

AYAHUASCA AS AN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE: INTEGRATING ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE AND CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION

Rogger Mauricio Silva Herrera
Ministerio de Educación. MINEDUC
Quito, Ecuador
rogger.silva@educacion.gob.ec
<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0202-0929>

María del Rosario Vivar Sarmiento
Ministerio de Educación. MINEDUC
Quito, Ecuador
charitovivar12@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-4662-9398>

Autor para correspondencia: rogger.silva@educacion.gob.ec

Recibido: 20/06/2025

Aceptado: 30/09/2025

Publicado: 15/01/2026

ABSTRACT

Ayahuasca, an ancestral beverage used by indigenous peoples of the Amazon, has transcended its ritual and medicinal use to become a significant resource within intercultural educational processes. This sacred brew not only represents a symbol of indigenous worldview but also acts as a bridge to integrate ancestral knowledge with contemporary educational approaches. The incorporation of ayahuasca in educational spaces fosters the recognition and appreciation of traditional knowledge, promoting a respectful dialogue between indigenous and scientific epistemologies. In the pedagogical realm, ayahuasca can be used to strengthen cultural identity, stimulate critical thinking, and raise awareness about the importance of environmental care and sustainability. Likewise, its study contributes to a more contextualized, inclusive, and relevant education for both indigenous and non-indigenous communities. However, it is essential to approach this integration responsibly, respecting cultural practices and avoiding cultural appropriation. The present work aims to explore how ayahuasca can become an educational tool that fosters interculturality, the revitalization of traditions, and the construction of plural knowledge. In this way, it proposes an educational model that fosters dialogue between ancestral heritage and contemporary challenges, promoting a comprehensive education that enriches all generations.

Keywords: Ayahuasca, Amazon, knowledge, education, interculturality, resources

LA AYAHUASCA COMO RECURSO EDUCATIVO: INCORPORANDO EL CONOCIMIENTO ANCESTRAL Y LA EDUCACIÓN CONTEMPORÁNEA

RESUMEN

La ayahuasca, una bebida ancestral utilizada por los pueblos indígenas de la Amazonía, ha trascendido su uso ritual y medicinal para convertirse en un recurso importante dentro de los procesos educativos interculturales. Este brebaje sagrado no solo representa un símbolo de la cosmovisión indígena, sino que también actúa como un puente para integrar el conocimiento ancestral con los enfoques educativos contemporáneos. La incorporación de la ayahuasca en los espacios educativos fomenta el reconocimiento y la valoración de los conocimientos tradicionales, promoviendo un diálogo respetuoso entre las epistemologías indígenas y científicas. En el ámbito pedagógico, la ayahuasca se puede utilizar para fortalecer la identidad cultural, estimular el pensamiento crítico y crear conciencia sobre la importancia del cuidado del medio ambiente y la sostenibilidad. Asimismo, su estudio contribuye a una educación más contextualizada, inclusiva y pertinente tanto para las comunidades indígenas como para las no indígenas. Sin embargo, es fundamental abordar esta integración de manera responsable, respetando las prácticas culturales y evitando la apropiación cultural. El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo explorar cómo la ayahuasca puede convertirse en una herramienta educativa que fomente la interculturalidad, la revitalización de las tradiciones y la construcción de conocimientos plurales. De esta manera, propone un modelo educativo que fomenta el diálogo entre la herencia ancestral y los desafíos contemporáneos, promoviendo una educación integral que enriquezca a todas las generaciones.

Palabras clave: Ayahuasca, Amazonía, conocimiento, educación, interculturalidad, recursos.

1. INTRODUCTION

Ayahuasca, a traditional psychoactive brew deeply rooted in the indigenous cultures of the Amazon, has historically been used for spiritual, medicinal, and ritual purposes. Beyond its ceremonial significance, ayahuasca embodies the rich cosmology and worldview of indigenous peoples, encapsulating centuries of ancestral wisdom. In recent years, there has been growing interest in exploring

how this sacred plant medicine can serve not only within its original cultural context but also as a meaningful resource in contemporary educational settings. Integrating ayahuasca into educational processes offers a unique opportunity to bridge ancestral knowledge systems with modern pedagogical approaches, fostering intercultural dialogue and mutual respect between indigenous epistemologies and scientific frameworks.

Utilizing ayahuasca as a pedagogical tool can enrich educational experiences by strengthening cultural identity, promoting critical thinking, and raising awareness about environmental stewardship and sustainability. This approach emphasizes a holistic, inclusive, and contextualized education that respects indigenous traditions while addressing current global challenges. However, incorporating ayahuasca into education requires careful ethical considerations to ensure respect for indigenous practices and prevent cultural appropriation. This paper aims to explore the potential of ayahuasca as an educational resource that revitalizes ancestral knowledge, supports interculturality, and cultivates pluralistic ways of knowing, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and comprehensive educational model.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative literature review approach to explore the potential of ayahuasca as a tool for integrating ancestral knowledge with contemporary education. A systematic search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and other reliable sources, focusing on peer-reviewed articles, books, and relevant reports published in the last years. Keywords such as ayahuasca, ancestral knowledge, education, interculturality, and resources were used to guide the search.

Materials and Methods

The selected literature includes ethnographic studies, educational theory articles, ethnobotanical research, and interdisciplinary analyses addressing the cultural, pedagogical, and ethical dimensions of ayahuasca. Inclusion criteria prioritized sources that discuss ayahuasca's role within indigenous communities and its application or potential in educational contexts. Exclusion criteria filtered out studies solely focused on pharmacology or clinical trials without educational implications.

Data extraction involved categorizing themes related to cultural identity, intercultural dialogue, pedagogy, sustainability, and ethical considerations. This thematic analysis enabled a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge, highlighting both opportunities and challenges in utilizing ayahuasca as an educational resource. The findings aim to inform future research and pedagogical practice in intercultural education that respects indigenous traditions and fosters pluralistic knowledge systems.

3. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF RESULTS

Ayahuasca can be understood from different disciplines: ethnobotany, transpersonal psychology, cultural anthropology, and neuroscience. From an ethnobotanical perspective, ayahuasca is a clear example of traditional indigenous medicine with proven pharmacological properties. According to Schultes and Hofmann (1992), its use is deeply integrated into healing systems that include diet, song, spiritual vision, and communion with ancestors.

In the psychological realm, authors like Grof (2008) and Labate (2014) point out that the introspective effects of ayahuasca induce processes of "emotional cleansing," trauma integration, and reconfiguration of life's meaning. These experiences have been compared to deep introspective therapeutic techniques, such as psychodynamic therapy.

From a cultural perspective, ayahuasca is not just a substance, but part of an ancestral knowledge system based on respect for the rainforest, spiritual life, and community codes. The brew is part of a symbolic language transmitted orally and reproduced in ritual songs (icaros), visions, and spiritual norms of coexistence.

Properties, Uses, and Current Perspectives

The most common preparation of ayahuasca includes the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the leaf of *Psychotria viridis*. While the vine contains monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs), *Psychotria* contains DMT, a powerful natural hallucinogen. Together, these components allow DMT to act orally, producing visions, mystical experiences, intense emotions, and altered states of consciousness.

The physical effects can include nausea, vomiting (called “the purge”), sweating, and increased heart rate, but at the psychological level, users often report deep access to the unconscious, emotional understanding of past conflicts, and spiritual experiences that are hard to verbalize.

Therapeutic Benefits

Recent clinical studies in Brazil, Spain, and Peru have shown promising results in the controlled use of ayahuasca to treat treatment-resistant depression, chronic anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and addictions. According to Palhano-Fontes et al. (2019), a single session of ayahuasca showed antidepressant effects in patients with major depression, effects that persisted for several weeks. Additionally, qualitative research indicates that people who participate in guided ceremonies report greater clarity in life, a sense of purpose, and improvement in interpersonal relationships.

In this way, Gonçalves et al. (2023) present a systematic review of scientific studies on the therapeutic effects of ayahuasca, analyzing its potential use in

treating mental health disorders such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, and addiction. The review compiles data from both clinical trials and observational studies, highlighting ayahuasca's effects on mood regulation, emotional processing, and cognitive flexibility. The authors also discuss the role of neurotransmitter modulation especially serotonin and dopamine systems and note changes in brain connectivity and inflammatory markers after consumption.

Ayahuasca and educational background

Ayahuasca is a traditional Amazonian plant medicine, made from the Banisteriopsis caapi vine and Psychotria viridis leaves, known for its powerful psychoactive effects and its use in indigenous spiritual and healing practices. Beyond its therapeutic and visionary potential, ayahuasca is increasingly being explored as a pedagogical tool a medium for learning, reflection, and transformation. In this way, Albuquerque (2018) explores the concept of ayahuasca's pedagogy as a pathway to epistemic decolonization a process of challenging and transforming Western dominated ways of knowing in education. The article argues that ayahuasca, when used in traditional ceremonial contexts, serves not just as a plant medicine but as an inclusive teacher that offers experiential learning grounded in indigenous worldviews.

Albuquerque highlights how ayahuasca ceremonies can foster spiritual, emotional, comprehensive and ecological awareness, helping participants reconnect with nature, community, and themselves. The author proposes that this form of learning rooted in indigenous cosmologies can serve as a counter-narrative to dominant colonial educational systems and help integrate ancestral wisdom into contemporary education.

Additionally, Tupper (2002) explores how entheogens psychoactive plants like ayahuasca can serve as powerful cognitive tools that enhance what Howard

Gardner calls existential intelligence: the capacity to reflect deeply on life's big questions, such as meaning, purpose, and death. The author argues that entheogens, traditionally used in indigenous cultures as plant teachers, offer unique educational value through direct, experiential learning. The plant can foster self-awareness, ethical insight, and spiritual understanding, which are often neglected in conventional education systems. The article challenges mainstream assumptions about drugs and learning, proposing that under safe and respectful conditions entheogens have the potential to expand human consciousness and contribute to holistic education.

One year later, Tupper (2003) in his article titled "Entheogens and education: Exploring the potential of psychoactives as educational tools" examines the educational potential of entheogens psychoactive substances like ayahuasca and psilocybin by framing them as tools for learning and personal development rather than merely recreational or medical substances.

The author claims that, when used in structured, intentional, and culturally informed contexts, entheogens can support critical self-reflection, moral insight, creativity, and spiritual growth. Drawing on historical, anthropological, and psychological perspectives, the article highlights how many traditional societies have long used these substances as part of rites of passage and knowledge transmission.

Cultural Uses in Ecuador and Around the World

In Ecuador, ayahuasca is traditionally used by Amazonian peoples such as the Kichwa of Napo, the Shuar, and the Achuar, who consider it a spiritual medicine. Ceremonies are usually held at night, led by a yachak or shaman, in an environment that includes chants, silence, and respect. The purpose may be healing, vision-seeking, or initiation. In this sense, Salibová (2021) describes the phenomenon of

ayahuasca ethno-tourism in Ecuador, focusing on its effects on the Shuar indigenous community and the experiences of Western participants who travel to the Amazon seeking healing, spirituality, or personal transformation. The study highlights how Shuar healers (uwishin) adapt traditional ayahuasca ceremonies to meet the expectations of tourists while trying to preserve their cultural integrity. While tourism brings economic opportunities, it also raises concerns about cultural commodification, loss of ritual authenticity, and power imbalances between locals and visitors.

Moreover, Naranjo (1979) provides an in depth ethnobotanical and anthropological analysis of the use of hallucinogenic plants, particularly ayahuasca, among indigenous groups in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The article documents how plants like *Banisteriopsis caapi* (ayahuasca) are not merely used for healing, but are embedded within complex belief systems involving spiritual communication, ritual knowledge, and communal identity. Naranjo details how shamans act as intermediaries between the human and spirit worlds, using ayahuasca to diagnose illness, gain visions, and connect with nature and ancestral spirits. It is important to highlight that the study also compares the cultural roles and symbolic meanings of different plant based hallucinogens among various indigenous groups, including the Shuar, Achuar, and Kichwa. The author also emphasizes the importance of viewing these practices not as superstition, but as coherent, traditional knowledge systems deeply rooted in ecological and social relationships.

Outside the Amazon, its use has expanded to urban contexts, in retreat centers, syncretic churches like Santo Daime, and alternative therapies. However, its Westernized use has sparked debates over cultural appropriation, improper commercialization, and the loss of sacred meaning. Furthermore, Hinojosa Becerra et al. (2017) present an audiovisual ethnographic study which, investigates the Shuar community of Shaime in Zamora Chinchipe, Ecuador, focusing on the ritual

use of ayahuasca called natem as a cultural and spiritual practice.

Through participant observation, structured interviews, and visual anthropology, the researchers produced a 20-minute documentary detailing six thematic phases: entry into the community, introduction of the shaman (Juan Chuinda), ingredient gathering, beverage preparation, ritual ceremony, and concluding reflections which notice that ayahuasca ceremonies persist as vibrant expressions of ancestral wisdom and cultural resilience.

Legal and Ethical Aspects

In Ecuador, ayahuasca is not prohibited as long as it is used in traditional contexts. In countries like Peru and Brazil, its ritual use is legally permitted. However, in many countries, its active component (DMT) is classified as a controlled substance, which creates legal contradictions.

UNESCO has promoted the recognition of indigenous ancestral knowledge as intangible heritage, reinforcing the need to respect original practices and protect traditional knowledge from exploitation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Ayahuasca fosters holistic learning beyond conventional education through guided ceremonial use, since ayahuasca facilitates deep emotional, spiritual, and ecological awareness enhancing forms of intelligence such as existential and intrapersonal that are often neglected in Western education systems.

Using ayahuasca as an educational tool invites a revaluation of indigenous worldviews and supports the decolonization of knowledge, promoting intercultural dialogue and respect for traditional epistemologies.

Ethical and contextual guidance is essential for educational integration, while

ayahuasca has powerful pedagogical potential, its use must be rooted in cultural respect, guided by knowledgeable elders or facilitators, and protected from commercialization or misuse to preserve its sacred and educational value.

Ayahuasca can serve as a bridge between scientific and spiritual ways of knowing by integrating experiential insights from ayahuasca with contemporary educational frameworks, it is possible to merge empirical inquiry with intuitive and symbolic learning, encouraging a more inclusive and multidimensional understanding of reality.

5. REFERENCES

- Albuquerque, M. B. (2018). Ayahuasca's Pedagogy: For an epistemic decolonization of knowledge. *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 26(1), 85. <https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.26.3519>
- Dupuis, D. (2018). Prácticas en búsqueda de legitimidad: el uso contemporáneo de la ayahuasca, entre reivindicaciones terapéuticas y religiosas. *Revista de Salud Pública*, 14(2), 341-354. <https://doi.org/10.15446/rsap.v14n2.73556>
- Gonçalves, J., Luís, Â., Gallardo, E., & Duarte, A. P. (2023). A systematic review on the therapeutic effects of ayahuasca. *Plants*, 12(13), 2573. <https://doi.org/10.3390/plants12132573>
- Grof, S. (2008). *La mente holotrópica*. Kairós.
- Hinojosa Becerra, M., López Fernández, M. A., Estrella, M. L. G., & Marín Gutiérrez, I. (2017). *El documental antropológico sobre el ritual de la ayahuasca en Zamora-Chinchipe*. *Educación, Arte, Comunicación: Revista Académica e Investigativa*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.1983.1122>

Labate, B. C., and Cavnar, C. (2014). *The Therapeutic Use of Ayahuasca*. Springer.

Naranjo, P. (1979). Hallucinogenic plant use and related indigenous belief systems in the Ecuadorian Amazon. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, 1(2), 121-145.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-8741\(79\)90004-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-8741(79)90004-7)

Palhano-Fontes, F., Barreto, D., Onias, H., Andrade, K. C., Novaes, M. M., Pessoa, J. A., and Riba, J. (2019). Rapid antidepressant effects of the psychedelic ayahuasca in treatment-resistant depression: a randomized placebo-controlled trial. *Psychological Medicine*, 49(4), 655-663.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291718001356>

Salibová, D. (2021). Ayahuasca ethno-tourism and its impact on the indigenous Shuar community (Ecuador) and Western participants. *Český lid*, 107(4), 511-532. <https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2020.4.05>

Schultes, R. E., and Hofmann, A. (1992). *Plantas de los dioses: orígenes del uso de los alucinógenos*. Fondo de Cultura Económica.

Tupper, K. W. (2002). Entheogens and existential intelligence: The use of plant teachers as cognitive tools. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 27(4), 499-516.

Tupper, K. W. (2003). Entheogens & education: Exploring the potential of psychoactives as educational tools. *Journal of Drug Education and Awareness*, 1(2), 145-161