

AN OPEN LETTER IN SUPPORT OF THE COFÁN PEOPLE AND AGAINST THE ACTIVITIES OF ALBERTO JOSÉ VARELA

We hereby manifest our support for the representatives of the Cofán people who signed a public denunciation¹ against Mr. Alberto José Varela and his commercial activities involving Yajé.

In their denunciation, they point out that Mr. Varela does not have the permission or approval of the Yajé authorities of Colombia to transport or use the Yajé medicine; that they have not trained or instructed anyone from Mr. Varela's organization, including Mr. Varela himself; and that he was not granted authorization to commercialize Yajé. By the same token, they note that Mr. Varela has made no economic investments for the benefit of the Cofán community, nor for the preservation of their culture and traditions.

The undersigned manifest our concern over the proliferation, in Colombia and many other countries, of a business model in which Yajé (also known as Ayahuasca) is used solely in the interest of making a profit; disrespecting the plant, its proper management, and the sacred character bestowed upon it by native peoples and mestizo populations of Southeastern Colombia.

The activities of Mr. Alberto José Varela are especially worrisome because he claims to have been "initiated" in 2001 by Taita Domingo Males Miticanoy, calling himself "the first Westerner authorized to use the ayahuasca of Taita Querubín in Europe,"² and referring to his organization, Ayahuasca International as "the first multinational corporation dedicated to Ayahuasca."³

Between his so-called "initiation" and his arrest in Spain in 2008, Mr. Alberto José Varela conducted Yajé ceremonies in Colombia, Spain, and other countries, claims to have trained therapists "according to the instructions of Taita Domingo," and sold Yajé to participants after ceremonies so they could consume it in their own homes.⁴

In 2007, Mr. Varela founded the Putumayo Association for the Assistance of Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon, which he uses to organize trips from Spain to the Dept. of Putumayo, Colombia, and through which he collects money with the supposed aim of giving economic aid to indigenous peoples of southern Colombia and providing "needy communities with materials such as clothes, shoes, toys, and books."⁵ The Putumayo Association also seeks to purchase land in the Colombian rainforest to allegedly collaborate with indigenous peoples in restoring it by "planting traditional crops and elaborating shamanic medicines which are the basis of their medical culture and their means of sustenance." By 2008 the Putumayo Association had purchased five hectares of land in the Colombian Amazon.

¹ http://www.plantaforma.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/20150728_Pronunciamiento_Taita_Querubin_Queta.pdf

² <https://www.facebook.com/ayahuascatravels/posts/1422031514767753>

³ <http://ayahuascainternacional.es/nuestra-identidad/>

⁴ http://web.archive.org/web/20081222213634/http://www.paradisfrutarse.com/espacio_abierto/yaje_datosim_portantes.html

⁵ http://web.archive.org/web/20081222213634/http://www.paradisfrutarse.com/espacio_abierto/yaje_datosim_portantes.html

Mr. Varela was arrested in Spain in December of 2008, after a police investigation initiated by complaints filed by family members of participants and neighbors over the disorderly conduct generated by the Yajé ceremonies he conducted. After fourteen months in prison, he was absolved in April 2011 of any crime against the public health because, as noted in the court's sentence, it was not possible to quantify the DMT content of the Yajé confiscated by police. According to news reports, 40 kg of Yajé were found at his home.⁶

In 2013, Mr. Varela resumed the same kind of Yajé activities he had carried out prior to his imprisonment, now using aggressive marketing strategies and investing significant amounts of money in advertising and social media.

In order to legitimize his activities, he named various Taitas who were supposedly part of his organization, including Víctor Queta, Taita Querubín Queta, Taita Juan Jamioy, Taita Alfonso Males Jamioy, Taita Juan Males Jamioy, Taita Biron Piajuaje and Taita Humberto.

To expand his business, he provides “training” for facilitators after only one to a few weeks long course through what he calls the “European Ayahuasca School”; these people – some without the least experience or training – then organize and conduct Yajé ceremonies.

It so happens that the founder of this “school” claims that he does not consume Yajé any more, because, according to him, he no longer needs to; he also prohibits facilitators from taking the medicine while they are conducting ceremonies,⁷ which runs contrary to the principles followed not only by Yajé traditional medicine practitioners, but in all contexts of Ayahuasca use we know of.

Mr. Varela has created a business model around the Yajé ceremony involving a network of businesses, web pages, and Facebook profiles designed to protect him legally from further complaints. Yajé is prepared on lands bought by the Putumayo Association⁸ and then distributed to facilitators who are “contracted” by one of his companies, “Inner Mastery International.” Trips to the Colombian rainforest are sold through “Ayahuasca Travels,” and Yajé is sold directly over the Internet through the company “Ayahuasca Planet.”⁹ All of these business activities are carried out by means of various intermediaries.¹⁰

Given all the aforementioned, we the undersigned declare as follows:

- ≡ We express our support for the Cofán people and their authorities, and we denounce Mr. Alberto José Varela for improper and fraudulent use of the name and traditions of Colombian native peoples, especially the Cofán, to legitimize his business activities;
- ≡ We denounce the use of aggressive marketing tactics and social networks to publicize and commercialize Yajé ceremonies, and condemn the direct sale of this medicine over the internet to anyone without any controls whatsoever;

⁶ <http://www.abc.es/20090105/nacional-sucesos/desmantelada-chalet-rozas-asociacion-200901051159.html>

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/ayahuascaoficial/posts/10153539110346473:0>

⁸ <https://m.facebook.com/ayahuascaoficial/posts/10153558227806473>

⁹ <https://goo.gl/YYQzoq>

¹⁰ http://www.playgroundmag.net/articulos/reportajes/ayahuasca-espiritualidad-efectos_0_1397260261.html

- ≡ We denounce the irresponsible use Mr. Varela makes of the Yajé medicine, employing people without the necessary experience and training to conduct Yajé ceremonies; moreover, we note that these facilitators do not consume the medicine during ceremonies, contrary to the manner in which Ayahuasca is used in diverse contexts around the world;
- ≡ While some people might benefit from the use of the Yajé medicine in sessions organized by Ayahuasca International, we warn prospective clients that participating in sessions run by this organization could result in grave risks to mental and physical well-being;
- ≡ In this context, we note that a growing number of witnesses who have participated in Yajé sessions organized by Ayahuasca International have reported reprehensible practices, contrary to the principles enumerated in various ethics codes and guides to best practice, such as those developed by Brazilian Ayahuasca religious groups,¹¹ ICEERS,¹² and PDA,¹³
- ≡ We denounce the commercialization of Yajé as if it were an ordinary product or service, generating an artificial demand based on crass manipulation of what it means to consume the Yajé medicine, and taking advantage of the ignorance, credulity, good faith, and vulnerability of many people;

We the undersigned are not opposed to the expansion and spread of Yajé usage *per se*. Instead, we affirm that the diffusion of these practices should always be based on knowledge, respect, and ethics. The activities of Mr. Albert José Varela represent a danger not only to those who take part in his organization's ceremonies, but also more generally to the expansion and consolidation of these practices beyond their region of origin.

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¹¹ http://www.bialabate.net/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/microsoft-word-code_of_ethics_canada_pdf.pdf
http://neip.info/novo/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/carta_p.pdf

¹² http://iceers.org/Documents_ICEERS_site/Safety&Ethics/Ayahuasca-Guia_Buenas_Practicas_ICEERS2014.pdf

¹³ <http://www.plantaforma.org/codigo-etico/>

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