

## Nicotiana Rustica - Mapucho

- Solanaceae - North and South America



### Biochemistry

The principal active biochemicals are nicotine, nornicotine and anabasine. The proportion of each varies greatly among the species and varieties. As many as eight other pyridine alkaloids occur in lower concentrations.

### Comments

Nicotiana (tobacco) is a genus of 21 to 67 species of perennial herbs and shrubs, including many subspecies, strains and cultivars, characterized by large fleshy leaves and numerous sticky hairs. Various species are used as ornamentals, insecticides, and for smoking.

Mapucho is considered very sacred by Amazonian shamans and is employed alone (by tabaqueros) or in combination with other plants in shamanic practices. Some shamans drink the juice of tobacco leaves alone as a source of visions. Mapucho is used extensively in healing practices and is considered a medicine, not a health hazard, when used properly.



Nicotiana are native in North and South America, especially in the Andes (45 species) and in Polynesia and Australia (21 species). The two commercially important species are *Nicotiana tabacum*, cultivated in warm areas for smoking tobacco, and *N. rustica*, cultivated mainly for insecticidal use. Both species are believed to be of hybrid origin.

Tobacco is one of the most important plants in the lives of all tribes of the northwest Amazon (Wilbert, 1987). It's many names include lukux-ri (Yukuna); ye'-ma (Tariana); a'-li (Bare); e'-li (Baniwa); mu-lu', pagári-mulé (Desano); khern'-ba (Kofán); dé-oo-wé (Witoto) It plays a part in curative rituals, in important tribal ceremonies and it is occasionally used as a recreational drug. In its various forms it is also employed in the ordinary medical practices of some tribes.

The Tukanoan peoples of the Vaupés often rub a decoction of the leaves briskly over sprains and bruises. Amongst the Witotos and Boras, fresh leaves are crushed and poulticed over boils and infected wounds. Tikuna men mix the crushed leaves with the oil from palms to rub into the hair to prevent balding. The Jivaros take tobacco juice therapeutically for indisposition, chills and snake bites. In many tribes tobacco snuff may be employed medicinally for a variety of ills, particularly to treat pulmonary ailments.

Tobacco is smoked on rare occasions, except in ceremonies and curative rituals of the medicine men who blow smoke or spit tobacco juice over the patient or inhale the smoke, all with appropriate incantations and ritual. Recreational smoking amongst the Indians of the northwest Amazon is not common, and cigarettes are rarely smoked except in areas where tribal customs are breaking down due to acculturation and the

availability of commercial cigarettes. The Witotos sometimes smoke cigars, but this custom may be recently acquired. During ceremonies in which Ayahuasca is taken, enormous cigars, some as long as 36 inches, are smoked, especially amongst the many tribes of the Vaupés. The Sionas of the Mocoa region, like the western Tukanoan tribes, also employ the gigantic ceremonial cigar, but occasionally make smaller cigars and smoke them for non-ritual use; they have probably learned this use from colonists who have come from the Andes. The Jivaros and Aguaruna of Ecuador smoke large cigars in a tobacco-smoking festival to celebrate the initiation of a youth into manhood.

The recreational use of tobacco is usually in the form of snuffing. Preparation of the snuff appears to be similar from tribe to tribe; the leaves are hung up to dry, sometimes over a low fire, then pulverized, finely sifted and mixed with about an equal amount of the ash of sundry plants. The product is a greyish green powder. The preferred source of ash for this admixture is the bark of a wild cacao tree (*Theobroma subincanum*). The snuff may be taken at any time during the day, but it is most frequently used towards evening when the men are taking coca. Usually it is sniffed alone, but on occasion *Capsicum* pepper may be added; it is said to make the snuff more "effective".

The Witotos and Yukunas may, on rare occasions and in special festivals, mix powdered coca with the tobacco snuff. During festivals and dances, tobacco snuff is consumed in enormous amounts, often with Ayahuasca amongst the Tukanoan tribes of the Colombian Vaupés. It is usually administered in snuffing tubes made of hollow bird bones or, occasionally, in long tubes made of reed-like plants. Almost all tribes in the northwest Amazon take tobacco as snuff: Kubeos, Barasanas, Makunas, Tanimukas, Sionas, Koffins, Witotos, Boras, Muinanes, Mirarias, and others.

Chewing tobacco leaves is common practice in numerous tribes, e.g., Cocamas, Omaguas, Zaparos, Omuranas, Sionas, Inganos; Waika men keep a quid of tobacco leaves in the lower lip all day. The Nonoyu mix tobacco with coca powder for chewing. Tobacco juice is taken by the Jivaros alternately with Ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis*) or maikoa (*Brugmansia*). Amongst the Coto Indians of the Rio Napo of Perú, only the shaman is allowed to take tobacco juice through the nostrils; the general male population drink it.

The mestizo ayahuasqueros of Perú mix tobacco juice with Ayahuasca, crushing the leaves and softening them with saliva, leaving the juice overnight in a hole cut into the trunk of the lupuna tree (*Trichilia tocachcana*), the presumably toxic sap of which drips into the tobacco juice. Amongst the western Tukanos of Colombia and Brazil, master medicine men make their students drink a gourdful of the juice to cause vomiting and eventual narcosis. The Jivaros of Ecuador drink the juice in initiations, visionary quests, war preparations, victory feasts and witchcraft; even women partake of the juice in wedding feasts and initiations.

Tobacco licking is also widespread in the northwest Amazon, although it is apparently not common in the rest of Amazonia. Its concentration appears to be in the Putumayo-Caquetá region of Colombia and Perú. The tobacco preparation is a thick syrup generally called *ambil*. The "civilized" llaneros of Colombia and Venezuela customarily take tobacco in this form which they call *chimb*. It is not clear whether they adopted it from the Indians or vice-versa; at least it has an ancient record of use amongst an extinct tribe once living on Lake Maracaibo, Venezuela.

With Witotos, Boras and several other tribes of the northwest Amazonas, the common use of *ambil*, usually with coca, takes place during the early evenings before fresh coca is made and chewed. The thick syrup is applied to the gums with a finger or a stick and is swallowed very slowly with saliva and coca powder. The residue, formed by the slow evaporation of aqueous extracts of tobacco leaves, is also mixed with the "salts" obtained by the leaching of ashes of various plants. Amongst the Witotos, any male may make *ambil*, and there is no special hour or ceremony connected with its preparation (Schultes, 1945).

The application of tobacco in any other form, such as rectally by enema, is almost unknown in South America except amongst the Aguarunas, a Jivaroan tribe of Ecuador who apply it by clyster alone or mixed with Ayahuasca. Ayahuasca is repeatedly drunk alternating with swallows of tobacco juice to cause vomiting before use of the tobacco-ayahuasca enema. The Kulina customarily smoke all night when taking Ayahuasca.

Details of the preparation of the various forms of tobacco and their uses, ritual, medical and otherwise, by the Indians of South America may be found in an outstanding recent treatise with extensive bibliographic references to earlier works (Wilbert, 1987).

References:

- Schultes, R.E. and R.F. Raffauf. 1995. *The Healing Forest: medicinal and toxic plants of the northwest Amazonia*, Dioscorides Press, Portland, Or.. ISBN 0-931146-14-3
- Wilbert, J. 1987. *Tobacco and Shamanism in South America*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn.