

## Unraveling the Mystery of the Origin of Ayahuasca

by Gayle Highpine<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

For decades, researchers have puzzled over the mystery of the origin of Ayahuasca, especially the question of how the synergy was discovered between the two components of the brew: the vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) with a monoamine oxidase inhibiting (MAOI) action and the leaf (*Psychotria viridis* or *Diplopterys cabrerana*), which requires that MAOI action to make their dimethyltryptamine (DMT) orally active. Drawing from two years of fieldwork among Napo Runa Indian shamans, cross-dialect studies of Quechua, and the record of anthropological data, I contend that the botanical origin of *B. caapi* was on the Napo River; that the original form of Ayahuasca shamanism employed the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* alone; that the shamanic use of *Banisteriopsis caapi* alone spread and diffused before the DMT-containing admixtures were discovered; that the synergy between *B. caapi* and *Psychotria viridis* was discovered in the region of present-day Iquitos, the synergy between *B. caapi* and *Diplopterys cabrerana* was discovered around the upper Putumayo River, and that each combination diffused from there; and that the discoveries of these synergies came about because of the traditional practice of mixing other medicinal plants with Ayahuasca brew. Among the Napo Runa, the Ayahuasca vine is considered “the mother of all plants” and a mediator and translator between the human and plant worlds, helping humans and plants to communicate with each other.

---

<sup>1</sup> The author has a BA in Applied Linguistics and an MA in Educational Policy, Foundations, and Administration from Portland State University. She is a moderator at the Ayahuasca forums at [www.forums.ayahuasca.com](http://www.forums.ayahuasca.com).

## Introduction

When I began to drink Ayahuasca with Napo Runa and Pastaza Runa in Ecuador, I knew little about it. All I knew was that it was very important to them and that they insisted that no one could understand their culture without drinking Ayahuasca.

Originally, I became involved in support of their struggles against the oil companies, but when Napo Runa friends learned that I was a writer and editor and linguist, they asked me to help them document their culture, which they feared was being lost by the younger generations. They wanted someone to transcribe oral history and traditions to help develop bilingual, culturally relevant materials for schools. I have a degree in linguistics with a special focus on Quechua dialectology, so, as I learned their language, I did linguistic analyses comparing their dialect of Amazonian Quechua (or Kichwa) with highland Quechua dialects of southern Peru and Bolivia, which I studied while living in those regions in the 1970s. At the same time, I did research for a master's thesis on Amazonian permaculture, which examined how Amazonian Indians cultivate the forest in a way that increases rather than decreases biodiversity.

I lived in Ecuador for nearly two years, most of that time with a Napo Runa shaman's family. Once or twice a month, someone would come for a healing and there would be an Ayahuasca ceremony. Then there would usually be another ceremony the following night to use up the leftover brew. I had an open invitation to drink at the ceremonies, so I drank Ayahuasca on average two to four times a month.

### **“Vine With a Soul”**

Ayahuasca is the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine, and the brew prepared from that vine. Unequivocally, this is the meaning of “Ayahuasca” to the Napo Runa people from whose

language the name comes.<sup>2</sup> Until recently, this was the definition of Ayahuasca for all ethnographers and ethnobotanists who recorded Ayahuasca use among indigenous and mestizo peoples of the Upper Amazon.

From the first written observations of Ayahuasca use by Jesuit priests in the 1700s, it was the vine, or liana, whose use was recorded. Ethnobotanist Richard Spruce, the first scientist to study Ayahuasca, observed that widely separated peoples in the Upper Amazon used the same vine, and he collected samples. “In the century that followed Spruce’s remarkable work,” wrote ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes, “many explorers, travelers, anthropologists and botanists referred to ayahuasca, caapi, or yagé... prepared from a forest liana.” (Schultes, n.d.)

Until the mid-1980s, all anthropologists who wrote about Ayahuasca use, without exception, defined Ayahuasca as *Banisteriopsis caapi*, or as vines of the *Banisteriopsis* genus. In books, the index entry for “ayahuasca” or “yagé” would say, “see *Banisteriopsis caapi*”—or vice versa. Some anthropologists mention other plants added to the brew, but treat them as being of secondary importance. Others don’t mention admixtures at all. By 1972, Marlene Dobkin de Rios, having read all the available literature mentioning Ayahuasca in English, Spanish, and French in preparation for her book *Visionary Vine*, summarized the unanimous definition of Ayahuasca at the time:

[A]nthropologists have commented on the use of ayahuasca as an hallucinogenic drink used by primitive horticultural societies. The drink bears the same name as

---

<sup>2</sup> Differences in dialect cause confusion about the translation of the word *aya*. In southern Quechua, *aya* means “corpse” (as in *ayapampa*, cemetery) so *ayahuasca* is sometimes translated as “vine of the dead,” and some people in southern Peru prefer to use the name *ayaq-waska*, or “bitter vine” (though in areas where lianas are not common, the primary meaning of *waska* is “rope”). But *aya* is unrelated to the usual Quechua word for “dead” (*wañusqa* in Cuzco, *wañushka* in northern Quechua) and Amazonian Quechua speakers deny that *aya* means “corpse” or “dead.” Rather, in Amazonian Quechua *aya* refers to human or human-like souls – which includes the souls of dead humans, but the *ayaguna* (plural of *aya*) are not dead themselves. (Where I lived, *aya* was also used for nature spirits -- for example, a tree spirit would be *yura aya* – but in other dialects nature spirits are *supay*.) *Ayaguna* can wander, and can take up residence in power objects. A stone with a soul, for example, is *aya rumi*. Although *ayahuasca* is often translated as “vine of the soul,” the translation that may best convey the sense that *ayahuasca* has in Amazonian Quechua is “vine with a soul.”

the vine, although various names such as *natema*, *yajé*, *yagé*, *nepe* and *kaji* have been used throughout the basin area. Ayahuasca is the general term that has been applied to several different species of *Banisteriopsis*, to which additional psychedelics may occasionally be added.

Richard Evans Schultes, “the father of modern ethnobotany,” who spent twelve years in the Amazon in the 1940s and 1950s, wrote in 1976:

Ayahuasca and Caapi are two of many local names for either of two species of a South American vine: *Banisteriopsis caapi* or *B. inebrians*.... Some tribes add other plants to alter or to increase the potency of the drink....

Plants added to ayahuasca by some Indians in the preparation of the hallucinogenic drink are amazingly diverse and include even ferns. Several are now known to be active themselves and to alter effectively the properties of the basic drink.... Two additives, employed over a wide area by many tribes, are especially significant. The leaves (but not the bark) of a third species of *Banisteriopsis*—*B. rusbyana* [now reclassified as *Diplopterys cabrerana*]—are often added to the preparation “to lengthen and brighten the visions.” ...Over a much wider area, including Amazonian Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru, the leaves of several species of *Psychotria*—especially *P. viridis*—are added. This 20-foot forest treelet belongs to the coffee family, *Rubiaceae*. Like *B. rusbyana*, it has been found recently to contain the strongly hallucinogenic N, N-dimethyltryptamine.

Plants were “added to ayahuasca by *some* Indians”; two additives were “employed *over a wide area* by *many* tribes.” Significantly, Schultes (who experienced Ayahuasca with more different Indian groups than anyone else ever has or will, and who carefully recorded admixture use and the effect caused by the addition of admixtures) does not say “usually” or that “most” tribes used admixtures. In fact, in his 1992 book *Vine of the Soul*, Schultes reduces the use of admixtures to “occasionally” (Schultes 1992:22).

### **Names and Classes of Ayahuasca Vine**

It is not only in Quechua-speaking groups that the brew is named for the vine. This is consistent in nearly all indigenous groups: *caapi*, or similar words among Tupi speakers, *yajé*,

*kaji*, or similar words among Tucanoan speakers, *natem*, or similar words, among Jivaroan speakers, *shuri*, or similar words, among Panoan speakers, *kamalampi*, or similar words, among Arawakan speakers: All are names used for both vine and brew.

The importance of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine in Amazonian Ayahuasca cultures is shown in traditional mythologies, in customs such as the use of the vine as an amulet and a motif for decorating ritual space and garments (Weiskopf 2005:125), and in the fine distinctions made among *B. caapi* varieties. The Tukano have at least six varieties, with names like *Suana-kahi-ma* (*Kahi* of the red jaguar) and *Kahi-vai Bucura-rijoma* (*Kahi* of the monkey head) (Schultes 1986). Junquera (1989) recorded 22 classes of *B. caapi* differentiated by the Harakmbet (Mashco) Indians, such as *Boyanhe* (green, unripe) which "produces visions of hunting, fishing, searching for property, migrations, visions, etc."; *Sisi* (flesh of ancestors) which produces "visions of heaven, here understood as the universe of the past to the present"; *Kemeti* (flesh of the tapir) which produces "signs which aim at recreating the mythical universe"; *Wakeregn* (white) which produces "white images which show the journey to Seronhai, a place where the dead stay"; and eighteen other classes. Reichel-Dolmatoff (1975:155) describes a Barasana shaman who identified pieces of vine as "guamo yagé," "mammal yagé" and "head yagé" by chewing them. The Kaxinawa of Brazil distinguish red, blue, white, and black varieties (Lagrou 2000). Mestizo ayahuasqueros in Iquitos recognize white, black, red, yellow, cielo (heaven), trueno (thunder), and boa caapi. Langdon (1985) recorded the following classifications of *B. caapi* vine among the Sionas: *yai-yajé*, *nea-yajé*, *horo-yajé*, *weki-yajé*, *wai-yajé* or *wahi-yajé*,; *wati-yajé*, *weko-yajé*, *hamo-weko-yajé*, *beji-yajé*, *kwi-ku-yajé*, *kwaku-yajé*, *aso-yajé*, *kido-yajé*, *usebo-yajé*, *ga-tokama-yai-yajé*, *zi-simi-yajé*, *bi'-ã-yajé*, *sia-sewi-yajé*, *sese-yajé* or *sise-yajé* ("wild pig yagé," used for hunting), and *so'-om-wa-wa'i-yajé* ("long-vine yagé").

Langdon writes that among the Siona, shamans often trade varieties of *caapi*, and that “if a shaman finds a wild liana in the forest, he will prepare a drink to ascertain its worth for inclusion in his own repertoire, especially in regard to what visions it can induce.” Wade Davis quotes Jorge Fuerbringer, an old German colonist long settled in the Putumayo (quoted in Weiskopf 2005:125): “When a [*yagé*] plant is passed on in trade, so is its specific vision. A Siona cannot classify a plant without knowing its trading history. Every plant thus has a lineage that links it through all time to every other.”

These classifications are based not on physical or botanical characteristics but on shamanic criteria—the effects and the types of visions produced. Richard Evans Schultes wrote (1986):

There is no doubt that Indians in the northwest Amazon can "identify" different "kinds" of caapi or ayahuasca at a distance without feeling, tasting or smelling the liana... The natives maintain that they are able to use these kinds of caapi or yajé or ayahuasca to prepare drinks of different strengths, for different purposes or in connection with different ceremonies or dances or magico-religious needs, or what the partaker wishes to kill in the hunt.

On the other hand, no such fine distinctions are made of varieties and effects and lineages of the admixture plants. It is the vine, not the leaf, that is classified according to the type of vision induced and the shamanic purpose it is used for.

### **The New Definition of Ayahuasca**

Richard Evans Schultes paid keen attention to admixture plants, and, based on his own experience drinking brews with and without admixtures, Schultes hypothesized that MAOIs in the vine might make the DMT in some admixtures orally active.

In 1984, this hypothesis was experimentally confirmed by Terence McKenna, G.H.N Towers, and F.S. Abbott. It was subsequently popularized by Terence McKenna. However, unlike Schultes, who had speculated that DMT was responsible for *much* of the activity of the

brew, McKenna made the DMT responsible for *all* of it. Although he conceded that the beta-carbolines in the vine “can be hallucinogenic at close to toxic doses,”<sup>3</sup> (1992:33) McKenna popularized the idea that *Banisteriopsis caapi* had no other role in an Ayahuasca brew except to make the DMT orally active. “They are important for visionary shamanism because they can inhibit enzyme systems in the body that would otherwise depotentiate hallucinogens of the DMT type” (McKenna 1992:33). “[T]he action of the *Banisteriopsis*, as far as the visions are concerned, is to prevent the *Psychotria* from being neutralized by gastric enzymes” (Calavia 2011:131).

In the western world, Ayahuasca acquired a new definition: It was now, by definition, the *combination of Banisteriopsis caapi and a DMT-containing plant*.<sup>4</sup> Ayahuasca became, by definition, “orally active DMT.” The first anthropologist to adopt the new definition seems to have been Luis Eduardo Luna in 1984. Luna spent time with Terence McKenna, absorbing his perspective, before beginning his fieldwork. Since then, anthropologists have increasingly adopted this definition and filtered their observations through it. The preeminence of the Ayahuasca *vine* in the indigenous Amazonian world became the elephant in the living room of Ayahuasca studies, with a tacit agreement to pretend it doesn’t exist.

In this view, the only important psychoactive agent in the Ayahuasca brew is DMT; and because *B. caapi* has no DMT, *B. caapi* is not psychoactive; and because *P. viridis* used alone has no DMT effects, *P. viridis* alone is not psychoactive. And thus a new “mystery” was born: How did the indigenous people figure out how to create a psychoactive beverage from two plants that, separately, have no psychoactive effects?

---

<sup>3</sup> “Toxic” here means “having uncomfortable somatic effects,” not “harmful to the organism.”

<sup>4</sup> Yet, an echo of the indigenous perspective persists in the fact that modern Ayahuasca drinkers and researchers still refer to the leaf—not the vine—as the “admixture” or “additive.”

## The Vine and the Leaf

I came to Ayahuasca without preconceptions. I had been drinking Ayahuasca for about half a year before I started doing outside research about it. When I did, I was struck to learn something that explained what I had discovered through experience.

I had discovered that there was no correlation between how deep a journey was and how visual it was. Sometimes an experience was very deep and also intensely visual; sometimes it was very deep but had little or no visual effects; sometimes it was full of colorful visuals but not very deep; and sometimes it was subtle in both respects. The depth and the visual effects were two independent variables.

Then I read that there were two necessary components to an Ayahuasca brew: the vine and the leaf. I began to take an interest in the leaves I saw being added to the brew. Sometimes a lot of leaves were added, sometimes a few, sometimes none, depending on what was available.

The leaves were called *chakruna*, which usually meant not *Psychotria viridis*, the plant commonly known as Chakruna, but more often *Diplopterys cabrerana*, the plant better known as Chaliponga or Chagroponga.<sup>5</sup> The Napo Runa sometimes use *P. viridis*, but prefer *D. cabrerana*, as well as another *Psychotria* species they called Amiruka.<sup>6</sup> When none of these were available, sometimes *Ilex guayusa* would be added to the brew.

The leaves were Ayahuasca's "helpers," I was told, and their purpose was to "brighten and clarify" the visions. The vine is like a cave, and the leaf is like a torch you use to see what is

---

<sup>5</sup> *Chakruna* is a Quechua word that means simply "mixture." For the Napo Runa it seems to be a generic term for admixture leaves. The names *chaliponga* and *chagropanga* (which the Napo Runa rarely use) may both have that meaning as well; *chagro-* may derive from *chakru-*, "to mix," the verb root of *chakruna*. *Chali* has no meaning in Napo Kichwa but may be related to the highland Quechua word *ch'alli*, which also means "to mix." Since *panga* means "leaf," both *chagropanga* and *chaliponga* may translate as "mix leaf."

<sup>6</sup> The name Amiruka or Samiruka have variously been applied, in different places, to *P. viridis*, *P. carthagensis*, and *P. alba*, but the species called by this name in the upper Napo appears to be none of these.

inside the cave. The vine is like a book, and the leaf is like the candle you use to read the book.<sup>7</sup> The vine is like a snowy television set, and the leaf helps to tune in the picture. There was a subtle attitude that the need for strong leaf was the sign of a beginner: An experienced ayahuasquero could see the visions even in low light.

Ayahuasca vine is not visionary in the same way as DMT. Visions from vine-only brews are shadowy, monochromatic, like silhouettes, or curling smoke, or clouds moving across the night sky. It is because their visions are usually monochromatic that vines are classified by the color of vision they produce: white, black, blue, red (in my experience, dark maroon). Snakes, the most common vision on Ayahuasca, are considered the manifest spirit of the vine.<sup>8</sup> Vine visions can be hard to see; in fact, the “visions” may not be visual at all, but auditory or somatic or intuitive. But the vine carries the *content* of the message, the teaching, and the insight. The leaf helps illuminate the content, but the teachings are credited to the vine. Vine visions are “frequently associated with writing, to a code that is present in visions...or in the ‘books’ where the spirits keep the secrets of the forest.” (Calavia Saez 2011:135). The vine is The Teacher, The Healer, The Guide. The purpose of drinking Ayahuasca is to receive the message the vine imparts. This is why it is the vine, not the leaf, that is classified by the type of vision it gives. “For them the vine is, in truth, a living guide, a friend, a paternal authority” (Weiskopf 2005:104).

### **Listening to the Vine**

While I was living in the village, someone began the process of shamanic apprenticeship. There was a series of ceremonies with brews of special strength for that purpose; brews with

---

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, the Santo Daime refers to the leaf as the Light.

<sup>8</sup> The tree boa is the animal manifestation of *B. caapi*; both wind around tree branches in a similar way.

enormous quantities of vine. About two to three pounds of fresh vine per person was used (about 25 to 35 times the amount needed for MAOI inhibition). Those were powerful experiences indeed.

Although the apprenticeship began with crushingly vine-heavy brews, the more the apprentice progressed, the weaker the brew he would need. He would learn to see the dimmest of visions. If he spent a full two years “fasting,” then eventually even smelling or tasting the brew, even touching an Ayahuasca plant, would be enough to visit her realms. On the other hand, he would learn to navigate the strongest of brews with clear focus, and be undistracted by any amount of DMT fireworks.

The most important way to become sensitized to Ayahuasca is through *sasina*, which the Napo Runa and Pastaza Runa translate as “ayuno,” or fast. This is essentially the same as what is known as the *dieta* among the mestizo shamans of Peru. It involves flavorless foods, no sexual stimulation, and avoidance of noise and unnecessary social interaction. Much has been written about the *dieta*, so I won’t go into details here.

For a shamanic apprentice, the “fast” allows them to dwell in the spirit world; flavorful foods and sexual stimulation would pull them back down into their body. For non-shamans, the “fast” makes them more sensitive and transparent to the plant spirits. (When I quoted the reason for sexual abstinence given by the soap opera-loving mestizos—that the plants were “jealous”—Napo Runa friends laughed). Ayahuasca taught the people this technique to help them to develop deeper relationships with plant spirits.

Ayahuasca has three interrelated roles among the Napo Runa. The best known role is her function in healing ceremonies. She is also well known for her role in divination, especially remote viewing. In the oral histories I recorded, incidents were sometimes mentioned when

family members at home, concerned about someone long absent, would drink Ayahuasca to find out what was happening with that person. Some literature mentions the use by some groups of Ayahuasca to locate game animals and to know what enemies were doing; also forms of divination.

Her third role, however, has barely begun to be recognized by the outside world. That is her role as mediator and translator between the human world and the plant world. Among the Napo Runa, one of Ayahuasca's vital roles is teaching humans about *other* plants besides herself.<sup>9</sup> Among entheogens, this seems to be unique. Other entheogenic cultures revere their entheogenic plants, but Ayahuasca teaches people to revere *other* plants. She taught people the practice of *sasina* so that they could use it learn to communicate with other plants, not only herself. If you learn enough from Ayahuasca, I was told, *all* plants are entheogenic and visionary, not just the few with chemical battering rams powerful enough to break through the stubborn barriers in human consciousness. In the Ayahuasca world, spirit allies are mainly plants.

### **The Quechua Language and the History of Ayahuasca**

The history of Ayahuasca is intertwined with the Quechua language. The very word *ayawaska* is Quechua, and the language is closely associated with Ayahuasca shamanism, even in areas where Quechua is not spoken. “Besides their ‘emic’ terms, all ayahuasca-using groups also use the Quechua word ‘ayahuasca,’ even in mother tongue discourse and songs” (Brabec de Mori 2011: 4).

The mestizo shamans of Iquitos, where the Napo River joins the Amazon, do not speak Quechua, and yet their practice is filled with Quechua words, such as *arkana* (fortress), *kutipa*

---

<sup>9</sup> If plant communication were to be discounted, one could postulate that this is because the MAOIs potentiate a variety of pharmaceutical effects in plants, not only DMT.

(revenge), *manchari* (fright sickness), *pusanga* (love charm) and even the forest spirit *Chullachaki*. Quechua words heard in mestizo icaros include *shamuy* or *shamuriy* (come), *shayay* or *shayariy* (stand or stay), *muyuy* or *muyuriy* (to go in a circle), *kapariy* (to shout or call), *kayariy* (to call or invite), *llukshiy* (to emerge), *sinchi* or *shinzhi* (strong), *sumay* (beauty), *samay* (breath or spiritual energy), *kawsay* (life or life energy), *shungu* (heart), *ñawi* (eye), *yawar* (blood), *wayra* (wind), *nina* (fire), *illapa* (lightning), *indi* (sun), *killa* (moon), *allpa* (ground, soil, earth), *urku* (hill or mountain), *sacha* (forest), *ambi* or *hambi* (medicine or poison), *puma* (jaguar), *amarun* (boa or anaconda), *kindi* (hummingbird), *kuraka* (chief), *pacha* (world, time, space), *hanan* (high, elevated), *wasi* (house, dwelling place), *pungu* (door), *warmi* (female human or spirit), *kari* (male human or spirit), *runa* (person, man, entity, spirit), *maymanda* (from where), and *chaymanda* (from there).

### **The Incas**

Quechua is best known as the “language of the Incas,” so the association of Quechua with Ayahuasca has, not surprisingly, given rise to speculation that Ayahuasca may have originated with the Incas or been spread by the Incas. There is no direct evidence that the Incas ever used Ayahuasca. But—despite the fact that they reached present-day Ecuador very late in their history, and despite the fact that their empire barely touched the fringe of Ayahuasca territory—it is unlikely that the Incas missed learning about Ayahuasca when they reached Ayahuasca-using regions. The Incas had an intense interest in the local plant life everywhere they went, although their interest was less in medicinal plants than in local varieties of edible crops.

If the Incas used Ayahuasca, though, it was restricted to the elite ruling classes (which is what the word “Inca” properly refers to) and the common people didn’t participate. That would have been business as usual for the Incas; the elite class had many private ceremonial practices

closed to the common people, though few details are recorded. It is possible that they didn't like Ayahuasca, though; the Incas had a distaste for anything too wild, chaotic or uncontrollable. Regardless, there is no sign of Ayahuasca use or the memory of it among the highland Indians (although people around Cuzco have recently started cashing in on Ayahuasca tourism).

If the Incas were the vector for spreading Ayahuasca to the Amazonian peoples,<sup>10</sup> that would make the use of Ayahuasca outside of its original homeland, very recent indeed: The Incas did not reach Ecuador until the mid-1400s. Then, even though they did not introduce Ayahuasca to their own people in the highlands, they would have then brought it not only to the few Amazonian tribes whose fringe abutted their empire, but to many more tribes outside their empire, and much farther to the east, all the way to Brazil; places where there is no evidence they ever set foot. The confusion about Ayahuasca and the Incas comes from a lack of knowledge of the history of the Quechua language.

### **Branches of Quechua**

Quechua is more accurately called a language family than a language. It has two main branches: the southern branch and the northern branch, and several smaller, isolated branches. The southern branch encompasses the highlands of southern Peru, Bolivia, and northern Argentina; the northern branch, northern Peru, Ecuador and southern Colombia.<sup>11</sup> Each branch has sub-branches divided into numerous varied dialects.

---

<sup>10</sup> Confusion is also caused by the fact that some Panoan peoples like the Shipibo and Kaxinawa say that the "Inka" brought them Ayahuasca. By "Inka," they mean not the historical Inca empire, but rather a mythological-spiritual being (See Lagrou 2000:31).

<sup>11</sup> In Ecuador, Quechua is referred to as Kichwa; in Colombia, as Ingano. For simplicity and clarity in this discussion, I am using "Quechua" for all varieties.

When the Incas adopted Quechua as the lingua franca of Tawantinsuyu, they were taking advantage of an existing lingua franca already in widespread use. Historical linguists trace the original Quechua proto-language to central Peru, from whence the main branches diverged between twelve hundred and two thousand years ago. So by even the most conservative estimate, Quechua was used in northern Peru and Ecuador many centuries before the arrival of the Incas, whose empire began around 1200 and reached Ecuador in the late 1400s.

The northern and southern branches of Quechua are mutually unintelligible; they have major differences in pronunciation, lexicon, semantics, and grammar. For example, “What is your name? My name is Ana” would be “Ima sutiyki? Sutiyaq Anam” in Cuzco; in Napo, it would be “Ima shuti kangui? Ana shuti kani.” “I love you” is “munayki” in Cuzco, “kanda munani” in Napo. “My father has a house” would be “taitay wasiyuqmi” in Cuzco, and “ñuka yaya wasira charin” in Napo.

The Quechua that is associated with Ayahuasca clearly belongs to the northern branch. Pronunciation follows the northern pattern (*shungu* vs. *sonqo* for heart, *arkana* vs. *hark'ana* for fortress, *kindi* vs. *q'enti* for hummingbird, *shamuy* vs. *hamuy* for come, etc.) So do the semantics; even within the limited range of Quechua words used by mestizos, it is easy to find examples showing they follow northern vocabulary and semantics. For example, *sacha* means “forest” or “wild” in Amazonian Quechua; in Cuzco *sach'a* means tree. The Amazonian Quechua word for “leaf,” found in many medicinal plant names, is *panga*; in southern Peru, “leaf” is *laqi*, *laphi*, or *raphe*. The root word for *pusanga* (love charm)—the verb *pusa-* (to lead)—does not exist in Cuzco Quechua. Many other examples could be cited. The Quechua associated with Ayahuasca is clearly not the Inca dialect.

## The Heartland of Amazonian Quechua

The Napo River basin is the heartland of Amazonian Quechua. It is the most accessible part of the entire Amazon basin. It lies below the Papallacta pass, a gateway where highland Indians and lowland Indians met to trade. (*Papallacta* is Quechua for "potato town," because potatoes were the main trade item brought by highland Indians.) The Napo River joins the Amazon River near present-day Iquitos. Thus, the Napo directly connects the Andean highlands to the Amazon River. It was a major trading route and corridor of intercultural exchange. Dozens of different ethnic groups traded with each other up and down the river, using Amazonian Quechua as their common language. The gentle, pacific character of their descendants suggests a society of peaceful commerce.

The contact between highlands and lowlands shows in the highland influence on upper Napo Runa music and traditional clothing, and in the way highland Indian curanderos in Ecuador, though they do not use Ayahuasca, employ the *soplar* and the *shakapa* in the same way as is done all along the Napo River to Iquitos.<sup>12</sup>

As the most accessible area of the entire Amazon Basin, the Napo region was the first part of the Amazon to be penetrated by Europeans, Gonzalo Pizarro and Francisco de Orellana, in 1541. It was the first area hit by epidemics, which preceded the Europeans themselves. The banks of the Napo River were already depopulated by the time Orellana saw it. The epidemics quickly swept up and down the major rivers, where populations were most concentrated; the Amazon River itself, once the most densely populated zone of the Amazon Basin, had 100%

---

<sup>12</sup> Although highland Indians generally look down on "Yumbos" (their derogatory name for all lowland Indians) they have great esteem for their shamanic healing skills. The shaman in the village I lived in was sometimes summoned to the highlands for healings. I was told by both highland and lowland Indians that Napo healers have been in demand in the highlands since pre-Inca times, and that highland Indians are aware of Ayahuasca but afraid of taking it themselves.

population loss. Since then, tribes and communities have continued to be shattered by various destructive forces, from epidemics to missionary disruption to virtual enslavement on *encomiendas* (land grants) to the Rubber Boom, and, in recent decades, massive colonization, deforestation, land losses, and the poisoning of rivers, which are the main source of protein in their diet, by petroleum companies.<sup>13</sup>

Unlike highland Quechua, which became peoples' first language as a result of the intentional eradication of local languages by Spanish missionaries, Amazonian Quechua, or Kichwa, developed as survivors of decimated groups married each other and regrouped into new families and villages. They spoke the language that they had in common with each other, Kichwa; their children, in turn, grew up speaking Kichwa as their first language. The Yumbos of Papallacta were absorbed into the upper Napo Runa, the shards of the once-powerful Omaguas were mostly absorbed into the lower Napo Runa, and the Zaparo were mostly absorbed into the Pastaza Runa, who also absorbed many displaced Shuar and Achuar people. Many Pastaza Runa speak Shuar or Achuar as well as Kichwa and Spanish. Many smaller peoples were also absorbed into the Runa. Thus, the Napo Runa and other Amazonian Quechua of today are a melting pot of different cultures.<sup>14</sup>

The total number of Amazonian Quechua speakers, variously estimated to be between 40,000 and 100,000, comprise only a tiny percentage of the total Quechua-speaking population, who number in the millions. Speakers of Amazonian Quechua (or Kichwa) comprise between 5% and 10% of total speakers of indigenous Amazonian languages, making Quechua (in widely varying dialects) by far the most spoken of the nearly 200 indigenous languages used in the

---

<sup>13</sup> The Napo River, Ecuador's largest river, is virtually a dead river today due to poisoning by oil company operations.

<sup>14</sup> Most tourist guidebooks to Ecuador state as a fact, quite incorrectly, that Amazonian Kichwa speakers are migrants from the highlands.

Amazon Basin. Collectively, the Amazonian Kichwa groups comprise well over half of the Indian population of the Ecuadorean Amazon.<sup>15</sup> Quechua can therefore rightly be called an Amazonian, as well as an Andean, language.

### **Ayahuasca and Survival in Napo**

The present-day Napo Runa are renowned in Ecuador among scholars and other Indian groups alike for the number of different plant medicines they know. Some scholars estimate that a total of 1200 different plant medicines are known and used among the upper and lower Napo Runa. Richard Evans Schultes estimated 1600 plants known in the greater region enclosing eastern Ecuador and adjacent areas of Colombia and Peru. Part of the reason for this may be that the Napo Runa originated as an amalgamation of different peoples, each with its own traditions. Another part of the reason is the fact that their territory contains significantly varied ecosystems due to the varying altitudes where the rainforest meets the foothills of the Andes. But both anthropologists and the Napo Runa themselves attribute the fact that the Napo Runa know so many plants to the fact that the ancestors of the Napo Runa were the first Amazonian Indians to encounter Europeans, and they were the first to be hit by European diseases.

In contrast, their neighbors (and traditional enemies) to the southeast, the Waorani, were able, because of their extreme fierceness, to maintain their isolation until the 1950s, and many still live free in the forest. In 1980, a few decades after the Waorani were “pacified,” making it safe for outsiders to visit them, researchers visited the Waorani to learn about their traditional plant medicines. Since they had been isolated for so long, their traditional culture kept intact for

---

<sup>15</sup> There are various culturally distinct groups of Quechua speakers in both highland and lowland Ecuador. All of them call themselves Runa (people) and Kichwa (after their language). Since the different groups all use these same names, when a specific group is discussed, it is necessary to use a prefix signifying their location. “Napo Runa” here means the upper Napo Runa. They are known in older literature as Quijos.

so long, surely, it was thought, they would be a treasure trove of ethnobotanical knowledge. But the researchers turned up a meager thirty-five medicinal plants among the Waorani, and realized that, in their isolated state, the Waorani had not needed many medicines:

They had never been exposed to polio or pneumonia, nor was there any evidence that smallpox, chicken pox, typhus or typhoid fever affected the tribe. There was no syphilis, tuberculosis, malaria, or serum hepatitis.... Of the thirty-five medicinal plants, thirty were used to treat one of six conditions: fungal infections, snake bite, dental problems, fevers, insect stings, pains and traumatic injuries such as animal bites, spear wounds, and broken bones. The remainder were valued for treating some idiosyncratic ailment (Davis 1996: 291-2).

Those medicines, until recently, were the only ones needed. Before the European invasion, the ancestors of the Napo Runa likely had a similar number and range of medicines, but in a short time they discovered many new medicinal plants to help them deal with new healing challenges.

Those who suggest that the synergy between Ayahuasca vine and admixture leaf was discovered by trial and error have no idea of the biodiversity of the Amazon.<sup>16</sup> About 80,000 plant species are catalogued in the region where Ayahuasca is used, but it is estimated that there may be about a million uncatalogued plant species.

---

<sup>16</sup> The total number of species that inhabit the planet is unknown. About 270,000 plant species have been catalogued scientifically, but uncatalogued species outnumber catalogued species many times over. The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) Global Biodiversity Assessment estimates that between 7% and 8% of the species on Earth have been catalogued, which suggests that there are about 3.25 million uncatalogued plant species on Earth. About one-third of the catalogued plant species on Earth are in the Amazon Basin. Proportionately, this would suggest that there are 1.17 million plant species in the Amazon Basin. However, a disproportionate number of uncatalogued species are in rain forests. The Amazon rainforest in particular, especially the western edge of the Amazon where the rainforest meets the foothills of the Andes, is the most biodiverse region on Earth. Because of their extremely high level of endemism (species that live only in a particular area), rainforests contain most of the numbers of uncatalogued species on Earth, and the extinction rate, variously estimated at 50 to 150 species lost per day, is due mostly to rainforest destruction.

The Napo Runa have discovered upwards of a thousand plant medicines, some in complex combinations, and discovered most of them in a very short time, within only a century or so of the introduction of European diseases. In fact, although the world had known malaria for thousands of years (it was described in China in 2700 BCE), and had no medicine for it, within 25 years of the introduction of malaria to the Amazon, the first plant medicine for malaria, quinine, was discovered by indigenous people in Ecuador.

Trial and error—giving sick people random plants to see what helps them—is not an effective way to discover plant medicines. The Napo Runa credit Ayahuasca with their discovery of so many medicines. When the new diseases struck—not only infectious diseases but diseases of stress from oppression and slavery—people of the Napo would drink Ayahuasca in the context of a strict “fast,” and Ayahuasca would send visions of specific plants and their locations. Once a new plant was found, it usually would be cooked together with the Ayahuasca vine to solicit visions to help to understand the plant’s effects, to communicate with the plant, and to learn to work in partnership with the plant as a spirit ally. Herbal healers also use Ayahuasca to help prescribe remedies for a patient, although plant spirit allies can help with healing even without a patient necessarily consuming them in physical form.

Even if one does not accept the possibility of plant communication (which I do), there could be other reasons why Ayahuasca is considered to be the teacher of other plant medicines. MAOIs can potentiate many kinds of pharmaceutical action, and the MAOIs in Ayahuasca may contribute to sensitizing people to plants, especially if one spends months in solitude in the forest on a strict diet continually drinking Ayahuasca. Humans have the same instinctive ability to sense medicinal plants as other animals do, even if most have never developed it. Whatever the

reason, the Ayahuasca vine is considered the great teacher of plant medicines and “the Mother of all plants.”

### **Places of Origin**

Evidence strongly suggests that the Napo is the place of origin both of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and of the cultural complex that is now known as “Ayahuasca shamanism.” From the north, indigenous shamans and researchers alike point to the Napo as the place of origin. Brabec de Mori (2011:24) says, “Among most researchers, there is a consensus that an ‘origin’ of ayahuasca, however remote it may be, should be located in the western Amazonian lowlands around the Rio Napo.” A document, published by UMIYAC (Union of Yagé Healers of Colombia) from the point of view of Colombian indigenous shamans, mentioned the origin of the vine in the Napo. Writing from Colombia, Weiskopf (2005:115) mentions the origin of Yagé as being on the Napo River. Colombian anthropologist German Zuluaga locates the origin of Ayahuasca or Yagé in the “*refugio*” of Napo, which includes the region from the Napo River to the Putumayo (Zuluaya 2005:175).

Peoples from north of the Napo point south to the origin of Ayahuasca, and on the other hand, peoples to the south point northward (Gow 1990; Brabec de Mori 2011; Calavia Saez 2011). If Ayahuasca had originally diffused *together* with either one of the admixture plants, then that admixture—either *P. viridis* or *D. cabrerana*—would likely be used everywhere in Ayahuasca brews. The evidence is consistent that the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine originated in Napo and diffused from there. It is also evident that Ayahuasca shamanism was fully developed in the Napo *before* the DMT admixtures were ever introduced, and eventually evolved into practices with DMT admixtures as it spread.

There is no mystery to how the synergy between *B. caapi* and the DMT-containing admixtures was discovered. Contrary to popular belief, *D. cabrerana* and *P. viridis* are psychoactive alone—they have psychoactive effects apart from their DMT effects—and both are documented to have been used alone. The practice of mixing other plants with *B. caapi* is well established. Over a hundred “admixtures” have been documented, but the number of plants that have been mixed with Ayahuasca at some point is beyond counting. Most of these “admixtures” are not added to enhance the psychoactive effect of Ayahuasca; rather, they are mixed with Ayahuasca in order to understand and communicate *with those plants*.<sup>17</sup> Ayahuasca has a traditional supportive role for other plant medicines.

Sooner or later the vine spread to the places where *D. cabrerana* and *P. viridis* were used. Like other medicines, each of them was mixed with Ayahuasca, and thus the DMT-containing Ayahuasca brews were born. In turn, each of the DMT-containing brews spread out from its own point of origin. If one maps out the cultures that use Chaliponga and those that use Chakruna as an admixture, the pattern of diffusion is quite apparent.

Another DMT-containing “admixture” is *Anadenanthera peregrine*, or Yopo. Yopo, as a snuff, has long been used alone (sometimes with admixtures) in Venezuela. The Piaroa have adopted the combined use of Yopo and *B. caapi* (Rodd 2002), an example of a psychoactive already in use being enhanced by *B. caapi*.

## **Chaliponga**

The synergy of *D. cabrerana* (Chaliponga / Chagropanga) with *B. caapi* was probably discovered earlier than the synergy of *Psychotria viridis* with *B. caapi*. The Napo Runa seem

---

<sup>17</sup> I even heard stories of shamans mixing foreign substances like gasoline with Ayahuasca in order to understand their spirits.

much more comfortable and familiar with it than with *P. viridis*, so it was likely to have come to them earlier.

*B. caapi* probably met *D. cabrerana* around the upper Putumayo River, the border of present day Ecuador and Colombia, through the Siona people. That is approximately the southern edge of the older practice with *D. cabrerana* alone, which influenced a culture of “Yagé” distinct in some ways from the culture of “Ayahuasca.”<sup>18</sup> As the use of *D. cabrerana* as an admixture spread southward, it was adopted by the Napo Runa, by the Pastaza Runa farther south, and by the Jivaroan tribes to *their* south: Shuar, Achuar, Shiwiar, Awajun, and Huambisa. The Pastaza Runa and Shuar adopted the name *Yaji* for *D. cabrerana*, because that was the novel element in the brew they received under the name *Yagé*. The only groups in Peru who use *D. cabrerana* as an admixture appear to be the Jivaroan peoples; in Iquitos, *D. cabrerana* is known as Huambisa after the tribe identified with its use.

## Chakruna

*B. caapi* met *P. viridis* somewhere around the confluence of the Napo and Amazon Rivers. From there this combination spread southward, especially up the Ucayali River. *P. viridis*, like *D. cabrerana*, has been used alone for its psychoactive effects. The use of *P. viridis* alone has been documented by Yves Duc, a Swiss student of an Asháninka curandero, who says the Ashaninka “diet”<sup>19</sup> Chakruna, sometimes with Tobacco added as a mild MAOI. “Chacruna alone does not give visions, but if one takes a concentrated decoction, the plant is, in my opinion, deeply and subtly psychoactive” (personal communication).

---

<sup>18</sup> Probably most significant is the fact that, where the vine is called Ayahuasca, she is a feminine spirit, but where the vine is called Yagé, he is a masculine spirit, which has great implications for the tone of shamanic practice. There are also some differences in ceremonial style.

<sup>19</sup> “Diet” means the same as *sasina*, above.

This practice with Chakruna likely predated the arrival of Ayahuasca vine to the region. Or, Ayahuasca could have led people to this “helper,” as she led them to many other medicines. However and whenever the meeting of Chakruna with Caapi took place, it seems to have happened near present-day Iquitos.

Gow (1996), Brabec de Mori (2011), and Calavia Saez (2011) make a compelling case, citing the indigenous people of the upper Ucayali themselves, that the diffusion of Caapi/Chakruna combination brews southward from Iquitos may be historically recent. They also make a thought-provoking case that the social disruptions of colonialism and the Rubber Boom contributed to making the Napo form of shamanism the dominant form of Ayahuasca practice in the Upper Amazon.

### **The Roots of Modern Ayahuasca Shamanism**

As I came to know the pre-European history of the Napo region, I started to understand something that had at first been strange and disturbing to me, as a North American Indian: the approach to shamanism as a business for which fees are charged, and the competitiveness and self-aggrandizement of the shamans. In North American Indian culture, medicine people are deeply humble people who would not consider charging money, but who would be, in the old days, taken care of by the whole community. But pre-conquest Napo was a society with much interchange between unrelated groups. Unlike a true tribal community, which is governed by kinship obligations and in which relatives are obliged to take care of each other, in the multi-ethnic, cosmopolitan society of the Napo River basin, people routinely interacted with strangers to whom they had no kinship obligations, so remuneration was called for. Up and down the river, healers were called to do ceremonies for strangers who were not their own relatives.. In fact,

there is an opinion among the Napo Runa that a shaman cannot do a good job of treating his own relatives, so even a shaman will seek another shaman, preferably a non-relative, if his own family gets sick.<sup>20</sup>

This style of shamanism has become the “classic” style of Ayahuasca shamanism. It is not rooted in any specific tribal culture, and it can be transferred across cultures from one individual to another. In my view, this is why this form of Ayahuasca shamanism has survived, and perhaps even spread and flourished, while families and communities of traditional cultures were being ripped apart. This style of shamanism—which focuses on the individual practitioner independent of community or kinship ties, and can be practiced with unrelated strangers—was easily assimilated into the atomized society of the mestizos, and it easily adapts to western consumer culture. In fact, contact with western consumerist society is causing this style of shamanism to flourish.

Mestizo Ayahuasca shamanism of Iquitos is primarily derived from Napo. It draws from other indigenous cultural roots, such as the Kukama, but even those were already influenced by the style of Napo. However, this influence has been in one direction only. Mestizo influence on Napo shamanism is nearly non-existent. In fact, in Ecuador, mestizo shamanism is literally unheard of. The unique historical circumstances that created mestizo Ayahuasca shamanism in Peru did not exist in Ecuador or Colombia. In Colombia, because many Indians have fled to cities due to the civil war, whites and mestizos may outnumber indigenous participants in Yagé ceremonies, but leading the ceremonies is entirely the work of Indians. In Ecuador, the mestizos are uninterested in Ayahuasca. The mestizos in the Ecuadorean Amazon are recently arrived colonists; since the 1960s, most of them arrived on roads built for the oil companies, encouraged

---

<sup>20</sup> This may be the origin of Gow’s (1996) “principle that people always attribute greater shamanic power to other people, particularly distant others”; a “principle” that I emphatically did *not* find in Napo.

by government promises of the “empty lands” of the Amazon to anyone who would clear it and raise cattle or sugar cane. Unlike the mestizo rubber tappers in Peru a hundred years ago, the mestizo colonists in the Ecuadorean Amazon do not need to turn to Indian healers with their health crises. They have no interest in Indian culture or in Indian rights.

### **Missionaries and Resistance**

Gow (1996) suggests that Ayahuasca shamanism originated in missionary *reducciones*, but the evidence offered for this is extremely weak, mostly based on the fact that the Spaniards used Quechua to administer the *reducciones*, and on the Catholic influence on Ayahuasca shamanism in Peru, both mestizo and indigenous. There is no discernible Catholic influence on Ayahuasca shamanism in Ecuador. I believe that in Peru, indigenous ayahuasqueros absorbed Catholic influence not because of the missionaries, but because they witnessed mestizo shamans blending Catholicism with shamanism in a friendly way. The mestizo shamans demonstrated that Catholicism could *add* to a shamanic practice, indeed, could strengthen that practice, with powerful new spiritual entities, without giving up native ways.

In Ecuador, where there is no mestizo shamanism, there is no blending of indigenous Ayahuasca shamanism and Catholicism. In Ecuador, the missionaries and the shamans are historic enemies. Recording Napo Runa oral history, I heard many stories depicting the shamans as the subversive leaders of covert resistance to the Spanish missionaries. The missionaries could enforce the wearing of clothes by whipping anyone they found going naked, and they could enforce attendance at mass by whipping anyone who was absent from mass, but they could not monitor what people were doing deep in the jungle at night. (I heard hints that, once upon a time, not all Ayahuasca ceremonies were done in complete darkness as they are today.)

Inconspicuousness is a traditional virtue to the Napo Runa, because being unnoticed means that one is not molesting one's neighbor. The tree sloth represents the ideal human character, in part because he lives unnoticed. But the ability to hide is also an asset of the Trickster, who for the Napo Runa is Rabbit. The Napo Runa are stereotyped in Ecuador as meek and docile, in contrast to the fierce Shuar and Waorani, but their own self-image stresses their resistance and survival, and Ayahuasca is credited with a role in that. Chief Jumandi allegedly used Ayahuasca before leading the rebellion of 1578-9, and the Napo Runa credit their own shaman-led resistance for the expulsion of the Jesuit missionaries from Ecuador in 1767, although history books give a different account.

### **Forms of Ayahuasca Practice**

What is known as "Ayahuasca shamanism" is only one orientation toward Ayahuasca practice. This is the orientation that focuses on the shaman as an individual, as a kind of professional. Usually the shaman will be the only person in the ceremony who drinks. When local people came for healing ceremonies, the shaman would encourage them to drink, but usually they would not. Most people consider the experience unpleasant. Healing is basically a form of divination: Ayahuasca allows the shaman to see and work with the problem. Ayahuasca is a divinatory tool used by skilled individuals.

When I asked people who were *not* members of a shaman's family about their experience and use of Ayahuasca, most people said they had experienced it at least once. Anyone curious about Ayahuasca will have the opportunity to satisfy their curiosity sooner or later, when someone in their family, or even a neighbor, develops an illness for which a curandero will be summoned. Or their family may attempt their own Ayahuasca curing session, much in the way

that city people may attempt self-treatment for an illness with home remedies before going to a doctor. Anyone present at a ceremony is encouraged to partake of the brew, but most people told me that, once having satisfied their curiosity about Ayahuasca, they did not care to repeat the experience. Some people had never experienced Ayahuasca, because they had heard it was so unpleasant. Ayahuasca is a felt presence, but most people seemed content to leave the unpleasant duty of drinking it to the shaman specialists.

There is another kind of healing ceremony, of which I had very brief and limited experience near Tarapoto, Peru. In this ceremony, everyone drinks, and purging through vomiting is the intent. In fact, the medicine is even referred to as La Purga, as was the ceremony. In Napo, purging is not emphasized, because it is the shaman's drinking that is important, and he presumably did all his purging during his apprenticeship. So there is usually not much purging in Napo Runa ceremonies. (I didn't have my first purge until I had been drinking for over a year.) Most who came for ceremonies in Napo declined the invitation to drink because they considered Ayahuasca unpleasant. The participants in the *purga* ceremony, on the contrary, considered it highly pleasurable. People wanted to drink, expected to drink, and expected to purge. Purging is far from automatic with Ayahuasca, but the body can be trained to reliably respond to Ayahuasca with a purge. An Ayahuasca purge can be powerful and ecstatic, cleansing and healing, so it was not surprising to learn that some people looked forward to a weekly *purga*. I believe that this style of ceremony, as well as the Napo style, influences the mestizo Ayahuasca culture of Iquitos.

There are also ceremonies of group bonding. Siskind (1973) describes the communal drinking of Ayahuasca among the Sharanahua (usually in all-male groups, but they did not discourage her from participating) and individualistic Ayahuasca shamanism as well. The

Tukanoans in Colombia have ceremonial dances with Yajé. The use of the Ayahuasca for hunting skills and visions of game is widespread and apparently ancient. Miller-Weisberger (2000) describes a unique practice among the Waorani of enhancing hunting skills with *Banisteriopsis* and a two-year “fast.”

These varied forms of Ayahuasca practice, and more, are vine-centered. The Napo Runa consider the vine the source of all wisdom. At the *purga* ceremony, if the brew contained any leaf at all, it was barely discernible. For the Sharanahua, the admixture is of secondary importance.<sup>21</sup> The Tukano use the vine alone; so do the Waorani.<sup>22</sup> A Waorani elder, Mengahue, says of the power of the vine:

*Miiyabu* is an attractor plant and its spirit is very strong. Many people are not strong enough or wise enough to use it in benefit of the people... This is why whenever you touch this plant you must be aware of what you are thinking, because whatever you are thinking is what you will attract to your life when you touch this plant. (Miller-Weisberger 2000:44)

### Antiquity of Ayahuasca

“During Ancient Times, full knowledge of the spirits of huanduj<sup>23</sup> and ayahuasca existed” (Whitten 1972:47).

“We affirm that ayahuasca is our sacred plant... It has always been guarded by our grandparents and ancestors” (Declaración de Yachac, Puyo, Ecuador, 2002).

“Yajé is grown from cuttings and is thus thought to be one continuous vine which stretches back to the beginning of time... yajé itself is compared to an umbilical cord that links human beings... to the mythical past” (Hugh-Jones, quoted in Schultes & Raffauf 1992:24).

<sup>21</sup> In 38 pages devoted to Ayahuasca use among the Sharanahua, Siskind makes but one passing reference to the *Psychotria* admixture.

<sup>22</sup> They use *Banisteriopsis muricata*, but attribute the same name and properties to the closely related *Banisteriopsis caapi*, which they acquired in the twentieth century from their former enemies the Napo Runa (Miller-Weisberger 2000:41).

<sup>23</sup> *Brugmansia*.

The Runa in Ecuador say their relationship with Ayahuasca goes to the beginning of time. The ancient presence of *Banisteriopsis caapi*, aka Ayahuasca, throughout upper Amazonia is attested to by the widespread and varied practices around it and the fine classifications of subvarieties of vine. I believe that genetic studies could help confirm the antiquity of its use. If, as with practically every plant of widespread human use in the Amazon, *B. caapi* was spread by humans from a single place of origin, then the degree of genetic difference between the plants in one location and another would give clues as to how long ago they were separated. Although *Banisteriopsis caapi* is propagated by cloning, even cloned plants show genetic change over time. Genetics might also give insights into the varieties recognized by indigenous peoples.

## Conclusions

“*Banisteriopsis* may well be ancient... [but] it appears that ayahuasca as we know it is not as old” (Brabec de Mori 2011:26). Historians of Ayahuasca would do well to look beyond “ayahuasca as we know it” and reexamine the psychoactive role of *B. caapi* as it has been well documented throughout the literature.

My conclusions are: The mainstream form of Ayahuasca shamanism originated on the Napo River, it originated as a vine-only practice; the admixtures were discovered because of the practice of mixing other plant medicines with *B. caapi*; and Ayahuasca’s history of use by humans is much older than the DMT-containing brew.

## REFERENCES

Brabec de Mori, B. (2011). Tracing hallucinations: Contributing to a critical ethnohistory of ayahuasca usage in the Peruvian Amazon. In B. C. Labate & H. Jungaberle (Eds.): *The internationalization of ayahuasca* (pp. 23-47). Zürich: Lit Verlag.

- Calavia Saez, O. (2011). A vine network. In B. C. Labate & H. Jungaberle (Eds.): *The internationalization of ayahuasca* (pp. 131-144). Zürich: Lit Verlag.
- Declaración de Yachac (2002). Puyo, Ecuador. Retrieved from [http://www.bialabate.net/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/declaracion\\_de\\_yachac\\_2002.pdf](http://www.bialabate.net/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/declaracion_de_yachac_2002.pdf)
- Dobkin de Rios, M. (1972). *Visionary vine: Hallucinogenic healing in the Peruvian Amazon*. San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co.
- Gow, P. (1996). River people: Shamanism and history in western Amazonia. In N. Thomas & C. Humphrey (Eds.) *Shamanism, history, and the state* (pp. 90–113). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Junquera, C. (1989). Alucinógenos y chamanismo en la tribu harakmbet. *Revista española de la antropología Americana*, 19, 207-227.
- Lagrou, E. (2000). Two Ayahuasca myths from the Cashinahua of northwestern Brazil. In L. E. Luna, & S. White (Eds.), *Ayahuasca reader: Encounters with the Amazon's sacred vine*. Santa Fe: Synergetic Press.
- Langdon, J. (1985). *Siona classification of yagé*. Bogotá: Congreso Internacional Americanistas.
- Luna, L. E. (1984). The concept of plants as teachers among four mestizo shamans of Iquitos, northeastern Peru. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 11, 135-156.
- McKenna, D., Towers, G. H. N., and Abbott, F. S. (1984). Monamine oxidase inhibitors in South American hallucinogenic plants: Tryptamine and beta-carboline constituents of ayahuasca. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 10, 195-223.
- McKenna, T. (1992). *Food of the gods*. NY: Bantam.
- Miller-Weisberger, J, S, (2000). A Huaorani myth of the first *Miiyabu*. In L. E. Luna, & S. White (Eds.), *Ayahuasca reader: Encounters with the Amazon's sacred vine*. Santa Fe: Synergetic Press.
- Reichel-Dolmatoff, G. (1975). *The shaman and the jaguar*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Rodd, R. (2002). Snuff synergy: Preparation, use and pharmacology of *yopo* and *Banisteriopsis caapi* among the Piaroa of Southern Venezuela. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, 34, 273-279.
- Schultes, R. E. (1976). *Hallucinogenic Plants*. Racine, WI: Golden Press.
- Schultes, R. E. (1986). Recognition of variability in wild plants by Indians of the northwest Amazon: An enigma. *Journal of Ethnobiology* 6(2), 229-238.

Schultes, R. E. (n.d.) An ethnobotanical perspective on ayahuasca. Retrieved from <http://www.biopark.org/peru/schultes-ayahuasca.html>.

Schultes, R. E. & Raffauf, R. F. (1992). *Vine of the Soul*. Santa Fe: Synergetic Press.

Siskind, J. (1973). *To Hunt in the morning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Weiskopf, J. (2005). *Yajé: The new purgatory*. Bogota: Villegas Editores S.A.

Whitten, N. (1972). *Sacha Runa: Ethnicity and adaptation of Ecuadorian jungle Quichua*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Zuluaga, G. (2005). Conservación de la diversidad biológico y cultural en el piedemonte amazónico colombiano: La herencia del Dr. Schultes. Retrieved from [www.ethnobotanyjournal.org/vol3/i1547-3465-03-187.pdf](http://www.ethnobotanyjournal.org/vol3/i1547-3465-03-187.pdf)

### **Acknowledgments**

Special thanks to Bia Labate, Jeremy Narby, Stephan Beyer and Clancy Cavnar for review, comments and encouragement.