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AYAHUASCA GUIDE



Written by:

Lynn-Marie Morski, MD, JD
Unlimited Sciences

and

Matthew X. Lowe, Ph.D.
Unlimited Sciences

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What is ayahuasca?

What does the word *ayahuasca* mean?

Ayahuasca is a psychoactive brew prepared by boiling the stems of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine with the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* or *Diplopterys cabrerana* plant and other botanical matter native to the Amazon basin. Ayahuasca has been utilized by Upper Amazonian tribes for centuries as sacred medicine owing to its ability to produce altered states of consciousness. This psychedelic brew has many names, including *ayahuasca* in Peru, *yagé* in Colombia and Ecuador, and *caapi* in Brazil. Ayahuasca is also referred to as "honi zuma," in Colombia, and among the Caxinaua Indians (Peru, Brazil), it goes by the name "honi." In Ecuador, particularly within the Achuar and Shuar ethnic groups, the term "natem" is often used. The Portuguese transcription of ayahuasca is recognized as "hoasca" (or "oasca"), a name also acknowledged in Brazil.¹

Renowned anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna recorded over 70 different indigenous names for these preparations,² but the most commonly known word to describe this brew, ayahuasca, translates to “**vine of the soul**”, and is derived from the Quechua-language roots, aya, meaning death, dead person, spirit, soul, or ancestor, and huasca, meaning rope or vine. The name ayahuasca therefore denotes the brew's perceived supernatural soul-transporting virtues that have garnered deep cultural significance across dozens of ethnic groups like the ancient Inca.³

How old is the use of ayahuasca?

Anthropological reports estimate ayahuasca has been used by indigenous communities for over 5,000 years, with direct evidence dating back at least 1,000 years.⁴

What is ayahuasca used for?

To many who participate in ayahuasca ceremonies, ayahuasca is considered to be an entheogenic and inspirited plant being with animacy and agency, seen as a being with its own spirit and ability to create and connect with others. Along the same vein, many cultures consider the world to be inhabited by anthropomorphic spirits, and these cultures believe ayahuasca facilitates communication with these spirits.⁵

Today, ayahuasca is a traditional medicine used by approximately **one hundred indigenous groups across the Amazon Basin**, including those dispersed in Colombia,

Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela. Ayahuasca has remained a central part of indigenous culture and is used in medicine, religious ceremonies, and rites of passage.⁶

How Ayahuasca works in the body

Scientific study attributes ayahuasca's mind-altering properties primarily to the presence of the potent serotonergic psychedelic N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in tandem with β -carboline alkaloids called monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAO-inhibitors) that render the DMT orally bioavailable when consumed as Ayahuasca tea. The MAOIs allow DMT to reach the brain by preventing it from being broken down before crossing the blood-brain barrier, enabling intense visions, psychedelia, and mystical states.⁷

Ayahuasca's Effects

Ayahuasca has long been revered by Native Americans as the most potent medicinal plant on the planet. They credit the concoction derived from this "magical" liana with the power to instruct and heal individuals, with some suggesting it facilitates a connection with the universe and spiritual entities. In recent years, the utilization of ayahuasca has transcended South America, reaching Europe, the United States, and beyond, prompting diverse biomedical investigations. While these studies offer optimism regarding its therapeutic capabilities, they also raise apprehensions about potential toxicity.⁸

Subjective Effects

The consumption of ayahuasca is associated with a variety of subjective effects, including visual hallucinations, altered sensory perception, mystical experiences, and euphoria. Ingestion of ayahuasca may also give rise to experiences of purging, both physical (e.g., vomiting, diarrhea) and emotional (e.g., therapeutic release of emotions). Although different indigenous groups have developed complex variations of ayahuasca to modify or potentiate the effects of ayahuasca, infusing up to 90 different plants into the brew, the most commonly used variations combine the roots of the *B. caapi* with the leaves of *P. viridis* or *D. cabrerana*.⁹

Pharmacological Mechanisms of Action

Ayahuasca is unique in its pharmacological activity, which is dependent on a synergistic interaction between active alkaloids in both plants, a currently well-known mechanism in which the monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitory action of harmala alkaloids allow the

hallucinogenic effects of metabolically labile DMT.¹⁰ The main compounds of the preparation are β -carboline alkaloids (harmala alkaloids-harmine, harmaline and tetrahydroharmine) and N, N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT). Pharmacologically, DMT binds and modulates serotonergic receptors throughout the central and peripheral nervous systems, triggering widespread entheogenic and psychotropic changes perceptually once ingested. Subjective experiential dimensions of onset involve physical purging or vomiting before dynamic visions begin, followed by otherworldly scenes perceived as staggeringly sentient yet fantastical, rich in elaborate detail yet undeniably supernatural.¹¹

What to expect from visions induced by ayahuasca

Phenomenologically, visions display alternately or concomitantly aqueous, botanical, zoological, and architectural motifs in heightened symbolic expressionistic fashion. Visions unfold with subconscious depths of self-insight, environmental interconnectedness, cosmic revelation, numinous mysticism, and sacredness universally described by indigenous groups variously as divinely transcendental, depending on tribal cosmologies. Psychopharmacology suggests ayahuasca's subjective effects derive significantly from DMT binding serotonin transporters and sigma-1 receptors, augmenting synaptic plasticity by heightening neurogenesis.¹²

Experiential dimensions include a perceivable prolongation of time, confrontation with personal issues, cathartic release of emotions, and renewed mindfulness towards relationships or constructive life changes after the acute effects subside.¹³ By bridging normal cognitive constraints, ayahuasca permits a temporary interconnectedness that lends perspective for addressing challenges confronted or changes sought once sobriety returns.

How long does ayahuasca last?

The effects of ayahuasca generally appear around 40 minutes after ingestion, peak at 1-2 hours following ingestion, and then fade after approximately 4 - 6 hours.¹⁴ In a study by Callaway, the enlargement of the pupil diameter started after 40 min and persisted even after 6 hours.¹⁵ The cardiovascular effect of ayahuasca consisted in an increase of heart rate (maximum after 20 min) and increase of blood pressure (maximum after 40 min), which then decreased to normal values. The neuroendocrine effect of ayahuasca was found in a significant increase of growth hormone, prolactin and cortisol, to their peak plasma concentrations occurring between 1–2 h after ingestion.

Origins & Traditional Use

The origins of ayahuasca can be traced back to the Amazon rainforest, where indigenous tribes such as the Quechua, Shipibo,¹⁶ and Asháninka¹⁷ have used this powerful plant medicine for centuries in their religious and healing practices.¹⁸ The traditional use of ayahuasca is deeply rooted in the spiritual and shamanic traditions of these tribes, who believe that the brew allows them to connect with the spirit world, gain insights, and heal both physical and mental ailments.

The preparation and consumption of ayahuasca is surrounded by ritual and ceremony, with experienced shamans guiding the process. The brew is typically made by combining the bark of *Banisteriopsis caapi* with leaves from *Psychotria viridis*. The specific ingredients and methods of preparation vary among different indigenous tribes, each with its own unique traditions and practices.¹⁹ **More than 100 different plants can serve as sources of β -carbolines and DMT**, which are the active alkaloids of this decoction, and therefore it is important to know the most accurate composition of the decoction, especially when studying the pharmacology of this plant.²⁰ For example, *Banisteriopsis caapi*, *Brugmansia suaveolens*, and *Nicotiana tabacum* are the principal hallucinogens used by the Shuar and related ethnic groups in Amazonian Ecuador and Peru.²¹ The 4 most used plants for the preparation of ayahuasca decoction include *P. viridis*, *B. caapi*, *M. hostilis*, and *P. harmala*.²²

The use of ayahuasca is considered a sacred and deeply spiritual practice among these indigenous communities, and it is often used for purposes such as healing, divination, and spiritual growth. The traditional understanding of ayahuasca is grounded in the interconnectedness of all living beings and the belief that plant medicine has the power to bring about profound healing and transformation.²³ The consumption of ayahuasca is often done in ceremonial settings, with participants sitting in a circle and drinking the brew under the guidance of a shaman or ayahuasquero/ayahuascquera, who leads the ceremony and facilitates the spiritual journey.

Concomitant ritual musical performances like ceremonial "icaros" chanting by maestro/maestra shamans invariably guide participants' profound vision quests during ayahuasca's acute psychoactive phase seeking overall collective spiritual catharsis for entire tribes practicing this spiritual sacrament since pre-Columbian antiquity by melding native jungle botanicals with metaphysical beliefs—a syncretic practice Andean & coastal tribes still honor today through community-binding ceremonies.²⁴

Ayahuasca in the 20th Century

Since the 1930s, beyond its traditional shamanic use, ayahuasca has found a place in syncretic religious movements that emerged in Brazil. The first of these was established by R.I. Serra, who, after acquiring knowledge of ayahuasca from indigenous communities during his jungle sojourn, returned to civilization and founded the Santo Daime religion, marking a fusion of Christian beliefs with alternative healing and shamanic practices. In 1945, Barquinha separated from Santo Daime, giving rise to the União do Vegetal (UDV), a Brazilian-origin religious society, in 1961. Following R.I. Serra's death in 1971, Santo Daime experienced factional divisions.²⁵

During the 1980s, syncretistic religions gained prominence in Brazil, extending their influence abroad to countries like the Netherlands, the USA, and others.²⁶ The phenomenon of "ayahuasca tourism" emerged at the close of the twentieth century, signifying the globalization of ayahuasca and its adoption across Asia.^{27 28} This development has spurred debates about the legal status of N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a controlled substance in many countries, making its production, purchase, possession, and distribution illegal.²⁹ Notably, the psychoactive effects of ayahuasca hinge on a specific combination of its primary plant components, a discovery made independently of modern scientific research.

Ayahuasca's Cultural Role

In Indigenous communities

- Indigenous communities have been using ayahuasca for centuries as a tool for spiritual and healing practices. Indigenous healers, known as shamans, ayahuasqueros/ayahuasqueras, or curanderos,³⁰ play a crucial role in administering ayahuasca ceremonies and guiding individuals through their transformative journeys.
- In addition to its significance in spiritual and healing practices, ayahuasca also plays a central role in the social and cultural fabric of indigenous communities.³¹ The brew often serves as a means of cultural preservation and transmission of traditional knowledge, as it is involved in communal rituals and ceremonies that reinforce the collective identity and values of the community. Furthermore, the use of ayahuasca is intrinsically linked to the ecological and environmental knowledge of indigenous peoples, as the plants used in its preparation are sourced from the rich biodiversity of the Amazon rainforest.

- The deep-rooted connection between ayahuasca and indigenous cultures underscores the complex interplay between spiritual beliefs, traditional knowledge, and environmental stewardship. This multifaceted relationship highlights the importance of understanding and respecting the cultural context and indigenous perspectives surrounding the use of ayahuasca. The use of ayahuasca in indigenous cultures extends beyond its psychoactive properties, encompassing a holistic approach to well-being that integrates the spiritual, physical, and environmental aspects of life. Through the guidance of experienced healers, individuals partake in ayahuasca ceremonies as a means of addressing not only personal afflictions but also communal challenges, reinforcing the interconnectedness of the community with the natural world.³²
- In the current global context, there has been a growing interest in the therapeutic potential of ayahuasca from a Western medical perspective. Researchers have conducted studies to explore its effects on mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. However, it is crucial to recognize that the indigenous use of ayahuasca is deeply rooted in a complex web of cultural, spiritual, and environmental elements that cannot be disentangled from the mere examination of its chemical composition or isolated pharmacological effects. This underscores the necessity of upholding ethical considerations and engaging in meaningful dialogue with indigenous communities to ensure that any external interest in ayahuasca aligns with their values and respects their rights.^{33 34}

Religious use

Ayahuasca is a sacrament used in the religious ceremonies of various indigenous and syncretic religious groups in the Amazon basin, including the following:

- Santo Daime - The Santo Daime religion, originating in Brazil, incorporates ayahuasca into its religious rituals and ceremonies, considering it a sacred medicine for spiritual healing and revelation.
- União do Vegetal - UDV is another Brazilian religious organization that uses ayahuasca as a sacrament in its religious practices. The UDV considers ayahuasca a means for spiritual development and communion with the divine.
- Native Amazonian Traditions - Various indigenous tribes in the Amazon rainforest have a long history of using ayahuasca in traditional shamanic and spiritual practices as a way to connect with nature and the spirit world.
- Barquinha - Barquinha is a syncretic Brazilian religion that incorporates elements of Christianity and indigenous beliefs and also uses ayahuasca in its religious ceremonies.³⁵



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