

Light from the Forest: Cultural Heritage and Religious Drug Use in Amazonian Brazil (*)

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In April of this year, Brazil's Culture Minister, the internationally famous musician Gilberto Gil, visited the Alto Santo Universal Light Christian Illumination Center in Rio Branco, capital of Acre state in the upper Amazon. Officials, including the mayor and the governor, witnessed the ceremonial submission of a request to the Ministry of Culture, asking it to recognize the church's religious practice as an element of Brazilian "cultural heritage." Joining in the Alto Santo church's request were several other groups which, while diverse in their ritual forms, all stem from rubber boom contact of Northeastern Brazilian migrant workers with indigenous Amazonian culture. A particular shared ritual element, as I'll explain in a moment, made the request a bit controversial: the ingestion of ayahuasca, an indigenous Amazonian plant hallucinogen.

The officials present offered unstinting praise of Alto Santo and the other ayahuasca churches. "Binho" Marques, Acre's Labor Party governor, called the ritual use of ayahuasca "one of our reasons for survival" and lauded the Alto Santo center in particular as "...our moral reserve, our fount of wisdom..." Gilberto Gil, the Culture Minister, spoke of the importance of Brazil's efforts to recognize its culture through the national heritage program, and characterized the ayahuasca churches as part of the "religious diversity that Brazilian democracy must respect." He noted their links with the natural world, with indigenous peoples, and with the

“peoples of the forest,” and concluded by saying “I hope...that we can soon celebrate the designation of ayahuasca as cultural heritage of the Brazilian nation.”

News of the Culture Minister’s visit to Alto Santo flashed across the internet. Video of the ceremony was posted on YouTube, and mainstream media outlets including Globo, Brazil’s largest news and entertainment conglomerate, picked up the story. In online reader forums, response was swift, with hundreds of comments posted within a few hours. Many of these comments questioned the idea of a valid distinction between ayahuasca and common street drugs:

“...we want to know when they will make cocaine cultural patrimony,” wrote one Ronaldo Travecos. “Please advise, cocaine expands my mind too!!!”

Exclaimed Cesar Saldanha, “It’s a disgrace! Soon we’ll canonize a pot plant. This minister has nothing better to do, he must have drunk a hallucinogen and gone flying.”

Other commentators scoffed at the very notion that a psychoactive substance could mediate contact with the divine:

“How can a hallucinogenic tea lift us up to God?” wrote one. “What this tea brings you closer to is the cloven hoof, not to God.”

The Culture Minister, added another, “...showed what a ‘great theologian’ he is by saying that this hallucinogenic tea makes man closer to God.... Only in Brazil, this joke of a country, would such a thing happen.”

Uniting these comments is a sense that Alto Santo ayahuasca use cannot be what the petition to the Culture Minister says it is: a legitimate expression of Brazil's religious diversity. The underlying premise, whose ostensible obviousness is signaled by the comments' use of irony, is that all psychoactive drug use is recreational, immoral, and irreligious, if not actually diabolical.

These media representations of the event leave implicit several assumptions about the question of ayahuasca's aptitude for designation as cultural heritage: first, that there are two, and only two, "sides to the story"; second, that the Culture Minister shares the church's perspective on ayahuasca; and third, that the church's purpose in making its request is to use the state's imprimatur to legitimize its practice.

I'll return to these points later in addressing the hierarchies of regimes of knowledge at work in media portrayals of the Culture Minister's visit. But first I want to complicate the picture by examining Alto Santo ideas about the nature of ayahuasca.

The central complication stems from the fact that Alto Santo conceptions of ayahuasca are based on different premises from commonsense notions about drugs. Commonsense views of drugs rely, I think, on a version of Christian cosmology that posits a transcendent spiritual realm radically divorced from the everyday. In this view drug use is immoral because it uses material means to create a simulacrum of the release from suffering that ought properly to be sought only through a transcendent divinity, and can only truly be achieved by salvation after death.

Alto Santo understandings of ayahuasca, meanwhile, are based on a partial synthesis of indigenous cosmology with Christian morality. Within this cosmology spirit and matter retain a

contrastive relationship, but the difference between them is perspectival rather than ontological. The worlds of humans, animals, and spirits interpenetrate, and are mediated by social and moral relationships. Indigenous hunters, for example, take care to maintain a respectful relationship with the spirit “owners” of the forest and its animals in order to insure fruitful hunting. Likewise, plant drugs such as ayahuasca are materializations of spirit beings, and their ingestion can initiate the perspectival changes that define the boundaries between worlds by crossing them.

The Alto Santo synthesis of this cosmology with Christian morality is expressed in the church’s origin narratives and in its ritual production and consumption of ayahuasca. According to the church’s lore, its founder, an Afro-Brazilian rubber worker from the Northeast region named Irineu Serra, learned of ayahuasca from Indians while working in the Peruvian forests. In his first encounters with ayahuasca, Irineu Serra’s visions revealed, not the expected pagan “devils” of forest shamanism, but the Virgin Mary. She appeared to him in a new aspect, the Forest Queen, and promised to make him a great healer.

First, however, she put Irineu Serra through an initiatory ordeal, similar to those of forest shamanisms, that required a *dieta* or “diet” of sexual abstinence and the consumption of only unsalted boiled manioc. At its conclusion, he received, not powers of sorcery, but an explicitly Christian mission to heal his fellows and to “replant the Holy Doctrine of Jesus Christ” in the forest. The Forest Queen authorized him to take ayahuasca from the forest to the town and to use it in his mission of healing, teaching, and seeking divine blessings for all humanity. Ayahuasca’s re-signification within an intercessory Christian doctrine was marked by baptizing it “Daime,” from the Portuguese rogate “give thee me.”

Irineu Serra maintained affiliation with the Forest Queen, whom he called “mother,” from the beginning of his mission in the 1930s until his death in 1971. She was his spiritual teacher, and the source of church ritual and teachings, in the form of hymns. (The bible is not used at Alto Santo.) These hymns are sung in the church’s rituals in order to channel the “light of the forest” that is in Daime. They help unite the congregation so that their appeals to the Forest Queen for blessings, healing, and learning may be granted.

In teaching his disciples to make Daime, Irineu Serra emphasized that not all ayahuasca was the Daime “of the Forest Queen.” Making proper Daime depends, not on technical prowess (I was told that “you do not make Daime from a recipe”), but on honoring the founder’s relationship with the Forest Queen. The gravity of this ritual is signaled by its exclusivity: only a select group of men is allowed to participate, and the special house where Daime is made is ensconced in an inaccessible, forested hillside behind the church. Participants must obey the same “diet” Irineu Serra followed in his initiatory ordeal as they go once more into the forest and harvest, prepare, and cook the requisite plants in ritual fashion. The work is physically demanding: chopping wood and pounding ayahuasca vines for hours with heavy hardwood mallets. The required discipline, though, is as much moral as it is physical. To maintain an atmosphere of Christian virtue is paramount: faith, fortitude, humility, forgiveness, and brotherly love are all welcomed. But if the mandate of sexual abstinence is disrespected or if social discord is manifested, the Daime is compromised and unfit for use in the church. The production of Daime “of the Forest Queen” thus requires presenting an ideal image of Christian sociality so that she will be pleased. “We do the brute work,” one maker of Daime told me, “but it is the divine who makes Daime.”

Alto Santo ideas about drinking Daime in church ritual stress morality and relationship over chemistry as much as concepts of making Daime do. One does not become virtuous just by drinking Daime. Along with prayer and hymn-singing, Daime opens a channel to the spiritual world, but the success of the congregation's appeals for illumination and blessings depends upon the moral purity of each individual and the unity of the group before the divine. Again and again my informants in the church stressed that the quantity of Daime drunk is not important; "worthiness" is what matters. If one is worthy, a small amount of Daime can mediate the reception of an important vision or a cure. Stray from the path (through gossip, lack of faith, or disobedience), and drinking Daime can be expected to be a painful calling to account. The explanation is that rewards and punishments result from one's moral status before the divine within the communion that Daime allows, and not from the drink's chemical composition.

Returning now to the Culture Minister's visit to Alto Santo, it should be clear that there are not just two "sides" to be considered. In fact, from the church's perspective, the difference between the Minister's cultural heritage discourse on ayahuasca and the internet commentators' commonsense views may be rather small. Both of them, I think, share the assumption that the ayahuasca churches are in fact drug users. Cultural heritage discourse may smooth over this view, but it is not capable of contesting it; instead, it supplements it by trying to validate the religious motive for their drug use. In Brazil popular ideas about drugs are grounded in moral disgust but made authoritative by medical-scientific knowledge about drugs' dangers. In this hierarchy of knowledge proffering a cultural motive can hardly alter the commonsense certainty that the very essence of drugs is morally suspect. The hierarchy is both epistemological and institutional: the National Anti-Drugs Council is headed by a white Army general; the Culture

Ministry is led (in 2008) by a black musician, associated with the counterculture, who was put in jail by the generals under the 1964-1985 military regime. Things have changed—a lot—but the metadiscursive positioning of culture talk still places it below concerns with what is “really real.”

And yet, generals and all, Brazil has, over the last couple decades, constructed a discursive middle ground of sorts to address the religious use of ayahuasca. Like other middle grounds—think Indians and fur traders, or environmentalists and indigenous leaders—it is full of tensions and contradictions. For instance, even as the most current government statements on ayahuasca recognize and vow to protect its cultural value, the National Anti-Drugs Council retains control over ayahuasca policy—rather than, say, the Culture Ministry. So is it a drug to be opposed or a cultural practice to be treasured? A Federal Police officer in Rio Branco whose job it is to know the difference had little doubt: “we know it’s a drug,” he said, “but we cannot prosecute its use because it’s protected as culture.”

Protecting culture has a long history in Brazil. At least since the Vargas era of the 1930s, when the state promoted samba as the national rhythm, Brazil has been interested in making inventories to establish its cultural distinctiveness. This agenda gained new force and a populist tone with the country’s 1988 constitution, which determined to restore democracy after military rule ended in 1985. Complementary factors, including the global indigenous rights and environmentalist movements, have contributed to increasing official recognition of formerly marginalized peoples and practices. Moreover, as one of the 175 signatories to the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, Brazil is beholden to the international community to regulate drug use. For the state, framing ayahuasca use in terms of religious and cultural heritage

allows it to fulfill its treaty obligations, and at the same time to add to its nationalistic project of making a cultural inventory.

From the perspective of the Alto Santo church, categorizing their practice of drinking ayahuasca as religious drug use is just as mistaken as seeing it as merely “getting high,” even if the intent is less offensive. Yet the church increasingly chooses to involve itself in the middle ground of cultural heritage discourse. Its leaders explicitly deny that the church seeks legitimacy through its relationship with the state; they already have the approval of a higher authority in the Forest Queen. Recognition as cultural heritage does, however, confirm the church’s own view of its pro-social nature. The church’s founder, himself a military man and a member of the party behind the 1964 coup, encouraged patriotism and civic engagement as part of his spiritual mission. Within the denominational field of ayahuasca-using groups in Brazil, cultural heritage discourse also helps Alto Santo advance its claim to be the oldest ayahuasca church, and the one most intimately tied to Irineu Serra and the Forest Queen. More concretely, restrictions on development in the neighborhood around Alto Santo, put in place as a joint heritage and environmental protection measure, help preserve the integrity of the diminishing forest patch crucial to the church’s ritual process.

But middle grounds, by their nature, create the space to pursue shared interests at the cost of doing some violence to the perspectives of those who join them. Just as the state must enter into contradiction with its own dominant view on drugs, so too does Alto Santo’s knowledge of the true nature of Daime get left behind in cultural heritage discourse. In conclusion, I wonder what dangers the middle ground may hold for the church. One formerly important practice, the use of Daime in midwifery, has already been abandoned in the face of medical hegemony over

childbirth, as church members have come to think it quite proper that children be born in the hospital. The church's ritual and narrative resources seem to keep its core knowledge of Daime well insulated from hegemonic concepts of drugs. But it seems reasonable to ask to what extent, and how, increased participation in the middle ground of cultural heritage might influence Alto Santo knowledge of the nature of Daime in the future.

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