
Jimmy Weiskopf

TWO JEWS AND A CHRISTIAN DRINK YAJÉ AT THE MALOCA

That a distinguished Jewish professor from Boston should be coming to the jungle to do yajé was unusual, but stranger still that I, a no longer nice Jewish boy from the Bronx, would be showing him around.

Professor Hani had drunk ayahuasca in Brazil and Peru but not Colombia, so we visited Wilmer, the shaman, to arrange for a session. The collective taxi dropped us at kilometer 7 on the only road leaving Leticia and a twenty minute walk along a jeep track brought us to an indigenous settlement of wooden shacks with open balconies where radios blared and soon, almost without noticing it, you were in the jungle. First, you crossed a stream that nourished a grove of *canangucho* palms. Then, halfway along the trail, there was a *chagra* bordered by high branches from which the pouch nests of *mochileros* dangled. You descended to the final mucky part, dancing along the logs until the path opened into another clearing and there was the *maloca*, not round, but not square either.

A dark, balding man of about forty, with a genial skull of a head, Wilmer was sitting bare-chested on a low, crudely-carved wooden stool at the far end and when he finally acknowledged our presence, the poker gaze broke into a big grin.

Hani settled onto another little seat, his bum nearly on the floor and talked about ayahuasca while Wilmer, cheek full of *mambe*, licked the *ambil*, and gave his sermon, his pulpit the high roof, tamped earth floor and woven palm leaves. Every now and again, he would pause, say “*está bien, está bien*” apropos of nothing and I’d be hypnotized, the effect heightened by the nutty-sweet powder in my mouth, its spirit so gentle I could never define it except for the rich green glow it gave to perception.

“You know what I do when people hurt me?,” he was saying to Hani. “I smile inside, at their stupidity. Because the Holy Spirit watches all. If they don’t even know that those who do ill will receive ill, then they know nothing.” The bitter conviction of his laugh was a little frightening.

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“Look at me, I am just a poor, ignorant *indio*. I have no knowledge, like you, Doctor Hani, nothing, just this *maloca* and *chagra*. But the little I have, I have gained honestly and here, inside” he emphasized, tapping his chest, “ I have the only wealth that matters, the Word of God, brother”.

After a while, I let his words flow over me without listening, because the inspiration of coca was too precious to waste on a religiosity I wasn't comfortable with. The plants were sufficient. Yajé made you aware of the vanity of worldly ambitions, while the powder showed you that Truth isn't *beyond* but *within* ordinary things: the mealy smells, implements strewn over the floor, yellow/black light upon leaf beyond the door and four great pillars reaching through the smoke-stained fronds to the very sky.

As we walked to Wilmer's the next afternoon, the heat, muck and my objecting that we were much too early made him testy and our rivalry emerged a little more. Though he didn't pretend to be a hard man in the jungle, Hani had an academic's disdain for my articles on yajé, and I was arrogant too, for having drunk in the Putumayo, where you were taught that the divinity of the vine was only revealed after it took you through hell. My whole experience of yajé had been grounded in nausea, cold sweat, pain, fear and shrill diabolical visions. Then, with luck —and repentance— came the cathartic release into the upper realms.

To Hani, this was suspicious. In the course of 150 sessions, he'd only vomited a few times, and then mildly, and he rejected my claim that the pain was built into the revelation.

As we passed green beings arranged in tiers like a watching assembly, I was annoyed by his slow, puffing gait, worry about snakes, and the way I had to hold his hand to negotiate the logs. It wasn't fair to blame him for being fat and fussy, except that fitness pointed to a difference in outlook. I had had the same sort of inhibited upbringing, but yajé, with all its frights, had rid me of some of my neuroticism, whereas Hani had never touched the live nerve of the plant, I sensed. Whenever I spoke in these terms, however, Wilmer got upset. No!, that was the way it had been before the advent of Christ and only pardonable for the Indians of long ago.

The maloca was deserted when we arrived and it was just getting dark when Wilmer turned up with five students from the university. As they strung up their hammocks, wondrous before the great, dark space, Hani whispered, “Do you know these kids?”

I was teaching English there for a term, and the campus was so small you got acquainted with nearly all of the students and professors.

“But, I don’t feel *comfortable* with them. Maybe I should go”.

“In the dark, through the jungle? I’m pretty scared myself, but talking to people takes my mind off it”.

Wilmer had this funny practice of getting everyone to tie a white kerchief around his head for the ritual and we sat on two logs on a platform of boards in the back. He placed his pocket-sized pictures of saints, a crucifix, some rosary beads and a colored candle on the floor and blessed the bottle with the *Padre Nuestro* and some other prayers, followed by a low, wordless chanting, and sprinkled talcum powder over us. In a little cup, going round the circle, he handed us the drink with a scowl. The oily texture and rank sweet aftertaste gave me goose bumps. Then we plunged into an absolute darkness. In a short while the lava erupted and filled my guts with a scalding outward pressure. Pace by pace, in a crouch, with my hands stretched out, I crossed the blindness until I perceived a faint purple-black light at the entrance, stumbled into the clearing and out it poured, wave after molten wave, so much it was hard to believe that one human being could carry such a load of waste.

I understood then that the insecurity which had provoked such a quick reaction had to do with Hani and only needed a touch of the acid liquid to set it off. But the vine had expelled the foolishness at once.

The trip back to the hut was like staggering through a battlefield. From the trees, from the bushes, the spirit bullets flashed by and intercrossed, razor-edged tracers of blue, green, yellow and violet fired by watchful, malicious faces behind the leaves.

The tuneless humming of Wilmer went up and down, blending with the musical vomiting of the *universitarios*. In the radioactive light framed by the opening, I glimpsed a stirring in the leaves of a plantain. *Gente*—people. The torn, drooping fronds had become a tree house holding half a dozen loafers. The vision did not have its usual shimmering, surreal quality: the spirits looked like ordinary *campesinos* in shorts and t-shirts.

I lost them when Hani sang a Daime hymn. As a Jew, he couldn’t accept their creed, he’d told me on the trail, but the orderliness of their rituals focused his inspiration. Dressing in white and dancing in file seemed horrible to me, I’d said. The discipline forced you to concentrate on the true insights of ayahuasca, he insisted: “there’s no room for ego trips”. Ouch!, I thought as I remembered that, impressed by the control he had shown so far.

Encouraged by Wilmer, Hani now chanted in Hebrew with the dark, operatic sonority of a cantor. It was a lament, deepened by the guttural sound of the

language, and though I couldn't understand a word, I knew that our long, sad exile was in it. Not just the persecution, but that peculiarly Jewish sense of inadequacy and guilt—the very baggage the vine was helping me to throw off. But not him, for the singing revealed how tortured he was. He had never married, and must have felt lonely at his fifty years, but that was only an aspect of it. Behind all that stuff about the vine being love was the voice of frustrated impulses. Guilt about tasting the tobacco of *ambil*, displeasing your parents and teachers, all the repression I knew so well.

When Hani finished, Wilmer went back to his singing, which, though as melancholy as Hani's, had the virtue of being aimless, without judgment or guilt. It was just the round of creation, florescence and decay in the forest.

I lay like a corpse until an increasing heaviness forced me outside again. Close to the ground, cold inside despite the heat, I looked for a place to release, but as I edged around the perimeter, the plants screamed “go on, you're not welcome here”, until there came an effortless gush of liquid, without the slightest heave. Much relieved, I gazed at the sky, which was full of spirits which hurt my eyes, superposed against receding layers so visible they gave me the illusion I might pierce the skin of appearance and get to the essence of the parallel dimensions. But, my limbs still like string and the low weeds an impenetrable jungle, I couldn't make my way back to the *maloca*, which reared up like a sinister vessel, with sheer sides, impossible to board. I kept on crawling. The ground in front of the door, which should have felt rough, had a slippery texture and was paved with tiles patterned in waves which merged with my *pinta* to form weird maps. I wondered why I had never noticed them before.

I had just returned to my place when a tremendous roar broke out which extinguished my visions and disintegrated into a harsh static. It was Hani, stretching over the platform to vomit with the bellow of a bull. The vine was teaching him, as it did me, that being smart, ambitious, hardworking and polite doesn't necessarily fulfill you. That when instincts kept too much in check rebel, they release a titanic force.

Though not particularly religious, he was still driven by Jewish devotion to a treacherous God and channeling his longing for faith into ayahuasca hadn't erased that ancient conviction. It explained his posing and sadness, and the morbid delight in other people's illuminations which lay behind his academic investigation of the *pintas* they'd seen.

I thought of the way the students had reacted, for they too were self-aware and sought realization. They had been beaten about, like every drinker, but it had been softened by their youth, companionship, good humor and absence of expectations.

By contrast, the resonance of Hani's roar had the despair of questions he wouldn't allow himself to answer because they undid all of the "culture" he believed in.

Rough as it was, the *maloca* was Wilmer's home and there was an unstated rule that you had to find the strength to vomit outside. But he showed his nobility and mildly told Hani not to worry.

Hani grunted an apology, staggered backwards and crumpled onto the boards. He lay on his back there, unmoving, and a minute later, we heard him snoring.

We had reached that point of the ritual, about one in the morning, after everyone has been purged, when the rituals in the Putumayo soar into a jubilant, wide-awake frenzy of vision, song and story.

Wilmer followed the custom of Peru, where you are cast adrift, because the session is over. It was a trial for me, since my inspiration depended on the collective one, nor could I sleep, so the hours till dawn became endless.

The night turned through a welter of sluggish thoughts. If "love" was being so clean inside that you became a creature of light, then the vine was what Hani said it was. But the word meant so many things it meant nothing to me, given the all too human tendency to slip, without warning, from the sublime to the base. Yajé gave you a pure enlightenment, but it was fleeting and went with an awareness that your dribbling self, with all its "humane" values, counted for little in the face of its primal urges. It was that which made me touchy about the goddamn rules which violated your autonomy. All you could do was to laugh at the cosmic joke of death.

I was out at first light and was puzzled to discover that the tiles I had felt under my palms in the middle of the night were no longer there. Joining Wilmer by the fire, I asked about the people I had seen in the plantain.

"Those are my guardians. I whistle to them in my prayers and they fly down from the heavens by the power of God. Some roost in the leaves of that tree, others in the thatch and there are ones who live under the ground outside and have moving reflections like the sand on a riverbed. In the sky they are streaks of fire. They all have their paths, like the animals in the forest. They are zealous about their territory, as soldiers are of their fortress. The ones who help me to heal are gentler and have softer colors. I always hail the guardians first, because the spirits sent by my enemies can be hard to spot and if the guardians don't deal with them first, the sickness of the patients may enter my body and kill me."

"You tell me the *gente* you saw looked like ordinary human beings. That's just a trick, to lure the enemy in and exterminate their evil. You must crush the

venomous serpent underfoot, it says in the Bible. You do not recognize these spirits, because you are too restless and don't have the faith that God alone protects us”.

Wilmer's wife, Lizabeth, appeared, a wryly humorous, down-to-earth woman with a flat face and stringy hair. She threw corn to the chickens and stoked up the fire to make soup, but only for herself, as Wilmer never ate after a session, unlike the taitas in the Putumayo, who immediately wolfed down enormous breakfasts.

She pointed to Hani, asleep on the boards.

“Is he the professor you told me about?” she asked me.

“Yes, Dr. Hani.”

“Well, he's certainly fat enough to be a big shot,” she joked. It wasn't ill meant, not necessarily: she made fun of everything, almost on principle, including Wilmer's evangelism, at least when his patients weren't around. Religion was too remote from the everyday reality of the jungle for her. She mocked my clowning in the sessions too, but with a certain respect for my daring. Or so I judged from her saying she'd seen me in her visions, not the kind of thing a healer's wife usually confides to an outsider.

I told her about my drunken confusion before the maloca

“The spirits understand that you have a good heart, despite being a gringo. But they don't know what to make of you, you're too crazy. So they scratch their heads, get you drunk and play tricks on you. The tiles you saw might even be true. Remember those spirit paths Wilmer was talking about? Sometimes the spirits show you things that *are* there, in their realm, and then make you doubt it. Those shamans in the Putumayo are always telling you how mysterious yajé is, but the biggest mystery is that it is also very simple.”

By now, the others had wakened. Pale with fatigue but nourished on faery dust, as I was, how to make my early class, with Hani in tow? When the purge became shock therapy, you saw a kind of penitent euphoria in the drinker the morning after. Hani, however, looked normal, on guard, ever the Herr Professor. If anything, the session had disappointed him. “The experience was flat, everything I saw opaque. I felt Wilmer's concern, his songs were great, but the brew didn't reach me. I don't think he has the mastery, compared to other shamans I've known”.

We walked back to the road with some of our companions and I was grateful for the hands which helped him along the logs, because the forest was so intensely alive now I could barely maneuver myself. The lacework of palm, vine

and fern became intelligible, like a city, the plants spoke in words known to my inner ear.

That afternoon, his last in Leticia, Hani gave a talk at the university about cognitive psychology and ayahuasca. Some of the students from the session who were there later told me that he had simply put into academic language what they already knew, that the vine challenged the very concept of reality, as we know it, except that what was distortion for him was another kind of truth for us. I didn't automatically reject rationality, as they did, but what good was it if you missed the connection between purgation and *pinta*? Instead of opening him to the spirits, the vomiting had put him to sleep.

When the term ended, I took a boat down the Amazon to Manaus and Santo Daime. It was a new country, new language and utterly alien ritual. The regimentation and absence of my taitas and spirits left me irritated, scornful, nostalgic for yajé but when the third and final session was over, something bit—the music, the aesthetics, the commonalty, the doubt that ayahuasca needn't always involve combat and monsters. Years later, after further visits, the itch turned into affiliation but that was when I started thinking about the relativity of the ideas we have about yajé. It also enabled me to creep into Hani's skin a little, to feel his fatness and ghetto soul, and reflect on the reasons why he continued to piss me off for being neurotic, cerebral and stubborn. A certain kind of *Jewish*, as I was, which was mortifying to admit. On the other hand, what did being Jewish have to do with stepping on tiles that might or might not have been there?

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