Ayahuasca: Amazonian Plant Lessons

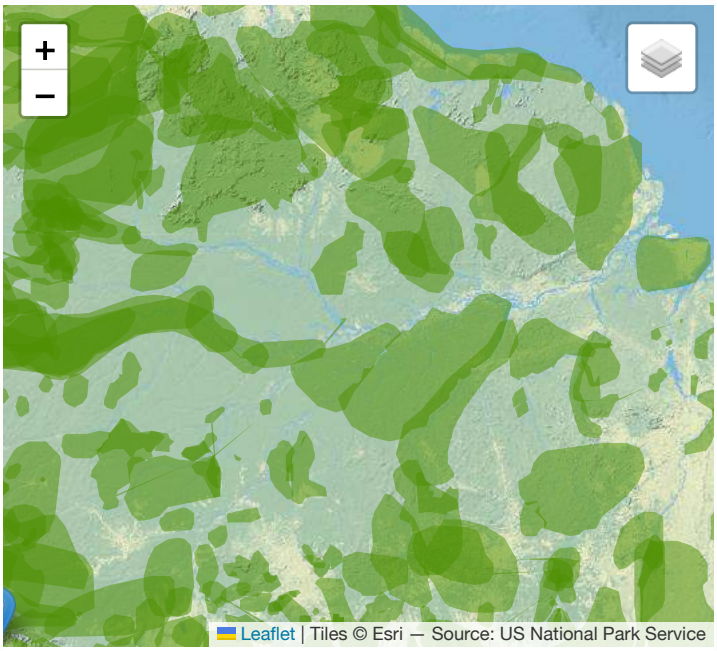
Ashley Thuthao Keng Dam, Diana Heredia-López, Rachael Nelson, and Erin Wrightson

Preparing Ayahuasca with Chacruna (P. viridis), Jairo Galvis Hen…

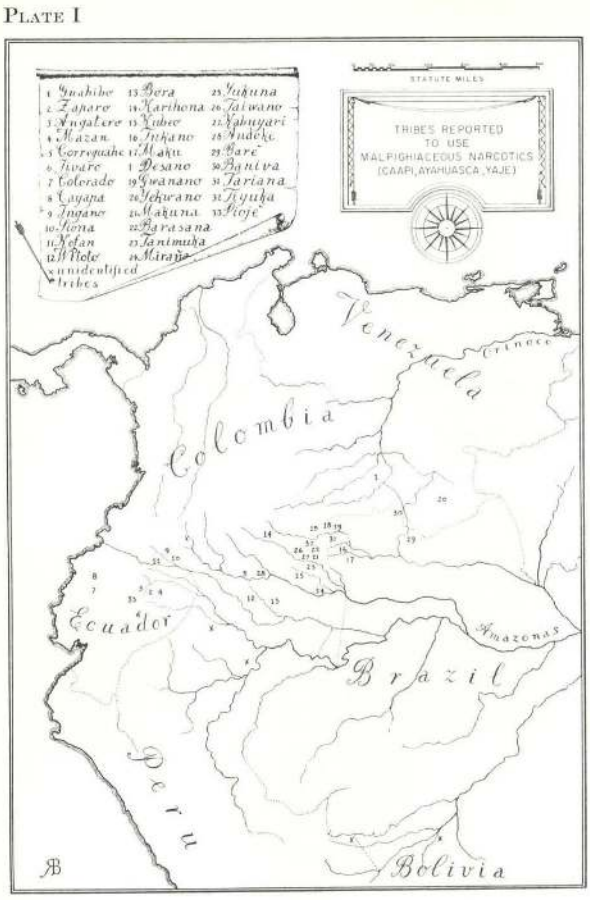
Since the late 1990s, the Amazonian psychoactive beverage ayahuasca has grown increasingly common throughout the world. Those living in Europe or the United States may be most familiar with the brew through New Age spiritual practices, exoticizing travel writing, and the growing ecotourism industry. However, these associations can obscure the long traditions of ayahuasca's use by a variety of Indigenous groups in what is now South America. Even within Amazonia, ayahuasca's ingredients and components, ritual usage, and spiritual and medicinal effects remain highly dynamic and contested. With its evolving story, ayahuasca can serve as an eloquent "plant teacher," as it is known in the Peruvian Amazon, highlighting both the relationality between humans and plants and the ways those relations were appropriated and transformed for a global market.

“Vine of the Soul”

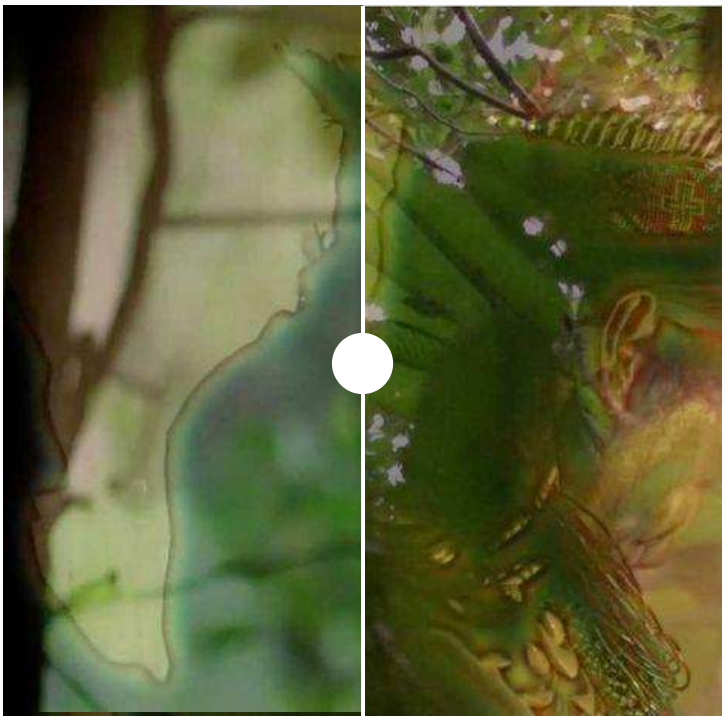
Although many associate ayahuasca with a particular species of plant, it is the name of a group of Indigenous psychoactive decoctions made by boiling a combination of species found in certain regions of Amazonia. Ayahuasca is from the Quechua language: *aya* meaning “soul, ancestors, or dead persons” and *waska* meaning “vine or rope.” Popular translations in English include “vine of the soul” and “rope of death.”[1] Among groups living in Ecuador, Colombia, Peru, and Brazil, ayahuasca is called *natema*, *hoasca*, *daime*, *yagé*, or *yajé*.



Map of South America, with Indigenous territories shown in…



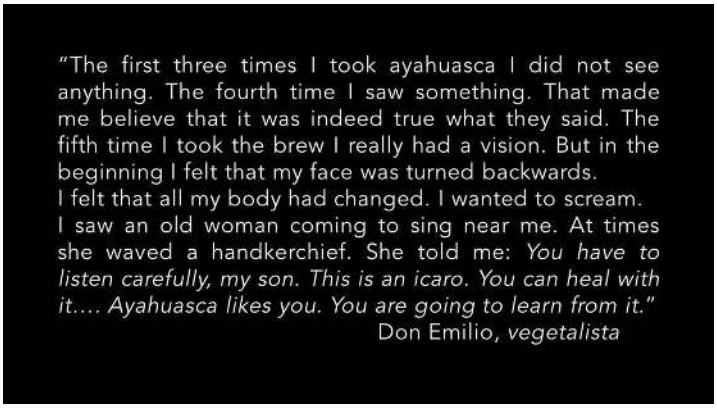
Map of various Amazonian groups reported to use ayahuasca…



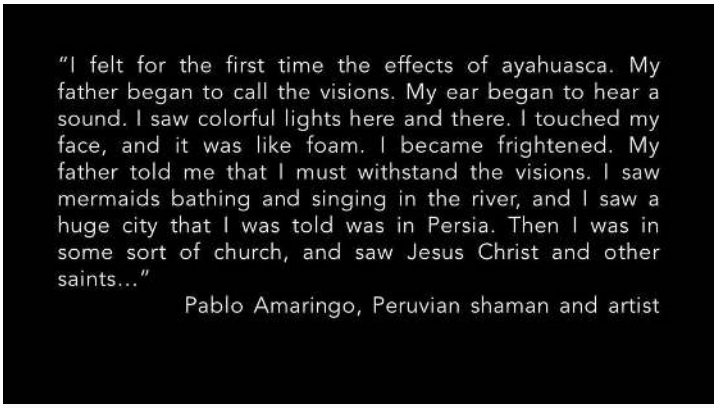
Users of ayahuasca experience vivid hallucinations and visions that some describe as “dreaming while awake.”[2] During these visual experiences, objects seem to vibrate, colors are brighter or more intense, and intricate shapes and patterns emerge in kaleidoscopic ways.[3] This is the result of the mixture of plants that combine two chemicals: *β-carboline* harmala alkaloids and *N,N-Dimethyltryptamine* (DMT). The two chemicals must be ingested together to cause psychedelic effects on the brain. There are two *β-carboline* harmala alkaloids, harmine and harmaline, which are known as monoamine oxidase inhibitors. Without them, the DMT would be inactivated by the monoamine oxidase within our gut and liver and no hallucinogenic reactions would occur. Although DMT is a naturally occurring chemical that is found in the brain in small amounts, larger amounts of it are needed to experience visions, strong emotional surges, and even “breakthroughs” to other dimensional realities.[4]

Many traditions are associated with the preparation and imbibing of the decoction due to its ubiquity among cultures throughout the Amazon basin and Andean highlands. Boiling and steeping together the vines of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the leaves of *Psychotria viridis* is most common.[5] Amazonian Indigenous populations have known about this combination of plants and its effects for at least 3,000 years.[6] However, there are recipes that do not contain any *P. viridis*, and instead use other plants that contain DMT, such as *Diplopterys cabrerana*.

Consuming ayahuasca produces a roughly four-hour period of altered consciousness. During this time, practitioners experience otherworldly visuals and fluctuations in conceptions of reality and selfhood. Most Indigenous groups of the Amazon basin understand the world as a series of interlocking human and nonhuman persons, both visible and invisible.[7] By entering the "ayahuasca world," a liminal meeting place with more-than-human beings, Indigenous participants in the ritual are able to better visualize the forces at work around them.[8] Such insight is used to treat physical ailments, address mental health concerns, and provide spiritual guidance. In these Amazonian communities, ayahuasca is central to religious, healing, and initiation ceremonies as a form of traditional medicine and psychiatry.[9]



Vegetalista Don Emilio reflects on the experience of consuming…



Peruvian shahman and artist Pabo Amaringo reflects on the…

The Origins of Ayahuasca and Plant Knowledge

The earliest archaeological evidence of the use of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis* dates back at least 1,000 years. A preserved ritual bundle containing snuff paraphernalia, dried plant remains, pouches, and textiles was found during the 2008 and 2010 excavatation of the Cueva del Chileno rock structure in the Sora Valley in Bolivia, associated with the ancient Tiwanaku state. Chemical analysis conducted on harmine and DMT residue indicates that *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis* were likely present in the bundle. It is not known how these materials were taken into the body (snuff plates and spatulas were discovered in the bundle, so the plants were possibly inhaled directly) but it is possible that the two plants were combined even then to create an early ayahuasca decoction.[10]

Map of South America showing Indigenous territories (gree…

How did apparently isolated Amazonian communities come to know the synergistic effect between different plant species in one of the most biodiverse forests of the world? For decades, outside researchers have assumed that Indigenous people have accumulated botanical knowledge by trial and error.[11] This umbrella method for diverse ways of knowing the natural world obscures the sophistication and depth of botanical knowledge of the Amazonians. Ayahuasca brews across the Amazon harness the psychoactive properties of at least 97 species from 38 plant families.[12] Aside from *Psychotria viridis*, Amazonian Indigenous groups have identified the medicinal properties of at least three other *Psychotria* species.[13]

Bundles of ayahuasca, Kofan, Rio San…

Decorated ritual ceramic vase for the…

Pottery cup with raised base, for drinkin…

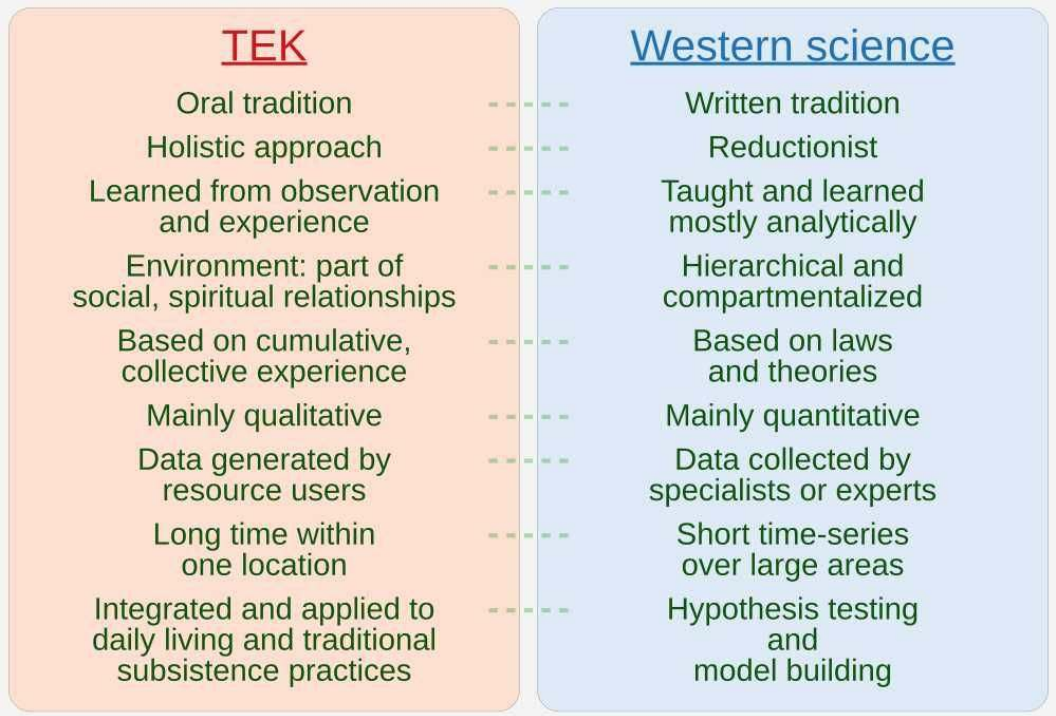
While these are veritable feats of botanical research, Indigenous ways of knowing are not necessarily measured by such standards nor rely exclusively on observations and collection of written data. Many *ayahuasqueros* in the Peruvian Amazon learn ayahuasca recipes through oral traditions from elders, but the "teacher" is considered to be the brew and its sacred plants, not the elder alone.[14] Learning through plant teachers involves at times solitude (*dietas*), long periods of sensorial interactions with the plant, and incorporating dreams and visions as significant teachings.[15]

The Huni Kuin science of Ayahuasca - Txana Ixã -…

For outsider researchers hailing from the West, identifying plant species used in ayahuasca decoctions has been difficult for several reasons. Recipes are often closely guarded by Indigenous knowledge keepers and precise measurements of the ingredients are not always recorded. Additionally, Indigenous groups may classify plants according to more refined and specific criteria than Western scientists have, identifying nuanced variations in leaf shape, size, breadth, flowering patterns, psychoactive effects, as well as the guardian spirits associated with the plant.[16] Indigenous groups using these complex classification systems will at times refer to the same plant species by many names or use the same name for different plants, all depending on their uses. In the case of ayahuasca, “different” species are used to create brews with varying strength and purpose.[17]

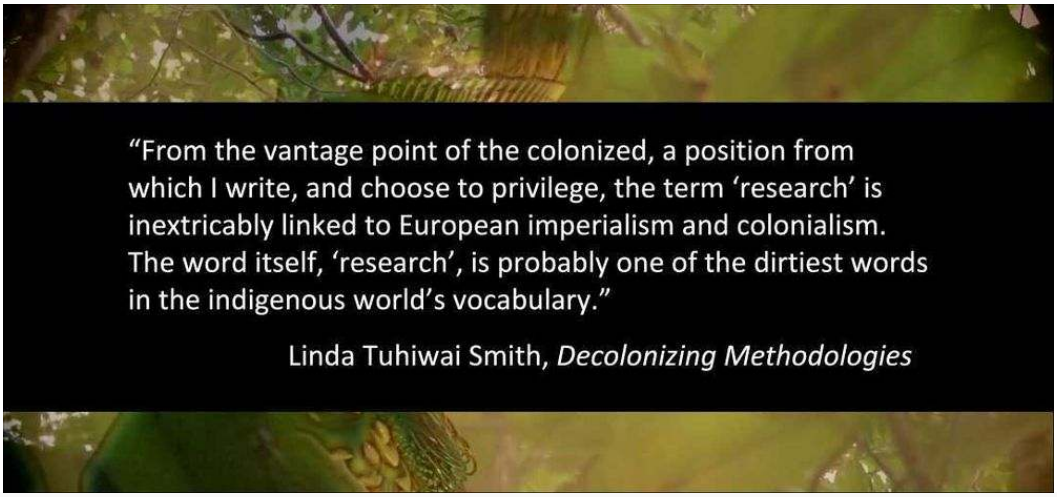
Richard Schultes, A young Kamentsá boy holds the flower of a…

For these reasons, ayahuasca and its associated plant species form an exemplary case study for considering the gaps between Western botanical and anthropological scholarship and the traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) of Indigenous Amazonian groups.[18] Western researchers must grapple with the sacred and intimate nature of this knowledge, and how it is carefully shared and accessed from within Indigenous communities.[19] To enter a community as an outsider and demand immediate access to precisely safeguarded knowledge could be a kind of scholarly colonialism, demonstrating the historical extractive aspect of research conducted within Indigenous communities across disciplines. In some instances, these research practices strained relationships with Indigenous communities by framing them as something (typically white) researchers actively do to Indigenous peoples.[20]



2005 Comparing Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) to Western Science - Fish & Wildlife Servic…

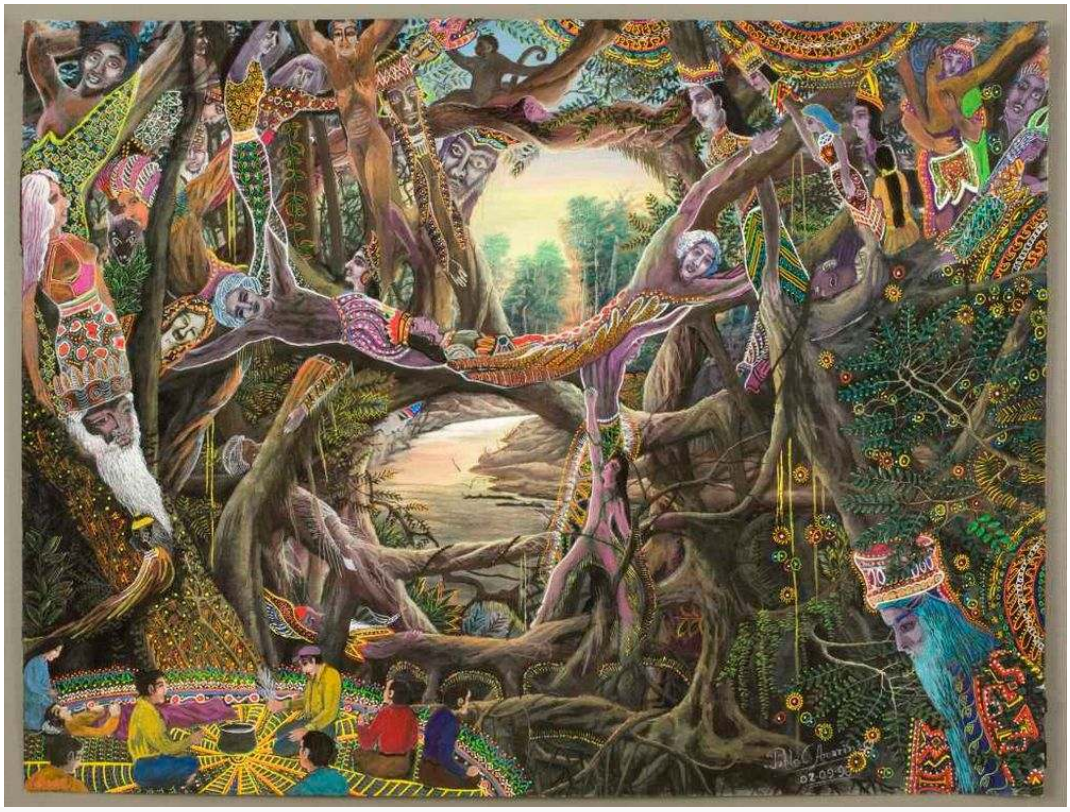
Western researchers have conducted studies that prominently centered their voices instead of those of the communities they studied. Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson highlights that despite the “good” intentions of some studies, many have resulted in the formation and “proliferation of negative stereotypes.”[21] To actively decolonize present and future scholarship, Indigenous scholars have led the charge toward revising this trajectory through the collaborative development of Indigenous paradigms of research.[22] With a focus on community engagement, reciprocally nourishing relationalities, appropriate crediting, and the acknowledgement that not all Indigenous knowledge may be accessible to researchers, further studies on TEK of ayahuasca are possible. The pursuit, documentation, and safeguarding of TEK are crucial to biodiversity conservation as a whole and therefore, it is in the interest of all to center and uplift Indigenous voices.[23]



Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples (London and Ne…

Representing Ayahuasca with the Senses

Numerous rituals and visual representations have arisen from the sensorial experiences prompted through ayahuasca rituals. While conducting his groundbreaking research on ayahuasca rituals among the *mestizo* population in the Peruvian Amazon, anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna encountered the *curandero* Pablo Amaringo. Wanting to know more about Amaringo's experiences with the brew, Luna provided him with paper and tempera paints and asked him to draw his visions. For Amaringo, the visual was a key component in ayahuasca's efficacy. "The Spirits don't talk," he explains, "but express themselves through images."[24] Full of bright colors, elaborate patterns, and fantastical scenes, Amaringo's paintings reproduce the effects of ayahuasca and point to the knowledge and wisdom derived from the rituals. Amaringo shared that the brew had transformed him into an artist by teaching him how to see and understand colors. In this painting, Amaringo explores the interconnectedness of humans, animals, plants, and spirits through the motif of the ficus tree (*Ficus insipida*). Practitioners can access that knowledge through ayahuasca rituals, fasting, and chanting.



Pablo Amaringo, Espíritus de los Renacos (Spirits of the Renacos), 1996, gouache on paper, 18 x 24 i…

For the Shipibo people of modern-day Peru, ayahuasca rituals also revolve around visualizing the unseen. According to Shipibo history, in ancient times, everything in the world–water, plants, earth, humans, etc.–was once covered with intricate patterns that expressed the fundamental nature of creation. As time passed, this patterning was lost. Through the transcendent hallucinations of ayahuasca, though, Shipibo artists once again gain access to sacred patterns. The Shipibo people are unique in that most of these artists and practitioners are female. By reproducing such patterns in pottery and textiles, these women practiced therapy and healing born out of the knowledge of the interconnectedness of the universe.[25]

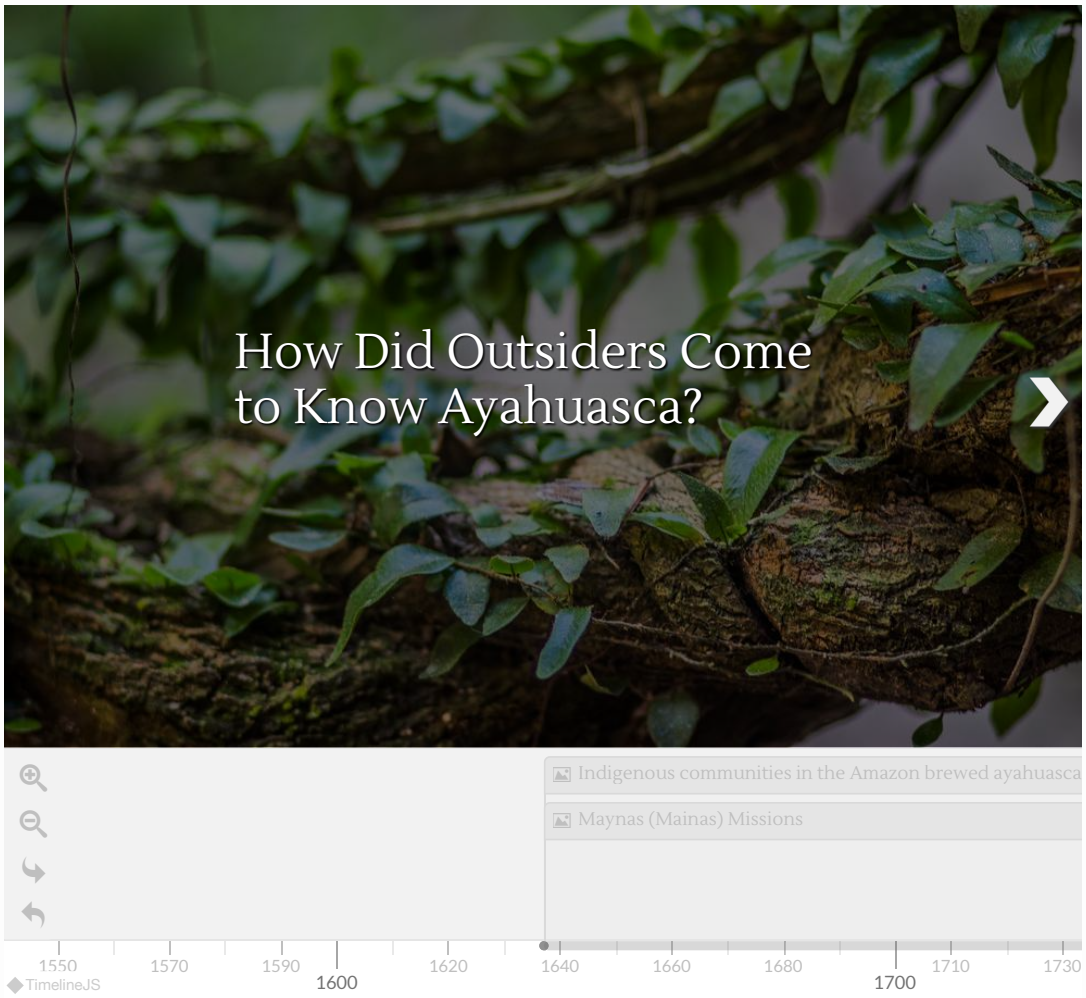
Traditional Shipibo Embroidery, photo by Juan Carlos Huayllapuma/CIFOR. Indigenous community…

More than just visual, the ayahuasca ceremony is a multisensory journey, with music being a vital component in several ayahuasca traditions. In Peru, ayahuasca healing ceremonies include whistled chants, *icaros*, carried out by *ayahuasqueros* or *vegetalistas*. The chants are meant to invoke spiritual forces so that they may open doorways and help to complete tasks, as well as to invoke guardian spirits of the vine. The chants likely also help to orient those who have imbibed the decoction, providing grounding while the participants are otherwise disoriented by its effects.[26]

Maestro Gilberto Picota Lopez Shipibo Icaro @ Spirit of the Jaguar

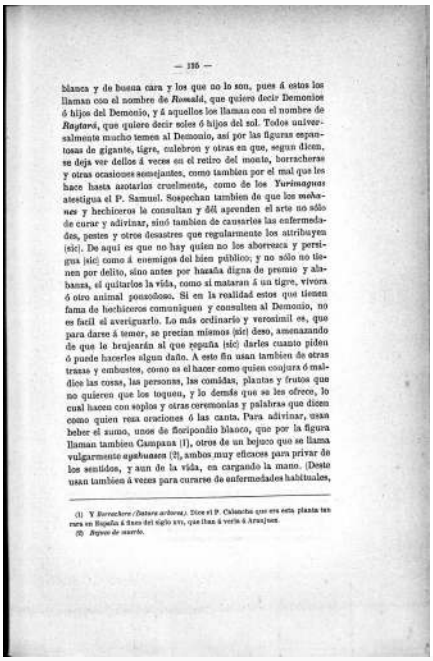
Ethnobotanical Encounters

The rich descriptions of ayahuasca ceremonies we know today have been written in the last five decades or so. Interestingly, the few materials that document early encounters with the brew often mention vernacular plant names or botanical traits of hallucinogenic plants. These details, however brief and meager, became relevant for twentieth-century ethnobotany. Selected episodes of ethnobotanical encounters, shown here, reveal how ayahuasca shaped the development of this discipline. Despite persistent religious and intellectual barriers, outsider researchers began to build their understanding of ayahuasca as early as the 1700s. The convergences and dissonances with Amazonian plant knowledge reveal different episodes of land and knowledge colonization.



Jesuits overseeing missions in the Amazon in the eighteenth century were among the first Europeans to explicitly mention ayahuasca (or *marari*) as a brew for ritual and medicinal purposes. Missionaries like Pablo Maroni (1695–1757) found it difficult to prove whether spiritual leaders had a pact with the devil but still were concerned about the divinatory purposes of “a white devil’s trumpet (floripondio)” and “a vine called vulgarly ayahuasca.” In their view, spiritual leaders (usually referred to as sorcerers–*mohanes y hechiceros*) were only tricking and deceiving people in their community.[27]

The Marañon or Amazon River with the Mission of the Society …



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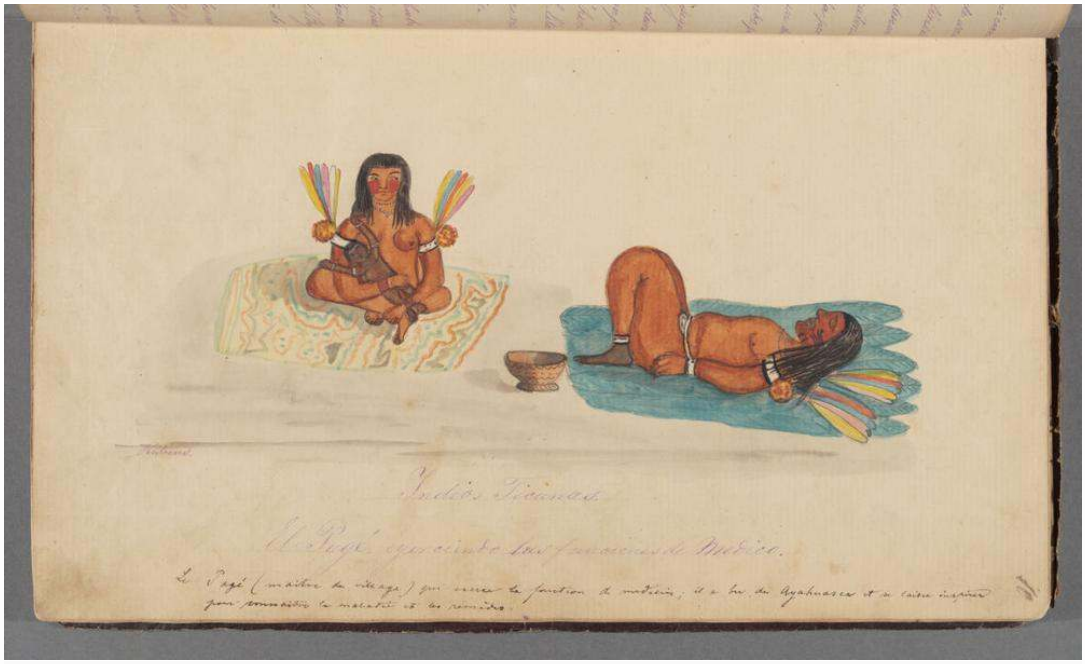
blancos y de buena cara y los que no lo son, pues á estos los llaman con el nombre de *Rossalé*, que quiere decir Demonios ó hijos del Demonio, y á aquellos los llaman con el nombre de *Raytaré*, que quiere decir soles ó hijos del sol. Todos universalmente mucho temen al Demonio, así por las figuras espantosas de gigante, tigre, culebron y otras en que, segun dicen, se deja ver dellos á veces en el retiro del monte, borracheras y otras ocasiones semejantes, como tambien por el mal que les hace hasta azotarlos cruelmente, como de los *Yurimaguas* atestigua el P. Samuel. Sospechan tambien de que los *mohanes* y hechiceros le consultan y dél aprenden el arte no sólo de curar y adivinar, sinó tambien de causarles las enfermedades, pestes y otros desastres que regularmente los atribuyen (sic). De aquí es que no hay quien no los aborrezca y persiguu (sic) como á enemigos del bien público; y no sólo no tienen por delito, sino antes por hazaña digna de premio y alabanza, el quitarlos la vida, como si mataran á un tigre, víbora ó otro animal ponzoñoso. Si en la realidad estos que tienen fama de hechiceros comuniquen y consulten al Demonio, no es facil el averiguarlo. Lo más ordinario y verosimil es, que para darse á temer, se precian mismos (sic) deso, amenazando de que le brujearán si que regaña (sic) darles cuanto piden ó puede hacerles algun daño. A esto fin usan tambien de otras trazas y embustes, como es el hacer como quien conjura ó maldice las cosas, las personas, las comidas, plantas y frutos que no quieren que los toquen, y lo demás que se les ofrece, lo cual hacen con soplos y otras ceremonias y palabras que dicen como quien reza oraciones ó las canta. Para adivinar, usan beber el zumo, unos de floripondio blanco, que por la figura llaman tambien Campana (1), otros de un bejuco que se llama vulgarmente *ayahuasca* (2), ambos muy eficaces para privar de los sentidos, y aun de la vida, en cargando la mano. (Deste usan también á veces para curarse de enfermedades habituales,

(1) Y *Borrachero* (*Datura arborea*). Dice el P. Calancha que era esta planta tan rara en España á fines del siglo XVI, que iban á verla á Aranjuez.
(2) *Bejuco de muerte.*

Pablo Maroni’s discussion of different Amazonian groups’ rituals…

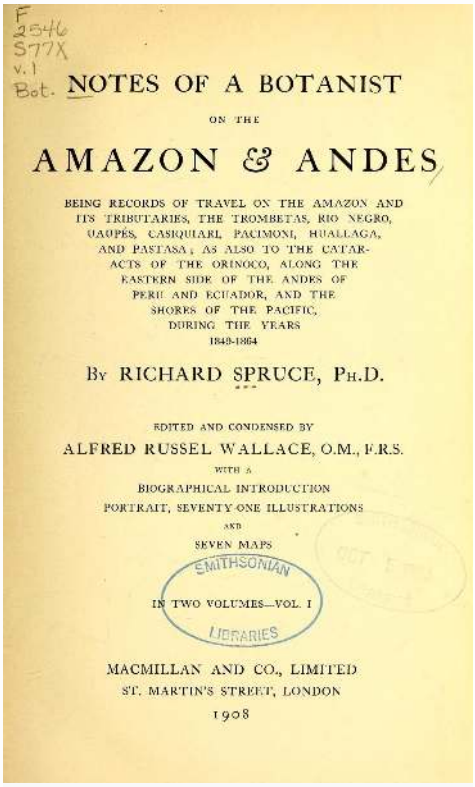
In contrast, descriptions of individual plant species were devoid of demonic or ritual associations. In the late eighteenth century, the celebrated Spanish explorers and botanists Hipólito Ruíz (1754–1816) and José Pavón (1754–1840) described a shrub from the western Amazon and named it *Psychotria viridis*.[28] Even though these botanists sought to obtain knowledge from local herbalists and sorcerers, the hallucinogenic properties and use of *P. viridis* in ayahuasca brews were never reported and remained unknown to westerners until the twentieth century.[29]

In the 1870s, the Portuguese missionary Manuel Rodrigues Pinto Rubens echoed the Jesuit views on ayahuasca when he wrote about the *Ticuna* in the northern Amazon. He recognized the importance of medical specialists of this community (called *pagés*) but also called them “impostors” who frightened the overly “superstitious indians” of the region.[30] Pinto Rubens’ work stands out from previous missionary accounts because it has great ethnographic detail about Indigenous rituals combined with botanical references to the plants used by the Ticuna. It also features several watercolors, including one of a *pagé* who apparently is using ayahuasca to understand a patient’s ailment and find its cure.



Pinto Rubens, Manuel Rodrigues, author. Costumbres de los indigenas que habitan en el Valle del…

While Pinto Rubens' work is certainly ethnobotanical in character, the most celebrated figure in the discipline is Richard Spruce (1817–1893). Considered one of the main pioneers of ethnobotany in the modern scientific world, this Victorian Era botanist traveled across South America for 15 years, extensively documenting the Putumayo region of the Amazon. Spruce was notably interested in the use of mind-altering plants, and dedicated one chapter dedicated to them in his 1908 posthumously edited book, *Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes*. Most of the chapter focuses on the plant *caapi*—the Tupi word for ayahuasca—and includes methods of preparing the plant for the decoction, notes on its etymology, and ritual descriptions.[31]



NOTES OF A BOTANIST

ON THE

AMAZON & ANDES

BEING RECORDS OF TRAVEL ON THE AMAZON AND ITS TRIBUTARIES, THE TROMBETAS, RIO NEGRO, UAUPÉS, CASIQUIARI, PACIMONI, HUALLAGA, AND PASTASA; AS ALSO TO THE CATARACTS OF THE ORINOCO, ALONG THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE ANDES OF PERU AND ECUADOR, AND THE SHORES OF THE PACIFIC, DURING THE YEARS 1849-1864

By RICHARD SPRUCE, Ph.D.

EDITED AND CONDENSED BY

ALFRED RUSSEL WALLACE, O.M., F.R.S.

WITH A

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

PORTRAIT, SEVENTY-ONE ILLUSTRATIONS

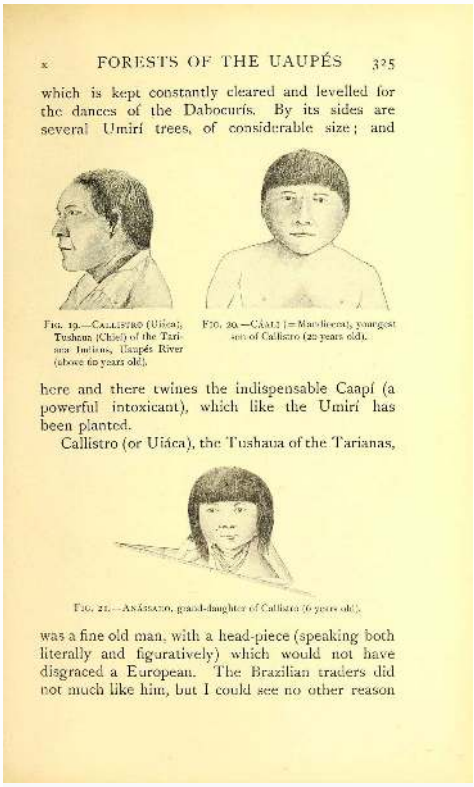
AND

SEVEN MAPS

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. I

MACMILLAN AND CO., LIMITED
ST. MARTIN'S STREET, LONDON
1908

⁝ Cover page Richard Spruce, Notes of a…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which is kept constantly cleared and levelled for the dances of the Dabocuris. By its sides are several Umiri trees, of considerable size; and

Fig. 19.—Callistro (Uiáca), Tushaua (Chief) of the Tarianas Indians, Uaupés River (above 60 years old).

Fig. 20.—Caati (= Marvellous), youngest son of Callistro (20 years old).

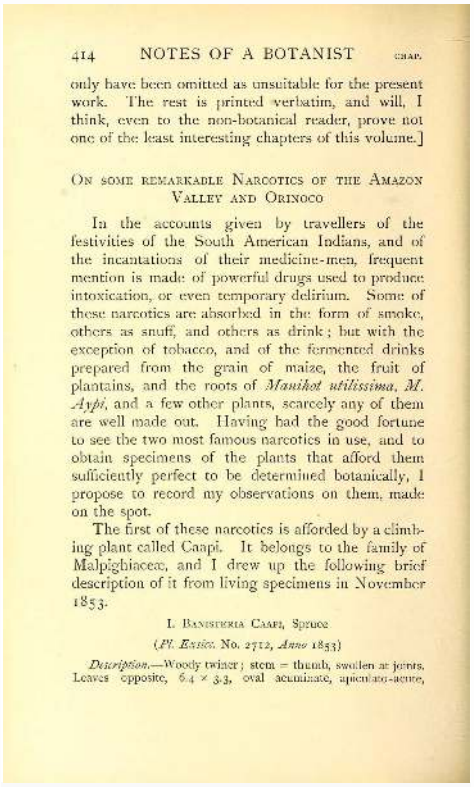
here and there twines the indispensable Caapí (a powerful intoxicant), which like the Umiri has been planted.

Callistro (or Uiáca), the Tushaua of the Tarianas,

Fig. 21.—Anássato, grand-daughter of Callistro (6 years old).

was a fine old man, with a head-piece (speaking both literally and figuratively) which would not have disgraced a European. The Brazilian traders did not much like him, but I could see no other reason

⁝ Richard Spruce's drawings of the Tarian…


414 NOTES OF A BOTANIST CHAP.

only have been omitted as unsuitable for the present work. The rest is printed verbatim, and will, I think, even to the non-botanical reader, prove not one of the least interesting chapters of this volume.]

On some remarkable Narcotics of the Amazon Valley and Orinoco

In the accounts given by travellers of the festivities of the South American Indians, and of the incantations of their medicine-men, frequent mention is made of powerful drugs used to produce intoxication, or even temporary delirium. Some of these narcotics are absorbed in the form of smoke, others as snuff, and others as drink; but with the exception of tobacco, and of the fermented drinks prepared from the grain of maize, the fruit of plantains, and the roots of *Manihot utilissima*, *M. Aipi*, and a few other plants, scarcely any of them are well made out. Having had the good fortune to see the two most famous narcotics in use, and to obtain specimens of the plants that afford them sufficiently perfect to be determined botanically, I propose to record my observations on them, made on the spot.

The first of these narcotics is afforded by a climbing plant called Caapi. It belongs to the family of Malpighiaceæ, and I drew up the following brief description of it from living specimens in November 1853.

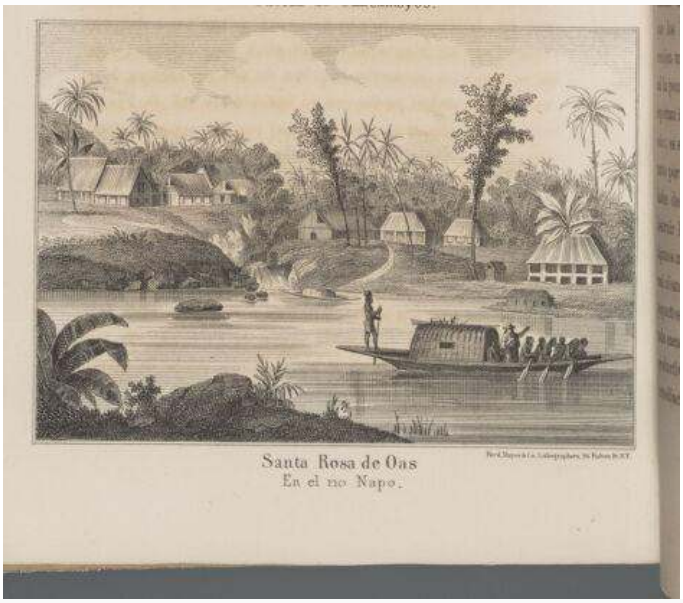
1. Banisteria Caapi, Spruce

(*Pl. Exsicc.* No. 2712, *Anno* 1853)

Description.—Woody twiner; stem = thumb, swollen at joints. Leaves opposite, 6·4 × 3·3, oval acuminate, apiculate-acute,

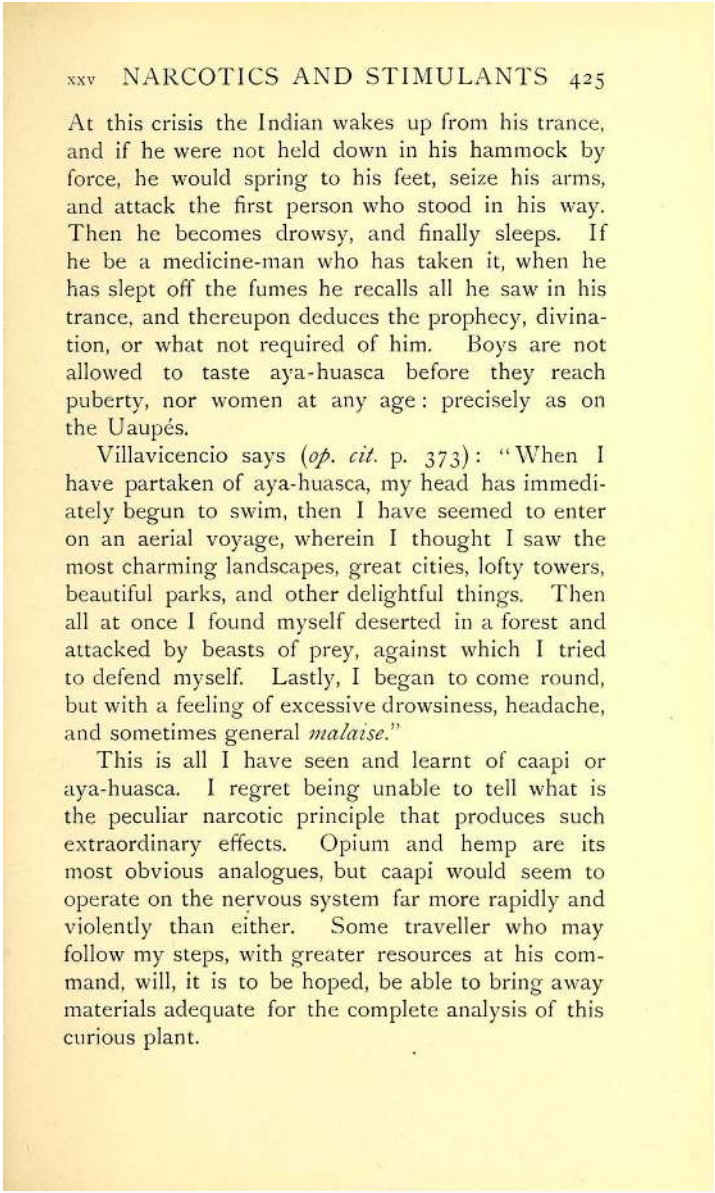
⁝ Botanical description and scientific nam…

Spruce obtained most of his field information on *caapi* through interviews and observations. However, when it came to researching firsthand experiences with ayahuasca consumption, Spruce had to tap into the scientific networks of the nascent Spanish American republics and the Brazilian Empire.[32] To illustrate the effect on "white men who have partaken of *caapi* in the proper way," Spruce drew from the account of a Brazilian friend and more extensively, from Manuel Villavicencio (1804–1871), a Quiteño *criollo* scientist who was governor of the Oriental Provinces in Ecuador in the 1850s.[33]



Villavicencio, Manuel, 1822-1871. Geografía de la República del…

Villavicencio wrote a lengthy book, *Geografía de la República del Ecuador* (Geography of the Republic of Ecuador), around the same time Spruce was traveling across the Amazon. Not surprisingly, he dedicated a sizable portion of his book to the Oriental Provinces and discussed strategies for incorporating the apparently isolated and wild tribes who lived there.[34] Villavicencio's book also included ethnographic descriptions, including the use of ayahuasca in Amazonian communities and his own experience from drinking the brew. Even though Spruce recognized the ethnographic efforts of Villavicencio, he found his botanical descriptions useless.[35] Villavicencio did include other important ethnobotanical details and also described the diplomatic and warfare uses of the ayahuasca brew in the Záparo and Jívaro communities.[36] These political uses are now rarely mentioned in ayahuasca literature, thus leaving the magical and spiritual connotations of the brew as the most relevant ones.



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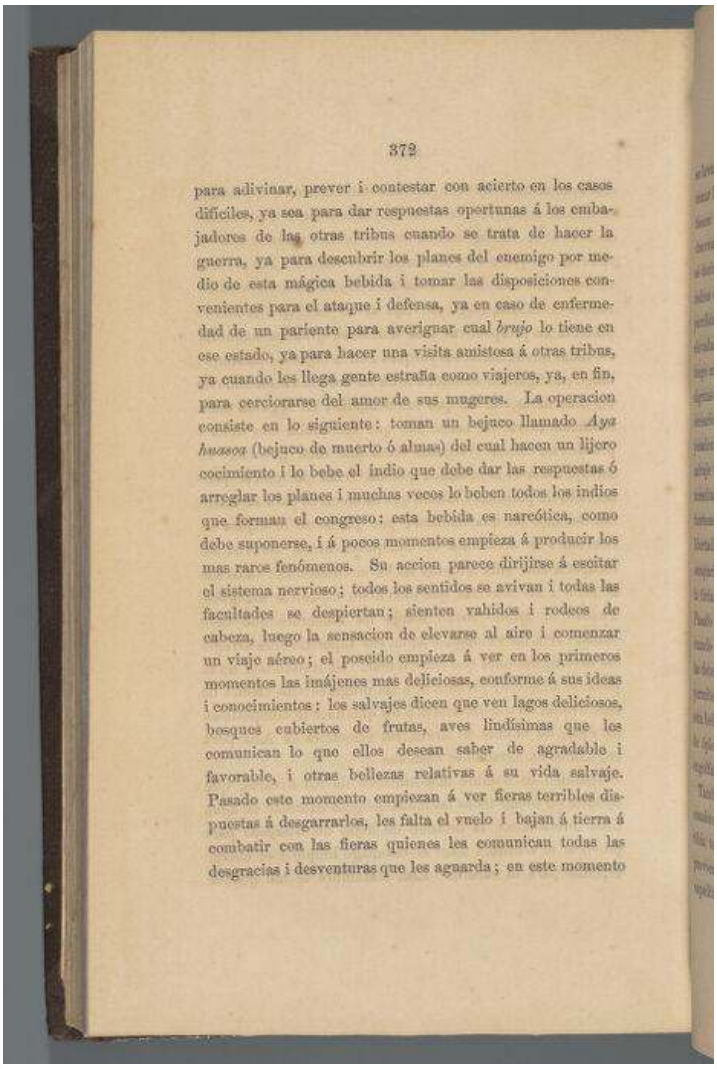
At this crisis the Indian wakes up from his trance, and if he were not held down in his hammock by force, he would spring to his feet, seize his arms, and attack the first person who stood in his way. Then he becomes drowsy, and finally sleeps. If he be a medicine-man who has taken it, when he has slept off the fumes he recalls all he saw in his trance, and thereupon deduces the prophecy, divination, or what not required of him. Boys are not allowed to taste aya-huasca before they reach puberty, nor women at any age: precisely as on the Uaupés.

Villavicencio says (*op. cit.* p. 373): "When I have partaken of aya-huasca, my head has immediately begun to swim, then I have seemed to enter on an aerial voyage, wherein I thought I saw the most charming landscapes, great cities, lofty towers, beautiful parks, and other delightful things. Then all at once I found myself deserted in a forest and attacked by beasts of prey, against which I tried to defend myself. Lastly, I began to come round, but with a feeling of excessive drowsiness, headache, and sometimes general *malaise*."

This is all I have seen and learnt of caapi or aya-huasca. I regret being unable to tell what is the peculiar narcotic principle that produces such extraordinary effects. Opium and hemp are its most obvious analogues, but caapi would seem to operate on the nervous system far more rapidly and violently than either. Some traveller who may follow my steps, with greater resources at his command, will, it is to be hoped, be able to bring away materials adequate for the complete analysis of this curious plant.

Excerpt of Richard Spruce's translation and summary of…



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para adivinar, prever i contestar con acierto en los casos difíciles, ya sea para dar respuestas oportunas á los embajadores de las otras tribus cuando se trata de hacer la guerra, ya para descubrir los planes del enemigo por medio de esta mágica bebida i tomar las disposiciones convenientes para el ataque i defensa, ya en caso de enfermedad de un pariente para averiguar cual *brujo* lo tiene en ese estado, ya para hacer una visita amistosa á otras tribus, ya cuando les llega gente estraña como viajeros, ya, en fin, para cerciorarse del amor de sus mugeres. La operacion consiste en lo siguiente: toman un bejuco llamado *Aya huasca* (bejuco de muerto ó almas) del cual hacen un lijero cocimiento i lo bebe el indio que debe dar las respuestas ó arreglar los planes i muchas veces lo beben todos los indios que forman el congreso: esta bebida es narcótica, como debe suponerse, i á pocos momentos empieza á producir los mas raros fenómenos. Su accion parece dirijirse á escitar el sistema nervioso; todos los sentidos se avivan i todas las facultades se despiertan; sienten vahidos i rodeos de cabeza, luego la sensacion de elevarse al aire i comenzar un viaje aéreo; el poseido empieza á ver en los primeros momentos las imájenes mas deliciosas, conforme á sus ideas i conocimientos: los salvajes dicen que ven lagos deliciosos, bosques cubiertos de frutas, aves lindísimas que les comunican lo que ellos desean saber de agradable i favorable, i otras bellezas relativas á su vida salvaje. Pasado este momento empiezan á ver fieras terribles dispuestas á desgarrarlos, les falta el vuelo i bajan á tierra á combatir con las fieras quienes les comunican todas las desgracias i desventuras que les aguarda; en este momento

Villavicencio, Manuel, 1822-1871. Geografía de la República del…

Spruce's work ultimately shaped twentieth-century ethnobotanical interests. The renowned ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes (1915–2001) was inspired by *Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon and Andes* and followed Spruce's steps into the Amazon during the 1940s.[37] Schultes lauded the naming of the ayahuasca vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) as Spruce's greatest "discovery" but regretted that he did not experience the ayahuasca brew.[38] In 1953, when Schultes was in Bogotá, he shared how to find ayahuasca with a fellow traveler, novelist William Burroughs. Burroughs' epistolary Colombian odyssey to experience the brew, *The Yage Letters*, was the first of many personal accounts and autoethnographies written under the influence of ayahuasca that would become popular in the second half of the twentieth century.[39]

Richard Evans Schultes (center) with Salvador Chindoy (left), a…

Ayahuasca's Global Travels

Today, many in the West are most familiar with ayahuasca through its incorporation into New Age spiritualism. By the late twentieth century, westerners were flocking to Amazonia in search of an authentic experience with the brew. So profitable was this new fascination with the hallucinogen, that an entire industry of ayahuasca tourism began to flourish in the Amazon basin. As a result, ayahuasca rituals were westernized to focus on self-exploration and emotional healing under the leadership of new "gringo shamans" and exported through vast networks, particularly into the United States and Canada, but also through Europe, Africa, and Asia.[40]

Scholars debate at length about the use of ayahuasca. On the one hand, ayahuasca tourism highlights the legacies of extractive colonialism as non-Indigenous peoples exploit Indigenous knowledge and belief systems and adapt them for their own benefit. In the case of ayahuasca, this often involves idealizing and stereotyping Indigenous shamans living in the modern world.[41] Additionally, the new demand has led to overharvesting of ayahuasca's botanical components, which are traditionally gathered rather than commercially cultivated. On the other hand, ayahuasca has provided Indigenous people with an economic tool to engage with the wider globe, while at the same time ensuring the persistence of practices that were threatened by Christianizing colonialism.[42]

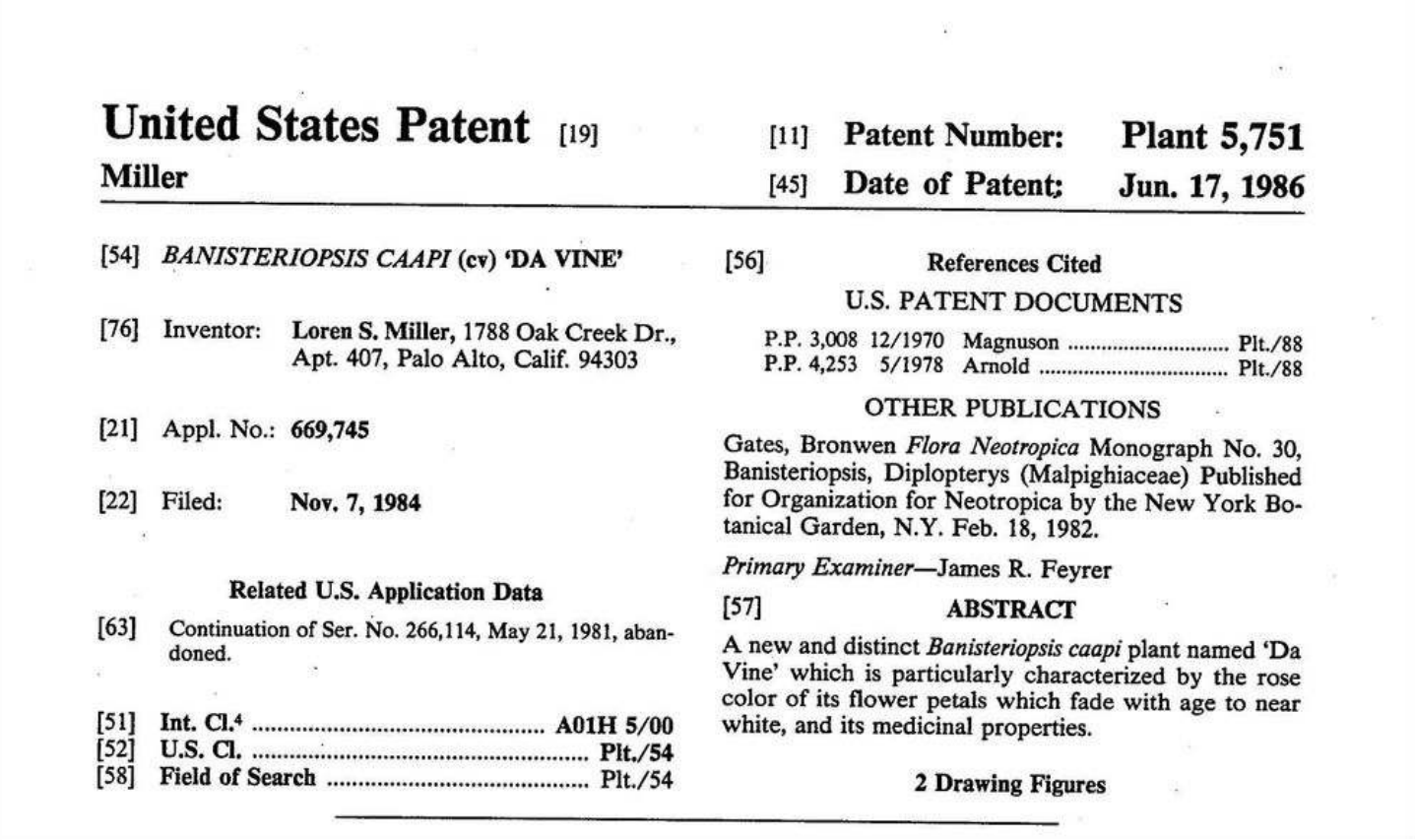
"Eco Aldeia Serra Sagrada," an ayahuasca retreat in Minas Gerais, Brazil. upsilon, Flickr, CC BY 2.0.

In truth, ayahuasca rituals have always been dynamic and multiple, differing among ethnic groups in Amazonia and evolving over time. In Peru, for example, the mestizo population developed a set of practices called *Vegetalismo*, which was influenced by both Catholicism and traditional Indigenous knowledge. *Vegetalistas* consider the plants that form the ayahuasca brew to be “teachers” capable of imparting specialized knowledge to humans. And in Brazil, in the 1920s, Raimundo Irineu Serra (1892–1971), a minister raised in an ethnically diverse rubber boom town, founded the syncretic church of *Santo Daime* based on Catholicism, African animism, and Indigenous *vegetalismo*, which uses ayahuasca extensively in its rituals. *Santo Daime* spread globally, with churches established in the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Cross in Matutu Daime Church, 2006. Lou Gold, Flickr, CC BY-…

Whose Vine Is It, Anyway?

In 1986, American scientist and entrepreneur Loren Miller patented a cultivar of the ayahuasca plant *Banisteriopsis caapi* that he claimed to have developed in Hawaii. He named the plant "Da Vine" and founded a company to study its potential benefits.[43] Miller's actions are best described as *biopiracy* and in 1994 were denounced by the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA). From the perspective of TEK, a specific plant could not be claimed as intellectual property because the knowledge and use of that plant is so deeply intertwined with Indigenous cultures. Miller's patent for "Da Vine" was an extreme example of extractive research practices; claiming ownership over TEK should not be the goal of anyone wishing to respectfully research within Indigenous communities.[44]



United States Patent [19]
Miller

[11] **Patent Number: Plant 5,751**
[45] **Date of Patent: Jun. 17, 1986**

[54] *BANISTERIOPSIS CAAPI* (cv) 'DA VINE'

[76] Inventor: **Loren S. Miller**, 1788 Oak Creek Dr., Apt. 407, Palo Alto, Calif. 94303

[21] Appl. No.: **669,745**

[22] Filed: **Nov. 7, 1984**

Related U.S. Application Data

[63] Continuation of Ser. No. 266,114, May 21, 1981, abandoned.

[51] **Int. Cl.**[4] **A01H 5/00**
[52] **U.S. Cl.** **Plt./54**
[58] **Field of Search** Plt./54

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Primary Examiner—James R. Feyrer

[57] **ABSTRACT**

A new and distinct *Banisteriopsis caapi* plant named 'Da Vine' which is particularly characterized by the rose color of its flower petals which fade with age to near white, and its medicinal properties.

2 Drawing Figures

Patent granted to Loren Miller in 1986.

Miller's patent was eventually overturned, but not because the courts recognized the COICA's claims to their own culture.[45] Rather, a herbarium specimen from the Field Museum in Chicago demonstrated that Miller's unique plant had in fact been cultivated on U.S. soil before he submitted his patent.[46] In the end, this seemingly simple botanical artifact–a pressed and dried plant with a descriptive label attached to a cardboard–provided the basis for the legal definition of ayahuasca in the United States.

The specimen not only includes a dried plant with its flowers but…

The popularity of ayahuasca continues to transcend boundaries of space, time, and culture. In fact, as interest in traditional medicine has surged, the intensive study of and therapeutic application of the ayahuasca brew has expanded tremendously.[47] As scientists test and probe the remedies and rituals of Indigenous peoples, the ongoing question and battle of whose judgement of "truth," "reality," and "efficacy," matters the most rages on. As "authentic ayahuasca retreats" occur worldwide, the sacred nature of ayahuasca and its use is degraded and commodified. With respect to these complexities, the narrative of ayahuasca is ever unfolding and evolving.

Yagé is Our Life - Documentary

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