

## Banisteriopsis caapi - Ayahuasca

- South America, West Indies



*Banisteriopsis caapi*  
from "Plants of the Gods"  
by Schultes and Hofmann

Ayahuasca is the name given to both the central ingredient of a South American Indian psychoactive potion (a species of the *Banisteriopsis* genus) and the potion itself. Almost invariably other plants are mixed together with the jungle vine *Banisteriopsis*; about a hundred different species are known to have been added to the potion at different times and places. Ayahuasca has been used in a number of countries in South and Central America, including Panama, Brazil, Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, and by at least seventy different indigenous peoples of the Americas. In addition to ayahuasca, other native names include yajé, caapi, natema, pindé, kahi, mihi, dápa and bejuco de oro, the last meaning 'vine of gold'. Ayahuasca itself means 'vine of the soul'.

Ayahuasca gained a reputation for providing telepathic powers and a psychoactive alkaloid found to be present in it was named telepathine (now known to be the same as the alkaloid harmine found in Syrian rue). Harmaline is also present in both ayahuasca and Syrian rue. The reports of its telepathic powers have long since been rejected by experts, although the legend lives on in some quarters.

The presence of other plants alongside the *Banisteriopsis* species significantly increases the overall psychoactive effects of these native preparations. The psychoactive tryptamines contained in these additives are inactive when administered orally, unless substances called MAO inhibitors (monoamine oxidase inhibitors) are present. As both harmine and harmaline are MAO inhibitors they complement the tryptamines and the conjunction of the two kinds of alkaloid facilitates the powerful hallucinogenic effects of the ayahuasca mixtures.

The serious scientific study of ayahuasca began with the field investigations of the English botanist Richard Spruce throughout the 1850s. In 1851 he collected samples of *Banisteriopsis* among the Tukanoan people of Brazil and sent them home for chemical analysis. Ayahuasca-type potions are still used by the Tukanoan peoples of the Colombian north-west Amazon, who call such preparations yajé. Yajé-induced geometric images play a highly significant role in shaping their cultural life. These hallucinatory signs are the raw visual data upon which is constructed a complex cultural code, each different sign representing a number of key social beliefs and institutions. These geometric forms and the states of visionary consciousness that they are perceived in are considered by the Tukano as pertaining to a higher reality than that experienced in ordinary states of consciousness. The powerful nature of these geometric forms is so pervasive in their cultural life that their decorative art is almost completely based on such designs. Their architecture, decorated pottery, sand drawings, masks, musical instruments, necklaces, stools, weapons, etc are all adorned in the same fashion. Even many of their songs

and dances are said to be based on auditory and visual hallucinations resulting from their use of the potion.

With the urbanization of Amazonian peoples Ayahuasca continues to be used for its magical and medicinal properties. The anthropologist Marlene Dobkin de Rios undertook a special study of its use among inhabitants of the city of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon. The slums of Iquitos are populated by people who have come in from the forest, and poverty, unemployment, malnutrition and crime dominate social life. Many of the slum dwellers seek out traditional ways of dealing with the myriad problems that they encounter; among these is the use of Ayahuasca for its curative powers. Surgeries conducted by native healers take place at night in forest clearings on the outskirts of the city. These healers carefully screen their prospective patients and will not allow those suffering from extreme mental disorders to take part in the Ayahuasca ceremonies for fear of disrupting the entire healing session. A communal cup is passed around and the amount consumed by each patient is monitored by the healer, who makes his or her assessment of the appropriate dosage according to each individual's body weight, physical condition and mental health. When all the patients have drunk from the cup the healer will then also take Ayahuasca.

Throughout the ceremony the healer moves around the gathering shaking a rattle, blowing cigarette smoke on some patients (tobacco smoke is considered to have healing properties) and exorcising evil spirits which are seen as the cause of various diseases and disorders. Many of the problems which the native healers try to cure are what we would call psychological traumas and depression. In the eyes of the slum dwellers they are more often seen as caused by the evil eye, witchcraft, and sorcery.

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**TRADITIONAL PREPARATION:** Ayahuasca is made in the form of a drink or potion. The main ingredient *B. caapi* would be used fresh, but pulverized and put into a pot over a campfire. Most often, *P. Viridis* (Phalaris Grass) is added just after the *B. caapi*, and the mixture is then boiled all day in the acidic water from the Amazon. About a one foot long and broomstick thick section of *B. caapi* is used per person in preparing the brew. The amount of *P. viridis* varies depending on the number of people who are to partake in the ceremony. Sometimes other N,N-dimethyltryptamine rich plants are substituted, depending on what the shaman is hoping to accomplish. Once the brew is done, it is stored until the ceremony. If it is protected from fermenting or spoiling, it will last for quite a while. In ceremonies by experienced guides and shamans, people will often drink more and more during the experience, especially after vomiting. The potency of the brew depends on the knowledge and the experience of the shaman preparing it.

**CHEMISTRY:** The active principles in Banisteriopsis are indole alkaloids found in several other hallucinogenic plants, identical to harmine.