

## ‘PUDDING-LIKE’ IDENTITY OF OUR TIMES. YAGE RITUAL

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### 1. LIFE OF KOFAN INDIAN

Kofans (*Los Cofanes*) is a name given to that tribe by the neighboring ethnic groups and it means ‘people who swim’. They describe themselves as *A’i* – people, real people. They inhabit areas in Ecuador in the Amazon region. They represent rain-forest type of culture. They have population of 1500 people, and their language has not been classified yet. The group discussed here, inhabits the north-east area of Ecuador, the banks of River Aguarico (near the town Lago Agrio). Observations were made in a settlement called Dureno in 1998 during Scientific Excursion lead by myself. Let me describe them.

Kofans do not use the traditional costumes any more, which is the effect of the influence of the first missionaries. Their costume took the shape of a blue or black tunic called *cushma* for men and red and white dress for women. Accessories used during the ceremony and yage’ ritual are: a crown of colorful feathers, necklaces of beads, seeds and the teeth of animals, feathers in the nose, ears, shoulders and individual make-up, called *tevacho*. Kofans’ daily dress is similar to the dress of colonuses (Ecuadorians).

The staple food of Kofans is bananas, yucca, rice and meat of fish, turtles, monkeys and birds. They complete their diet by the products bought from white people. They drink a beverage from cooked bananas and *yóko* (which has a similar effect to coffee). Their economy is based on agriculture (i.e., bananas, yucca, and coffee), hunting and fishing. Now Kofans also rear pigs and cows, sell handcrafts and medications. They supplement their income with tourism and work for colonuses. Kofans are partylinear, and they live in settlements based on egzogamy. The traditional division of the society was done according to the clans, and Kofans were polygamic. Now this division is disappearing and monogamic relationships prevail. The social organization of Kofans finds support in the person of shaman. At the top of the tribe’s social hierarchy is the shaman, political and religious leader, and also tribal medicine man.

Traditional beliefs are based on the narration stages – myths, in which the main character is the god Chiga and spirits *cocoyas* and *cuancuas*. The center of the religious system, and at the same time, is the ritual of taking the stock from the holy plant called *yage*—the subject of this paper.

## 2. CULTURAL ORDER OF KOFANS

The center, around which the cultural order of Kofanes Indian concentrates, is the ritual of consuming the stock from the psychoactive plant *yage*<sup>1</sup>. It is a popular ritual observed for thousands of years in South America. It determines the ecological-cultural niche from the southern Bolivia, through Peru and Ecuador, to north-west Colombian Amazon. It is the basis of the religious and medicinal system of 72 tribal groups inhabiting those areas. And some authors (e.g. Fercigla, Robinson) consider it to be the starting point for their patterns and cultural values. Other names used to describe *yage* are: *nepe*, *daimé* and the most frequent—*ayahuasca*.

The *yage* ritual is lead by the shaman, very often the formal and spiritual leader of the group, the man of knowledge, medicine man. He is the expert on the plant, he knows the way of brewing the stock and the mythical system connected with the ritual. The ritual takes place some distance from the settlement, in a special ritual hut, called *yage t'sa'o*. Usually men take part in it, and women and children only in the case of illness. The first stage of the ritual is finding, gathering and bringing the ingredients necessary to make the stock. Next, for a few hours, following a number of rules, the shaman prepares the stock. The actions are: cutting the creeper into pieces, barking the pieces, shelling the inside—*cuerpo de yage*, carrying water, adding the *yage* and *yage o'k'o*, cooking for about 4 hours and then purifying and cooling the stock—*yage veneno*. After that, the leader of the ritual, changes into the special costume (*cushma*), puts on the decorations, paints his face with the seeds of *achiote* plant and waits for dusk.

The proper part of the ritual takes place at night and consists of drinking the stock from the ichiorodi goblets and the magical clearing of the area. The participants of the ritual use an incense (*kokie*), a leaf-duster (*sanganga*) and tobacco smoke, while singing ritual songs. The clearing procedures are supposed to protect from the influence of the evil forces (*davu*) and enable contact with the world of the mythical visions. During the ritual, which lasts the whole night, the participants share their visions<sup>2</sup>.

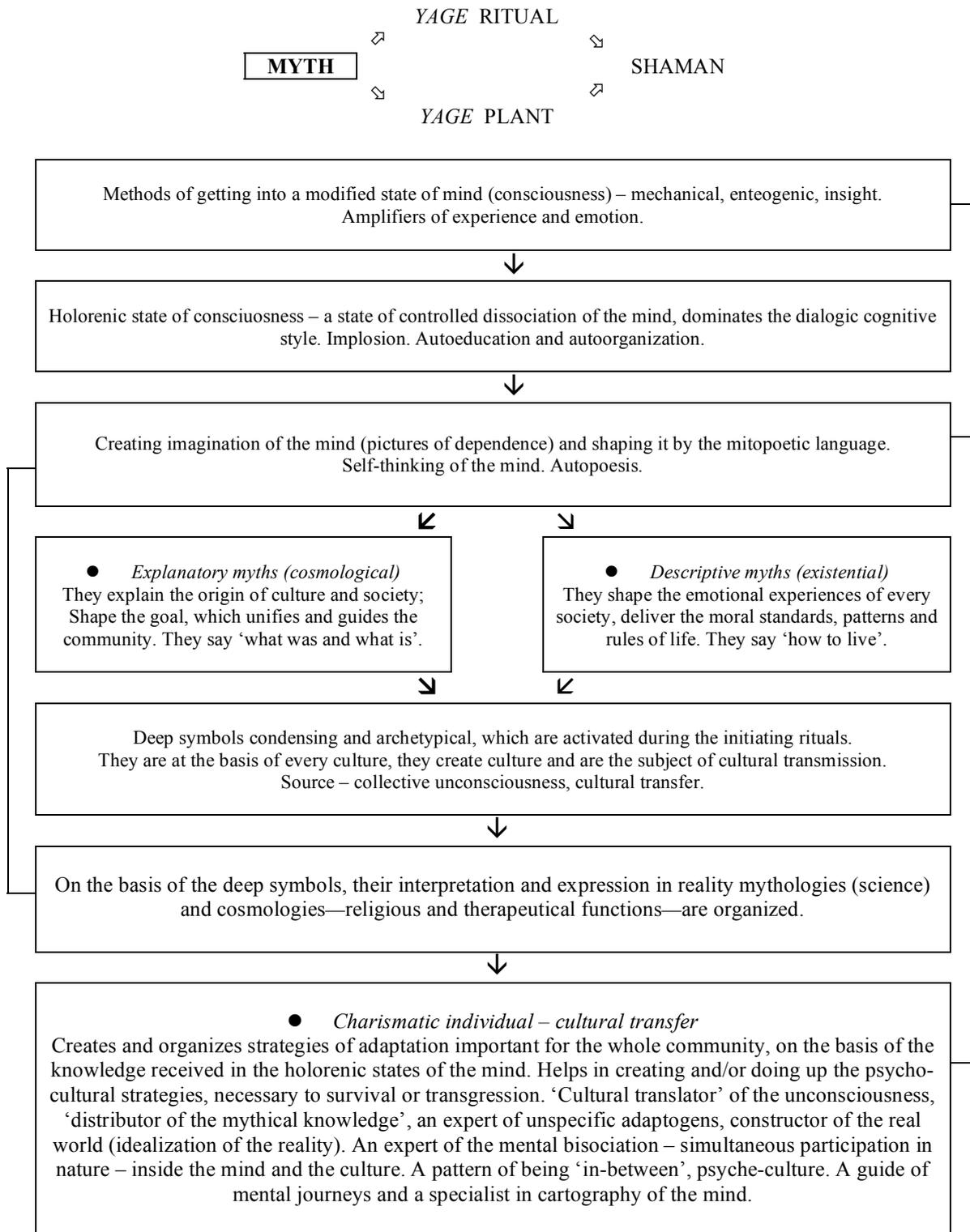
The functions of the *yage* ritual depend on the present needs of the group, and come down to, in, healing, initiation, counseling (before the war, hunting and other event important for the members of the group), integration of the group, and sometimes 'psychological help'. But *yage* is also drunk to fathom the knowledge (in Spanish: "*para conocimiento*") and for pleasure.

An important element of the cultural order of Kofan Indian is the myths, taking the shape of narration cycles, updated during the *yage* ritual. The diagram "Psycho-Cultural Interface" shows the interconnection of all elements described here.

<sup>1</sup>. Another name of this creeper is *ayahuasca*—the creeper of the dead (*Banisteriopsis caapi*), also used to define a stock, also consisting *chacrana* (*Psychotria viridis*), called by Kofanes *yage o'k'o*. Chemical creeper *ayahuasca* contains betacarbolins (harmine and harmaline), which are the inhibitors of the monoamine oxidase enzymes—MAO.

<sup>2</sup>. *Yage* is a hallucinogenic plant, which is, by ethnographers classified as enteogenic—substances enabling the members of the tribal groups contact with the deity. In the literature the plant is described as the amplifier of the experience, a substance causing a modified state of consciousness. People who have taken it describe, that it helps to introspect emotional states and past and present experiences. Positive feelings dominate, and if people cry, they describe it as cathartic. They experience very vivid images and they have a stronger ability of verbal and visual associations. *Yage* is also described as an oneirogenic substance—that's why the analogy of visions to dreams, waking dreams. What prevails: dynamic images, bright colors, snake-like shapes changing into their variations.

The reason why we presented the characteristic of the group and the *yage* ritual in such detail is the inability to separate the phenomenon of myth from the person of shaman, sacred for Kofans plant *yage* and the ritual of taking it, which is shown on illustration below.



**Psycho-Cultural Interface: A Diagram of the Psycho-Cultural Order's Structure**

(Compiled by A. Pankalla, based on J.M.Fercigla)

### 3. 'LIVING' MYTH IN PSYCHO-CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

The recapitulation of the characteristics of Kofan Indian can be the scheme of their cultural order. It is at the same time the starting point of the psychological-cultural perspective the myth to the culture of that ethnic group. The scheme was formulated on the basis of the book by Joseph Fercigla (Fercigla, 1997). We will discuss it in the context of the psychological-cultural perspective outlined in Chapter 3—the concept of three worlds concept by Karl R. Popper.

*World I.* It is the chemical composition and pharmacological effects of the psychoactive substances included in the yage stock, which is not the subject of this article. We are interested in the world II and III and the interactions between them in the context of the cultural order of Kofan Indian.

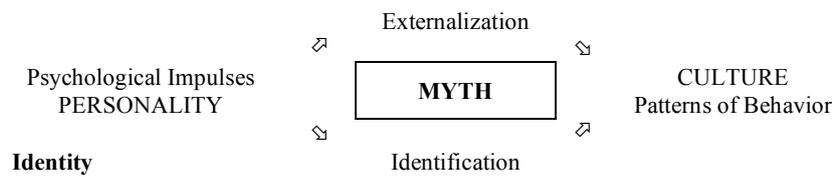
*World II.* The state after taking the psychoactive substances, such as yage, is described in the literature of the subject as the modified state of consciousness. Joseph Fercigla, making the assumption from the cognitive anthropology, acknowledges that the dominating cognitive style of it is the **dialogue style**, and the state of consciousness under the influence of *yage* is called the **dialogue consciousness**.

The dialogue style is characterized by mental auto-observation, auto-reflection and 'inner projection' of the own psychological processes and lifting the restrictions in perceiving the reality in dualistic categories (inner/ outer, past/present, here/there etc.). On the account of the great dynamics of the psychic processes in the dialogue state of consciousness, crossing the dualism, positive emotional state and the ease of synthesis of a big number of stimuli and creativity, it culminates in generating images which have a symbolic character. They acquire some meaning either in confrontation with psychic reality, an individual's experiences or thanks to the interpretation done by shaman. The ambiguity of the images is conducive to projecting on them one's personal or group experiences. The ability to comprehensive perception of self and the character of the processes of thinking in this state (magical thinking), enable the contact with holy stories – myths. Fercigla writes: 'Indians drink *yage*, to solve the problems, reaffirmate one's perception of the world and make a contact with one's own mythic world' (Fercigla, 1997, p.47), and later: 'it is under the influence of the enteogenic substance that the mythic language reveals its meaning' (p.50). And also: 'between the consecutive goblets of *yage* one or two myths were reminded, perhaps provoked by the visions of the participants of the ritual. For instance, Rufino Criollo, shaman from the Dureno settlement, described the conversations in the mythical system of Kofan Indian, which he had during the ritual with *yage a'* with the dead shamans, reminding the norms and helping to cure.

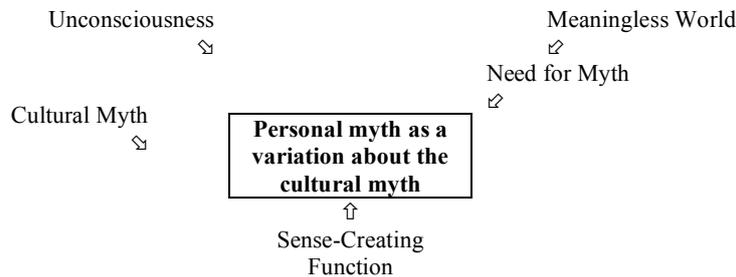
*World III.* The mythological system of Kofans consists of a number of short stories. These are based around important events, characters, the origin of plants and animals, shamans and their abilities, god Chiga and demons. According to the scheme, they can be divided into **explicative** myths that explain the origin of the world and the culture of Kofans and give the sense of unity and cultural identity to the group, and **descriptive** myths that describe how to live and which rules to obey, and shape the system of values of Kofans. The first talk about the beginnings of the Kofan culture, pantheon of deities, they explain 'who is who', what serves for what, what are the names of particular phenomena and objects and the relations between them. The last

ones give the patterns of recommended actions and consequences of bad behavior (i.e., they say what is good and bad), they establish the norms for particular categories of Kofans (i.e., shaman, woman, child, warrior, etc).

*Interaction between World II and World III: The Interface.* On the basis of the conception of three worlds by Karl R. Popper, the myth is generated in a dynamic process of interaction between the psychic and cultural world (example in the field of psychology is the conception of the myth by Jerome S. Bruner or Roll May). Psycho-cultural perspective is present in, analyzed in my book “Psychologia mitu” (2000a). The conceptions of the myth J. Bruner and R. May are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2 respectively.



**Figure 1**  
**The Conception of Myth by J. Bruner**

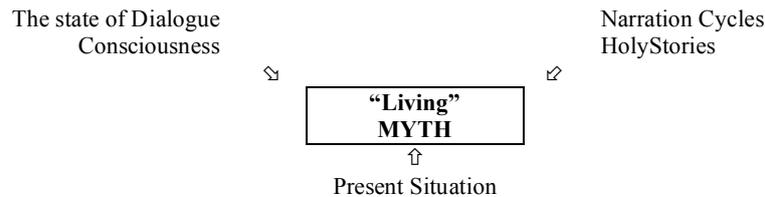


**Figure 2**  
**The Conception of Myth by R. May**

Its genesis and representation takes place in the individual’s mind (World II), but it functions autonomously as a cultural formation (World III). World II and World III of the myth influence and change each other. The myth like identify in this perspective is a psycho-cultural phenomenon.

In Kofan culture (and probably in other, based on the cultural order presented before), during the ritual it comes to an interaction between the world of individual visions formed, in the dialogue state of consciousness (World II), which is culturally defined, and updated by the shamans collection of myths. According to Popper, interaction is the ability to provoke changes, on the mutual matching of the individual visions and the culturally determined narration cycles – myths. Popper uses an expression ‘making and matching’, which can be understood literally here.

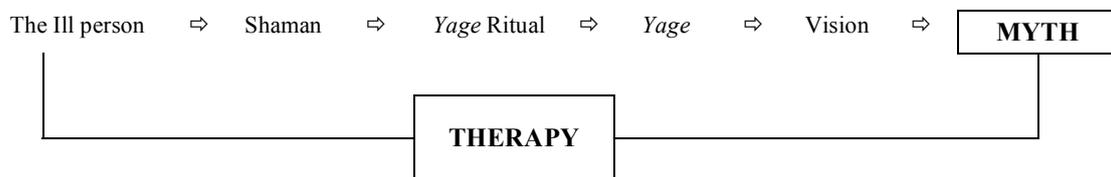
‘Living’ myth ( the effect of interaction between World II and World III, unlike the myths – narration cycles belonging to the World III), is created in the second world, but as an effect of interaction between the individual images, visions of the participant of the yage ritual, and fragments of the ‘holy stories’. It is a mental representation of myths as narration cycles recalled by the leader of the ritual. Usually the pretext for taking up the ritual is the present problem of the group or individual (i.e., hunting perspective, choosing a woman, fear of somebody, etc.).



In the dialogue state of consciousness the participants of the ritual find it easier to create alternative solutions to the problems (a process close to creative thinking), generating a large number of alternative solutions. As a result of synthesis of the individual images and ideas (artistic and linguistic creativity) and by using elements of mythical stories, it comes to creating symbols. They are not empty symbols, because their meaning is given to them by the myths present in the culture the person knows about or is reminded of them by the shaman. As an effect we can talk about ‘living’ myth created in the individual’s mind, but in the context of the culturally present mythical stories. Joseph Fercigla talks here about the adaptive function of the process – the present problem forces participation in yage ritual, and individually generated solution, in the context of mythical knowledge enable the individual to adjust to the changing reality. It can be applicable to solving political, social, pedagogical and also psychological problems of a group or individual. And here we are close to mature identity shaping process.

#### 4. THE MEANING OF ENTEOGENS IN MYTHOTHERAPY

The process of treatment, including psychotherapy, in Kofan culture is shown on illustration below:



For Kofans there is no division into psychic and somatic illnesses. A person who is ill and requires help goes to the shaman, who in case of simple illnesses recommends proper herbs or behaviors, and in more difficult ones celebrates the *yage* ritual. He himself takes the stock from *yage* plant, to search for the diagnosis and therapy in his visions.

Fercigla describes the treatment in the following way: “taking this substance (*yage* – A.P.) is always connected with the necessity to take a serious decision in the critical moment or a life change (...), its use is also observed with the aim of treatment (in the case of shaman), to cure others with the help of visions appearing as the effect of drinking *yage*, and with the aim of autotherapy (in the case of not – shaman)” (Fercigla, 1997, p.162). In practice the shaman takes the problem into consideration using his visions and in the context of mythical knowledge that he has. The treatment consists in the update of the myth and its applying to the images appearing in the vision. “Living” myth, as a product of interaction between the holy stories known to the shaman and symbolical images from the visions, becomes the remedy for the illness (problem) of the patient. The process proceeds identically in the case of problems, which from the perspective of the Western culture we would call psychological, that is marriage problems, educational, fear of something/somebody, interpersonal (i.e. competition for the position in the group), culturally improper behaviors. That process “gives the therapist the ability to enter culturally important causes of the illness, and the role of shaman in psychotherapy comes down to being ‘a creative source of interpreting symbols.’” Fercigla writes that “the mythical language and artistic symbols present in the ritual (...) and psychotherapy carry a reindicatory function” (Fercigla, 1979, p.70).

At the participation in *yage* ritual in Kofan culture, according with the scheme by Fercigla, we can look as a specific auto-psychotherapy, in which the prominent role is played by the myth as a psychological-cultural creation. In the dialogue state of consciousness there is an intensive ability of auto-observation and auto-education. The myth has a role of a mediator between the individual’s psychological world and the outer world—social-cultural. It becomes a tool for adaptation to changing conditions of the surrounding and problems resulting from it (adaptive function mentioned before). Because of the prominent function of the myth in the process of psychotherapy and auto-psychotherapy in Kofan Indian, they can be labeled—mythotherapy.

To summarize, there are four links in my speech leading to the idea of psycho-cultural interface: (1) Agony of “between a pig and sublimate” (S. Lem), psychoanalytic idea of man; (2) Thin red line between Popper’s World II and World III or border of psycho-cultural interchange lying “in-between” the two; (3) “Seesaw-like” process of genesis of such ideas/ entities like identity or personal myth (as a narrative identity). They are a border not part of any world - L. Wittgenstein; and (4) Enteogenic *yage* ritual, where as my shaman says, you can “be more”. It is an abstract idea in that you exist more fully, as a focus where psycho-cultural dimension becomes subjectively touchable (i.e., in that you become aware of the border between World II and World III).

## CONCLUSION

1. There is necessity of a reactualization of cultural myths and reauthorization of personal myths during identify shaping process. We can not talk about identity without talking about myth.

2. “In-betweenness”, psycho-culturalness of most ideas psychologists are obsessed with and necessity of psycho-cultural perspective in postmodern, transcultural times.

3. Autotherapeutic function of traditional ritual which our societies gravely lack—that is why nowadays we can talk about “pudding-like identity”—disintegration of identity, unshaped identity, prolonged moratorium.

4. Methodologically, transgressions that I was talking about can only be investigated introspectively and basically in quantitative researches. Ego of psychologist learns something only about itself. We are mistaken if we believe that we can investigate anyone other than ourselves. It is a case of psychological abuse. When we investigate others we do nothing more than learn something about ourselves. That's why what you have read in the article is based on my own experience participating in some strange ritual, and nothing more.

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