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Plant Teachers in the Upper Amazon. Acquiring Information through Psychotropic Plants.

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Abstract

Plants which produce altered states of consciousness have a special place in the cosmology and social and cultural life of Upper Amazon Indians belonging to numerous indigenous groups. They are considered to possess "strong spirits", and through them they get in touch with normally invisible worlds from which they receive information. Music, body painting and other artistic manifestations, as well as great part of the narratives of these tribes have as their source encountering with beings from such dimensions. Their social life is often glued by collective ceremonies in which these plants are taken, diagnosis of illnesses and healing being carried out by specialists in those plants. Westerners have usually relegated such statements to the realm of myth or superstition. I will be focusing my attention on ayahuasca a plant preparation made of a vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the leaves of either *Diplopterys cabrerana* or *Psychotria viridis*, both of which contain the powerful visionary alkaloid DMT (dimethyl tryptamine). Ayahuasca is used also as a sacred plant preparation by mestizo practitioners, has been adopted as a sacrament by Brazilian Christian organizations which have centers all over Brazil and in many other countries, and is currently being used in smaller circles as a therapeutic agent and as a subject of various kinds of investigation, including cognitive psychology and consciousness studies. I will present a panorama of such studies as well as present a case for the possible use of ayahuasca in the proper setting as a cognitive research tool.