

Was Espingo (Ispincu) of Psychotropic and Intoxicating Importance for the Shamans in Peru?

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When the early Spanish chroniclers in South America wrote about *hechiceros* and their use of certain drugs, etc., we cannot always identify them with shamans or medicine men. The best translation seems to be "sorcerer." Among the Inca:

... the sorcerers (*omo*) claimed to speak directly with the spirits. They usually dressed differently from ordinary people, and wore their hair long or cut in some special way. They were usually consulted to find lost or stolen articles or to learn what was happening at a distance. They talked to the spirits in the dark, and theirs and the spirits' voices could be heard but not understood (Rowe 1946:302).

Other words for *hechicero* are "diviner" and "witch doctor." Rowe continues his text by saying that "some diviners summoned the spirits by saying a spell and drawing lines on the ground, others drank themselves into insensibility and gave their answers when they recovered" (Rowe 1946:302). He also refers to Cobo's statement that the latter "put the juice of the *wil'ka*, a berry also used as a purge, into their *chicha* to give it

I am deeply grateful to my Swedish friends, Dr. Victor Hasselblad, Gothenburg, and Dr. Herbert Tigerschiöld, Stockholm, who, with their liberal view of the importance of international scientific cooperation, have given their financial support so that I might accept the invitation of the President of the Organizing Committee of the IXth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences.

I have friends both in Sweden and in the United States who have taken a keen interest in this paper and participated scientifically. My sincere thanks to all of them: in Stockholm, Dr. Wolmar E. Bondeson, Professor Bo Holmstedt, M.D., Dr. Eskil Hultin, Dr. Jan-Erik Lindgren, and Dr. Benkt Sparre; in Gothenburg, Professor Gunnar Harling; and, in the United States, Professor José Cuatrecasas, Washington, D.C., and Professor Richard Evans Schultes, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Mrs. Sharlie Otterström, an American living in Gothenburg, has very kindly helped with translation and text correction, and Miss Maj-Britt Berglund, of the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum, has typed the manuscript. To both of them my best thanks.

more strength." This has been treated in more detail by Siri von Reis Altschul (1967:307) in her paper, "Vilca and its use":

Around 1571, Polo de Ondegardo reported that the witch doctors of the Incas foretold the future by speaking with the devil in some dark place by means of various ceremonies, for which office they intoxicated themselves with an herb called *Vilca*, pouring its juice into *chicha* or taking it another way. The reporter stated that, although only old women were reputed to practice this craft, in fact its use was widespread but concealed among men and boys, as well.

The same author has also mentioned several other sources in which we find references to *vilca* as a purgative, as a stimulant, etc. During her herbarium search at Harvard University, two specimens labeled *Vilca* were found. Both belonged to *Anadenanthera colubrina*, one was from southern Peru, the other from east of La Paz. "These data indicate that *A. colubrina* indeed is identifiable with *Vilca*, but they do not insure that *Vilca* is referable exclusively to this plant" (von Reis Altschul 1967:308).

I have quoted this passage especially for the fact that in the old literature we find another plant product used by sorcerers as an admixture to *chicha* which no one seems to have taken interest in until now. What I am thinking of is *espingo*, seeds, that obviously were used in old Peru in the same way as the abovementioned *vilca*, namely, as an added ingredient to *chicha*, with effects the chroniclers described as in part purely medicinal, and in part quite drastic, plainly with psychotropic effects. "They became crazy from it" is a common phrase. I therefore consider that learning about *espingo* can add to our knowledge of the different means used by South America's medicine men.

With respect to pursuing my research on *espingo*, I wish to acknowledge my gratitude to an Argentine-born friend and colleague, Dr. Ana María Mariscotti de Görlitz, now of Marburg, Germany. It was she who, in connection with a scientific correspondence between us on the burning of *khoa* or *khoba* (*Mentha pulegium*, of the family *Labiatae*) during the so-called *señaladas* or traditionally old offering ceremonies to Pachamama (see Wassén 1967:276-277), insisted that I should not lose track of *espingo*. She kindly gave me some references to the literature — e.g. to de Arriaga's *Extirpación*, where we find the following report:

Espingo is a little, dry fruit with round kernels (*al modo de unas almendras redondillas*), with a very intense smell, although not particularly good. One gets it from the Chachapoyas,¹ and it is said to be very medicinal [to be used] for stomach pains, stool bleedings (*cámaras de sangre*) and other sicknesses, and that it is taken in powder form and is expensive to buy. It was usually sold for these

¹ Chachapoya would seem here to be one of the tribes from "deep in the Andean valleys of the upper Marañón River in North Central Perú," and who "apparently had diverse languages and Tropical Forest cultures" (Steward and Métraux 1948:614-615).

purposes. In Jaén de Bracamoros² not too many years ago, the Indians paid their tribute with *espingo*. The previous archbishop forbade, on risk of excommunication, that it be sold to the Indians, since he knew it was a question of an extraordinary offer to *huacas*,³ especially in the flatlands, where there is no one who does not have *espingo*, since all who have been visited there have *conopas*⁴ (de Arriaga 1920:46).

A similar but shorter piece of information appears in the work *Exortaciones* written by the sixth archbishop of Lima, Pedro de Villagomes (1585–1671). He says, concerning what the Indians offer, only the following: “*Espingo*, es una frutilla seca, al modo de unas almendras redondillas de muy vehemente olor, aunque no muy bueno, y no hay quien no tenga espingo teniendo *conopa*” [*Espingo*, is a small dried fruit, similar to a round almond, with a strong odor, although not a good one, and anyone who has *conopa* will certainly also have *espingo*] (de Villagomes 1919:165–166). He continues, as de Arriaga did, to tell of *aut*, another little, dry fruit, not dissimilar to *espingo*. He himself has explained that he had de Arriaga as a source as well as other chroniclers (see Urteaga’s preface to the edition used here of de Arriaga’s *Extirpación* [1920:xiv]).

I return to the beginning of de Arriaga’s fourth chapter, where he declares those who used *espingo* to be sorcerers, and describes some of its effects. His reports are in translation: “On the plains from Chancay and downwards, the *chicha* that was presented to the *huacas* was called *yale*.⁵ It is made of *zora*⁶ mixed with chewed corn and powder of *espingo* is put into it. It [the *yale*] is made very strong and thick and then one gives of it what one considers suitable to the *huaca*; the sorcerers drink the rest and they are driven crazy (de Arriaga 1920:42).⁷

De Arriaga has also reported on nocturnal sessions of “*hechiceros*, *chupadores de sangre*”: “During these sessions the devil appears, sometimes in the figure of a lion, other times as a tiger, and as he sits down very

² Jaén de Bracamoros was a “city” founded by Diego Palomino (in 1549?) near the junction of the Chinchipe and Marañón rivers (see Steward and Métraux 1948:616).

³ *Huaca*, sacred shrine.

⁴ *Conopa*, sacred image.

⁵ *Yale*, possibly from the Chancay language, “once spoken on the Chancay river, department of Lima” (Loukotka 1968:272).

⁶ *Zora*, *sora*, or *jora*. According to Friederici (1947:570), “malted Indian corn used for preparing a very strong *chicha*, the use of which, according to Garcilaso, was forbidden by the Incas.” In Garcilaso de la Vega’s original text (1943:177, *libro octavo*, 9): “Algunos indios más apasionados de la embriaguez que la demás comunidad echan la cara en remojo, y la tienen así hasta que echa sus raíces; entonces la muelen toda como está y la cuezen en la misma agua con otras cosas, y, colada, la guardan hasta que se sazona; házese un brevaaje fortísimo, que embriaga repentinamente: llámanle *uiñapu*, y en otro lenguaje *sora*. Los Incas lo prohibieron, por ser tan violento para la embriaguez; después acá, me dizen, se ha buelto a usar por algunos viciosos.”

⁷ In Spanish: “En los lianos desde Chancay a baxo la *chicha* que ofrecen a las *Huacas* se llama *Yale*, y se haze de *Zora* mezclada con maíz maseado, y la hechan polvo de *Espingo*, hazen la muy fuerte y espesa, y después de aver hechado sobra la *Huaca* lo que les parace, beven la demás los *Hechiceros*, y les buelve como locos.”

ferociously, resting on his forelimbs, they worship him" (de Arriaga 1920:40–41).⁸ This reference to the mighty felines (puma and jaguar) in the sphere of conjuring Indian sorcerers or shamans is evidently of great interest, especially if we think of the nearly pan-American distribution of jaguar figures in combination with the *alter ego* motif.⁹

Cobo is another chronicler who mentions *espingo*. According to him:

... the gentle Indians of the Andean provinces in Peru used to get from the peoples of their frontier some small capsules [Cobo uses the word *vainillas*] as *algarrobas*, of a dark, tawny color, the curdled substance of which is like *Sangre de Drago* (*Pterocarpus draco*), however brilliant with a shade of black, and of a mild and intense smell. These "*vainillas*" are produced by a tree called *Espingo*, found in those regions. The rude Indians bring forth these capsules as a precious thing to barter them for knives, scissors and other trifles which they highly value; and this they obtain easily from the Spaniards as these capsules are held to be very medicinal.

Cobo continues to tell how the powder, taken in different ways, cures various forms of serious bleeding (1891:95–96).

There are some more references to *espingo* in various sources. De Murúa (1946:306) says that it was the *trébol* (Latin *Trifolium*) which was called *espínco*, and that the Indians connected this plant with various superstitions. The same information, but without mention of *trébol*, is found in Antonio Ricardo's Quechua vocabulary from 1586, where it is said that *Yspincu* is a certain plant and fruit which is fragrant and used for various bewitchments (1951:93).¹⁰

Lastres (1951:305) also gives *espingo* (*ispunku*) as botanically *trébol*. According to the Peruvian Quechua Indian, Dr. Salvador Palomino Flores (who, at this writing, is at the University of Copenhagen), the correct spelling should be *ispunku*; *espingo* could, however, be a phonetic variation of the word in the Quechua of Bolivia (letter of January 30, 1973). As meaning *trébol*, Lastres (1951:305) also quotes the names *chullku* and *cchikmu*. *Trébol*, however, cannot be the source for the samples treated here, and we must draw the conclusion that the Indian word has been used for several plants, or seeds from several plants. Thus we do not know which *espingo* Lastres (1951:250) is referring to when he, without any indication of his source, reports that *chicha*, prepared from Indian corn and *espingo*, was used as an offering to the *huacas* during the great Inca ceremonial feasts Raimi, Citua, and Aymoray. The

⁸ In Spanish: "En estas juntas se les aparece el Demonio, unas vezes en figura de León, otras vezes en figura de Tigre, y poniéndose asentado, y estrivando sobre los braços muy furioso, le adoran."

⁹ Dr. Ana María Mariscotti de Görlitz observing this wrote to the author: "Allí tiene su alter ego!"

¹⁰ The original text: "Y *spincu*, cierta yerua y fruto oloroso con que se hazen muchos hechizos."

same is the case when he mentions (1951:291) a medicinal use of *espingo* powder.

What we have determined thus far, from the testimony of the original written sources, is that *espingo* is used as an admixture with *chicha*; it is said to have medicinal uses, and was even used for certain purposes by the shamans. It soon became clear that knowledge of *espingo* was minimal, and really, from a scientific point of view, nonexistent. Neither La Barre (1938) nor Hartmann (1958), writing about alcoholic beverages among the natives of South America, named the *espingo* additive to *chicha* in old Peru. On the other hand, the Bolivian ethnobotanical specialist, Enrique Oblitas Poblete (1969) listed *asango-espingo* together, explaining that the *callahuayas* receive these remedies from Cajamarca, Peru; that they are used in cases of neuralgia and muscular pains; and, taken with *agua de llantén*¹¹ and wine, also are used for curing *cámaras de sangre* (Oblitas Poblete 1969:80). If the information presented by Oblitas Poblete was received from modern *callahuayas*, it would mean that the traditions about the use of *espingo* for certain bleedings, etc., has been carried on from the time of its discovery.

As I wanted to find out what *espingo* really was, I started a correspondence with Dr. Oblitas Poblete, and one reason for going to La Paz in the summer of 1970 was the *espingo* problem. When we met in La Paz, Dr. Oblitas Poblete gave me two seeds of *asango* (possibly from the family *Rubiaceae*), and two quite different seeds, about one centimeter long and half a centimeter wide, of *espingo*, without, however, knowing anything about the botanical names for the plants producing these seeds. We also went to the Bolivian capital's historical museum, Casa de Murillo, with its collection of medicinal plants, seeds, etc., and among the specimens on exhibit were some *espingo* seeds of exactly the same appearance as those I had received that day. When Oblitas Poblete gave me the two samples, he also left a little note saying (in translation): "Seeds of a small tropical plant from the department of Loreto, Peru. It is used antiseptically (against stomach disorders) and it is taken pulverized or it has to be chewed."¹² The *espingo* samples had and still have a fragrant smell, as stated in the old sources. This curious odor has been referred to as being similar to that of fenugreek, typical for all species of *Quararibea*.¹³

On my way back to Sweden, the samples were left in the hands of Dr. Richard Evans Schultes, director of the Botanical Museum at Harvard University. Dr. José Cuatrecasas of the Smithsonian Institution also

¹¹ *Llantén*, *Plantago* species.

¹² Original text: "Semilla de una planta pequeña de zona tropical, departamento Loreto, Perú. Aplicación antiséptica (para desarreglos estomacales). Se toma pulverizado o se masca."

¹³ Letter from Dr. Richard Evans Schultes, Cambridge, Massachusetts, March 14, 1973.

inspected the *espingo* samples and suggested they might originate from the family *Lauraceae*. When Schultes was in Gothenburg in September 1971, he, however, considered the *espingo* samples to represent a *Quararibea*, in this case of the family *Bombacaceae*. This determination was confirmed in 1973 by Dr. Benkt Sparre of the Botanical Section of the Natural History Museum, Stockholm, and by Professor Gunnar Harling, Gothenburg University's Institution for Systematic Botany, Sweden.

Two small samples (one of the seeds weighing 0.4470 gram) constitute too limited a supply for a real investigation of the chemical compounds found in the *espingo* seeds (Collection 71.35.2a-b in the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum), but I have submitted the material anyway to Professor Bo Holmstedt for chemical research and to Dr. E. Bondeson for a pharmacognostical examination (see Wassén 1973: appendix).

As Cajamarca in Peru was referred to in connection with *espingo*, I got in touch with Dr. Luís Ibérico Mas of the Universidad Técnica de Cajamarca. He kindly sent a considerable quantity of a Peruvian plant called *ishpingo* (Collection 71.36 in the Gothenburg Ethnographic Museum). Samples were forwarded to Dr. José Cuatrecasas in Washington, D.C., via Dr. R. E. Schultes, and according to a written statement of August 30, 1971, Dr. Cuatrecasas has determined the *ishpingo* material (leaves and stalks, no seeds) to be *Gnaphalium dysodes* Spreng. This plant, however, has nothing to do with the plant *espingo* of a *Quararibea* species.

Valdizán and Maldonado (1922:397) have included *ishpingo* in a list of popular names for plants used medicinally, but botanically unknown. The reference seems to be from the region of Madre de Dios, and they present this *ishpingo* as a tree with very fragrant seeds, useful for curing dysentery and other diseases.

As has already been pointed out, both American and Swedish botanical experts have reached agreement on a *Quararibea* as the mother plant to the *espingo* seeds. My collaborator, Wolmar Bondeson, Stockholm, has therefore been able to send me a list of not fewer than twelve species, that according to MacBride (1951-1956) are known from the department of Loreto. Furthermore, the list names four additional Peruvian *Quararibea* species (Bondeson, personal communication, March 7, 1973).

We must now go on to further botanical clarity, and above all, through chemical-pharmacological research, to find out if the old sources spoke the truth when they described the psychotropic effect of *espingo*. Dr. Eskil Hultin of Stockholm, in a letter written January 9, 1973, considered some form of folk-etymological idea association: "à la absinthe with the fragrant scented addition of *Artemisia*." Perhaps the Indians' intoxication on strong beer, with the addition of *espingo*, was what the Spaniards disliked?

Lévi-Strauss (1950:483; 1948:368) has mentioned "the rosin of certain *Bombacaceae* as a magical poison," with references to the *Nambicuara* (the rosin of the barrigudo tree). We do not know, however, if this last idea could have a direct connection with the use of *espingo* as an added ingredient to beer and a means of magic in ancient Peru.¹⁴

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¹⁴ To quote La Barre (1972:277): "Whether shaman alone, or shaman and communicants, or communicants alone imbibe or ingest *Ilex* drinks, *Datura* infusions, tobacco in whatever form, native beers and wines, peyote cactus, ololiuqui or morning-glory seeds, mushrooms, narcotic mint leaves or coca, the ayahuasca "vine of the dead spirits" (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) or any of the vast array of Amerindian psychotropic plants, the ethnographic principle is the same. *These plants contain spirit power.*"

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