

From *rau* to sacred plants: Transfigurations of shamanic agency among the Siona Indians of Colombia

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Abstract

Translations of the native notion of shamanic agency of the Siona Indians of Colombia is explored throughout different historical and social contexts. The polysemic concept *rau* is central to the shaman's capacity for establishing relations of exchange and negotiation with humans and non-humans. As the embodiment of his power, it fits within a semantic field that conveys the waxing and waning of life cycles. Sharing a series of qualities with the Melanesian concept of *mana*, *rau* should be understood as a social phenomenon whose use and meaning has transfigured through time and space. However, unlike the globalization of *new mana*, the important notion of Siona shamanic agency has been substituted by representations of the ritual substance of *yajé* as key symbol for power and knowledge as Siona rituals have been revitalized in their dialogue with the ethnic identity movement and the neo-shamanic network that associates sacred plants with primordial knowledge and agency.

Keywords

Ayahuasca, narratives, power, shamanism, witchcraft

Résumé

Les traductions de la notion autochtone de l'agentivité chamanique des Indiens Siona de Colombia sont analysées à travers les contextes tant historiques que sociaux. Le

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concept polysémique de *rau* est central dans la faculté du chamane d'établir des relations d'échange et de négociation avec les humains et les non-humains. Comme incarnation de ce pouvoir, il s'inscrit dans un champ sémantique qui évoque la croissance et le déclin des cycles de vie. Partageant une série de qualités avec le concept mélanésien de *mana*, le concept de *rau* devrait être compris comme un phénomène social dont l'usage et la signification se sont transfigurés à travers le temps et l'espace. Cependant, malgré la globalisation du *nouveau mana*, l'importante notion d'agentivité chamanique siona a été substituée par les représentations de la substance rituelle de *yajé* en tant que symbole clé du pouvoir et de la connaissance, tout comme les rituels siona avait été revitalisés dans leur dialogue avec le mouvement identitaire ethnique et le réseau néo-chamanique qui associe les plantes sacrées avec l'agentivité et le savoir primitifs.

Mots-clés

Ayahwasca, chamanisme, pouvoir, récits, sorcellerie

The ontological turn in anthropology has contributed to renewed discussions of the classical concepts of shamanism and animism among native peoples around the world. In addition, it shares and supports certain perspectives associated with the global phenomenon of the New Age movement. One common concern involves the recognition of multiple ontological worlds and the need to take 'native ontologies seriously' (Viveiros de Castro, 2004). Since the 1990s, discussions of the concepts of animism and perspectivism have oriented anthropological analyses of native shamanisms as part of the relational system between humans and non-humans (Costa and Fausto, 2010) in which there is a continuity of souls but not of bodies. This paradigm, taken seriously, also serves to justify the hybrid practices and ontologies of the new animists and neo-shamans.

Here I explore the notion of shamanic agency that is central to mediation and exchange in these multiple ontologies (Crépeau, 2007), but which has been eclipsed in South American ethnological discussions on animism and cognition and in neo-shamanic discourse on sacred plants. Rather than viewing the notion of power as a stable category in indigenous thought and ritual practices, I explore the concept of shamanic agency among the Siona Indians of Colombia as a fluid and polysemic concept that has changed with historical and social practices. Called *rau* in their native language, it is the embodiment of power and belongs to a larger semantic field concerned with the waxing and waning of life cycles (Langdon, 1992). It is central to the relations of exchange and negotiations between humans and non-humans that affect these cycles, and its importance has been observed by Colonial missionaries, anthropologists and the Siona themselves since the Colonial period. However, its importance and multivocalic references are disappearing with the revitalized shamanic rituals of the 21st century. In addition, *rau* shares a series of qualities and representations of the Oceanic concept of *mana* (Lévi-Strauss, 1987; Mauss, 1972). But as recent discussions demonstrate for *mana* (Tomlinson and Tengan, 2016), it should be understood not only as part of an ontological system characterized as animist, but also as a social phenomenon whose use and meaning has transfigured through time and space (Kolshus, 2013).

The Siona Indians, a Western Tukanoan group, are found along the Putumayo River where it divides Colombia from Ecuador and Peru. They share in a general way the epistemological and ontological principles of shamanic cosmology that have been described for other Amazonian groups (Seeger et al., 1987; Viveiros de Castro, 1998; 2006). The cosmological world is one of constant transformation in which Western distinctions, such as nature/culture; animal/human; or natural/supernatural, do not apply. The cosmos is constituted by a multiplicity of owners/masters, and their collectivities are repeated infinitely in a 'fractal logic' (Kelly, 2001; Cesarino, 2010; Langdon, 2013a). This transformative nature of the universe and the change of perspective that determines appearances are expressed by the Siona through their concept of *can'co* or 'side'. Perception and experience have different sides: *ë can'co*, or 'this side' refers to that which is normally visible, while the 'other side', *yequë can'co*, is that of occult forces that influence and interfere in the collective processes of well-being. However, correct perception of the other side depends on one's development of *rau*; all do not equally perceive the nature of appearances.

The other side is accessed through rituals in which *yajé* (*Banisteriopsis*, popularly known as *ayahuasca*) is ingested. It can also be known through dreams and some accidental encounters that are not always beneficial, such as not clearly perceiving the identity of different beings that appear when alone in the forest. Because of the knowledge (*rau*) gained through apprenticeship, shamans have the capacity to perceive at will the other side and negotiate with the beings in order to protect and defend their group or attack others. Up until the 1960s, it was expected that all men would undertake shamanic training in order to be able to mediate between the visible and invisible sides, to correctly discern the true nature and causes of events in this world and to influence the non-human entities to assure collective well-being or to defend against invisible attacks (Langdon, 2014). The shaman, often designated by the word *curaca* of Quechua origin, was a person who was recognized as possessing sufficient shamanic power to lead the community in *yajé* rituals. In Siona language, he was designated by a variety of terms, primarily *yai* – jaguar, *uncuguë* – he who drinks *yajé* or *ëñaguë* – he who sees. All of these terms refer to his capacities of transformation, seeing the true nature of events as well as predicting the future and leading the group in the rituals that take them to other realms of the universe. The role of healing was only one part of his role and his powers and possession of *rau* associated him with negative as well as positive agency.

The shaman's religious and political role has changed over the last 400 years in response to the missionary and extractive activities as well as to the armed violence that has characterized the region over the last 30 years. I have explored the changes in this role in other papers, tracing the reconfigurations of the shaman's leadership as both religious and political (Langdon, 2016a; 2016b). Not only has the role of shamans changed, but the expressions of his power have also undergone reconfigurations throughout the history of contact. Here I examine the different translations and attributions of shamanic power, *rau*, since the arrival of missionaries in the 17th century up to the present in which Siona *taitas* negotiate between conflicting armed forces that dominate their traditional territory and conduct *yajé* rituals for both their communities and non-indigenous groups that are identified with the neo-shamanic movement. Siona shamans today are public figures, recognized as traditional authorities by their communities and

the 1991 Constitution and as wise counselors (*taitas*) by new age spiritual groups who participate in their *tomas de yajé* (Caicedo-Fernandez, 2015). Drawing on the discussions of shamanic substances by Robert Crépeau (2007), I explore the continuities and ruptures of shamanic function through tracing the translations of *rau* as agency and its embodiment overtime.

The witch's power of the colonial period: *Rau*

Prior to the arrival of the Spanish, Western Tucanoans (including the living Siona, Secoya, Ancutero, Mai Bai and remnants of other groups) occupied a large territory encompassing the Putumayo, Aguarico and Napo Rivers of Colombia, Ecuador and Peru dispersed throughout the region in groups of some 30 to 70 people. Spanish forces entered the Putumayo region in the 16th century to mine alluvial gold deposits. Later Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries attempted to gather Indians into fixed centers to harness their labor and for religious conversion. Western Tucanoans were especially resistant to evangelization and forced residence in large groups (Langdon, 2014; Cipolletti, 1999; 2011). Missions were short-lived and several priests were assassinated. Isolation, epidemics and native uprisings resulted in the cessation of most missionary activity among these groups by the late 18th century (Gómez López, 2006).

An extensive Secoya vocabulary compiled in 1753 by an anonymous Jesuit source attributes a priest-like role to certain shamans (*Vinia pain* and *jujaque*) who led the villagers in night-long rituals of drinking *Datura* and *Banisteriopsis* and singing and dancing. He distinguished these ritual practitioners from witches, called *raube neque* or *raube nehuati*, those who make or send illness (*raube*) (Cipolletti, 2011: 466)¹. *Vinia pain* and *jujaque* are translated as priest, healer or singer who blesses the psychoactive brews currently known as *ayahuasca* or *yajé*. Cipolletti observes for the Secoya that *rau* 'deals with a semantically rich expression: besides the person who sends evil, *rawé* refers to the small arrows that he sends to harm another, as well as the sickness that is a consequence of this action' (Cipolletti, 2011: 466).

The curaca's power of the 20th century: *Rau*

The Jesuits' missions ceased in Ecuador with their expulsion from the Americas in 1767, and the Franciscans abandoned their efforts among the Western Tucanoans in the Putumayo region around the end of the 18th century due to the isolation and difficulties of maintaining the missions. Almost 100 years later, it became a focus of quinine and rubber extraction and renewed missionary activity.

Capuchin missionaries, sent from Popayán in Colombia, took responsibility and authority for the Putumayo region in the 'name of the patria and Church'. They made several excursions to Indigenous communities, establishing contact, performing baptisms and marriages and relocating some groups to the Colombian side of the border (Wasserstrom, 2017). By the mid-1930s, there were three remaining Siona communities on the Putumayo and their population was reduced to 300, a third of what it had been in 1900 (Langdon, 2014).

The Capuchins conducted linguistic as well as ethnographic investigations along with their missionary activities. They composed vocabularies and recorded customs about their religious life in order to translate Catholic doctrine into the native languages (Castellví, 1934), gathering myths and registering *yajé* songs. In the 1970s, I located a number of their documents in the Centro de Investigación Lingüística e Etnográfica de la Amazonía Colombiana in Bogotá (Langdon, 2014: 271–276). One manuscript of three handwritten pages contains a brief text sung in 1945 by Rafael Paiyoguaje², *curaca* of Piñuña Blanco (Castellví, ms 1944–1945) and translated into Spanish by Lorenzo Piaguaje:

*huati bainbi raye mainre rau yo'ocuabi*³
 Devil people come to ensorcell us
rau yo'oguëna, ju'inye main
 Having ensorcelled, we are sick
oco re'cona saiguëna, uncuni, huajëyë
 Over remedy he sings, we drink and get well
yurecá ju'inyë
 then we become sick
re'ojí, yurega, se'e huatibi
 we are well, then again from the *huatí*
guineru ju'inyë
 from his shout we will get sick.⁴

The Capuchin author of this text, as in the case of the Colonial manuscripts, translates *rau* as sickness, and in the song, Lorenzo translates *rau yo'ocuabi* in Spanish as 'to bewitch' (*brujear*), but literally the text reads as 'working or making *rau*'. It is an interesting text in that it sings of the alteration between health and death (*huajë-* and *ju'in-*) that are results of the infinitely recurring processes and exchanges of power between humans and non-humans associated with astronomical, seasonal and life cycles (Langdon, 2014). Calling upon their power, shamans negotiate with the entities responsible for these cycles, including celestial figures such as Sun, Moon and Thunder, *yajé* people and owners and/or parents of animals, plants and specific environmental and geographical features. Shamans also negotiate with those beings, primarily the evil intentioned *huatí*, to cause misfortune and sickness through the production and manipulation of *rau*.

One Capuchin ethnographer, Frey Plácido de Calella (1940–1941), opens his article in the journal *Anthropos* with three photos: Siona *curacas* with ceremonial feather crowns and jaguar teeth necklaces; an assemblage of ritual paraphernalia including the *yajé* vine, flutes, chalice and base for the *yajé* pot; and geometric designs inspired by the visions. He observes that *curacas* perform the roles of priest, magician, doctor and witch and are designated by various terms: *yai* (tigre), *huati* (spirit or devil), *nāiké* (he who sees or seer); *dause-koké* (he who cures, doctor), and *uinhaké* (he who sings) (Calella, 1940–1941: 743). His article contributes to understanding the translation of the song above, since the shaman sings (*juin-*) over remedies to bestow them with curing power.

The mostly likely translation of *dause-koké* is 'He who returns *rau*' (*rau go'igüe* using current Siona orthography). Calella also describes aspects of shamanic apprenticeship and indicates that the secret of shamanic powers comes from drinking *yajé*.

Colombian Anthropologists associated with the Instituto Colombiano de Antropología y Historia also took great interest in the *curaca*'s activities (Chaves, 1958). Carlos Garibello Aldana, responsible for the video and audio documentation of the Instituto for many years, recorded *yajé* songs in the 1950s and filmed shamanic healing rituals (Langdon, 2013b). Two articles were published in the 1960s describing shamanic practices based on information from Felinto Piaguaje, a Siona youth who served as a linguistic informant in Bogotá (Mallol de Recasens, 1963; Mallol de Recasens and Recasens, 1964–1965). Paradoxically, while scholars and others became increasingly interested in capturing shamanic performances of art and music, practicing *curacas* were disappearing on the Putumayo. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the last of the *curacas* and *cacique curacas* died in a sequence of witchcraft assaults. None of the elders proved powerful enough at the time to replace their leadership and there were no youths undertaking shamanic apprenticeships.

Besides the deaths of the last practicing *curacas*, the 1960s marked a turning point in the ethnic configuration of the Putumayo. Colonist migration during the first half of the 20th century had been relatively slow due to the lack of roads from the highlands and the region's isolation. However, in the 1950s, oil was discovered near the Siona village of San Diego. A road connecting the highlands to Puerto Asis on the Putumayo River was finally completed in 1968 for the extraction of petroleum, and with its construction, thousands of settlers migrated to the region and virtually surrounded the last few Siona communities. The Siona appeared to be in the process of integrating into the peasant economy and abandoning their language and traditional ways of life, including shamanic practices. Almost all were bilingual and their dress and housing no longer distinguished them visibly from their colonist neighbors.

Thus when I arrived in 1970 in Buena Vista, the largest Siona community on the Putumayo, there were no *curacas* to lead *yajé* rituals, although the elders had undertaken shamanic apprenticeships and participated in rituals conducted by shamans from other ethnic groups. It was a situation of shamanism without shamans. The Siona continued to seek understanding of misfortunes and illnesses in their perspectivist universe inhabited by invisible forces and they constantly lamented the absence of a *cacique curaca* responsible for their well-being through negotiation with the invisible forces, who could protect them from attacks of the evil intentioned beings called *huati*.

My initial intention was to understand etiological beliefs behind illness events and their relation to therapeutic itineraries. It soon became obvious that the Siona were asking very different questions than I, but that their understanding and central notions could not be easily translated into Spanish. I thus undertook work with a number of elders to learn the Siona language by recording narratives in *bain coca* and then transcribing and discussing my transcriptions with them. This methodology proved to be far more useful than simply learning the language, for all of the stories concerned their ontological understanding of the world and the causes behind visible events.

More importantly, it was through these narratives that I discovered additional meanings of *rau*, the concept from the Colonial documents referring to the witch's

arrows and commonly translated in the 1970s as sickness⁵. The narratives provide the different contexts of the term that convey a broad understanding of the conception similar to *mana* and exercise of agency in a relational universe. In order to understand the complexity of the concept, I shall present excerpts from several narratives recounting the activities of *curacas* of the past as well as personal encounters with the invisible realms. They are exemplar in the sense that they contextualize the different meanings and uses of *rau* to understand its full meaning.

Rau in its most ample sense refers to the power of agency or energy that circulates among humans and non-humans (Langdon, 1992: 47). As Mauss (1972: 133) describes for *mana*, *rau* is a difficult word to translate, since it escapes our notions and logic. It is a quality, a substance, a verb, a noun and a state that has a relation to an abstract concept of vital energy or power in the universe and as an embodied substance that can be manipulated and exchanged between certain humans and non-humans. Shamans, through their apprenticeship with *yajé*, develop the capacity to manipulate *rau* consciously, but all humans develop a certain amount of force to protect them from minor spirit attacks as they mature. The lack of this life force is what makes infants and small children so vulnerable to spirit attack. In the same way, certain non-human entities who live in the fractal domains of the universe also possess and manipulate this power, but it would be a mistake to generalize that all non-humans or humans have this capacity or that this energy is equivalent to the notion of soul. *Rau* is a generalized power that can be accumulated, possessed, harnessed, exchanged and sent. It is manifested in shamanic praxis. All humans, whether they possess *rau* or not, have a heart or soul (*recoyo*) as the center of corporal processes and individual courage and that can be captured by demon-like *huati*⁶.

When a man begins his shamanic apprenticeship and drinks *yajé* on a regular basis, a substance grows within him as he accumulates more knowledge about the different realms of the universe. This substance, called *rau*, embodies the knowledge and power gained from his experiences. Apprenticeship consists of mastering a sequence of journeys to different realms of the universe to meet the 'people' or 'owners' who reside there (Langdon, 2013a). He seeks to perceive them clearly, learn their designs and language (chants), thus increasing his *rau*. Once he accumulates sufficient *rau* to conduct *yajé* rituals, he is considered to be a *curaca*. During this apprenticeship, the shaman also receives objects that possess *rau*, in the form of small nuts and seeds, flutes, or other objects that are 'dropped' by the *yajé* people (*juinja bain*), their most important spirit allies⁷. The jaguar necklaces worn by the shamans possessed *rau*⁸.

The accumulation of *rau* as shamanic knowledge is never a finished process, but one in which all shamans endeavor to increase by amplifying their contacts with the various non-human beings of the universe. *Rau* enables the shaman to transform into a jaguar, anaconda or other being; to heal, to negotiate with different inhabitants in the multi-layered universe, including the owners of the animals and fish, to battle with other shamans and to send harm to others. It also give him the ability to induce visionary states with lesser stimulants, such as *yoco* (*Paullinia yoco*) or fermented beverages. It can be activated through sweating or drinking *chichi* or *aguardiente*, although the latter is traditionally prohibited because of its harm to a shaman's *rau*.

As an embodied substance in the shaman, it must be disposed of properly upon his death, or it will continue causing harm. It needed to be removed from his body and sealed

in the hollow of a tree in the forest. His crown, jaguar canine necklace and other ritual implements, all of which possess his *rau*, should be destroyed. The daughter of the last cacique *curaca* saved her father's canine necklace, and during the 1970s it was speculated that many of the illnesses that were afflicting her family were due to the *rau* of the necklace⁹.

Rau is dispersed throughout the body, but also takes on the concrete form of magical darts residing in the shaman's left arm, which serves as a dart holder. In shamanic battles, *rau* is mobilized in a variety of ways: it is 'worked' or 'twisted' into a projectile or other substance to throw (Langdon, 2001). Below is a section of a narrative relating a shamanic battle that marks the location where the Guepi River joins the Putumayo. The citation concerns the exchange of *rau*. Two hunting parties from the village at the mouth of the Guepi have disappeared in the jungle. In a *yajé* ritual, a shaman journeys to the forest to discover what happened and sees an anaconda swallowing them. He then makes a shield out of leaves of a palm species with spines at the edge of the river¹⁰ where the anaconda is floating with his mouth wide open:

huahuaguëna, ëñaguëña

He saw the anaconda floating.

'*re'oji, yureta'ã yë'ë rau yo'ozaniyë*' *ro'taguëña*.

'Good, now I **will work my rau**' he thought.

cani baguë rau ca'ëni, rau 'ëini, baguë 'aña pëkë raure baguëña baguëga.

and thinking, **he twisted dau and threw dau, anaconda's rau** he possessed

ba'iguëbi, hã'ã ca'ëni rau ëini *aña pëkë yi'obona senjoni ayaguëña.*

Possessing, that **rau** he **twisted, threw** and into the anaconda's mouth sent.

sejoni, ayaguëna, jã'ãrëbi *aña pëkë güina'ru baguë raure rauguëña.*

He sent, placed it inside, then the anaconda likewise his **rau worked.**

rauni baguëbi, tã'ãbana jã'ãruna huen raquëña ba rau

He **worked rau**, in the shield, that place, it became caught, that **rau.**

huen raguëna, hã'ãrëbi baguë beoru *aña pëkë rause'e rau chiaguëña.*

It became entangled, then, the shaman all the **anaconda's rau** gathered.

chiani, jã'ãrëbi, te'e garabëna si'nsoguëña.

He gathered, then, one bundle he whittled.

si'nsoni jã'ãrëbi baguë yacahuëna sejoni, ayaguëña.

He whittled, then he sent it to the anaconda's stomach and placed it inside.

sejoni, ayaguëna, jã'ãrëbi ba achoguëña.

He sent it inside, then nearby was heard

'*tuuuuh*' *achoguëña.*

'Tuuuuuh' was heard.

achoguëna, 're'oji' ro'taguëña.

It was heard, 'Good' he thought.

cani, añaya pëkë'ga jã'ãrëbi caguëña, baguë cocabi.

He spoke, then Anaconda spoke in his language.

‘më’ë yë’ëre ro yo’oguëni, yë’ëre rau yo’ohuë më’ë’ caguëña.

‘You are the one who worked against me, to me you worked evil,’ he said.

This narrative gives the various forms of manipulating or possessing *rau*:

rau yo’ozayë – will work *rau* and translated in Spanish as *voy a brujear*

rau ca’ën – to twist *rau*, *brujo* in Spanish

rau chiaguëña – to gather *rau* that has been sent

rau ‘ëini – to throw *rau*

raugüëña – *rau* – as verb stem for making the object *rau*, *brujo* in Spanish

aña pëkë raure baguëña – possess *rau* of anaconda as knowledge

The different expressions of *rau* – as a substance, verb or knowledge – are central to the shamanic battle and exchange of this force between two powerful beings. An anaconda, possibly a shaman from another community, is causing the strange disappearance of hunters in the forest. The avenging shaman perceives what is happening to his people through the *yajé* ritual. In the ensuing battle, the two shamans exchange *rau* in the form of projectiles. The winner possesses the *rau* of the anaconda, gathering it all into one bundle (*te’e garabë*), translated by the narrator as the anaconda’s *brujo*. In our discussions of the transcription, the narrator described the anaconda *rau* as having the appearance of crystals. The possession of *rau* is unequal between beings, and thus in the battles, it is necessary to possess the opponent’s *rau* or to have more *rau* than the other.

The possession of the *rau* is normally acquired through creating allies with the invisible non-human entities. In *yajé* rituals, the master-shaman guides the apprentice on the other side, so that he may meet the different beings, learning ritual by ritual where each one lives, its characteristic ways of life, corporal adornments, designs and language. However, there are also exchanges in which power, knowledge and objects circulate. Shamans commonly return from their encounters from the other side bringing plants for healing, fabricating adornments or other purposes¹¹. In one narrative (Langdon, 1991), a shaman discovers that his wife is trading food for sex with her anaconda¹² lover that emerges as a shaman out of a pool of water in the forest surrounded by *chontillo*, a pencil thin palm used for making darts. The betrayed husband sets a ‘people catching trap’ on the path where the anaconda walks. The trap catches his shamanic crown and leaves him hanging. The anaconda reveals his chant to the betrayed shaman in order to gain his freedom, who in turn has the power to take revenge later with the darts made from the *chontilla* surrounding the pool where he resides.

The lines below are from another narrative that recounts a shamanic battle occurring in a village below Guepi inhabited by those who speak the Oyo dialect. An Oyo shaman is crafting a small canoe-like container for grated manioc with a small broken machete when the other, who has put on the jaguar’s clothing, attacks him. The attack is a complete surprise, since the Oyo is working without ‘thinking’ or suspecting anything, and he jumps this way and that to avoid being eaten. His broken machete is inadequate and he becomes too hoarse to sing a defending chant. Luckily, all his sweating causes *rau* to fall from above, empowering him to defend himself and win the battle.

yai yuara ainreguëna, jã'ärëbi baguëbi ja'su ga'nihuë neguëña.
 the jaguar ready to eat, when the Oyo's body began sweat
*neguëna, umubi baguëre **rau** joni tonguë ba'quëña.*
 It began and from above to him *rau* hatched and fell
*Joni tonquëna, jã'ärëbi baguë yai ya'aguëna yai yi'obona **rau garabëte** senjoni ayaguëña.*
 Fell from above, then the jaguar yawned and he threw the *rau* bundle into his mouth.
sejoni, ayaguëna baguë co'coguëya
 He threw inside and the tiger choked
co'coguë, caguëña 'ai, më'ë ro yo'oguëna, më'ë yë'ëre yo'ohuë ja'yë' caguëña.
 Choking he spoke 'Oh, you are doing bad, you are doing bad to me, big brother' he said.
'më'ë ëa ba'ji'i' caguëya
 'You asked for it,' the Oyo said.
caguë, go'quëña.
 He spoke, returned.
*go'ni, baguë querë ñataguëna **rau neguëña***
 The jaguar returned and rapidly at dawn he became ill (caught *rau*).

A similar narrative containing battles with *rau* documents the deaths of the last practicing shamans of the 1950s and 1960s on the Putumayo. There were approximately seven shamans conducting *yajé* rituals for the communities of Granada, Buena Vista and Pinuña Blanco in the 1950s, and they began a sequence of attacks that started with the bad dream of a *curaca* living in Buena Vista that indicated one from Granada was working his *rau* against him in the belief that he had killed one of his relatives. By 1961, the last *curaca* died in Buena Vista. The adult men of the community united in a *yajé* ritual, expecting the *curaca*'s brother to lead them. However, they were unsuccessful in negotiating with the invisible realm, and all they saw was darkness and evil spirits. As one of the elders lamented to me about the end of their *curacas*:

Those curacas, those who saw the Devil,
*They traded back and forth their **rau** and killed each other.*
Among themselves they fought, sending illness until they finished each other off.
Now we are suffering,
there are no animals to hunt;
there is no Sun,
Lost we will end our lives.
We are suffering greatly.
Now there is no one who has the capacity to drink and tell us what good or evil will happen.
There is a silence, which no one can penetrate.
We are poor orphans alone.
All we can do is trust that God will protect us until we die.

If God helps us, we will live.

If he calls us, we will die and rest.

In these narratives *rau* is the embodied power as used in particular contexts, be they attacks by powerful non-humans or shamans. *Rau* was a force behind misfortunes and disasters as well as healing and hunting success. It gave the shaman the capacity to help or harm and his ambiguous identity of witch, doctor or priest characterized him in Colonial times and persisted through the 1970s. *Cacique curacas* were regarded as protectors of their village members who used their *rau* for benefit, and not harm. However, these same shamans were accused of attacking those of other villages. Although some shamans were regarded as putting on the clothing of the evil *huati* to cause harm, the category of shaman, as one who possesses *rau*, was an ambiguous category and there was no clear frontier between who was evil and who was good. The use of *rau* for harm or benefit depended upon the intention of the one who mobilized it. Siona ethnohistory portrays the shamans as the true cause of the epidemics brought by the rubber collectors that destroyed many of their villages in the early 20th century. The deaths of the last *cacique curacas* in the 1950s are still remembered today as a consequence of their own rivalries that caused the great shamanic battle, bringing end to Siona *yajé* rituals for almost 20 years.

Rau can also transform into harmful action based on strong emotions, anger or thought, not always intended by the possessor. This is particularly common in the case of shamans, and their *rau* can be mobilized by angry thoughts, causing harm unintentionally to community and family members or after a shaman's death before his heart goes to the house of the dead shamans. However, non-shaman adults also have a bit of *rau*. In 1972, my *comadre* told me that her brother was suffering from health problems because he had been fighting with their mother. She explained that their mother, as an elder, also had *rau* and that her angry thoughts were most likely the unintentional cause of his ill health.

Thus, a possible translation for *rau* is 'vital force', since examination of the narratives indicate that there is a vital energy behind the cycles of life and death that occur in the fractal universe. *Rau* is best understood as part of a relational universe expressed in the semantic field that is concerned with the endless processual cycle of life and death (Langdon, 1992: 45): *huajë* – to be alive, green, young, corporal, tender; *ju'in-* to be old, dying, dark, rotten, emaciated; and *ëco* or *yajé* – remedy. The endless cycles of life and death along with the seasonal changes are a result of the activities of non-humans in the different realms of the fractal universe. Collective and individual well-being (*huajë-*) is the objective of *yajé* rituals. However, it is not *yajé* as a substance that imparts health or knowledge, nor does everyone succeed in benefiting from its potential experience that results in the accumulation of *rau* by the apprentice who learns how to communicate and exchange with the other beings of the universe. *Yajé* rituals were held for both collective and individual purposes, and their outcomes depended always on the capacity of the shaman to guide the participants through the realms of the fractal universe in order to assure that everything proceeded as expected in hunting, agriculture or fishing. In cases of individual illnesses, the healing shaman needed to have sufficient *rau* to remove the sickness substance, also designated as *rau*, sent by a human or non-human. In such

illnesses, the shamanic arrows or other forms of *rau* that enter a victim must be removed if a cure is to be effective.

Rau also refers to sickness as a generalized state, one not necessarily caused by shamanic or spirit action. In this meaning, it conveys the idea of the condition of ill health which is conceived as in the 'process of dying'. In one sense, life is a process of waxing and waning of individual life force, alternating between the verb to grow (*huajë-*), the desired state, and to die (*ju'in-*) from a *rau*. Not all illnesses (*rau*) are attributed to shamanic intentions or to a shamanic substance, but those that defy normal treatment or have a sudden or unusual onset are suspected to be caused by a shamanic *rau*. As merely a sickness, it is a temporary condition that can be reverted with herbal remedies or other therapies, and the person can return to a state of *huajë*, or health. In theory the remedy should be sung over by a shaman to imbue it with *rau*, but I saw this occur only in few serious or persistent cases of illness in the 1970s that raised speculations as to invisible causes or sorcery.

Conclusion: Shamanic revitalization and the loss of *rau*

Based on the shamanic narratives and their translations that were collected in the 1970s in the Siona language, the concept of *rau* shares various qualities of the classic concept of *mana* that is discussed by Mauss (1972) and Lévi-Strauss (1987). *Rau*, as expressed in the narrative segments, is an action, a force, a substance, quality or state. It can mean to enchant, but also to indicate shamanic power, force, memory and knowledge. It is dispersed in the shaman's body but can be gathered, whittled, worked and thrown as an object. As a quality, it is associated with sickness and dying, black colors, rottenness. As a state of being, it refers to being sick, rotten or evil. It acts as a substantive noun and a transitive verb in a semantic field that is concerned with the processes of life and death. The Siona shaman exercises his *rau* to heal and negotiate with non-human beings to bring about desired outcomes, such as hunting, fishing, etc., for the well-being of the collective group. However, his *rau* can also be used to harm and kill. Every adult accumulates a bit of *rau* as they age. *Rau*, in its different grammatical and contextual forms, can be seen as concrete expressions for a more abstract notion of spiritual power or shamanic agency.

However, as social phenomenon, *mana* and *rau* have very different trajectories in different social and historical contexts. *Mana*, as a native term, was first noted and diffused throughout Oceania by the Christian missionaries looking for a theological translation equivalent to spirit or God (Kolshus, 2013). Studies of contemporary uses and expressions of *mana* (Tomlinson and Tegan, 2016) have demonstrated that *mana* has not only survived, but also has gained global prominence. Discourse on *mana* has flourished in political, religious and artistic fields. It has an important connection to ethnic politics among the Maori and other groups. It appears in novels, theoretical discussions, cultural performances and computer games. It has been appropriated by New Age theologies as a universal life force (Tomlinson and Tegan, 2016: 14–15) and incorporated by native activists and scholars as an ethical and spiritual orientation in education, cultural reaffirmation and community projects (Tomlinson and Tegan, 2016: 20–21).

Among the Siona of the Putumayo, *rau* has all but disappeared as a mediating power or agency in a perspectivist universe, although *yajé* and the new shamans have become representations of indigenous identity in politics and new age practices. Unlike *mana*, the term has not spread beyond Western Tukanoan groups, despite the fact that other language groups have similar notions (Crépeau, 2007). Missionaries associated *rau* with evil or sickness, and thus did not use it in theological translations. Today, in the Siona's interaction with globalized shamanic practices, the polysemic concept of *rau* has all but disappeared and has been reduced to the univocal translation of sorcery object. Some of its semantic associations, however have transferred to *yajé*. *Yajé*, more commonly identified by its Quechua name *ayahuasca*, has risen to prominence as a sacred plant that mediates the relations with the non-human world and between Indians and non-Indians (Labate and Goulart, 2005; Labate and Cavnar, 2014). As one of the most important substances currently circulating in globalized neo-shamanic practices that view sacred plants as having agency to give access to primordial knowledge important for saving the planet (MacKenna, 2005), *ayahuasca* circulates in contemporary shamanic rituals that are emerging in novel ways among indigenous and non-indigenous groups (Caicedo-Fernandez, 2015; Langdon, 2013c). In Colombia, *yajé*, via the indigenous shamans, was incorporated into mestizo *curanderismo* in the Colonial period and Indigenous shamanism is considered to be the basis of contemporary Colombian popular medicine (Pinzón and Garay, 1997). In the 1980s and 1990s, *yajé* rituals were sought out by urban professionals in search of individual healing and spiritual experiences (Caicedo-Fernandez, 2009). Closely associated with indigenous primordial knowledge and defense of nature, its importance is manifested in identity movements, traditional medicine, cultural performances, contemporary aesthetic productions and spiritual gatherings¹³.

There has been an extraordinary revitalization of Siona shamans as a consequence of the changes in the political and social status of the Indian since the Constitution of 1991 and the neo-shamanic demand for *yajé* (Langdon, 2016a; 2016b; Musalem, 2016). The situation of the 1970s, when no *yajé* rituals were performed by the Siona, has been totally reversed as shamanic practices have been resumed and re-elaborated through dialogue with the growing network that links ethnic groups in the Putumayo and extends to the Andean cities and beyond. Under the globally recognized designation of *taita*, Siona shamans transport their preparations of *yajé* and conduct *tomas de yajé* for those seeking spiritual experiences. Certain characteristics of what constituted Siona shamanism have undergone reconfigurations. The structures of the rituals are changing and becoming more homogeneous with those of the larger network. Elements of popular Catholicism in the form of prayers and ritual objects are increasingly present. New musical instruments, rhythms and chants have been incorporated and are far more varied compared to those registered in the first half of the 20th century by missionaries and anthropologists. Traditional shamanic clothing and adornment has incorporated beadwork motifs and other objects that represent indigeneity globally (Graham and Penny, 2014).

An important impact of the integration into the global movement of new age shamanisms has been changes in the public image of the shaman. In the past, possession of *rau* made the shaman an ambiguous figure capable of wielding his power for evil as well as for benefit. The relational universe of exchanges between humans and non-humans was not a loving universe, but rather an intentional universe in which processes of health

and well-being were negotiated. Public discourse of this image of ambiguous shamanic agency has changed. Siona taitas say that they no longer transform into jaguars or anacondas. In 2013, one affirmed that as part of the non-governmental organization of shamans (UMIYAC, 1999), they no longer perform witchcraft. They circulate in the Putumayo region in 'medical brigades' that conduct *yajé* ceremonies in different communities to spread ancestral knowledge in protection of the environment. Outside the region they are perceived as wise counselors that guide non-Indians in their search for self-knowledge, self-healing and spirituality in *tomas de yajé* (Caicedo Fernández, 2009).

Through an analysis of the representations of *rau* throughout different historical contexts, this article has attempted to show how, as a social phenomenon, it shared the qualities and agency of that of *mana*. However, unlike *mana*, it is gradually disappearing from shamanic discourse. With the loss of the Siona language and the ongoing dialogue with the larger neo-shamanic movement valuing sacred plants above shamanic agency as mediation, *rau* is no longer a key concept for expressing spiritual agency in a cyclic universe and its ambiguous polysemic references have been reduced to a univocal meaning of witchcraft substance. It has been replaced by emphasis on *yajé* as a 'sacred plant' that imparts knowledge and mediates between humans and spirits. Emphasis is now upon *yajé* as essential for experiencing contact with alter realities. *Yajé*, as a sacred plant, is a source of knowledge and agency in the animistic universe of new age ontology.

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Notes

1. An anonymous manuscript containing Siona vocabulary in the National Library of Bogotá attributed to the Franciscans contains similar translations: *rabue* – sickness; *rabueco* – female witch; *rabueque* – male witch (Ortiz, 1942: 172).
2. Rafael Paiyoguaje was remembered in the 1970s by members of the community of Buena Vista as the most evil of the last *curacas*, responsible for many illnesses.
3. All the transcriptions in this paper use the orthography developed by Wheeler (1987) and adopted by the Siona, with a few minor changes.
4. Considering that the meaning of *yajé* songs is difficult to translate because of their telegraphic contextualization, this last line could also be translated as 'likewise we become ill' – *guina'ru ju'inyě*.
5. I remember the first time I began to understand the complexity of this term in 1971 and discussed it with the SIL linguist Alva Wheeler. At the time, he had only understood it as sickness and was unaware of its other connotations.
6. As observed for other Amerindians, the Siona represent the soul or heart as birds.
7. Once when discussing his renewed shamanic apprenticeship with Ricardo Yaiguaje, he showed me a small shiny dark pointed palm nut that he had recently received from the *yajé* people in a ritual. Most likely this was incorporated later into a shamanic collar.

8. On another occasion, Ricardo Yaiguaje gave me the canine of an ocelot, warning me never to lose it.
9. Pedro Musalem (2016) told me that today the shamanic collars are saved and used as representations of Siona traditional culture.
10. The references to darts and spines indicate *rau* and suggest the Achuar-Jivaro *tsentsak* (Crépeau, 2007).
11. Cipolletti (2002) describes this exchange more fully for the Secoya of Ecuador. For both groups, exchanges with non-humans living in the other realms are an ongoing experience and not limited to origin myths.
12. The Siona version of this narrative demonstrates the multiplicity of perspectives, particularly in translation. In the Siona narration, the anaconda is specified as the anaconda fish (*aña pëquë wa'i*) but the narrator translated it as anaconda.
13. An important example of how it permeates cultural, political and aesthetic manifestations of the area is the International Encounters of the Andean Cultures held in the city of Pasto in Southern Colombia since 2009, promoting cultural diversity, ancestral knowledge and traditional medicine.

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