

Anadenanthera - Yopo, Cebil, Villca

- Leguminosae - South America, West Indies



YOPO or PARICA (*Anadenanthera peregrina* or *Piptadenia peregrina*) is a South American tree of the bean family, Leguminosae. A potent hallucinogenic snuff is prepared from the seeds of this tree. The snuff, now used mainly in the Orinoco basin, was first reported from Hispaniola in 1496, where the Taino Indians called it cohoba. Its use, which has died out in the West Indies, was undoubtedly introduced to the Caribbean area by Indian invaders from South America.

VILCA and CEBIL are snuffs believed to have been prepared in the past from the beans of *Anadenanthera colubrina* and its variety *cébil* in central and southern South America, where *A. peregrina* does not occur. *A. colubrina* seeds are known to possess the same hallucinogenic principles as *A. peregrina*.

An early Peruvian report, dated about 1571, states that Inca medicine men foretold the future by communicating with the devil through the use of vilca, or huilca. In Argentina, the early Spaniards found the Comechin Indians taking sebil "through the nose" to become intoxicated, and in another tribe the same plant was chewed for endurance. Since these Indian cultures have disappeared, our knowledge of vilca snuffs and their use is limited.

The hallucinogenic principles found in *A. peregrina* seeds include N, N-dimethyltryptamine, N-monomethyltryphmine, 5-methoxydimethyltryptamine, and several related bases. Bufotenine, also present in *A. peregrina* seeds, apparently is not hallucinogenic. Elucidation of the chemical make-up of the seeds of the yopo tree has only recently been accomplished. Future studies may increase our knowledge of the active principle of these seeds.

TRADITIONAL PREPARATION: It varies somewhat from tribe to tribe. The pods, which are borne profusely on the yopo tree, are flat and deeply constricted between each seed. Gray-black when ripe, the seed pods break open, exposing from three to about ten flat seeds, or beans. These are gathered during January and February, usually in large quantities and often ceremonially. They are first slightly moistened and rolled into a paste, which is then roasted gently over a slow fire until it is dried out and toasted. Sometimes the beans are allowed to ferment before being rolled into a paste. After the toasting, the hardened paste may be stored for later use. Some Indians toast the beans and crush them without molding them into a paste, grinding them usually on an ornate slab of hardwood made especially for the purpose.

Several early explorers described the process. In 1801 Alexander von

Humboldt, the German naturalist and explorer, detailed the preparation of yopo by the Maipures of the Orinoco. In 1851, Richard Spruce, an English explorer, visited the Guahibos, another tribe of the Orinoco, and wrote: "...in preparing the snuff, the roasted seeds of niopo are placed in a shallow wooden platter that is held on the knee by means of a broad handle grasped firmly with the left hand; then crushed by a small pestle of the hard wood of pao d'arco...which is held between the fingers and thumb of the right hand."

The resulting grayish-green powder is almost always mixed with about equal amounts of some alkaline substance, which may be lime from snail shells or the ashes of plant material. Apparently, the ashes are made from a great variety of plant materials: the burned fruit of the monkey pot, the bark of many different vines and trees, and even the roots of sedges. The addition of the ashes probably serves a merely mechanical purpose: to keep the snuff from caking in the humid climate.

The addition of lime or ashes to entheogenic or stimulant preparations is a very widespread custom in both hemispheres. They are often added to betel chew, pituri, tobacco, epena snuff, coca, etc. In the case of yopo snuff, the alkaline admixture seems not to be essential. Some Indians, such as the Guahibos, may occasionally take the powder alone. The explorer Alexander von Humboldt, who encountered the use of yopo in the Orinoco 175 years ago, mistakenly stated that "...it is not to be believed that the niopo acacia pods are the chief cause of the stimulating effects of the snuff..." The effects are due to freshly confined lime.' in his time, of course, the presence of active tryptamines in the beans was unknown.

Yopo snuff is inhaled through hollow bird-bone or bamboo tubes. The effects begin almost immediately: a twitching of the muscles, slight convulsions, and lack of muscular coordination, followed by nausea, visual hallucinations, and disturbed sleep. An abnormal exaggeration of the size of objects (mucropsia) is common. In an early description, the Indians say that their houses seem to "be turned upside down and that men are walking on their feet in the air."