

## Exploration

# Is Gender Important in Consciousness Exploration? The Modification of Male & Female Consciousness with Chichaja Brew

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### ABSTRACT

*Gaultheria insipida* is a plant native to the Andes used traditionally by female indigenous Inga healers near the Colombian Amazon to prepare a brew currently known as Chichaja. This brew is an element that allows distinguishing a very original type of Colombian shamanism, but *Gaultheria insipida* and Chichaja have not yet been studied by psychedelic researchers or ethnobotanists. In this text, we argue that the brew made from *Gaultheria insipida* tends to modify the consciousness and bodies of female and male drinkers in different ways. We present here six testimonials from Chichaja drinkers collected during ethnological fieldwork started in December 2010 and finalized in July 2011, conducted in different parts of Colombia, particularly the west Amazon forest. The active components of *Gaultheria insipida*, as well as the very special psychotropic properties of the brew elaborated from this plant, are so far unknown for science.

**Key Words:** MSC (modified state of consciousness), male, female, psychedelic brew, indigenous knowledge.

### Introduction

*Gaultheria insipida* is a plant native to the Andes, used traditionally by indigenous female healers near the Colombian Amazon to prepare a brew called Chichaja, also known as the “Female Ayahuasca”, widely used today before or after the consumption of Ayahuasca in Colombia. The aim of this text is to describe the effects of Chichaja over consciousness and body. Chichaja tends to alter in divergent ways the consciousness and bodies of female and male drinkers. Such is the thesis we defend according to the observations made during fieldwork (December 2010 - July 2011), which have been conducted in different parts of Colombia, particularly the west Amazon forest (Mocoa, Putumayo). In order to present this unknown

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psychedelic brew, we make comparisons of Chichaja with Ayahuasca, a well-known psychedelic drink from the Amazon.<sup>1</sup>



## Problem, Hypothesis and Methodology

Traditionally, *Gaultheria insipida* has been used by Inga indigenous women, based in Sibundoy - High Putumayo, to elaborate Chichaja. The Colombian anthropologist, Clara Giraldo-tafur has studied the ways this brew is used by Inga women in Santiago, one of the main towns in Sibundoy. We found the item “Chichaja” among other 118 indigenous medicines listed by the anthropologist, and we learn it would be useful to heal laziness, sleeping excess and bodily pains:

Table 1. Medical and Nutritious Plants used by Inga Women in Santiago, Sibundoy Valley, Putumayo.

Scientific Name	Inga Name	Uses	Preparations
(Ericaceae) <i>Gaultheria insipida</i>	Chichaja	Hemorrhoids, Prevent diseases, blood cleaning, bodily pains, laziness and sleeping excess, purgative.	1. Hot tee, sirop with tropical fruits (to drink three times daily), Chichaja decoction.

<sup>1</sup>*Ayahuasca* is a term of Quechuan origin that means “vine of the souls,” and refers to the brew habitually made from the decoction of two plants native to the Amazon forest: the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the leaves of *Psychotria viridis*. We have an extensive bibliography about this brew, recently reviewed by Labate(2008).

Taken from: GIRALDO-TAFUR, Clara. Medicina tradicional de la mujer Inga.

Revista de la Academia Colombiana de Ciencias. Vol. XXIV, N. 90, Mars 2000. P. 17.

(Translated from Spanish by authors).

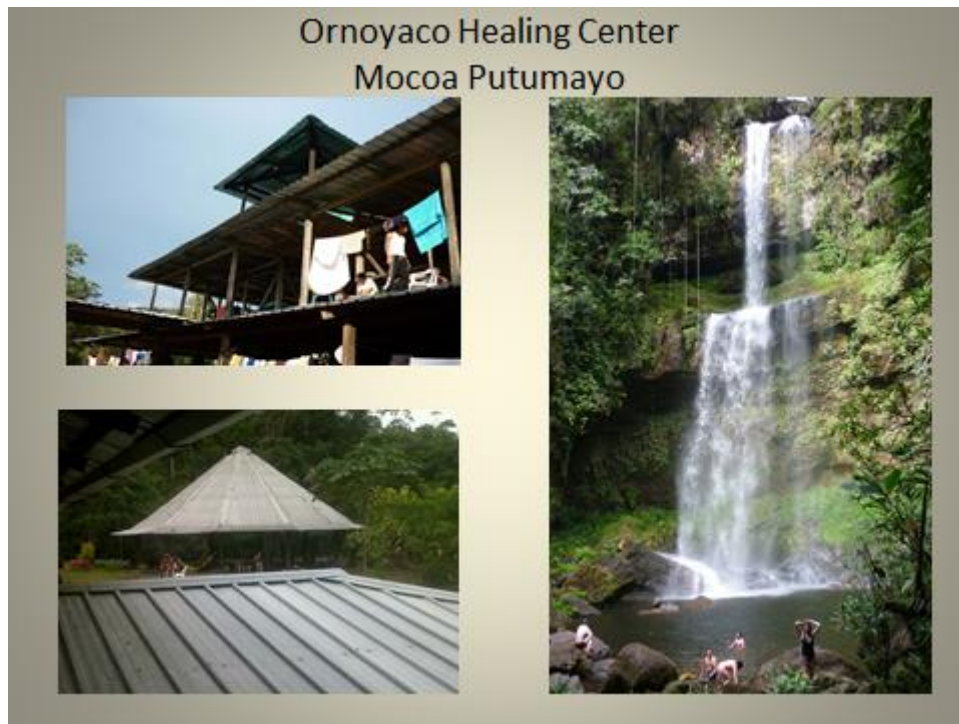
Here, we will focus on the shamans we have shared time and experience with within a field-work started in December 2010 and finalized in July 2011: the mestizo Gregorio Castro and his wife Carmenza Chindoy-Garreta, from the Inga indigenous people. They run a healing center called “Ornoyaco”, located near Mocoa, bellow the Sibundoy Valley. While Gregorio is responsible for all the matters related with the Ayahuasca, Carmenza is responsible for preparing Chichaja.

## Carmenza Garreta-Chindoy and Gregorio Castro



The dry leaves of *Gaultheria insipida* are ground, put in a cauldron with water and boiled the entire night. At dawn, the liquid has reduced to just a few liters. Once the brew is ready, Carmenza shakes a wairasacha and chants to cast a spell on the brew, while Gregorio carries out the same ritual with Ayahuasca. This gender-based division of labor is related with the spirit that is associated to Chichaja. It is a female spirit, a mother, who some chichaja drinkers report to have seen during their experience with the brew. Sometimes Chichaja is related with two spirits, a mother and her daughter, but in any case it is always linked to a female presence. It is why Chichaja is called the female Ayahuasca, a designation not restricted to the Gregorio and Carmenza, but that has been adopted all around the country.

What does it mean for Chichaja to be associated with a female spirit or spirits? It seems to mean, at first glance, that women have less painful experiences with Chichaja. They have normally more relaxed and short processes with the brew, in comparison with men’s experiences. Indeed, as we can see in ceremonies and as reported by drinkers and shamans, most of the men have a hard time with Chichaja (in psychedelic terms commonly referred to as “bad trips”).



Why does Chichaja seem to affect in different ways male and female drinkers? A pharmacological study is needed to answer that question in a complete way. Maybe there are some active components that act in different manners in male and female bodies and minds. But a chemical research about the active components of *Gaultheria insipida* and Chichaja does not exist to date. To partially answer that question, we used the participative observation method. We listened to people talking about their experiences with Chichaja, paying attention to gender differences, observing Chichaja drinkers. We could obtain six testimonies from people who agreed to talk with us about their experiences with Chichaja, two young men and two women over their thirties, the testimonies from Carmenza and Gregorio, and of course, we drunk Chichaja ourselves several times.

### **Chichaja & Patriarchalism**

According to Carmenza: “the Chichaja is the master mother and the Ayahuasca is the father. Chichaja is a medicine for body and mind. When the process of spiritual quest has begun, they help the being to look at himself and see what has happened in oneself and what are the things that one needs to transform in oneself, it helps to become conscious... it’s a centering plant. It allows reassessing the feminine part of each one of us and teaches you to value your feminine side.”

From data collected in interviews, it seems Chichaja offers “bad trips” or “hard lessons” if the drinker has some patriarchal beliefs or attitudes. Some parts of the interviews can illustrate such idea. For example, a young man talked about the moment his Chichaja experience became difficult to handle: “I had asked mother Chichaja to be gentle with me, to treat me with love.

After drinking Chichaja, I continued my prayer, and, a short time after, I started seeing images from the past: I was with my girlfriend in a taxi travelling to the airport, and I was being rude with her. I blamed her for not knowing to which terminal we were supposed to go to, and for that reason we were risking to miss our flight. When I saw these images, Chichaja told me: ‘you did not treat your girlfriend with love, why do you ask to be treated with love by me?’. At that moment – the young man continues- it became hell”.

As we see from this quotation, the spirit of Chichaja can talk to the drinker, show images and the drinker can talk with her, just as with Ayahuasca. This oral account also teaches us about the way Chichaja may spot which aspects of the personality the drinker needs to improve in order to be a better person. Another young man shared with us a very intimate experience he had had with Chichaja. He told us that when he was younger he used to watch a lot of pornographic videos. Once under the effects of Chichaja:

“I saw images of nude women, especially their breasts, and I started having the feelings I usually have when masturbating, or when penetrating a woman. Then Chichaja told me “you are addicted to that sensation, you are addicted to sex, you cannot escape from here, you must recognize it”. “yes, I do recognize it” – answered the young man to Chichaja- After I said that – he continues- I puked my soul”. Here, Chichaja Spirit is an agent who helps the drinker to realize his limitations, and, after doing so, the drinker has no choice because he cannot escape from himself. Chichaja then cleans up the drinker’s body, opening the possibility to change what is wrong with his sexuality.

### Three Chichaja drinkers at Ornoyaco Healing Center, January 2011



## Women Experiences with Chichaja

So far, we have described Chichaja experiences with men. What can we say about women Chichaja experiences? As a female spirit, Chichaja seems to have preference with female drinkers. It's not strange to observe women who drink Chichaja, have short processes with the brew, from one to three hours, while men may be laid down all the day or even more. One of the women who had a short process with Chichaja, just stood up without assistance, and told Gregorio (the shaman), Chichaja has said to her that the brew has gone to the liver and was working with blood circulation and that was all the process she had. Nevertheless, Chichaja can also give "hard lessons" to women. We have registered the case of a skilled female drinker, with several and well-passed experiences with Chichaja. Although, once she made a "bad trip". Later she explained she got a hard process because she had not asked Chichaja spirit to kindly guide her during her experience. Instead of that, she had promised herself to be strong under the effect of Chichaja, and therefore Chichaja had punished her pride.

From the testimonies we have quoted, we can argue that one of the main teachings Chichaja offers to "her sons and daughters", is to learn to be gentle, soft, kind, lovely people. Given that softness, delicate manners are associated with a female way of being, while aggressive or proudly manners are viewed as male behavior, Chichaja has been qualified with a female personality, besides the fact people see, listen and feel a female spirit. This is just a hypothesis, we are not saying that all women are delicate and all men aggressive, but only referring to a type of social representation on gender roles in Colombia and maybe in Western culture in general.



## Chichaja and Ayahuasca

Now that we have a general view about what Chichaja is, it is time to make a comparison between Chichaja and Ayahuasca, in order to understand the place Chichaja holds in the Ayahuasca ensemble. We can list first the characteristics which distinguish Chichaja from Ayahuasca. Chichaja is always associated with a female spirit, while Ayahuasca could be linked either with female or male spirits. Chichaja tends to induce different effects depending on the drinker's sex (which is not the case with Ayahuasca) and it produces some particular symptoms. The drinker feels hot waves on the face, the arms; the skin becomes extremely sensitive, any sensory stimulus is dramatically amplified as an electrical vibration in the nerves (indeed the drinker is advised not to take a shower after the experience, because the feeling of water on the skin would be unbearable).

Carmenza offers a dose of about 20 centiliters of Chichaja brew, which is much more than a standard Ayahuasca dose. Chichaja is a very less concentrated brew and its taste is not as bitter as Ayahuasca taste, but is not very pleasant neither. About twenty or forty-five minutes after consumption, the drinker starts to feel Chichaja effects. It is quite common to see bright colors at the beginning of the process, as orange, red, blue, that occupy all the field of vision. During these moments, the drinker sees nothing but vivid colors. Between these periods of "colorful blindness", the drinker can go through gaps of total blackness, and this full blackness could appear at several points of the experience and last many minutes and produce anxiety. The ataxia individuals sometimes experience with Ayahuasca, is much more common with Chichaja, it's almost a rule. Therefore, with Gregorio and Carmenza, it is mandatory, to be allowed to drink Chichaja, to have a personal assistant that will take care of the drinker. Ideally, the person who assists the drinker may be a relative or a close friend, eventually he or she will guide the drinker to the bathroom, help him or her with clothes.

This is very different from Ayahuasca drinking, when it is not needed any pre-selected personal assistant; if the drinker eventually suffer ataxia he or she just can rely on the help of the shaman or shaman's assistants. With Ayahuasca, it is not necessary to choose a place to stay after the consumption, at least in Ornoyaco healing center. With Chichaja, because of the very common ataxia, the drinker must select a place to lay down before taking the brew.

What is the reason to drink Chichaja plus Ayahuasca?. At the end, what does Chichaja offer that Ayahuasca does not? Chichaja specializes in certain teachings, because of its female nature, as it has been argued in this text. Also it's possible that Chichaja complements the cleaning of Ayahuasca. At least, the use of Chichaja and Ayahuasca is very related in Ornoyaco healing center. Most of the time Ayahuasca consumption takes place at night, while Chichaja consumption takes place at the beginning of the day, before breakfast. Chichaja would clean the drinker up before Ayahuasca. In that way, according with *taita* Gregorio Castro, the drinker will be able to reach a direct connexion with "the source", or "the information". Thus, Chichaja would allow the drinker to have an actual enteogenical experience, by skipping the purgative period often precedes Ayahuasca visions.

## Conclusion

Chichaja, “the female Ayahuasca”, is an almost unexplored matter. We would like to insist in the need to carry out an ethnobotanical research on *Gaultheria insipida*. Researchers can go to Colombia and contact shamans using Chichaja. We also need a chemical study of the active components of Chichaja. If the effects described here are proved independent of set/setting, it would be an important discovery in the world of psychedelic plants and ethnobotanic. We hope this text will be an introduction to further quantitative-qualitative work on the gender-based effects of Chichaja, and the possibilities *Gaultheria insipida* could offer in medical and consciousness research.

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