

Labate, Beatriz & Sena Araújo, Wladimir (Eds). *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca*. Second Edition (Campinas, Brazil: Editora Mercado de Letras, 2004). 736 pp., USDS 25,00

Reviewed by Christian Frenopoulo, M.A. (c)*

Ever since the first edition of *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (The Ritual of Ayahuasca) was published in 2002, it has been the text on ayahuasca that I most frequently consult. This densely-packed handbook is especially important as it is the only available publication to compile the most salient scholarly work on the urban Ayahuasca churches of Brazil.

Ayahuasca is an entheogenic beverage native to Western Amazonia and fundamental to the shamanic complex of that region, both indigenous and mestizo. The Ayahuasca-using churches are a unique urban phenomenon inaugurated by former rubber-tappers who migrated into Brazilian Western Amazonian towns during successive slumps in the Rubber Boom. These churches then spread throughout Brazil and were very influential in achieving the legalization of ayahuasca use in that country. Anthropological studies of the churches are fundamental for all scholars who have a recurrent interest in examining the conditions and effects of ritualized long-term use of entheogens by nonindigenous peoples inserted into urban capitalist and Western lifestyles.

The volume is divided into three sections, of which the second outweighs the other two in quantity of articles. This section presents a variety of anthropological articles written by authors who have researched the churches. Because this research is mostly dispersed in unpublished papers and theses that are difficult to obtain, I will briefly overview a few of the salient contributions that they offer.

Practically abandoned to their fate when the market for Brazilian rubber suddenly disappeared overnight, many rubber-tappers generated a response that involved creating an alternative social, economic, ecological and moral model for community living. Sandra Goulart examines this process for the Santo Daime church. She explains how the Santo Daime created moral communities of co-residence united through ties of kinship, marriage and *compadrio* (godparenthood), and joint economic efforts of communal labor and production (*mutirão*). Very significantly they replaced the important Amazonian popular festivities of the Catholic saints with their own celebrations centered on the use of ayahuasca on these dates, effectively severing their social and moral ties with the wider community.

Goulart also draws attention to the transformation of the Santo Daime from initially being a loosely organized conglomeration of popular beliefs oriented towards healing, into a distinct universalistic project for moral conversion. The vocation for moral conversion is now a common salient aspect of the several churches, and was influential in their recognition as bona fide religions.

Maria Cristina Pelaez contributes an article in which she researches the conversional effect of the ayahuasca experience within the Santo Daime context. Not surprisingly, she refers to theorists of psychedelic therapy, such as Grof. She concludes that the peak experience of transcendence leads participants to redefine themselves and their relationships, eventually recreating their identity, personality, biographical self-narratives and other aspects.

Others articles are especially helpful for describing the settings and contexts of consumption, and how they structure and provide interpretation for the experience. Perhaps one of the most valuable is provided by Arneide Cemin, who discusses the series of techniques exerted upon the body of the participant of the Santo Daime. Her description is especially instructive in view of a frequent assumption that entheogens primarily affect psychological consciousness, and that their healing potential is generally limited to this level. By contrast, the Santo Daime religion is a totalizing life-project that regulates the bodies of its participants. Cemin describes the many disciplinary requirements that the body of the participant is subjected to, such as diets, sexual restrictions, an ethic that prioritizes manual labor, regimental dancing (significantly called “marching”), and other situations. Thus, the moral training of the participant is also located as a body experience. Moral indoctrination involves enhancing attention to the details of a proprioceptive somatic consciousness and embodied experience.

The article by Fernando Couto reinforces these insights, as he draws attention to the rigid structuring of the Santo Daime rituals. He concludes that these rituals fortify order, hierarchy and group synchrony. His article counters a common apprehension or assumption that the use of entheogens involves a form of Dionysian or even anomic release. On the contrary, the participant is encouraged, if not obliged, to adhere to the rigid imperatives that determine ritual procedures and sequences of events. Along with Turner, Couto understands the Santo Daime rituals to promote structure (as opposed to anti-structure or liminality). With Douglas, he claims that order is equated with purity, and thus disorder and disharmony are interpreted as intrusion and impurity and so purged.

As a moral principle, the importance of order is also notable in the União do Vegetal church. The article by Lucia Gentil and Henrique Gentil describes the ritual structure, the uniforms, and the bureaucratic organization of the hierarchy, including the process of ascension and moral conditions that must be met by the candidate. The article also lists central elements of the ethics of this organization, such as their opposition to the selling of the brew and its use by the uninitiated, and the rejection of the use of other psychoactive or entheogenic substances.

One particularly useful article for researchers is Beatriz Labate’s exhaustive review of the academic and non-academic literature produced in Brazil on the churches, which provides a bird’s eye view of the state of the art.

Other themes covered in this section include the dynamics of religious synthesis in the churches (one particularly sensitive issue is their approach to spirit-possession) and a

highly nuanced discussion concerning the parameters of the notion of “shamanism” for these contexts (a recurrent topic spread across several articles).

No other available edited volume brings together such a range of academic studies of the churches as can be found here. Metzner (1999) provides a brief factual summary of them in his introduction, but much of the rest of the information about them is from short first-hand reports of participants. Luna & White (2000) also supply a basic account, but nonetheless mostly dedicate their section on the churches to reprinting internal religious literature (such as lyrics of hymns).

The book also contains a section in line with the anthropological literature on ayahuasca published elsewhere, which focuses on forest-dwelling peoples, that is: indigenous groups, mestizo shamanic healers and rubber-tappers. The article on the rubber-tappers is innovative not only because their use of ayahuasca has been virtually unstudied (despite their major part in the founding of the churches), but also in the sense that the authors’ approach has been to trace the diversification and expansion of use of this entheogen in accordance with economic and political changes affecting the region and concurrent changes in the lives and social organization of these people.

Researched in the Upper Juruá region, the authors of this article trace the contemporary use of ayahuasca to the collapse of the rubber industry and subsequent reorganization of the workers. The process began with several independent ayahuasca healers of varied cultural origins, who each used their own healing techniques. A turning point occurred in 1988 when the rubber-tappers began to mobilize themselves politically in order to achieve land rights and to organize themselves into self-administered cooperatives. Simultaneous to their growing political unity and identity, the participants and leaders of the union meetings began to hold ayahuasca sessions led by indigenous Kampa shamans (and eventually by themselves). The most recent stage in this process is a tendency to spontaneously include elements from the Santo Daime *corpus* (such as hymns, ritual calendar, and closing prayers), in their ayahuasca sessions, though they have not organized themselves strictly as a church.

Other articles in this section deal with topics such as Amerindian perspectivism and the role of the shaman and shamanic apprenticeship. In addition, therapists will benefit from the article by Jacques Mabit, the renowned physician who runs an anti-addiction center in the Peruvian Amazon, describing his center and work, including explanations concerning the setting and conditions for rituals (such as darkness, silence, and the use of *icaros*, *schacapas* and blowing tobacco; the co-interference of each participant’s experience and visions; and the influence of posture and diet) and a detailed description of the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience (such as transpersonal experiences, a distinct sense of reality, and the permanence of consciousness). He explains “learning” as a process of dominating the visionary experience.

The third section of the book reveals the other large arena of ayahuasca studies, investigations into clinical issues related to the consumption of ayahuasca mostly carried out by a network of scientists with research experience into a variety of entheogens,

hallucinogens and psychedelics. Coming from the fields of neurochemistry, pharmacology, ethnobotany, psychology and anthropology, they have often worked in conjunction with Brazilian medical researchers associated to the União do Vegetal. The Hoasca Project is one of their major accomplishments (see Grob, Greer & Mangini 1998: 317), and is the topic of several articles reprinted in this volume.

This section also has an article by Benny Shanon who attempts a cross-cultural comparative phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience based on empirical research in a wide variety of settings and groups. Some of the constants in the visionary experiences include seeing felines, snakes and architectural marvels. Shanon departs from considering these in terms of Jungian archetypes, because they do not self-evidently reveal the human condition. His discussion moves on to the frequent user's experience of identity as being deitic and inherently transformational.

Although I would have liked the text to have included something on the research that foretells of the globalized future of ayahuasca, such as Groisman's study of the Santo Daime church in the Netherlands (see Groisman 2000), I realize that it is already very dense and varied as it is. There is, though, one article by Carsten Balzer who discusses the painful introduction of the Santo Daime into Germany, since the religion was misrepresented to participants as "shamanic workshops" and therapy, thereby distorting expectations and preparation.

Although the book resolved the fundamental problem of access to unpublished Brazilian scholarship, I am acutely aware of the urgent need for an English translation that will make this material available to a wider audience of scholars. As it stands, this text will bring relief, encouragement, and a change of mind to readers who think that research on entheogens is in a dismal, retracted or sluggish state. I have found it to be a fundamental handbook for my own research.

References

- Grob, C.; Greer, G. & Mangini, M. 1998. Editors' Introduction: Hallucinogens at the turn of the century. *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 30 (4): 315-319.
- Groisman, A., 2000. *Santo Daime in the Netherlands: An Anthropological Study of a New World Religion in a European Setting*. London: Goldsmiths College, University of London. [PhD Thesis].
- Luna, L. E. & White, S. (Eds.) 2000. *Ayahuasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon's Sacred Vine*. Santa Fe, New Mexico: Synergistic Press.
- Metzner, R. (Ed.) 1999. *Ayahuasca: Human Consciousness and the Spirits of Nature*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.

(*) University of Regina, Canada.

Please address correspondence and reprint requests to Christian Frenopoulo at freno@chasque.net

Published at: *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*, Volume 37 (2), June 2005.

