Ayahuasca Encyclopedia Article

Ayahuasca

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In 1851, the botanist Richard Spruce observed natives along the Rio Negro in Brazil preparing a beverage from the roots of a vine, which he called *Banisteria caapi*, of the family Malpighiaceae (it was recently designated *Banisteriopsis caapi*.) He laterobserved the use of a similar drink in the Ecuadorian Amazon basin, where it was called *ayahuasca* (from the Quechua language, spoken in the Andes). He noted that the brew was often a mixture of *Banisteria caapi* with the roots of another indigenous plant. There were apparently several variations in the recipe for *caapi* and most of those who have studied it believe that each recipe produces somewhat different psychic effects. In 1929, the great pioneer of psychopharmacology, Louis Lewin, published a monograph describing the pharmacological actions and possible therapeutic uses of *Banisteria caapi*, whose actions he believed to be due to an active alkaloid, harmine. In early studies in patients with Parkinsonism, harmine produced improvements in chewing, swallowing, and movement that lasted from two to six hours. Curiously, it was reported to have little orno psychic effects. It was latershown that harmine acts to inhibit the enzyme monoamine oxidase, thereby raising levels of the neurotransmitters DOPAMINE and NOREPINEPHRINE.

Mixtures containing *Banisteriopsis caapi* are still in use among the indigenous peoples of the Amazon. A tea brewed from it and the leaves of *Psychotria viridis* has been used in shamanistic rituals for hundreds of years in Colombia, Brazil, and Peru. In recent years, a number of people seeking alternatives to Western medicine, and for other reasons, have participated in Santo Daime rituals, in which drinking ayahuasca is a central feature. The tea is said to induce ecstatic states, during which the participants claim to experience great insight. In southern Brazil, some psychotherapists and homeopaths have been known to bring clients or patients to participate in such rituals.

See Also

Hallucinogenic Plants; Hallucinogens)

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