time.

To this day, I remain relatively quiet in mameaderos. Having yet to embrace the abundant consumption of *ambil* in these circles, I only manage to share a few words before giving thanks—nothing compared to the poetic and spiritually inspiring words shared by the other participants. This way of speaking and praying is not for everyone and what initially seemed to be a requirement, a level of spiritual seniority to attain, is more so a matter of personal style and preference. During one of the mameadero at Casa Zindulí with Taita Giovanni, he expressed that I had shared a good word.

“Buena palabra,” he said as we exchanged a customary hug at the end of the mameadero.

I remained silent, surprised by Taita Giovanni’s comment given that he rarely ever made any remarks at all. In fact, El Taita Giovanni has always been a quiet healer, the perfect example of someone who truly understands the profound and quiet science these medicines and of *yagé*. According to the Cofán, with whom Taita Giovanni initially studied the science of *yagé*, those who overshare or brag of their power and knowledge are said to hold no knowledge at all (Jütte, 2018. p. 4).

I pick up my sketchpad and resume working on the sketch of El Abuelo, refining my strokes and drawing the fine lines in expression from the day of the inauguration of the new maloca. I begin noticing the surroundings of this memory in greater detail, the benches lining the sides of the maloca, the tiger tapestry hanging on the wall, the dim and cool light entering the space, the height of the roof and the immensity of it all, and the chattering and conversations leading up to the moments that accompanied the one I am currently drawing. I find that the practice of redrawing sketches and devoting more time to the drawing, whether they are highly realistic or not, contribute greatly to this practice of sketchbook keeping, capable of awakening memories as I draw out the scenes and begin recounting the moment with words. This process of drawing in detail evokes further attention and reflection to events and things that initially may not have been noticed, and even things that may come across as “invisible and auratic,” playing into the magic of the sketchbook or the notebook (pp. 13; 105).

1.5 Inauguration of *La Maloca Inkal Awá*

Squatting beneath the 40-foot-high thatched roof, the men gather in a circle at the back of the new maloca, near the entrance of *el altar*, the altar of *yagé*, *para mambear* and listen to the powerful Uitoto Elder, El Abuelo Rodolfo, share stories, myths, *palabra de vida y pensamiento de oro*. With their cheeks puffed from large quids of mambe, the men resemble the ancient figures of San Augustin—those depicting the earliest use and reverence to the plant medicine of coca in the Andes (Davis, 2020, p. 55). The men take turns exchanging and tasting various pots of tobacco honey and the bags of fine green powder—shooting back multiple spoonsful of pulverized coca, and abundantly collecting *ambil* on their fingers. Bursts of green clouds escape their lips and expand throughout the

air as some try to speak before a film of saliva has fully enveloped the powder, creating a quid that can comfortably be held between the tongue and cheek while speaking.

“Mhm, mhm, mhm,” sound in unison as the men agree with the words shared by El Abuelo.

During these preparatory nights leading up to the inauguration of the new maloca (*la pisada de maloca*), a special batch of *ambil* is being prepared, an *ambil* to organize and harmonize the universe. As a “cosmic model of the universe,” (Davis, 2019, p. 105) the maloca is a sacred space, as well as a place of governance and leadership and during the dance a cosmic imprint of the maloca will be made to inaugurate this place of governance of *yagé* (Pereira, 2011, p. 72).

In this setting, *ambil* is consumed in such large quantities that “sweat comes to the fingertips and the world spins wildly, yet always in harmonic resonance” (Davis, 2009, p. 104). *La chuma del ambil*, or this drunken and dizzying feeling, along with



the heat of the tobacco makes my stomach churn and I feel myself getting lightheaded. I stand slowly and crouch over as I make my way towards the pitcher of basil infused water at the centre of the circle, hoping to cool down the internal fire brought on by the *ambil*. Noticing my visible discomfort, La Madre Prudencia, wife of El Abuelo, gestures me to come over and sit with the women at the centre of the *maloca* where the food was being prepared.

“Es por eso que la mujer no debe sentarse en el circulo con los hombres cuando estan mambeando. Hay mucho que se mueve ahí en esos momentos,” said La Madre, explaining to me that traditionally only the men sit in the circle *para mambear*. A woman does not sit in the circle because there are a lot of things being moved in those moments. *Mambe* and *ambil* is traditionally a medicine for the men, which they take to develop *la palabra dulce*, a sweet word, whereas women hold a different power and are understood to already have *la palabra dulce*.

I nod in understanding and watch as she prepares the cassava bread, carefully spreading the ground *yuca* mixture onto the hot metal sheets with ease and maneuvers the flat bread with her bare hands before placing them in a large woven basket covered with a fabric to keep them from going dry. The other women stand over a giant pot where they hand me two pineapples, gesturing me to smash them together in preparation of *la caguana*—an Amazonian drink made of fruits and cassava, important to the *mambeaderos* and even more so for *las danzas*, the dances (Pereira, 2011, p. 73). With these nourishing foods and beverages, along with an Amazonian boar hunted and prepared especially for this event, they ensure that we rejoice in abundance during the night of the inauguration

and in celebration of this new ceremonial yagé space for El Taita Giovani—*La Maloca Inkal Awá, gente de rio y montaña*.

The following afternoon, the last of the guests are beginning to arrive. Various city folks, friends, and family of Taita Giovani, and numerous Indigenous peoples from the Amazon such as Embera, Nasa, Awá and various Uitoto clans make their way into the maloca in their regalia, ready for *la pisada*, the dance. The enthusiasm in the air is palpable as dozens of children run around the maloca, playing, and searching for their parents while the final touches are being prepared for El Abuelo to initiate the dance.

The indigenous dancers gather in the centre of the maloca, ready to begin the first round of dancing. The women and men sing in intervals as everyone paces and stomps back and forth in a circular motion. After several minutes of dancing, we break for an intermission, all the dancers in regalia head out of the maloca while those inside being to chatter waiting for the next round to begin—mambe and ambil is shared in abundance and *totumas de caguana*, bowls of caguana, are passed throughout the maloca. The dancers return, the seeds of the anklets jingling to the pace of their stomping—the people cheer and stand to join the dance once more. As the night goes on, the dance floor becomes increasingly sparse, with fewer and fewer people joining the dance. Forcefully standing and following the lead of the dancers is the only way to keep the fatigue at bay, for those who stand still are overtaken by slumber amid the celebration. As the sun rose, only the most resilient of dancers remain and after a long night of dancing, the once uneven earthen floor is somewhat smoother and flatter from the night of rhythmic stomping. With the inauguration complete and the maloca consecrated, a spiritual registry of this space is officially established and recorded in the cosmos.

El Abuelo squats beside the altar and begins to mix the vegetal salt with the tobacco reduction, patiently massaging it into the tobacco paste until it became ambil, neither too salty and runny, nor too hard and dry. He places a small amount of ambil onto pieces of banana leaves before personally making the rounds and handing a bullpup of carefully wrapped ambil to all those remaining and awake in la maloca. As El Abuelo makes his way towards me, I sit up and eagerly receive the gift with both hands.

“Muchas gracias Abuelo,” I thank him enthusiastically and naively unaware of the magnitude of this moment, the only time I would know and the last time that I would see, El Abuelo Rodolfo Giagrekudo.



Since the loss of El Abuelo in 2020, and of his son and dear friend Jesus just a few short months later, the mambaderos in Barranquilla have understandably dwindled. Partly due to the changes brought on by the loss of an important Elder, but also due to relocations and life changes for some of the members of the Barranquilla Family. *Mambaderos virtuales*, virtual mambaderos, and other in-person events have been organized over the years to honour the memory of El Abuelo and Jesus—bringing together people from all over Colombia, and even around the world, as they share and remember the memories and good words of El Abuelo. In her chapter *Sonorous Sensations*, Laplante proposes that plants, such as *umhlonyane* (*Artemisia afra*), are far more than simply objects (or subjects) of study for their molecular compositions, but rather that they are mediums through which we communicate (Laplante, 2022, p. 33) offering pathways that heal and connect people and memories through space and time. Marisol de la Cadena speaks to the affinity that emerges between human and the more-than-human through the term “being-in-ayllu,” as a weaving of lifelines between and with plants, people, but not only, in an ongoing communication and multispecies compositions (Cadena, 2015, pp. 18, 44).

It is thanks to El Abuelo Rodolfo that Taita Giovani came to know Casa Zindulí and the Barranquilla Family many years ago, at a time where El Abuelo also gave out yagé.

“El que de verdad sabe del yagé es El Taita Giovani,” says El Abuelo, assuring that he who knew the most about yagé was not himself, but El Taita Giovani.

The desire to come together as a community for the Barranquilla Family remains strong, with temazcal or sweat lodge, and yagé ceremonies organized regularly and sustained by frequent visits from El Taita. The medicine of mambe and ambul continues to

be carried and valued amongst the Barranquilla Family, especially amongst those (men and women) who have a process with yagé and those who accompany El Taita Giovanni.

Chapter 2

Un Mundo Azul

2.1 *Dr. Bee*

I'm abruptly awakened from a *siesta* by the sound of construction and shouting coming from the finca next door. The neighbours recently and quite suddenly set up shop for an industrial business, producing fibreglass containers and other metallic structures. I make my way out of bed and head out on the front porch to find Taita, Freidel and Germán talking quietly—mambeando. Germán must have arrived while we were napping; he is one of Taita Giovani's oldest friends, with a friendship and commitment spanning over nearly 18 years. While many have come and won the affection of Taita Giovani, few to none have remained as long and steadfast as Germán, also referred to as *El Coste* by endearment. Bare feet shuffle along the cold concrete floors making their way to the patio, sheltered by the vine-laden pergola and its cascading passionfruit flowers.

“¿También te despertó el sonido de la pulidora?” I ask Andrés who nods as he joins us outside, visibly irritated by the disturbances and rising tension from the situation next door we've tried to ignore.

“¿Será que visitamos Dr. Bee antes de la ceremonia?” I say, proposing a quick visit to Jhon, better known as Dr. Bee, our neighbourhood beekeeper and apiculturist.

“No es mala idea,” says Andrés, “además, me está dando dolor de cabeza el olor de la resina,” he adds, drawing attention to the headache-provoking fumes in the air, emitted from the adjacent fibreglass production site.

We promptly set out on foot, passing the increasingly tall cement brick wall built by the new neighbours. Casually peering through the slim opening of the 16-foot-high gate

from the other side of the road, we notice workers loading a truck with products for buyers. A few steps further down, bordering the dried-up gully of a large stream, *el Arroyo Grande*, we pass a no littering sign that reads: “No tires basura aquí. Cuida nuestras aguas,” and at the base of the signpost, a small mound of garbage bags picked apart by wild animals and stray dogs. With little to no infrastructure to manage waste in rural areas, these sites are all too common along the Caribbean Coast, and throughout Colombia and even South America. Burning garbage is also common practice to dispose of accumulated waste, and along with illegal hunting fire practices, pose the greatest risk during the dry season causing increased spread of fire into vital tropical dry forest and mangroves ecosystems, such as *el Parque Natural Isla de Salamanca* (Daza, 2020). Multinational companies also partake in practices of burning waste, accompanied with the dumping of its remnants, such as toxic ash, on the roadsides of rural areas. During the rainy season, heavy rainfalls quickly sweep up these ashes and debris into nearby waterways, further contaminating water sources for which companies evade cleanup responsibility—much like the dumping of crude oil residues from 1964 to 1990 by Texaco onto the roads surrounding the Aguarico River, Ecuador (Fajardo et al., 2021, p. 33; Weisbrod, 2022; Petrlik & Bell, 2020).

Arriving at Dr. Bee’s house, we are greeted with friendly handshakes and a refreshing bottle of freshly brewed kombucha.

“Esta semana tengo kombucha de mango. ¡Esta bien fermentado!” Announces Jhon, handing us the recycled glass bottles of the fermented mango drink.

After a few minutes of catching up and laughs on the front porch, Jhon, Taita and Freidel walk into the consultation room to begin treatment. Taita is up first; he received an invigorating massage of the shoulders, back and legs. Up next, Freidel shares complaints

of lower back pain, and he is asked to lie down face down on the *camilla*, the massage table.

“Vamos a ponerte unas agujas,” says Jhon reaching for a new pack acupuncture needles from the windowsill.

Freidel lifts his head in surprise, “will it hurt?” He asks.

“It doesn’t hurt me,” responds Jhon with a wide grin. Playful chuckles make their way through the room.

Jhon and Taita come back out on the porch while the needles make their effect on Freidel’s back.

“¿Cómo va el negocio Doc?” Asks Andrés, making conversation about Dr. Bee’s acupuncture and apitherapy clinic hidden away amongst the trees.

“¡Muy bien! Tengo gente llegando todo los días, de Galapa, de Baranoa y de Barranquilla. Llagan buscando tratamiento porque el sistema de salud les está fallando. Hay cada vez más gente buscando curarse a sí mismos, y lo están logrando,” replies Jhon explaining how more and more people come seeking treatments outside the biomedical system as they are increasingly looking to heal themselves, and in many cases are succeeding in doing so through treatments of alternative medicine like acupuncture, apitherapy, homeopathy, and the ancestral medicines of these culturally diverse and rich Colombian territories.

“¿Quien sigue?” asks Jhon ready to continue with the round of treatments. Andrés and I follow Jhon back inside the house, leaving Taita and Germán mambeando on the porch.

“Yo quiero un ajuste y una abejita Doc,” says Andrés lying down on the empty massage table.

“Ah bueno empecemos primero con el ajuste,” answers Jhon as he begins performing a series of movements and tugs of the towel to give Andrés a chiropractic adjustment. With Andrés sitting up on the edge of the bed, Jhon steps behind him and firmly grasp his head preparing for a swift twisting of the neck to adjust the spine.

“Take a deep breath in and let it out. Now relax, this is how I kill all my chickens,” Jhon lets out with a chuckle while swiftly performing the twist in the window of surprise caused by his comment. There is audible pop and Andrés sighs in relief.

Jhon’s attention and dedication to his work often means a treatment session is lengthier than a regular visit to a doctor in a biomedical clinic; however, the chatting, surprising comments and good laughs are an essential part of feeling better after a visit to Dr. Bee.

“Ya vuelvo con las abejas,” says Jhon as he goes to get the bees in the woods behind the house.

Some time ago, Jhon lived solely from the honeybees and bee-derived products such as honey, pollen, and propolis which he sells in his storefront, but with the changes in the costal climate and increased unpredictability in rainfall, pollinator food sources have become scarce. After years of study, he began offering traditional Chinese medicine services alongside apitherapy, while continuing to sell bee-derived products when available, and free-range eggs to his patients. Like many other beekeepers and healers, Jhon is increasingly concerned with the health of the honeybees. With the implementation of new 5G networks, Jhon expresses great concern regarding the radioactive waves that

cause the honeybees and other pollinator populations to plummet (Levitt et al., 2022; Sharma & Kumar, 2010).

Within a few moments, Jhon returns casually holding a honeybee by its wings in each hand. He approaches Andrés and places a bee on either side of his upper calves, stinging him on the Zu San Li point, known to boost the immune system. The stinger can be seen pulsating above the skin as the bee venom makes its way into the body before Jhon removes the stinger and leaves Andrés to breathe through the burning pain. The bee venom holds anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties assisting with pains associated with arthritis as well as other muscular issues, and is especially efficient when combined with traditional Chinese medicine system and delivered on acupuncture points (Lee et al., 2005).

“¿Y cómo está Dariel? Te veo triste hoy,” asks Jhon, noticing my slightly concerned expression.

“Ha estado un poco estresada por la tesis,” says Andrés explaining that my thesis has been stressing me out.

“Bueno siéntate aquí y vamos hacer algo,” responds Jhon, asking me to come take Andrés’ place on the massage table.

Pressed against the unyielding massage table, I feel my face getting hotter as I look up at Dr. Bee, whose attention was now turned to me, and hold back wistful tears.

“Yo cada mañana me levanto y agradezco por el regalo de la vida y el día de hoy.” Every morning he gives thanks for another day while chanting a mantra. “También repito el mantra *Yo Soy—yo soy luz, yo soy vivo, yo soy salud perfecta*. La enfermedades empiezan aquí,” illness begins here, he says tapping his fingers to his temples, “y aquí,” he follows by pointing to the centre of his chest. He goes on to explain that many people suffer

from illness that starts with overthinking and worried thinking, from stress, anxiety, and depression. He prescribes me a series of circles to complete with my thumb on the midline point Shanzhong, the palace of sincerity, or the point between the breast plates. He also teaches me a series of movements and acupressure points on the hands, feet, and head to help relieve headaches.

“Gracias Doc,” I say sitting back up.

“Solo faltaría Germán,” says Andrés’ stepping outside to get the last patient.

Germán hesitantly steps into the consultation room and lingers near the doorframe.

“Entonces, qué tiene Germán,” ask Jhon while removing the needles from Friedel’s back.

“Se lesionó la rodilla cargando leña en el monte,” says Andres, explaining that Germán hurt his knee while carrying firewood through the uneven forest floor.

“Ah well then I guess our only choice is to put the whole leg in the beehive,” exclaims Jhon with a laugh, checking to see if he can shake Germán’s look of fear and uncertainty.

With Germán on the table, Jhon begins twisting the injured leg in all directions, checking in to see if any of the movements are causing him pain. He starts massaging around the knee and despite Germán’s wincing, he applies steady and firm pressure until the skin turns red.

“Aquí sacamos dolor con más dolor,” he chuckles stating that here, pain is relieved through more pain and that one must endure this pain to get better. This principle of curing through similarity or likeness, better known through the phrase “*similia similibus curantur*” is most famously associated with the German physician and founder of homeopathy, Dr.

Samuel Hahnemann. This healing principle is used throughout a myriad of medical fields from physiotherapy, psychology, education, veterinary medicine, and many more (Marques Arpa, 2016, p. 18), and can even be seen played out in ancestral medicine ceremonies such as during the yagé ceremonies with Taita Giovanni.

“Me avisas cuando ya baje el dolor,” he says, asking Germán to let him know when the pain has diminished.

Seconds into the vigorous massage, Jhon asks, “¿Y ahora como sigue? ¿Igual o peor?” He teases Germán about the pain being equal to or worse than before the massage.

Germán chuckles in discomfort and lets out determined “¡Ya, ya, ya! Está mejor, gracias,” relieved that Jhon finally stops the acupressure massage.

After nearly two hours of treatments, we’re ready to head back home and finalize preparations for a second weekend of yagé ceremonies.

“¡Gracias Doc! We’ll see you tonight for the ceremony!” I shout as we start heading back towards La Finca.

2.2 Charla con los Musicos

Back at Casa Zindulí, the preparations for the ceremony are nearly complete. The mats and buckets are neatly stacked at the entrance of the kiosk and the maloca; the dry bathrooms have been cleaned and restocked—only the final touches, such as bringing out neatly folded napkins for post-vomiting, a pitcher of water and lighting the candles are left for the hour before the ceremony begins. We take this down time before the patients arrive to enjoy the sunset from the kiosk, each swinging in their own hammock.

“Pruebe este mambe Taita,” says Germán, passing the newly opened bag of mambe to Taita to try, “lo conseguí de Alejandro, esta vendiendo buen mambe ahora, no es dulce

como el anterior pero se vuelve chicloso,” he exclaims explaining how the texture of this mambe forms a steady long-lasting quid even though the taste isn’t particularly sweet compared to previous batches of mambe.

With the commodification and the popularization of this medicine in various contexts, amongst indigenous and non-indigenous populations in urban centres, such as Bogotá (Cure, 2015), it has become increasingly difficult to find good batches of mambe.

“¡Es una loteria!” says Germán.

Each bag of mambe is either hit or miss, with mambeadores (those who consume and carry mambe) stocking up on the high quality mambe whenever possible. While to some, mambe is understood as pulverized toasted coca leaves, an experienced mambeadero will know that not every coca bush or leaf can be used for the making of good mambe.

Traditional medicine of the Andes, coca has been used by Andean communities and Indigenous peoples for over 3,000 years for spiritual and healing purposes in various ceremonies, and to treat numerous ailments such as gastrointestinal issues, altitude illness, hunger pains, fatigue, and much more (Cadena, 2015; Stolberg, 2011; Plowman, 1984; Biondich & Joslin, 2016, p. 3). Within *Botanical Perspectives on Coca* (1979), coca is classified as a part of the pantropical genus *Erythroxylum*, with over 250 species recorded in the American tropics with greatest concentrations in central and southeastern Brazil, the Andes, the Amazon basin, and Guiana region (Plowman, 1979, p. 104). In Colombia specifically, several varieties of coca are identified by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), some of which are commonly cultivated for traditional and legal use such as coca chewing, whereas others are more popular and prolific in the illegal trade and production of cocaine (UNODC, 2005, pp. 135-138).

“¿Oye, y la policía que vi a la entrada de la trocha, andan molestando por aca o solo se quedan ahí parchando con los pimpineros?” asks Germán, curious to know what so many police officers are doing hanging around the gasoline shacks at the beginning of the road.

“Jmm,” sounds El Taita with eyes closed.

“Como que se hicieron amigos con los pimpineros,” I reply, glancing over to see if Andrés might share our most recent encounter with the neighbourhood police.

“Pues...justo el otro día nos pararon en el puente en camino donde Dr. Bee con una libra de mambe en la mochilla,” he begins recounting our last visit to Dr. Bee when we got stopped by the police with a pound of mambe.

They insisted on inspecting all our belongings until they came across the large bag of green powder—they had never seen mambe before. When Andrés told them that it was an ancestral medicine derived from coca they immediately called for back-up, including a drug detection dog, to ensure that we were not carrying any cocaine. Complying with the inspection process, the sniffer dog soon confirmed that mambe is not cocaine—uninterested by pulverized coca leaves.

“Casi nos llevan a la estación de policía. No estaban convencidos de que no era cocaína y le querían hacer prueba química en el laboratorio,” adds Andrés.

I listen carefully, opening the jar of *ambil* while balancing the bag of mambe on my lap as my feet dangle from the hammock.

“Ellos no saben que esto es una medicina—no es una droga,” I exclaim, passing the bag of mambe and jar of *ambil* counterclockwise to Andrés.

The police officers and other law enforcement services in Colombia, elsewhere, are not familiar with coca in these forms and remain on high alert for anything coca-derived, even the mambeadores know that once the coca leaves are toasted, they no longer serve in the chemical extraction process necessary to produce pure cocaine.

As part of their fight against illicit drugs and international crimes, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) regularly conducts surveys on the state of coca production in Colombia, amongst other South American countries where cocaine production and export are prevalent. Despite often being framed as a drug, the coca plant is inherently a plant medicine and an integral part of Andean and Colombian cultural identity and cosmology—its significance extending far beyond its association with cocaine. In fact, chewing whole coca presents a cocaine concentration of only about 1/50 when compared to the whole blood concentration of pure cocaine (Biondich & Joslin, 2016, p. 3). Along with the United States' *War on Drugs*, the prohibition and criminalization of drugs and the stigma against the plants such as coca has caused immense harm to marginalized communities, rather than effectively decreasing drug use and drug trafficking (Cohen et al., 2022). In *My Cocaine Museum* (2004), Taussig argues that the War on Drugs (in fact a “War for Drugs”), is funded by the inflow of gold, cocaine, and money, while simultaneously spreading violence and devastation along its path (pp. 18, 144). While the UNODC's efforts might be ineffective and short-sighted when approaching the drug problem, their access to substantial funds and resources means they can generate relatively reliable and relatively accurate data on drug production and trafficking at the international level.

Although commercial coca cultivation for exports to the United States and Europe has been ongoing for nearly four decades (Taussig, 2004, p. 92), the UNODC reports that coca production in Colombia reached a historical high in 2021 (UNODC, 2021), particularly in the regions of Nariño, Norte de Santander, and the Putumayo (p. 3), making travel to these parts of Colombia and the traditional territory of Taita Giovanni in Orito, Putumayo, increasingly dangerous and complicated due to the risks for both locals and foreign visitors. The increased presence of drug trafficking groups—previously FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia or the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and now dissidents of the guerilla and other criminal organizations—near coca production areas generate heightened pressure and incentive for coca production amongst impoverished populations on indigenous reserves, and Afro-descendant communities who willingly or unwillingly join in on coca farming practices (ibid.; UNODC, 2005). In these conditions, coca farmers conduct extensive clearing of the forest floor to make way for coca crops and resort to the use of agrochemicals more frequently (p.1; 4). Using the coca cultivated for the illegal production of cocaine in the preparation of mambe is understood by some to result in a bitter powder, most likely due to the use of agrochemicals and the higher alkaloid levels in the leaves.

“¡El mambe que nos llegaba antes era duulce!” exclaims Freidel.

“Es que era más fácil conseguir buen mambe en el tiempo del Abuelo,” mutters Andrés, referring to the time when the Uitoto Elder, El Abuelo Rodolfo was alive and good mambe was easier to find through his connections. Regardless, El Taita Giovanni often receives gifts of mambe (some of better quality than others) from friends across the country and some who also knew El Abuelo Rodolfo.

“El otro día vi en Facebook que están vendiendo yagé por la calle en Barranquilla,” shares Germán, expressing concern around the sale of bottled yagé on Facebook groups and on the streets of Barranquilla.

“Jmmm,” sounds El Taita while licking a small dollop of *ambil* off his pinky finger before placing his hands behind his head—resting in the embrace of the aerated *chinchorro* hammock.

“Esa gente se va a enfermar,” says Andrés, “no sabemos como lo están preparando y con que lo están mezclando,” he adds knowing very well that no good or healing can come from drinking that kind of yagé—one that is purchased off the streets without any knowledge of where it comes from, who prepared it, and most importantly which plants it contains.

Many taitas and elders say that people from the cities were in dire need of the remedy of ayahuasca (*yagé*). According to Agudelo (2023), *yagé* made its way to urban spaces with greatest intensity in the '90s (p. 283), where many sought out the medicine for its curative properties and fantastic visionary experience. Others fearfully shied away from encounters with *yagé*, some of which include Indigenous community members in the Amazon where drinking *yagé* and healing with *yagé* is common practice. Seeing the success of taitas and their *yagé* endeavours in the city, many become drawn to providing a similar service in a flux of interest in neo-shamanic practices, psychedelic medicine, and healing centres, such as ayahuasca retreats and psychedelic or spiritual tourism (Aguelo, 2023, pp. 283-284; Ayahuasca Foundation, 2024; Langlitz, 2013; Doyle, 2012), sometimes leading to unfortunate events where patients, unbeknownst to them, fall victim to

propaganda and may drink with a charlatan or an extremely unexperienced healer capable of causing them great harm and trauma (Kavenská & Simonová, 2015).

Drawing attention to the risks of engaging with charlatans serving yagé, Taussig (1986) exclaiming that “those who drink [yagé] and heal for money [or power] keep people sick” (p. 257). Along with the rise in healing retreat and neo shamanic practices (and shamanism certification courses), numerous organizations offer healing services and training sessions to the public; best known amongst the yagé communities in Colombia is the case of Ayahuasca International who claims to have obtained the permission, teachings and blessings from a Cofán taita of the highest authority, El Taita Querubín Queta Alvarado (may he rest in peace), in the creation of their organization and in the sharing of yagé ceremonies and teachings (Jütte, 2018). Due to its commodification and globalization ayahuasca can often be consumed “without [proper] regard [or education] to its status as an Indigenous Amazonian culture heritage” (Hudson, 2011, p. 26), yet the tourism ventures associated with ayahuasca can also provide opportunities to share and preserve Indigenous cultural heritage particularly when managed by Indigenous peoples in the context of Indigenous-led ecotourism (Fotiou, 2016, p. 169).

Typically prepared through the combination of two plants, the ayahuasca vine or *bejuco* and the *chacrana* bush, yagé may also include additional plants such as *borrachero* (angel’s trumpet) in a special preparation by only the most experienced taitas, deeply familiar with the experience of such plants. Numerous variations are possible depending on the types of vine and preparation methods used to prepare the brew by the taitas. While each ayahuasca drinking community throughout South America has a distinct method of preparing this remedy, including variation in their ceremonial design and execution,

yagéceros (yagé drinkers in Colombia), say that Colombian yagé is the strongest in South America, especially when served with the constancy of honey (yagé *miel*) as opposed to a watery brew commonly encountered in say Peru, but also amongst some communities in Colombia.

“¿Cuántas personas vienen hoy?” asks Freidel, wondering how many patients are expected for this weekend’s ceremonies.

“Como 23, algunos faltan por confirmar,” responds Andrés as his phone rings. It’s one of the patients calling to confirm their attendance.

“¡Hola Andrés!”

“Hola Magalis. ¿Como estás? ¿Me llamas para confirmar su asistencia?” asks Andrés.

“Eh no mira, lo que pasa es que...bueno, no creo que voy a poder llegar a la ceremonia hoy...,” the woman replies unconvincingly over the phone quickly adding, “es que el yagé del Taita Giovani es muy fuerte... y ya me programme para ir a tomar en Puerto, en Muelle del Sol...allá sirven un yagé mas suave...” she concludes, stating that she feels more comfortable drinking a softer yagé served at Muelle del Sol, a comfortable retreat centre, owned by one of the richest families in the country, gaining popularity in Puerto Colombia.

“Ah bueno Magalis, para la próxima entonces,” replies Andrés, nonchalant, before ending the call.

“Bueno, ya van 22,” exclaims Andrés after another participant drops out of the ceremony.

Due to the number of ceremonies held at Muelle del Sol, interest and participation in yagé ceremonies held at Casa Zindulí have dwindled in the past months. Muelle del Sol offers participants comfortable facilities with an incredible vista overlooking the Caribbean Sea—welcoming dozens of taitas and healers during their several weekly ceremonies. This pales in comparison to the rustic amenities offered at Casa Zindulí where only a handful of ceremonies are organized a year. Most of them yagé ceremonies with Taita Giovani and the occasional visit from elders and traditional healers. Most of the participants attending these events at Casa Zindulí are either members of the Barranquilla Family or returning patients contacted directly by Andrés to be made aware of upcoming a ceremony. The news spreads through word of mouth and additional participants register for the ceremony, sometimes reaching 35-50 patients per night. Since Casa Zindulí does not operate as a business, the cost of attendance is kept low even offering ceremonies free of charge to those who express a strong desire and need to drink yagé without the means to pay for the ceremony.

“Ya no quieren tomar aquí Taita, dicen que su medicina esta muy fuerte,” says Andrés reiterating that some participants have found alternative more comfortable ceremonies to attend in Barranquilla’s surrounding areas.

“Es que la mayoría de las personas esperan que el yagé los coja suave—solo quieren visionar sin trabajar,” exclaims Germán, explaining that people prefer to have a milder experience drinking yagé, hoping only to see *pintas*, or visions.

“Es que no es asi, las visionoes llegan solo si el yagé les abre las puertas para visionar,” adds El Taita, clarifying that the purpose of drinking yagé is not to see beautiful things—this is a possibility, but only if the yagé opens those doors to you.

“They say that a man serving yagé en Muelle del Sol paid over *cinco millones de pesos* (nearly 2000 Canadian dollars) for a cup that would supposedly grant him unbelievable powers and pintas from a taita in the Putumayo,” adds Freidel.

We all let out a series of chuckles, bewildered at the extent some will go hoping to acquire knowledge and power.

“La gente se cree taita despues de un par de tomas, pero así no han recibido nada—lo han comprado, no se lo ha entregado la planta,” adds El Taita, critical of those who believe themselves to be taitas after just a few ceremonies and are convinced of having acquired certain capabilities through monetary transaction rather than having been gifted knowledge directly by the plant.

A cloud of tobacco smoke makes its way up the hill—Fabio must be nearby. Born and raised in the municipality of Córdoba, Bolivar, also known as the land of tobacco, Fabio grew surrounded by tobacco cultivars under the scorching sun; today, he can often be found with a hand-rolled tobacco pressed between his lips as he works around La Finca. His grandmother was one of the early cultivators of tobacco in the region; planting, picking and hand-rolling tobacco leaves—a practice which later became fundamental to the mediation of violence for women as armed conflict increased in their municipality, and predominantly in the surrounding municipalities of El Carmen de Bolivar and Ovejas, Sucre (Carmona González et al., 2023; Gamarra, 2018).

Fabio approaches El Taita, greeting him and gifting him a bundle of these hand-rolled cigars from his *pueblo*.

“Fabiooo” I exclaim, “¿Vas a tomar con nosotros hoy?” I tease him to see if he will be joining us during the yagé ceremony tonight.

Fabio drank yagé once before many years ago, right here in Casa Zindulí with El Taita Giovani but has since been afraid to drink again—something about the effects having been too strong and startling him from ever drinking again.

He chuckles playfully evading my question.

“¡Voy pa donde el Mono!” he responds scurrying towards the front gate. Preferring a night of beer and billiards with one of our neighbours to a night of drinking medicine, he successfully makes his escape from yet another yagé night.

“¿Tocamos algo?” I suggest, picking up the charango resting against the wooden post of the kiosk.

Andrés and Germán reach for their guitars while Freidel places the recording device on top of the hand-painted yagé stool and we begin practicing our repertoire of *musica medicina*, medicine music sung to yagé in this case, in preparation for the ceremony.

Several years ago, when yagé ceremonies were first being organized, Taita Giovani was the main musician, singing while playing the drums. With time, the *asistentes* or helpers became multi-instrumentalist, playing for hours during the night, leaving Taita to focus on the *curacion*, or the personalized healing portion of the ceremony. Some ceremony organizers have been to play pre-recorded music on large stereo speakers, but this does not compare to live music played during the ceremony due to the lack of ceremonial musicians present. Only the most experienced helpers or yageceros have the capacity to play and sing during the peak hours of the yagé ceremony, and even then, having a rotation of musicians is key in cases when one is too *borracho*, or drunken from the medicine, another can pick up the guitar and play. These experienced ceremonial

musicians know when to play a certain song with a certain *rasgueo* or strumming pattern compatible with the vibration of the yagé at that moment of the night.

After several songs, I put in the request to practise Nubecita Blanca (Caserito Dúo, 2019).

“That’s a nice one you can play después de la curación,” says Andrés, “we can play it all together.”

Each song has the adequate moment to be played, some are reserved for the beginning of the ceremony while others are playing after la curación, accompanying the process with the plant. Fotiou (2012) states that “ayahuasqueros can move or manipulate a person’s visions or state of mind by using different icaros at different times or change the overall energy and feeling of the ceremony” (p. 17). Like icaros, songs of yagé gifted to the taitas or yageceros by the yagé, música medicina played and sung during the ceremony have the power to sway the experiences and visions during the night.

While familiar with dozens of songs sung to the yagé, I am still getting accustomed to the peak hours of the yagé when the *chuma*, the drunken feeling of the medicine, preferring to accompany by singing along and joining in with the charango at sunrise, or practising with the musicians during these pre-ceremony jamming sessions.

As patients begin to arrive and settle on the benches across from us, we wrap up our session and prepare the final touches for the ceremony.

2.3 Ceremonia en Casa Zindulí

“¿Dariel, tienes una cobija que me puedas prestar?” asks one of the returning patients.

“Si claro,” I respond, quickly heading back inside the house to grab extra blankets and cushions for the guests.

“Hola, bienvenido,” I exclaim running into the last of the patients arriving down the side of the house, “el kisoko está por ahí,” I add, gesturing to the thatched roof kiosk tucked away behind the nocturnal shadows of the borracheros.

Making my way down to the kiosk, blankets in hand, I notice patients are already lining up beside the altar to receive *rapé Yawanawá* prior to drinking yagé. I distribute the blankets to the remaining patients, offering a comforting smile to those who nervously but gratefully receive them from me. Others are so deeply captivated by the process of receiving the snuff that I quietly lay the blankets at their feet as they watch their peers—eyes watering from violently coughing as the fine powder urges them to vomit in nearby buckets. A plume of peppery rapé forcefully escapes the perimeters of the thin bamboo applicator and hovers above those sitting in the kiosk. Medicine of the Amazon, rapé dates back several thousand years and is “thoroughly integrated into the culture of northwest Amazonian tribes” (Stanfill et al., 2015, p. 50). Several varieties can be prepared through varying combination of finely ground plants, such as “high nicotine tobacco species, [...] tonka bean, cinnamon, clove buds, etc.” (ibid.). Rapé and ayahuasca share capacities to cure and, amongst the Yawanawá, are both fundamental to practices of prayer and healing, but not only (Pérez-Gil, 2001, p. 336). These plants and medicines, along with mambe and ambul (amongst others) have found affinity within certain circles, such as at Casa Zinduli and the yagé ceremonies led by Taita Giovani, while others such as *ganja* or cannabis remain relatively taboo.

Dispelling anxious thoughts and grounding those overwhelmed, rapé before drinking yagé can instill an air of tranquility for the start and duration of the ceremony, although not always.

“Varios recibieron rapé,” quietly notes Taita Giovani as he takes a seat by the altar, “está bien, les va ir mejor durante la ceremonia,” he adds, relieved that most patients accepted rapé and that they will enter yagé more calmly.

Seizing this small window of down time, I rush back inside the house to freshen before Taita begins the ceremony. The presence and proximity of yagé in combination with the rapé still lingering in the air makes my stomach turn in anticipation—the remainders of yagé from the previous ceremony bubbling inside. They say yagé stays with(in) you for several months after ingestion, in a process that Annemarie Mol (2008) refers to as *transubstantiation*; while the example she gives is the apple, we can replace it by yage to express the process by which you “become (made out of) [yagé]; while the [yagé] is (a part of) [you]” (p. 30). Taussig (1986), suggests the duration of this process for yagé could last as many as 6 months, stating that drinking yagé twice a year protects you against *maleficios* or curses (p. 253).

I do one last check inside the house to ensure we have everything we need in the kiosk and maloca, grabbing the last of the instruments and adding a few more bottles of Gatorade in the fridge before turning off all the lights.

El Taita has already begun the introductions of the ceremony.

“Cuando venimos a hacer este acto con la planta, estamos levantando un rezo para la tierra, el agua, el aire, el fuego,” says Taita, explaining that by entering in correspondence with yagé, we are engaging in an act of prayer for the Earth, the Water, the Air and the Fire, “el yagé es una planta de sabiduría, una medicina; le decimos así porque tiene la capacidad de currar,” he adds, stating that yagé is a plant of great wisdom, a medicine with the potential to heal.



He takes a seat at the base of a large *mamoncillo* trunk where his altar is set with a colourful fabric, a pitcher of water and a collection of recycled plastic bottles from Pony Malta and Gatorade, encasing different types of yagé and other plant essences. Singing icaros, he calls the men over one by one—handing them a long ceramic shot glass of the remedio and taking care to wipe the cup clean after each serving. The women are up next, drinking a different yagé, or a combination from various bottles, received in ornate and rounded ceramic cup. They newest patients thoroughly gulp down the entirety of the cup, enjoying its early sweetness.

“No está tan mal,” whispers one of the women to her friend who is called next.

I shiver at the mere thought of receiving the medicine. Those who are assisting El Taita will most often drink after all the patients, a few minutes into the first wave of yagé but before the peak of the ceremony.

Everyone returns to their mat and embraces the process of sitting with yagé as Andrés turns off all the lights in the kiosk and maloca.

It's not long before *los primeros en aliviar*, or the first to vomit, are heard. Germán reaches for a tissue from the stack of neatly folded toilet paper in a small woven container and makes his way to the patient sounding in the distance by the kiosk. On his way back, he stops to tend to the fire between both ceremonial spaces. With a small skillet and feather fan in hand, Freidel walks over to the fire, tossing gems of young amber onto the skillet of hot embers. Sacred gummy resin typical to Central and South America, *copal* is burned throughout the yagé ceremony to dispel evil spirits and negative energies—cleansing the ceremonial space and protecting those drinking yagé. Each person is enrobed in a blanket of thick and fragrantly fuming Amazonian copal—eliciting a calming and uplifting effect, amongst others (Merali et al., 2018) while perhaps also drawing out an urgent gush of yagé.

A woman begins pacing around, frantically searching for God. I get up and reach her right as she's about to tumble over the roots of the *tamarindo*. I help find a seat by the fire and keep her calm but to no avail. Seeing my desperation with the situation, Germán hurries over to help, followed by El Taita—the rattling of *walkas trueno* (sonorous seeds) sounding in his tracks.

“Deje que se encargue Germán,” exclaims El Taita, “ya está siendo tarde, vayan a tomar,” he urges Andrés and I to drink before it gets to be any later and to protect us from everything that is being moved during the ceremony.

We follow El Taita back to the altar where he serves Andrés. He conjures the cup a little longer, praying to the plant but also gifting special *pintas* or visions and specific *sabiduria*, or teachings. These icaros increase or diminish “the intensity of the visions produced by the [yagé], for changing the colours perceived, for directing the emotional content of the hallucinations, etc.” (Luna, 1986, p. 105).

El Taita learned the science of yagé directly from his experience with plant—a true *vegetalista* (Luna, 1986)—and by offering yagé, rather than only drinking it himself to make diagnosis and healing, patients have the chance to learn for themselves through these ceremonies, or “knowing from the inside” as Tim Ingold (2013, p. 1), in this case giving way to an ongoing correspondence in-between El Taita, the plants, the assistants, and the patients. The attunement of El Taita and the assistants reaches beyond the basic knowledge of plant uses but rather dips into active ongoing attention to the intensities of human-plant entanglements and ways of knowing plant medicines such as yagé.

El Taita knows that yagé is a good teacher and will bring to people the necessary knowledge or lessons to make the changes they need in their lives to live well, but whether the patients take and commit to these changes, or *tareas que les deja el yagé*, is up to them in a process by which the patient takes responsibility towards their own healing (Fotiou, 2012).

El Taita hands me my cup, conjured to enter the world of blue.



Grasping the cup with both hands, I slowly bring it up to meet my lips—the wide rim guiding a mouthful of the cold syrup onto my tongue. The process of learning about yagé is “inseparable from doing it” (Ingold, 2000, as cited in Hsu & Lim, 2022, p. 148), in this case drinking it. I can barely stomach its scent and bitter sweetness—pushing myself to gulp it down with one swift tilt of the cup.

“Gracias Taita,” I whisper, whipping the corners of my mouth and handing the cup back to him—a small remnant of the yagé miel forming skid marks as it slips back down the sides of the bowl.

I take my spot in a hammock by the mamoncillo trunk—preferring to sit in the hammock until I have vomited. With eyes closed, I kick off the ground with the tip of my toes, swaying ever so gently—enough to sooth without disturbing the undulating yagé slithering down my stomach. Freidel finds a seat by the fire and begins playing the first

song on the guitar—although it is not an icaro per se, these first songs serve the purpose of “subir mareación” or increasing the vibrations of yagé (Luna, 1986, p. 106), and that it does. Despite drinking later than the others, the magical melodies propel one into the world of yagé.

As a class of plants known to *los vegetalistas* as *los doctores* (Luna, 1986, p. 16), or the doctors, el yagé “entra al cuerpo y escanea todo,” as El Taita says—yagé enters and scans the body, releasing that which is impeding on the patients’ health and well-being, be that illness, boredom, confusion, etc., and strengthening the spirit or life force.

“Dariel,” says Germán, standing three feet away from me with the copal skillet—he fans a plume of smoke in my direction which I receive with a swoop of the hand and over my head. El yagé shifts inside, awakened by the provoking smell of the burning white resin.

Approaching the peak of darkness, permeability of the space is heightened—everything and everyone is open and mixing in the humid air. Droplets lay against and seep into the skin, cooling each limb as somnolence and dreaming builds upon the layers of the yagé night. The vegetation surrounding la maloca is dense and somber yet familiar shadows pace under the moonlight glow. I take surefooted steps over the tangled roots and low hanging *mamones*.

“Les faltó sembrar ají picante,” says Jesus Giagrekudo, the son of El Abuelo Rodolfo, observing *la chagra* or garden space beside la maloca. A chagra should always include tobacco, coca, yucca, albahaca and spicy peppers, amongst other comestibles.

“Cierto,” I affirm, “mañana le diré a Andrés de sembrar unas semillas de aji en el semillero,” I say, promising to start spicy pepper seedlings for the garden.

“Deberias volver adentro, aquí te puede coger el pájaro chupa almas,” warns Jesus, urging me to go back inside la maloca where its safe from the mythical soul sucking bird.

A woman shrieks in my ear.

“¡Ayuda! ¡Ayuden me!” she desperately calls for help.

“¡Esto está fuerte, esto está fuerte!” responds a man in a symphony of screams.

The rattling of walkas approach and just as quickly fadeout. I let out an inaudible call for a blanket, but everyone is occupied—it’s all hands-on deck and I’m left alone. El Taita and the ayudantes tend to the patients struggling to navigate the threshold of life and death, or as Taussig (1986) refers to it, the space of death (p. 7)—a space of transformation where the souls of those killed in terror during the Putumayo rubber boom roam the winds— “viviendo libre en la gloria de un mundo invisible” (Cordoba, 2017, 1:36)

In passing this space of death, one closely encounters death and gains a more “vivid sense of life”—learning through suffering (Taussig, 1986, pp. 7; 140).

I huddle in the dampened hammock and take deep breaths to comfort myself—giving in to my trembling limbs as a stream of copal washes over me.

“Aguanta, aguanta.”

The shrieks are coming from above, claws scratching at the metal roof.

“Dariel, ayuda al muchacho que solo habla inglés, asks El Taita.



I find the man meditating under one of the four posts of the grand maloca.

“Sir, let me help you find a seat elsewhere. We need the space to start the healing,”

I tell the man caught in a daze, assuring him that he will be called when it is his turn for the curación.

With over 70 patients inside the maloca, there are not enough buckets everyone. “Working myself in[to] the circle” of the ceremony (Sacco 2020, p. 16), I grab as many buckets as I can—rushing out the back of the maloca to empty and clean them. El Barranquero hoots. I return the buckets inside only to exchange them for soiled ones at the doorframe—ensuring the more experienced helpers are free to help those in need inside.

Swish, swoosh. Hoot, hoot. Walkas.

“Dariel, la curación.”

Undistinguishable shadows illuminated by the glow of the central fire spiral across the walls of la maloca.

Walkas.

“Dariel, vengase para la curación,” El Taita calls me over for the healing.

Una pluma de Guacamaya—a Scarlet Macaw.

Its sheltering wingspang fanning the darkness away as I basked under the warm glow of its aura— “su aura [que] era mágica y dorada” (Losada, 2016, 1 :32).

El Taita set the feather down. He takes a seat beside me on the bench, looking ahead at the fire he asks:

“¿Como estás Dariel? Nunca habia visto al yagé cogerla tan fuerte.”

“Tuve mucho miedo de morirme Taita,” I whisper back.

“Lo que se muere es la oscuridad,” replies El Taita.

“¡Welcome to the club of los chumados!” exclaims Andrés encouragingly.

A drop falls on my cheek. Another on my chin. A plop on the forehead, and on my bare feet.

The breeze picks up and the mamoncillos release a splatter of droplets onto the hammock. I gasp for air as if breaking the surface. Andrés quietly swaying in the hammock, raises his head in perplexed confusion. I try to get my barring before slipping out of the hammock and untie it from the post, but suddenly decide to rush over to the patients who have also hung their hammock outside the reaches of the roof by the kiosk.

Water guzzles down the roof of the maloca, its sheets of plastic sealed together with duct tape allowing pools to form on the fine sand floor. People scurry like ants taking shelter from the rain in pockets of safety. I'm soaked before even making it through to the *kiosko* where I help an elderly woman find shelter under its impermeable thatched roof.

El Taita rushes towards the benches by the fire, *colmillos de jabalí* glistening behind a web of faceted spinel like the wide-open mouth of a midnight jaguar.



“Dariel, ayuda a guardar los instrumentos,” he advises as we both stumble back across the boggy terrain to make space for the curación inside the maloca.

I place a rickety stool at the edge of the entrance just shy of the downpour, with my back to the curación taking place behind me. I keep my gaze on the fire that continues to burn vividly despite the *aguacero*, the harsh rainfall.

The rustling of *la waira sacha*, “spirit of the forest [...] brush of the wind” (Taussig, 1986, p. 99), the harmonica and the *soplos de chonduro y aguardienete* or plant essence of chodure (Flores & Flores, n.d.), mark the culmination of this yagé night for the first round of patients.

I’m called for the last round with Germán and Andrés and a few remaining patients.

“Cierren los ojos por favor” instructs El Taita in preparation of the soplo.



I close my eyes in anticipation of the fragrant perfume. El Taita brushes the waira over my open palms once, twice...and twenty times over accompanied by rhythmic tapping, “closing” the process with the yagé and calling me back from the threshold before moving on to the person on my right. I open my eyes and spot a bucket at Germán’s feet—trying to gauge if he will need it or not, I leap forward just in time to avoid vomiting at my feet.

Minutes away from dawn, the rain turns to a soft drizzle giving way to the first particles of sunlight across the blanket of fog enveloping La Finca. A cacophony of *guacharacas* prance amongst the treetops, causing a ruckus below.

“Andrés sería bueno que fume tabaco para lo de los vecinos,” says El Taita, instructing Andrés to smoke a tobacco in prayer for the with impromptu fibreglass plant next door.

I watch as Andrés lights a hand-rolled tobacco, the same ones gifted by Fabio, releasing plumes of tobacco smoke in the direction of the next-door neighbours—praying for the situation to improve and for the unlawful business to simply go away.

I carefully make my way up the hill and inside the house to prepare fresh tropical fruit and warm *aguapanela* for everyone before they wake up. From the kitchen window, Zindulí can be seen fluttering around the newly opened blossoms and fresh nectar.

Platter in hand, I make several trips offering fruit and panela water to those who are awake before joining El Taita and los yageceros Andrés, Germán and Freidel para mambear and recount the best moments of the yagé night.

“Coste, casi les hecho el Gatorade que dejaste en el banquito durante la curacion,” exclaims El Taita amused at the confusion between the chonduro bottle, and the Gatorade bottle left on the bench by Germán during the healing.

A woman approaches to speak with El Taita and Andrés about the ceremony.

“La verdad quede muy impresionada con la ceremonia, la música, la curación personal—quiero seguir tomando con usted. ¿Cuándo es la próxima ceremonia?” She affirms her desire to continue drinking with El Taita Giovanni en Casa Zindlui and to visit la Maloca Inkal Awá.

“Esa mujer toma en Muelle del Sol y mira, le gusto mas tomar yagé aqui,” comments Andrés as the woman gathers her belongings.

“Andrés, vámos a visitar al Mamo mañana,” says Taita, urging us to embark on a road trip down the coast to visit his long-time friend Mamo Jaime in Palomino, an hour east from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (or three hours east from Barranquilla), and simultaneously enjoy this opportunity to sunbath on the Caribbean coast of Colombia after two long weekends of yagé nights.

Chapter 3

Sitios de Pagamentos

3.1 *El Caracolí*

“Mira como el mar se ha comido la playa,” I exclaim at the sight of the quickly receding shoreline in Palomino.

“Pronto no quedará nada,” adds Andrés dismally, affirming that at this rate the entire coastline will be swallowed by the Caribbean Sea. Palomino is amongst the most vulnerable regions on the Caribbean coastline with an average erosion rate of 1.2 metres a year and some areas losing nearly 2 metres of its sandy beaches to the sea each year (Rangel-Buitrago & Anfuso, 2009, p. 794).

We pull up in front of a local shop boarded by muddied motorcycle and *camionetas* unloading new produce for the day. Hopping out of the truck, we hopscotch our way over to the entrance, evading the low pools of water that have formed across the sandy clay soil. El Taita and the others fill several shopping baskets with coffee, rice, *panela* or whole cane sugar, beans, salt, cooking oil, potatoes, tomatoes, fruits, fish, etc., while I select a few sketchpads, colouring books, and coloured pencils before joining them at the till.

The foothills of the Sierra Nevada rejoice in an abundance of water, but segments of the road into the tropical forest have been washed away by the recent *aguacero*. Andrés carefully maneuvers through the winding road and overgrown vegetation; out of the passenger window, a ravine gives way to a serpentine river and houses sprouting on the hillsides. As we gain altitude, the dispersing clouds unveil the rapidly receding snow-capped peaks. The glacier that once covered over 80 square kilometres of this enchanting coastal mountain system is receding at a rate of 3 square kilometres per year since 2000,

spreading fear and concern over the changes occurring to this UNESCO biosphere reserve—El Corazón del Mundo (Serrano, 2024; Magrin et al. 2014, p. 1517). The truck begins its descent towards a narrow crossing; the river of snowmelt just shallow enough to safely make it across before gaining altitude once more.

Arriving at a small Arhuaco village of circular thatched-roof homes, we unload the groceries at the entrance of the river rock gate and walk over to a small house under a 400-year-old *arbol de Caracolí*, or a wild cashew tree. Children in cotton tunics run around barefoot, playing, and collecting fallen fruits of cashews and mangos from the mossy ground cover.

“¡Mamo Jaime! ¿Cómo está?” exclaims El Taita at the sight of his old friend.

“¡Muy bien Giovani, muy bien! ¡Gracias por la visita!” he replies cheerfully. “Sientense, sientense. ¿Quieren café?” he adds gesturing us to take a seat from a selection of three-legged chairs and tree stumps while the Sierra Nevada coffee is being prepared.

I take a seat by the entrance of the house and hand out the colouring books and pencils before pulling out my own sketchbook and drawing with the children.

“¡Dibujaste a mi papá!” exclaims Lucia, daughter of El Mamo at the sight of one of my drawings resembling her father. She is right, it’s a drawing of Mamo Jaime by the cashew tree.

“¡Si, lo es, y mira,” I quickly sketch out the both of us sitting by the house, “y aqui estamos tu y yo!” I say, watching her smile grow.

“¿Te gusta el libro de biodiversidad marina?” I ask.

“¡Si me encanta!” she responds, choosing to colour a tropical fish from the marine biodiversity colouring book with one of her siblings.

“¿Mamo puedo hablar con usted?” asks Andrés.

“Claro claro, venga sientense acá,” replies El Mamo, graciously leading us to his site of work, under the majestic branches of the ancient Caracolí.



Once seated, El Mamo’s eyebrows furrowed into a stern expression—his arms crossed firmly over his chest, with two mochilas tucked beneath his armpit. This stance accentuating the dozens of woven cotton bracelets secured to his forearms that surprisingly did not cut off his circulation.



“Cuentame Andrés,” he says, ready to listen to Andrés’ troubles.

“Mamo, no sabemos que hacer. Vivimos en una finca y los vecinos al lado montaron una planta de fibra de vidrio,” begins Andrés, recounting the arrival of the fibreglass company next to Casa Zindulí, “hemos intentado hablar con la alcaldía pero parece que por algún motivo, los vecinos tienen derecho de tener esa empresa ahí, ” he adds, frustrated with the many failed attempts to communicate with the mayor’s office in hope of getting the company to shut down operations in a rural and tropical forest conservation area.

El Mamo reaches into one of his mochilas and pulls out a handful of *hayo* or *áju*, specially toasted coca leaves typical to the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. He offers a portion to Andrés who receives them with both hands and naturally brings them to his

mouth in a customary greeting and in an initiation to the work about to commence (Bastien, 1978, as cited in Stolberg, 2011, p. 133). El Mamo looks at me with another handful of leaves; I quickly open my palms to receive them. They immediately stick on contact with my lips, tongue, and cheek. Hesitating between chewing the hayo or holding it in my cheek like a quid of mambe, I curiously look to Andrés, gauging what he has done with the hayo and in doing so indivertibly miss part of the conversation between El Mamo and Andrés.

“La resina da dolor de cabeza, pica los ojos y la garganta. No nos podemos quedar ahí cuando estan trabajando y los residuos entran al arroyo...no queremos vender la finca pero está difiicil vivir al lado de ellos,” expresses Andrés disheartened at the prospects of continuing to live at Casa Zinduli without being affected by the toxic resin fumes and disturbances that have pushed him to consider selling the property.

El Mamo, *poporo* in hand and pointed dowel in the other, attentively records everything being shared—meticulously etching the neck of the gourd with the lime it contains, tinted by the chemical reaction with the alkaloid-heavy hayo in his cheek to produce the pale chartreuse ring that gives the poporo its distinctive shape and colour. The size of the “yellow crust of dried spittle at the mouth of the poporo” is a testament to this “purifying ritual” and *pagamento a la Madre*, or payment to the Earth, by which thoughts are written and imbibed with coca from the Sierra, and shells from the Caribbean Sea (Taussig, 2004, p. 16). La coca opens the pathway for thoughts while the lime is a return to the origin, “[al] momento de creacion” (Angarita Cáceres et al., 2024, p. 4).



Poporo en pueblo Arhuaco – Mixed media drawing by Andrés Galeano (2023)

“Antes de todo, hay que entender que nada se va dar en este plano si no ha estado trabajado en lo espiritual primero,” he begins, explaining that it is crucial to initiate a spiritual work, *un pagamento*, to ensure the best possible outcome for this situation. The process of making a pagamento allows one to deposit their “spiritual load,” relieving them of any burdens and negativity and allowing them to fulfil a spiritual alignment with the Sierra Nevada as they “harmonize thoughts and energies [...] that balance the flow of natural forces,” while also purifying and ensuring the ecological substance and health of both the Sierra and the peoples completing the pagamentos (Parra Witte, 2020, p. 10). El Mamo explains that without the pagamento, any request made by Andrés to the mayor’s

office will only fall on deaf ears, in addition to leaving the inhabitants and visitors of Casa Zindulí susceptible to distress and illness. Pagamentos—practiced by the four Indigenous groups descendent of *el pueblo* Tayrona (Arhuaco, Kamkuamo, Kogi and Wiwa) that now inhabit the world’s tallest coastal mountain—correspondent to the *Ley del Origen* or *Seyn Zare*, “a philosophy that governs human relationships to nature and the universe” (Diaz, 2021; Confederación Indígena Tayrona Organización del Pueblo Arhuaco, 2017). To follow the Ley del Origen is to fulfill a duty to consult, seek permission, offer retribution, heal, prevent illness, and “mantener el equilibrio del mundo sobre la Sierra,” maintain balance of the world through the Sierra (Coral, 2023; Organización Gonawindúa Tayrona y Parque Nacional Natural Tayrona, 2022, p. 15; Quigua et al. 2009, 0:56).

El Mamo carefully sets the poporo against a steady rock before pulling out a hearty cotton blossom from his mochila and begins tugging at its fibres, rolling them into several



small spheres. We carefully receive the bundles of cotton in each hand—some in the left for the negative and some in the right for the positive.

“Hagan así,” instructs El Mamo, gesturing for us to circle our wrist outwards, in a cleansing motion—discharging thoughts, memories and actions through the circular weaving movements that also “recall[s] the moment when the Great Mother spun the universe into being” (Parra Witte, 2020; Davis, 209 p. 144).

Grasping the pieces cotton firmly so that none escape from the crevasse of my fists, I concentrate on the process of discharging as the Mamo continues to instruct us on the *pagamento*.

“Concéntrense bien” he says, “todo lo que tiene que ver con el vecino, vayan sacando todo lo que han visto, toda la rabia, la envidia, los malos pensamientos, vayan sacando todo, todo,” he adds, as we continue to cleanse ourselves of every interaction and



thought to do with the fibreglass company next to Zindulí and more before carefully returning the cotton bundles to him.

He gathers the bundles and speaks to them blowing a loving breath as he calls on *las Jabas* and *los Jates* (*las madres y los padres espirituales*) or the spiritual mother and father, before setting the cottons aside to be placed in two sacred sites once back at Casa Zindulí. He hands us another set of cotton spheres, this time to bring in abundance, good health and positive thoughts. El Mamo instructs us once more, this time to weave our wrists inwards:

“Concéntrense. Piensen en lo que quieren atraer en la vida...en tener buena salud, felicidad, que estén bien ahí en Casa Zindulí...que se vayan los vecinos; que Dariel tenga éxito en la tesis, en su trabajo...” he adds, cheerfully guiding the pagamento as positive thoughts of everything we wish for our lives seep into the folds of the golden fibres of the cotton blossom.



The golden rays of Bunkuakukui, the sun, shine on the delicate gold flakes pressed against a peso. El Mamo instructs us each to tuck this peso in our wallets and to always carry it with us—calling on the abundance and riches taken from the Americas and brought to the European civilizations to return to the territories from which it originated.

“¿Tienen algún perfume?” asks El Mamo requesting a bottle of perfume for each of us for the final steps of the pagamento.

“El Taita debe tener esencia de flores,” responds Andrés, gesturing to El Taita who is quietly sipping on a cup of coffee with Germán and Freidel.

El Taita makes his way over under the Caracolí and pulls out two small bottles of plant essences specially made in his maloca. This batch is especially powerful, containing the essence of the enchanting pink flowers of an Amazonian beauty—the Bobinzana tree (Luna, 1986, p. 101).

“¡Perfecto!” rejoices El Mamo. He gratefully receives the bottles, stuffing them with the small cotton bundles that had been charged with positivity. “Aquí tienen el perfume, echenselo antes de una entrevista de trabajo, antes de hablar de un proyecto un negocio o antes de una reunión importante,” he adds instructing us on the use of the perfume before important meetings or interviews.

La Saga, wife of El Mamo, approaches the Caracolí carrying a bundle of twisted cotton strings to be placed on our wrists—connecting us to this sacred site.

“Mira este cabello,” she exclaims lovingly stroking my hair as I lean into her soft belly. She assures me that even the smallest piece would make a fine payment towards my spiritual home, and more, in another pagamento.

“La próxima vez que venga aprender a cosechar áyu,” adds El Mamo inviting me to learn how to harvest áyu or coca from the Sierra with the Arhuaco women.

“Gracias Mamo. Claro que sí me gustaria mucho,” I reply, accepting his invitation.

“Mamo, cuando quieran pueden venir a visitarnos y tomar yagé en Casa Zindulí. Nosotros pagamos el transporte,” adds Andrés inviting El Mamo and his family to visit and attend the yagé ceremonies at Casa Zindulí.

“¡Yagé! Tengo años sin tomar yagé, desde la última ceremonia con El Abuelo Rodolfo en la maloca chiquita del Taita Giovanni,” says El Mamo, reminiscing over his last yagé ceremony with El Abuelo Rodolfo when Taita Giovanni still used the small maloca for ceremonies.

“¿Que le debemos hoy?” I ask, offering to pay El Mamo for his time and help.

“Nada, nada. Solo pido que no me olviden cuando les vaya bien y ¡que no se le olvida hablar bien de los pagos en su tesis!” he responds, generously gifting us his services with the condition that we think of him when things are going well and that I don’t forget to speak of the payments in my thesis.

“Muchas gracias Mamo Jaime. Gracias Saga,” I say gracefully thanking El Mamo and his wife for their generosity and hospitality.

“Antes que se vayan, podrian pasar por Piedra Pintada. Ahí se va hacer un pago con un amigo, un mamo Kogui. Mi sobrino les puede acompañar hasta allá,” says Mamo Jaime, encouraging us to attend a pago happening at the sacred site of Piedra Pintada.

“Ah bueno Mamo Jaime, claro que sí nos gustaria ir,” replies Andrés, as we follow El Mamo’s nephew into the woods behind the Caracolí.

3.2 *Piedra Pintada*

“Que t n lejos queda Piedra Pintada,” I ask the man leading the way after roughly 40 minutes of hiking down the narrow foot trail through the dense tropical canopy.

“Para nosotros los ind genas media hora, pero para los bunachis una hora y media,” he replies, confirming that there is an hour left, or a little over “one cocada,” to get to the sacred site (Stolberg, 2011, p. 134).

I do my best to keep up with the pace set by the Arhuaco guide, stepping in the same wells created by his rain boots and steadying myself on the winding vines and hearty root systems as we make our way up and down the muddy terrain. A section of thinning canopy gives way to an aqua stream accompanied by swirling pools of water between towering smooth rocks. Women in long cotton tunics vigorously cleaning linens in the cool glacier waters, their glistening beaded necklaces sway with each movement of their wrists. Nearby, children splash and giggle in the safety of the shallows.

As the scorching heat of high noon intensifies, I find myself longing for the refreshing pools of water we’ve left behind. Looking up, I notice the guide effortlessly gaining altitude on an unimaginably lengthy and daunting climb.

“Es por aqu ,” says the guide, signalling the way forward on a deviating path back under the cover of the trees.

Los monos aulladores, or howler monkeys, announce our proximity to the site. An eerie feeling washes over me as I imagine the snakes that could be harboured within each humid and rocky crevice beneath my boots.

“Mira,” says Andr s, sharing the same preoccupation. “Hechate ambil en el tobillo. Asi hacia Jesus Giagrekudo para alejar a las culebras,” he adds, handing me the small tub

of *ambil* to place on my ankles—a preventative measure Jesus Giagrekudo used to drive snakes away.

Arriving at the site just as the *pagamento* is about to begin, we quickly find a spot amongst the handful of people in attendance. I shimmy my way into the cave, nestled beneath the narrow opening just shy of the top of my head. I trace my hand over the ancient painted engravings of humanoid figures that grace the humid walls and floor of the cavernous mouth. Across from me, the Mamo is diligently working with the *poporo*—*poporeando*—as a divinely placed ray of sunshine pierces the canopy, illuminating the back of his white cloth.

Pockets of sunlight filters in a soft golden glow over the man-made engravings resembling a stairway or house, deeply embedded into the rock wall. The smoothness of the surface can be attributed to water coursing and sculpting the space since time immemorial. A slow and steady trickling echoes in the background as the Mamo welcomes us to *Kasmhashoru* or *Piedra Pintada*—a sacred site of the *Mokaná* (Rodríguez, 2023) and a part of *la Linea Negra*, *Sé sizha*.

“Este sitio de *Sé sizha* se conecta con el origen de la vida. Es un sitio donde se paga con el negativo,” recounts the Mamo.

The sacred and natural sites that flow from *la Linea Negra* are interwoven with various sites across the Universe—a meshwork of lifelines and sacred sites, an ongoing happening and correspondences in-between living beings (OGT & PNN Taryona, 2022, p. 14; Ingold, 2015, p. 3; Ingold, 2013b, p. 107; Cadena, 2015). These sites are recognized by the Colombian government and as important to the Indigenous peoples originating from *la Sierra* who hold the right to practice their cosmovision in these sites—ensuring harmony

and balance is maintained across all spaces and ecosystems, that which are visible and invisible (OGT & PNN Tayrona, 2022, pp. 7; 14).

Bundles of cotton are distributed amongst the group to begin collecting material to pay the negative, to return everything that we are carrying, what we have consumed, to Jaba Someizhi, spiritual mother for healing illness and negative thoughts (OGT & PNN Tayrona, 2022, pp. 12; 38).

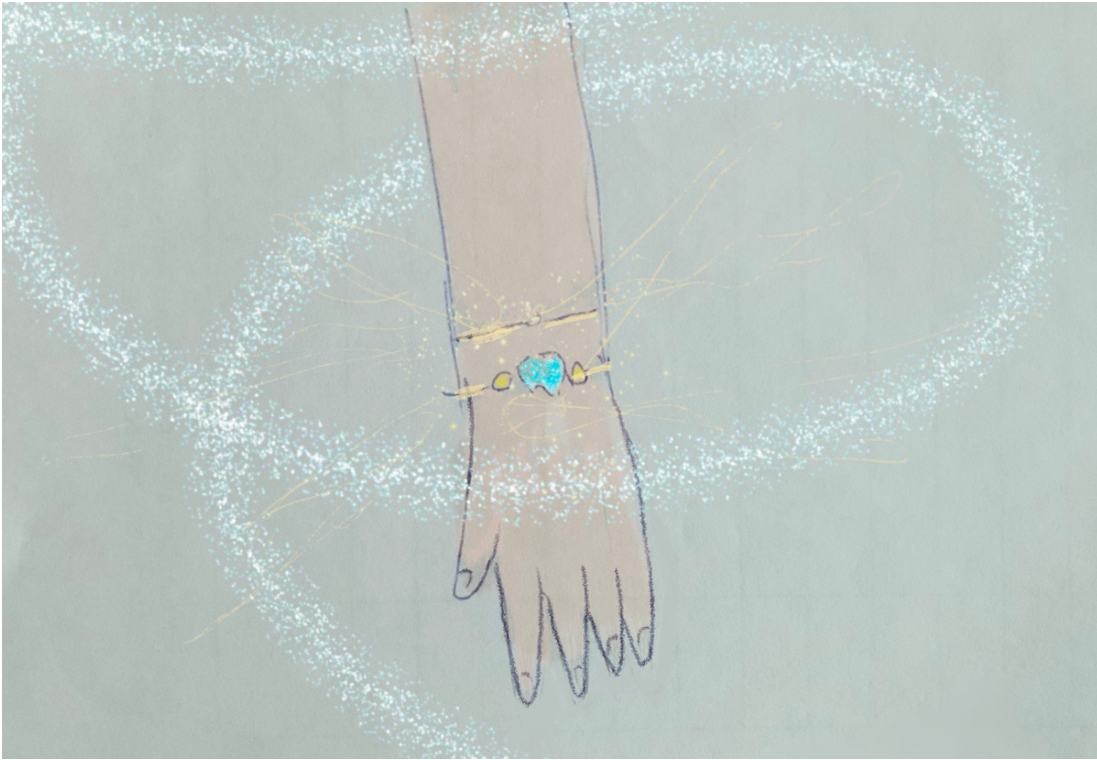
“Para mantener el equilibrio, el negativo tambien hay que pagarlo, y es lo que estamos haciendo aquí,” explains the Mamo, explaining that all things need to have its balance and that balance and harmony are achieved through the *pagamentos*—*pagamentos* to the positive and *pagamentos* to the negative.

“Cuando se vayan de este sitio y regresen a su casa, acuerdense de este lugar y manden sus pensamientos, su *pagamento* aquí en Piedra Pintada para ir alimentando el sitio,” he adds, instructing us on conducting *pagamentos* at a distance. Through remembering this site, Piedra Pintada would receive and be nourished by our *pagamentos* whether we are physically present at the sacred site or not.

The cotton bundles left at the site ensure that participants are registered to this energetic node—woven into the meshwork of la Linea Negra (Arenas Gómez, 2020, as cited in Parra Witte, 2020, p. 10; Ingold, 2015).

The children of the Mamo distribute *manillas*, or woven cotton bracelets, to each participant while helping us to tie them to each wrist. These *manillas*, sometimes adorned with glass beads, are considered to protect the wearer, particularly amongst the Kogi (Angarita Cáceres, 2024, p. 2). Amongst the Arhuaco or Iku, these bracelets are understood

to tie or connect the person to the sacred site—serving as a testimony of the spiritual work completed or important meeting assisted by the wearer of these manillas (ibid.).



With the *pagamento* finalized, the Mamo and his family are the first to head back down the hill. The Mamo’s wife, *la Saga*, gracefully navigates the uneven terrain with a *mochila* strapped across her forehead—leaving her hands free to effortlessly weave the intricate pattern of a new *mochila* as she disappears into the winding trail.

The drive back to Barranquilla is marked by several stops at *peajes*, toll booths, along the Troncal del Caribe or the Ciénaga Highway. Built in 1956 under the dictatorship of Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, the Troncal del Caribe spans from Barranquilla all the way to Paraguachón on the border with Venezuela (Rueda, 2020)—crossing the most productive estuarine ecosystems in the world, *la Ciénaga Grande de Santa Marta* (Rasolt, 2023). The

separation of the Ciénaga Grande from the Caribbean Sea led to devastating consequences to its mangroves, avian and aquatic species, such as the critical ecosystems and avian sanctuaries la Isla de Salamanca, better known as *el Aeropuerto Internacional de las Aves* or the Avian International Airport (ibid.; Parques Nacionales Naturales Colombia, 2023; Daza, 2020).

The same road that deprives the once vibrant mangroves from the saline breath of the sea, also stifles Tasajera—a small fisherman village in Pueblo Viejo largely overlooked by the Colombian State and one of the poorest places in the country (CE Noticias Financieras, 2020). The colourful mosaic of plastic and waste surrounding makeshift homes glisten under the setting sun along with the puddles of murky salt water. In absence of basic amenities such as safe drinking water, waste management and sewer systems, the inhabitants of Tasajera are forced to depend on the transient traffic that passes between the toll booth for subsistence—fishing from the sea and Cienega but also from the road, collecting debris from car wrecks or looting gasoline from toppled tanker trucks (ibid.).

Closing my eyes for a moment, I return these sights of Tasajera’s environmental degradation, plastic pollution, and government-imposed hardships to Piedra Pintada—nourishing the sacred site and reinforcing the *pagamento* to the negative.

3.3 *Temazcal*

The vigorous rustling of the ruffled fan palm heralds the arrival of the northern winds, marking an early end to the rainy season on the Caribbean Coast of Colombia. Kneeling beneath the broad *malanga* or taro leaves in the garden at Zindulí, I carefully transplant the hot pepper seedlings, taking advantage of the slightly damp soil. A series of honks echoes throughout la finca and Fabio rushes out of his adjacent house, hastily pulling on a worn-

out t-shirt before hurrying to open el portón azul the front gate. Several vehicles arrive, seeking shelter under the neem trees' canopy. I gently press the final seedling into the soil, swiftly wiping my hands clean along my thighs before joining the guests at the main house.

“¡Hola Dariel!” exclaims Dr. Bee, “aquí les traigo huevos y miel,” he adds, handing me a carton of fresh eggs and a jar filled with dark amber liquid from his most recent honey harvest.

“¡Muchas gracias Jhon!” I thank him, receiving his generous gifts. “Andrés está abajo preparando el fuego para el temazcal,” I add, alerting him and the other members of La Familia de Barranquilla who've arrived simultaneously that they can find Andrés by the *temazcal*, also known as the *inpi* in Mesoamerican cultures or as the sweat lodge in North America.

The flames engulf the neatly stacked river stones for a minimum of two hours. Dr. Bee and Fabio stay behind to assist the fire keeper with the sacred fire while Andrés leads the rest of the Barranquilla Family down the forest trails of Zindulí.

“Vamos a recoger material para entregar al sitio,” exclaims Andrés already several steps ahead. El Mamo Jaime carefully instructed to establish two sacred sites once we returned to Zindulí, one down the hill at the back of la finca, or Yakiné to collect the negative and one at the top of the hill near the entrance, or Yakuma to collect the positive. These sacred sites establish correspondence from Zindulí to the site of the Gran Caracolí and ultimately joins them into to the meshwork that is La Linea Negra.

Arriving to La Bonga, a towering Ceiba tree at the back of the lot, I cautiously pull out the small bundles of cotton from my left pocket, the same cotton spheres we worked with under the Caracolí and hand them to Andrés to place at the base of the Bonga. He

goes on to hand each member present a new set of cotton spheres so that they too may collect material to leave at the site for Yakiné.

Our next stop is back near the main house, under the Tamarindo tree by the maloca. Once more, I pull out the cotton spheres this time from my right pocket and place them at the base of the tree before gathering further material at the site for Yakuma. The sun is nearly setting below the distant treeline—bugs and birds zoom around during this window of heightened activity. An emerald zindulí (hummingbird) flutters by the *cayena* or hibiscus bush, leading me into the flower garden to collect fresh blooms for La Tortuga, the turtle altar in front of the temazcal.

The logs have reduced to embers and the river stones are glowing a vibrant sun-drenched red—it is nearly time to enter the inipi. I stay behind to finish decorating the turtle with blossoms and a handful of beans while the others hurry to get changed for the sweat.

A skillet of burning copal awaits at the entrance of the temazcal for participants to smudge before crawling beneath the low hanging arch. I bow my head to the ground, mouthing:

“Aho Mitakuye Oyasin,”—for all my relations.

The stones are brought in one by one and carefully placed in the centre pit using deer antlers before being welcomed by a unified “bienvenida abuelita,” welcome grandmother, accompanied by a sprinkle of fragrant herbs. The tarp is pulled over the entrance, enveloping us in a comforting darkness, aroma, and vapour—the faint glow of the stones fading with each drop of water added to the pit. The steam steadily draws out toxins; releasing, purifying, and healing to leave one feeling reenergized and reborn (Aparicio Mena, 2006, p. 7). With each of the four rounds of the temazcal, a word and

prayers are shared for the health and well-being of the members of La Familia de Barranquilla—bringing harmony and balance to our relationships (Aparicio Mena, 2006, p. 2). Each heartbeat dances to the rhythm of the drum and chanting, another integral part of the healing process (Osborn, 2009, as cited in Ismare et al., 2020, p. 236). Passed down to the *buscadores* of the family, the vision seekers of the Camino Rojo, the temazcal remains a private affair open only to the members of the family and most often with the added support of Taita Giovani who encourages a sweat each time he travels to the coast.

“¡Puerta!”

The flap of fabric is lifted, and a whirl of cool air electrifies the skin and dampened cloth. Blissfully crawling through the mud and bowing at the entrance once more, several members collapse outside of the inipi—rejoicing in the calm trickling of the nearby stream and a mesmerizing sight of the Milky Way.

The cauldron rumbles over the stove top in the kitchen; I pull out a dozen cups to serve everyone a warming cup of *aguapanela* before they depart back to the city.

“Recibí una llamada de Malabo cuando regresamos de Palomino, pero no me entraba la señal en la Sierra,” I notify Andrés and those who remain of a call from a Sikuani Elder. “Nos invito a conocer la danza pero empieza en dos días, no sé si nos da tiempo de llegar,” I add extending Malabo’s invitation to participate in a ritual dance of Tsamanimonae (Agudelo, 2023).

“Vámos ahora que el arroyo está crecido,” says El Taita enthusiastically accepting the invitation and encouraging us to travel tonight while the stream is still high.

Despite hesitation, Andrés, Germán, Freidel, El Taita and I agree to embark on a night's journey to Sikuaní territory, arriving in time for la danza and pay a long overdue visit to a well-respected friend and Elder, El Abuelo Malabo Nakua Liwasi. Thankfully, my bag from our visit to Mamo Jaime sits unpacked on my bed; I quickly switch out a few items before joining the other by the stream where Fabio's pirogue awaits.

I slip into the swaying vessel and settle in what appears to be the steadiest part of the pirogue, grasping onto my mochila for comfort. Ahead, the inky waters wind through a maze of low-hanging vines and black bamboo. Guided only by a sliver of moonlight, the canoe furrows to the low hum of the current and from the shorelines a thousand golden eyes— “la vigilan...los jaguares y las boas, la protegen desde la espesura, mil jaguares y mil boas” (Pinto, 2024, 1 :01-1 :30).



Rufus Tailed Jacamar (King Hummingbird), Casa Zindulí



Thatched roof of the kiosk, Casa Zindulí



Andrés leading the way through the forest trails, Casa Zindulí



La Bonga—Sitio de pagamento en Casa Zindulí



En Los Llanos Orientales de Colombia – In the Eastern Plains of Colombia



Hand-painted bench for yagé ceremonies, Maloca Inkal Awá



Night sky in Santa Elena, Maloca Inkal Awá



Pagamento, Piedra Pintada



Coastal Maloca with provisional plastic roof, Casa Zindulí



Fabio Guisado outside el portón azul, Casa Zindulí

Chapter 4

Cantos de Permiso

4.1 *Liwaisibo*

Day breaks over the misty river as Germán leads the pirogue into a narrow channel, bringing us deeper into the tangled mangrove forest. The current settles at the edge of gentle whirlpool created by a hidden waterfall where a large man is bathing. The man gathers his things, tossing two large bottles of spring water over his shoulder and shooting a smile at us before scaling an earthen stairway.

We haul the pirogue onto the bank bordered by delicate and fragrant aquatic flowers populate the clay riverbed. I reach below the water and scoop up a handful of ashy clay—the perfect mosquito repellent—and apply it to any exposed skin. Playful ears peer over the stairway, and to my surprise a curious copper-colored dog at the top. He gallantly leads us through the trail, occasionally pausing for us to catch up, guiding us further into Sikuani territory—*Los Llanos Orientales de Colombia*, the Eastern Plains of Colombia. As we emerge from the canopy, the landscape gives way to a plateau of rolling hills, their surfaces dusted with a mix of burnt sienna and dark charcoal from recent slashing and burning, stretching as far as the eye can see. Our furry guide stares at the path ahead reaching *el resguardo* Sikuani, the Sikuani reserve, which resides merely a few hillsides away.

As we enter the community, our large backpacks mark us as outsiders, but our canine guide seems at home as he prances towards an outdoor kitchen space adjacent to a thatched-roof building. Amidst the unfamiliar faces, I recognize a man in a dark blue plaid shirt and *sombrero llanero*, a traditional cowboy-style hat from the grasslands of Colombia, this one noticeably fashioned from otter skin and ornate bird feathers.



Liwasibo– Mixed media drawing by Andrés Galeano (2023)

“¡Hola Malabo! ¿Como está?” I exclaim as we enter the kitchen space and embrace the Elder.

“¡Dariel, Andrés, Giovanni! ¡Que bien que pudieron llegar!” he says joyfully returning our greetings.

“Si Abuelo, estuvo largo el viaje en canoa pero llegamos bien,” adds Andrés recounting our long but safe nocturnal journey by canoe.

“Me alegra mucho. El desayuno está listo. Coman aquí y nos vemos en Liwasibo,” responds Malabo, offering us a delectable bowl of potato and egg broth accompanied by an *arepa* before joining him in Liwasibo, *La Casa de Pensamiento* or the house of thoughts, where Malabo goes to sit and work every day.

With our bellies full, we step into Liwasibo and take a seat on the long wooden benches placed along the four walls. Across from the benches, several hand-carved stools

of the various animals of the Eastern Plains, such as the Chigüiro or Capybara, the Turtle, the Armadillo, the Tapirs, the Toad, the Alligator, etc., covered in intricate black and white patterns. I turn my head and press my cheek against the wall, gazing through the narrow openings of the wooden plank siding—powder blue skies lean down to kiss the green pastures that stretch across the horizon.

“Entonces Dariel, cuentame ¿como va la tesis? Andrés me dice que estas haciendo un proyecto bien interesante. ¿Que necesitas de mi?” asks Malabo, inquiring about my thesis and if I there’s anything he can do to help.

“Todo bien Malabo, pero si me gustaria pedirle permiso para escribir sobre nuestra visita aquí,” I reply, asking him permission to include stories of our time here on the Sikuani reserve.

“Dariel, el permiso ya está. Lo que necesitas, estoy aqui para ayudar,” he says, ensuring me that I already have his permission and all his blessings to complete my thesis.

The phone rings and Malabo apologizes before standing to take the call. I watch as he paces around in his handwoven sandals adored with the portrait of a horse, before taking a seat in the *chinchorro*, an aerated cross-woven hammock from the Wayuu, in the corner of the building.

“Yo soy un hombre de palabra,” answers Malabo over the phone, assuring the nervous vendor that he is a man of his word and will make the payment in full as soon as he makes it to the bank in town this afternoon.

As a Sikuani Elder, healer, entrepreneur and campesino, Malabo poses a diligent work ethic, mastering farm work and animal husbandry as a young boy before beginning his studies with the medicine of *yopo* and teachings acquired from his father-in-law. He

attributes the prosperity of his community to the work he does with yopo and although some members of the reserve are averse to the frequent visits received in Liwasibo, Malabo strives to help those in need of his assistance and ensure abundance for his growing family.

“Todo lo que aprendí, lo aprendí del yopo y todo lo que tengo aquí, lo tengo por el yopo,” he says, further affirming this prosperity and knowledge brought by his dedicated work with yopo.

He takes a seat on the backrest of the bench and carefully draws out a cigarette from his packet of Pielroja, a famous Colombian brand of unfiltered cigarettes. Holding the cigarette between two fingers, he begins tapping and singing to the tobacco—*pidiendo permiso al tabaco*, asking for permission before lighting *el cigarillo*.

“Todo tiene su nombre, permiso, rezo, su canto,” explains Malabo, stating that everything has a name, a prayer and a song of permission or *canto de permiso*, including medicinal plants, the wind, the water and the earth (Agudelo, 2023, p. 219).

Before long, Malabo receives another call, this time from a concerned daughter requesting his support in treating her mother.

“Mándeme el nombre de su mamá y una foto para yo investigar y trabajar eso,” says Malabo, requesting the name and a photo of the mother from which he begins investigating the cause of the illness and treatment in the distance.

As a “cosmic mediator” and “ontologically amphibious” plant, *el yopo* allows for diagnosis and healing correspondences as a mediator of the in-between (Coccia, 2016, p. 104; Ingold 2015).

“Si uno no nació con la enfermedad, yo la puedo curar. Para eso estudié con el yopo, para curar,” adds Malabo, reassuring the woman over the phone that if the mother

was not born with this illness that he will be able to cure it, that is what he studied with yopo, to heal.

A young man in rubber boots and a rifle strapped to his back enters Liwasibo and takes a seat in front of Malabo.

“Abuelo vengo para dar un reporte,” begins the young man, announcing his purpose for visiting the Elder. “Vengo del terreno donde queremos sembrar el cacao pero no tuvimos éxito. Hemos hecho varios huecos pero cada vez la tierra está mas dura, el suelo no está bueno para la siembra y los hombres están frustrados,” he goes on to explain that the field in which they are hoping to plant the cacao seeds is not as fertile and malleable as they had hoped it would be. The farmers are frustrated at the prospect of finding the adequate soil conditions for this crop.

“Tranquilo que aquí vamos a solucionar todo. Muchas gracias por su reporte. Siguan haciendo los huecos,” expresses Malabo in a calm and reassuring tone, asking the man to continue looking for better soil conditions while he works on this with yopo from Liwasibo.

The young man exits la casa de pensamiento, relieved to have Malabo’s support as he returns to the fields.

“Bueno. ¿Quien va sorber yopo?” asks Malabo looking at us.

Everyone nods indicating their desire to take yopo except for Germán who still has a quid of mambe in his cheek and will join us in a few minutes.

« Primero hay que masticar el capi. Este capi le decimos Tsipi, o capi colibri,” begins Malabo, handing us a piece of hummingbird capi and instructing us to chew the bitter vine. This capi, hummingbird capi, differs from the ayahusca vine; rather than

seeking the light above the dense rainforest canopies, it grows along the earth, sprouting roots and spreading like rhizomes into capi bushes.

“El yopo lo conecta uno al Cielo, a lo celeste, mientras el capi lo conecta a la tierra” adds Malabo before dropping the burn red powder into the palm of our hands, helping us find the right *siripo* for our nostrils to inhale the yopo that will connect us to the sky, to the celestial (Agudelo, 2023, p. 219). El yopo, “is simultaneously earthly and celestial,” in a “commingling of sky and earth” (Klee, 1973, as cited in Ingold, 2015, p. 44).

Holding the *siripo*, a Y-shaped bone instrument, in one hand and opening my palm to receive the yopo in the other, I take a deep inhale through my nose pulling up the sweet yet fiery particles up the *siripo* and into my nose.

Suddenly my legs feel heavy, and a fiery wave washes over me. I wipe away any residue off my palm and blow my nose into a tissue to discard any remaining particles.

“El caracol es lo que impulse hacia el Cielo y lo celeste, por eso que sienten el calor y el calambre en los pies,” he says reassuringly, explaining that the shells burned and pulverized in the preparation of the yopo powder generates great heat while also propelling us to the celestial.

After several minutes, the heat and cramping have passed, and the floor is no longer spinning in tangled spirals.

The young man with the rifle stomps back into Liwasibo.

“Abuelo, les tengo otro reporte. Hicimos los huecos en el mismo lugar pero ya la tierra esta blandita,” he exclaims, recounting how the soil in the same area of the field where they were previously attempting to sow seeds is now soft and malleable—a prosperous site for growing the cacao pods.

“Aquí hemos estado trabajando todo eso, con el buen pensamiento,” replies Malabo, assuring the young man that *el pensamiento bonito*, or good thoughts and a calm mindset are key in such moments in addition to working with yopo.

“Si Abuelo, es increíble,” he says merrily before prancing out of Liwasibo.

“Bueno, creo que ha sido suficiente por hoy,” says Malabo, marking an end to our work en la casa de pensamiento for today. “Yo tengo que ir al banco hacer una consignacion, pueden quedarse descansando que mañana harémos la danza,” he adds encouraging us to rest up for tomorrow while he heads into town to make a bank transfer.

After lunch, we find a spot to hang the hammocks under the dappled shade of the mango grove—admiring the fruit ripening on the low hanging branches against the backdrop of the eastern plains.

Germán and El Taita are swaying between the trees while Freidel plays guitar, practicing his repertoire of yagé songs. Andrés is sketching Liwasibo while I paint with tobacco resin, working on a portrait of Malabo’s horse, Yopo. In his youth, Malabo traded his cherished horse for a bull—an economic decision he gracefully made to secure the livelihood of his growing family.

4.2 *La Danza*

The next morning, I awake under the cover of the towering Kaliwirinae; its delicate leaves vibrating like a thousand macaw feathers against the bright, blue sky, and between the sunrays, the faintest sight of the capi vines that once kept the tree tied to the cosmos (Ministerio de Educación Nacional, 2025, p. 27).

Malabo, along with a few other guests, are already seated in Liwasibo ready to begin today's lesson before the ritual dance. Plumes of smoke collect within the hollowed peak of the thatched roof, creating a sea of smoke. Malabo is recounting the story of creation according to Sikuani cosmivision, inviting the sea creatures that inhabited the entirely blue planet to enter the house of thoughts—a sea turtle with a carapace covered in glowing plankton weaves between the tall posts. Along with these creatures come the gods, Kuwei and Tsamanimonae, who gifted the medicine of *yopo*, *los cantos de permiso y de curación* or the songs of permission and healing, and the ritual dance of Tsamanimonae *petaxünamuto* (Agudelo, 2023).

A woman enters the house and takes a seat by the entrance, placing five large cigars by her side on the bench. She smokes them one after the other adding to the glowing silver tides stirring above our heads. By the exit a man sits beneath a shelf of carved animal



figures, stories as Malabo calls them, each sculpture holding its own myth. Through the palm overhang, a man sits on a stump beneath the mango trees, singing and studying the sky, the clouds, and the stars.

The rhythmic rattling of the *tsitsitos* or *maracas* (shakers), echoes the momentary suspension of a hummingbird in flight, announcing the beginning of the ritual dance. The leader of the song walks over from beneath the animal figurines and takes his place between the posts of Liwasibo.



“Piensen bonito y danzen con intención, para lo que quieran llamar a sus vidas,” instructs Malabo, handing each of us a maraca and before joining him in a circular dance around the house to pray for our lives in a correspondence of oral histories and embodied knowledge (Buitrago Escobar & Gaitán Quintero, 2016, p. 15).

After several dizzying rounds of dancing led by both the man and the woman, we return to our seats for a moment. Malabo draws a cigarette from his nearly empty pack of Pielroja, whispering his *canto de permiso* before lighting the tobacco.

“Malabo, tengo un dolor aquí en el pecho desde muchos meses y no se me ha quitado, » exclaims Andrés, pointing to a pain in his chest he has carried for several months.

“Ahorita vamos a trabajar todo eso,” responds Malabo, assuring Andrés that he will be treated shortly.

“Dariel tambien lleva varios días con migraña,” adds Andrés, sharing how I have been suffering from terrible migraines for several days.

“Bueno eso tambien lo vamos a trabajar,” says Malabo, assuring that he will treat me as well.

Before beginning the treatments, Malabo brings in a new pitcher of spring water to be prepared for drinking. Equipped with a long bamboo straw, he blows hundreds of air bubbles under the water, imbuing it with the vital breath of life—a breath he draws with the same outstanding lung capacity as that of an Olympic swimmer, despite his frequent inhalation of tobacco smoke. According to Emanuele Coccia (2016), “*le souffle*,” or the breath, is not an isolated object but rather it is the vibration which animates the world in its totality and through which all life entangles (p. 76).

“En Sikuaní decimos, *najuo jumàli*, que significa la respiración del universo,” explains Malabo, describing how the universe is breathing and alive, and that by harmonizing with this breath, we can learn to fly (Manconi, 2021, p. 373).

Malabo gestures for Andrés to sit on one of the animal stools near the exit of Liwasibo to begin his treatment. The diagnosis is witchcraft, and the cure is to remove it through suction.

“Mas tarde repetimos,” says Malabo, indicating that this treatment will take several sessions, “hay que cuidarse mucho, y mas que todo un tomador como usted,” he adds cautioning Andrés to take great care particularly during yagé ceremonies.

“Hay que cuidarse a uno mismo y a su espacio, no prestar su espacio a cualquiera si no se mete en mas problemas,” adds Taita Giovani also cautioning against letting others use one’s ceremonial space, something that he learned the hard way after letting friends of his host yagé ceremonies in his maloca many years ago.

“Bueno Dariel, vamos a empezar su tratamiento,” exclaims Malabo inviting me to take a seat on the wooden turtle.



With my eyes closed, I focus on the swirling of the *tsitsito* before suddenly feeling a strong pressure on the crown of my head—the vital breath of the universe travels down my spine to the soles of my feet and into the ground, dispelling all blockages along its path.



Malabo utters the name of Kuwei, the god that brought the songs for healing to the Sikuani, and repeatedly chants *wajis*, the incantations blown on a patient or in water for the purpose of healing and the diagnosis of illnesses (Manconi, 2021, p. 205).

He gently removes his hat and leans in to blow below my ear, guiding the air along the nape of my neck and away to my side bringing about a great release of pain and tension.

“Usted se preocupa mucho por su futuro, hay que pensar bonito en la vida,” he says, explaining the accumulated muscular tension in my neck is a result of frequent worry and the importance of having peace and good thoughts.

“Con las medicinas se va trabajando todo eso,” adds Taita Giovani in agreement with Malabo’s diagnosis and the work that can be done through the medicines.

“Si, esas enfermedades, la preocupación, la ansiedad, la depresión, los cólicos menstruales, no son cosas que se ven en nuestra comunidades. Son cosas que se ven en la gente de la ciudad porque no hay permiso,” continues Malabo, explaining the frequency of which illnesses such as worry, anxiety, depression, and menstrual cramps are seen in city people, illnesses which correspond to a lack of permission.

Without permission, harmony is jeopardized; the earth and living beings suffer and from their exploitation arise spirits that bring further confusion and ailments to humanity.

“Las medicinas, las plantas maestras, se comparten hoy porque hay una confusión en la humanidad y lo que hace esta medicina es aclarar. Aclarar la mente, aclarar el corazón, vivir con la verdad,” adds Malabo, stating that medicines or master plants are shared more openly today to overcome the widespread confusion and distress faced by humanity, to bring clarity to the mind and the heart while living in honesty (Gaitan, 2020, as cited in Agudelo 2023, p. 219).

“Malabo, como agradecimiento por su servicio le regalo esta pintura de su caballo Yopo a base de tabaco,” I exclaim, gifting the horse portrait to Malabo as a token of gratitude for his service and friendship.

“Muchas gracias Dariel, estás pintando muy bonito de verdad. Lo voy a poner aquí en Liwasibo para verlo cada dia que me siente a trabajar,” says Malabo in awe before placing the portrait on the shelf beside the animal figurines.

4.3 Hacia las Estrellas

Returning to the village after a much-needed swim in the lagoon, we find El Taita Giovanni and Germán preparing a fire pit outside of Liwasibo—tonight, we will be drinking yagé en los Llanos Orientales. It should come to no surprise that travelling with El Taita always holds the possibility of an impromptu yagé night, after all it is another opportunity to work with the medicine of yagé and yet I cannot help but feel unprepared to drink again so soon and in a space that is still unfamiliar.

In addition to the crew from Zindulí, Malabo's son—the large man who we saw bathing under the waterfall upon our arrival en los Llanos—will also be joining us, along with another patient who has been following a treatment with Malabo.

“Yo tengo todo lo que necesito con el yopo, pero ustedes sientanse libres de tomar aquí esta noche,” says Malabo before retiring to his house for the night—all the knowledge he needs comes from yopo and he has no interest in working with other medicines but is happy to lend us the space for the ceremony.

As customary, the men are served first, and as the only woman there, I am the last one to be called. El Taita hands me the cup—yagé foaming to the brim of the shot glass. Without hesitation, I down the medicine, appreciating how much quicker it passes when served in the shot glass as opposed to the wide-brim cup usually used to serve the women.

I take a seat by the fire with others and rejoice in the far-reaching warmth of the flames as the night grows cold and the cosmos begin to turn.



Below the canopy of the mango grove, the milky way peers through the mist and winding tree trunks. Suddenly, a woman screams in the night and several lights turn on in neighbouring homes—dogs bark furiously at the nocturnal intruder. In an instant, we have lost track of one of the patients who has aimlessly wandered into the village, drawn to and confused by dense spirits. The nearby oil wells unleash the density of the underworld from which these spirits emerge, stirring confusion and throwing off the balance of the world (Agudelo, 2023, p. 288). El Taita is nowhere to be seen, surely, he has gone to retrieve the patient from the village.

By the fire, Malabo's son hangs over the chair—I grab a blanket that has fallen beside him and place it over his shoulders. A few feet away, a shadow ripples through the tall grass. I walk over to find Freidel uncomfortably embracing himself against the damp ground—I toss a blanket over him as well.

“Gracias,” he utters, happily curling up with the blanket.

El Taita returns with the patient in question, sitting him down by the fire and scolding him for venturing away from the heart of the ceremony.

“De aquí no se levanta mas,” he tells the patient to remain seated before preparing his soplo (plant essences) and proceeding with la curación.

“Gracias Taita,” I whisper after my turn.

I huddle back to my tent where I find my pillow dampened from the nocturnal dew.

“Le fue bien a Dariel esta noche. Ya le perdió el miedo al yagé,” is the last I hear El Taita say before drifting away to the twinkling sky and light-hearted chuckles around the dimming of the fire.

Chapter 5

Tejidos de Sanación

5.1 La Espiral

As the sun begins its descent, bathing the sky in hues of pink and orange, I lean over the railing on the balcony at Zindulí, admiring the rise of the Evening Star over the tropical dry forest.

“Dariel, venga le muestro como se hace la gasa,” says Laura, the wife of Mamo Jaime teaching the women of la Familia de Barranquilla how to knit mochilas and Arhuaco designs.

She loops a dozen woollen threads around her big toe, holding the opposite end between her teeth as she skillfully weaves the strands into *la gasa*, the woven strap of the mochila. Initiating the first few inches of the strap, she transfers the gasa to me, looping the threads onto each of my fingers. I aim to recreate the crisscrossing motion she demonstrated, initially managing to create a wonky and loose weave before steadying the tension and progressing to weave the length of the strap.

In the Arhuaco tradition, the weaving of the mochila is the equivalence to the memory and storytelling of the woman performing the weaving; a weaving of the myriad of correspondences whereby the quality of each stitch is a record of the quality of her thoughts at that time (Ingold, 2015; Rodríguez-Burgos et al., 2016).

Fabio finds Andrés on the terrace below and shares recent news about the next-door neighbours.

“Tuvieron algún desacuerdo con los patrones y ya no van a venir mas,” says Fabio, sharing that the workers have not been paid in weeks and are fed up with the owners of the fibreglass business.

As a result of the spiritual work and *pagamentos* with Mamo Jaime, along with the ongoing work with the medicines of the Colombian territories, balance and equilibrium return. The neighbours, no longer able to sustain the production of fibreglass containers, ceded to work on the adjacent lot. This turn of events secures the purpose Casa Zindulí as a node of healing correspondences and ancestral practices for a while longer.

These *pagamentos* and ancestral healing practices are understood as an ongoing process rather than a singular event (Fotiou, 2012, p. 6), whereby continuous work is necessary to maintain harmony and well-being. Anthropology and research, according to Ingold, can be understood as a similar process, a process of ongoing correspondences and open-ended dialogue, in-between human becomings and the more-than-human (Ingold, 2013a, p. 8; Ingold, 2021, p. 11).

I turn my attention back to Laura who continues to weave the intricate pattern of her spiral bag. Before arriving to the end of the thread, she removes the needle and reaches for a new piece of thread over twice as long. By a swift rolling motion on her thigh, she effectively and seamlessly joins the two pieces into one continuous thread before resuming the weaving of the mochila, looping each stitch into the previous row with the needle.

Weaving, like writing, is an intricate process of threading memory and imagination whereby the last stitch is not a closing or a tying off, but a visible pause in the woven spiral, a spiral of stories attending to a myriad of healing correspondences.

Human becomings continually forge their ways, and guide the ways of consociates, in the crucible of their common life. In so doing, they weave a kind of tapestry. But like life itself, the tapestry is never complete, never finished. It is always work in progress.
—Tim Ingold, 2013a, p. 8

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