

Currents, fluids, and forces: The contribution of esotericist philosophy to the development of Brazil's "ayahuasca religions"¹

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Accounts of the Brazilian ayahuasca religions usually describe these groups—the União do Vegetal and Santo Daime being the most prominent—as somehow combining folk Catholicism, indigenous shamanism, and European Spiritism à la Allan Kardec.

In Santo Daime practice, folk Catholicism is everywhere evident, from the use of Christian prayers to the constant invocation of Catholic divine persons: Jesus Christ the Redeemer, the Ever-Virgin Mary, and the Divine Eternal Father. Likewise with shamanism, whose contribution of the substance ayahuasca is what seems to attract the most contemporary attention.

But what about the “Spiritist” side? What do Daimistas think and say about this aspect of their practice? It is relatively well known that spirit mediumship is accepted in many of what we

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might call “expansionist” groups of Daimistas, but not so much in the “traditionalist” groups in Acre. There is a basic lack of information about this point, which might lead some to assume that esotericism played a minor role in the development of the urban use of ayahuasca, perhaps even having been added by “New Age” adherents from the 1970s onward. This is incorrect.

In this paper I will focus on Alto Santo, the first Daimista center, which was founded in the 1940s in the capital city of Acre state, Rio Branco, and where we did fieldwork on several trips between 2002 and 2007. I want to suggest that esotericism was central to the development of Santo Daime, while addressing these questions:

At what point, and under what circumstances, did esotericism enter the picture? What part did it play in the formation of Daimista practice within Acrean society? How does esoteric thought inform Daimista understanding of ayahuasca, health, and illness?

My contention is this: by looking at the role of esotericism in Santo Daime history, we can understand Daimista ritual practice as a means of easing tension in Brazilian culture between individual autonomy and hierarchical holism.

“The current brings the healing”: Daimista theories of health and healing

There are two primary kinds of ritual in which ayahuasca is used at Alto Santo: *hinários*, or “hymnals” (also called *bailados* because they involve dance) and “concentrations,” which are silent, seated meditations. At the outset of the second kind of ritual, Daimistas are read the

“Decree,” which is essentially a series of moral precepts, delivered as such. There are instructions for parents and general orientations for those seeking to learn from what it calls “this School of Divine Wisdom.”

Among the decree’s instructions is this:

Upon receiving the Santo Daime, everyone should consider themselves within the current, and not permitted to go outside for conversation.

Current

The word translated as “current” here is *corrente*, which has many of the same meanings as its English cognate. It is named in the Decree as an agent acting through the ayahuasca / Daime which, having been ingested by those present, joins them all in mysterious union. Or at least, ought to join them all—use of the imperative “should” implies both a moral obligation and the possibility of ignoring it.

The sense of “current” as energy moving through a medium seems most appropriate to the Daimista usage, since it recalls Mesmeric ideas of a fluid plenum throughout the universe, flowing (as one 19th century writer put it) “through one body by the currents which issue therefrom to another, as in a magnet, which produces that phenomenon which we call Animal Magnetism.” The concept of a “current” joining the ayahuasca drinkers in Santo Daime rituals thus makes use of para-scientific language shared with hydraulics and wave theory, applying the jargon of a Tesla or Mesmer to experience of the indigenous drink ayahuasca.

Alongside it, too, we find in Daimista talk other notions with related roots. The term *afluído*, for example, which refers to the experience of ayahuasca's dwindling effects at the conclusion of a ritual, posits ayahuasca as working on those same "fluids" behind "animal magnetism."

Likewise, ayahuasca / Daime (and especially the *jagube* vine component of it) are said to bring a mysterious, yet basic "force" (*força*) that is characterized in the hymns as being universally present and accessible to all, but often ignored or even condemned as diabolical.

"Karmic morality"

With this esoteric vocabulary emphasizing connection and energetic encounter, Alto Santo discourse points to the belief that the sacred coordination of collective intentionality is critical to gaining divine favor, especially health. Simultaneously, it implies the inverse proposition: namely, that profane bickering and dissension earn disfavor and breed illness.

This in turns suggests a Daimista theory of health and illness: The idea that ordinary social relations tend to create discord and then sickness, and that the performance of hymnal rituals reverses these ill effects through the displacement of human willfulness by divine order. (And especially the voice, but there's no time to get into that here.)

Looking more closely at Daimista discourse about morality and illness, however, we can see that the issue is framed not in terms of local social relations but universal moral laws written, as it were, into the fabric of the cosmos. This might be called "karmic morality," for its

resemblance to Eastern ideas of karma as well as the presumed influence of exponents of esotericism on its formation, figures such as Swami Vivekananda and Madame Blavatsky.

Daimistas at Alto Santo illustrate this view of the moral causes of illness with stories in which the source of suffering is traced to an act of ill will, hence disobedience to moral law and an insult to cosmic order. In one such narrative, an early follower of Irineu Serra sought to discover, through drinking Daime, why he was afflicted with a congenital malady of the leg that would not be healed, despite his assiduous “spiritual work.” In a vision, the man (who was Afro-Brazilian) saw a colonial-era sugar mill, where a white master cruelly whipped black slaves. Realizing that he had been previously incarnated as the slave master, the man understood that his crippled leg was divine punishment for a moral transgression whose magnitude meant that it couldn’t be expunged in a single lifetime. “Daime heals all, except for divine sentences,” as Daimistas say.

Another story tells of Irineu Serra’s adopted son, Paulo, who was once asked to ride to town and pick up a sack of grain. Grumbling, Paulo carelessly flicked his horse with a switch, injuring its eye. On the way back from town, then, riding through the woods, Paulo passed under a low-hanging branch that scratched his own eye in exactly the same place as the horse’s injury. He arrived home only to find that Irineu Serra already knew all about it, explaining to Paulo that his eye would only heal when the horse’s did.

Such stories reveal an iron law of karma: acts of ill will return to their originators, who must feel, on their own skin, the suffering they have caused others. Thus, within ritual, Daimistas

seek to discover the moral transgressions that have caused them suffering, to confront this reality, and to ask divine forgiveness for doing wrong.

We thus have Daimistas drinking an indigenous drink, praying to a Christian God, and framing the experience in esoteric terms. Where did this esotericist influence come from, and why did it gain traction among the rubber tappers who gathered around Irineu Serra?

The colonization of Acre: Order and Progress in the implantation of civilization in the jungle

Esotericism was widespread in Brazil in the first decades of the 20th century, and was especially pervasive amongst military officers, who often picked it up with their training at the national army academy in Rio de Janeiro and carried it into the interior as part of their work of integrating the nation and bringing civilization to the backlands. While at least nominally Catholic, many officers were also Rosicrucians or Freemasons, as well as adherents of Comte's religious Positivism.

Among the avatars of religious Positivism in Brazil, none is more revered than Cândido Mariano da Silva Rondon. A poor child of part-Indian descent, Rondon found his way to the national military academy in Rio, which served as launching pad for his career as explorer, army officer, and founder of Brazil's first Indian agency. Perhaps most famously, in the two decades straddling the turn of the 20th century, Rondon led teams of explorers through Brazil's backlands, laying down telegraph wire across hundreds of miles of wilderness in a Herculean attempt at, as historian Todd Diacon put it, "stringing together a nation."

Rondôn's work in the backlands reflected his commitment to religious Positivism as much as his nationalist fervor. This double purpose can be seen in photographs he had taken of Indian people literally wrapped in the Brazilian flag, making sure that the Positivist motto "Order and Progress" appeared in the picture as a visual argument for Positivism's role in bringing them into the national fold. "What was under construction in the interior," Diacon writes, "was as much a Positivist message as a nationalist one."

The Catholic Church fiercely opposed esoteric groups, yet they evidently held ideological appeal to men engaged in the conquest of the Brazilian interior. Across the great cultural divide between European-descended Brazilians and forest Indians, religious Positivism promised to build a bridge. This supposed capacity to change "wild" outsiders into citizens of the nation represented an extension of Positivism's "primary mission," in Diacon's words, "to complete the pact between social classes so that one, unified Humanity could unite all people on earth."

This noble goal existed in a certain tension with Positivism's "fundamental tenet": the "notion of a natural social order." It may appear problematic to hope to diminish social friction while assuming that inequality is the result of a natural, even God-given order. But part of the appeal of Positivism, it appears to me, was its fit with a contradiction in Brazilian culture that results, in anthropologist Roberto DaMatta's words, from the

curious and often perverse combination of an imported, individualist, civic egalitarianism with a personalistic and hierarchical form of social organization. This amalgam of holism and individualism, of equality and hierarchy, results inevitably in *caudilhismo*, authoritarianism, in the various personalisms...performing the role in Brazil's social landscape of the uninvited guests of democracy. [Da Matta 2000:357-8]

To oversimplify, organization on the plantation “house” model meant an outside role in practical social relations for the personalistic sphere (with its hierarchical forms), with Enlightenment values of impersonal citizenship and individual autonomy seemingly tacked on with later attempts at modernization. Da Matta sees, as one result of this, a tension between the Brazilian culture’s tendency to create social groupings around authoritarian “big men” and its fervent embrace of democratic ideals.

Rondôn—a consummate “big man” despite his tiny physical stature—carried this contradiction into the field, helping set the tone for colonization of Brazil’s interior in the early 20th century, and inspiring many to follow his example of connecting the benighted peoples of the backlands to the Brazilian nation, and through it, to the dynamo of world civilization.

In Acre’s rubber industry there were, similarly, men who specialized in mediating contact with the natives in furtherance of the goals of civilization (or at least capitalism). Known as “Indian tamers” or, in a nod to their ostensible concern for the indigenous soul, “Indian catechizers,” these men were glorified in standard historiography as pioneers, while revisionists revealed some of them to be little more than hired killers. More recent, nuanced portraits of their perspectives and motivations show that, for at least some of these men, esoteric knowledge was central to their work bringing the Indians into the nation and civilization.

For example, the Acrean “catechizer” Felizardo Cerqueira, a contemporary of Rondôn whose fame was merely regional, explicitly credited his success at “taming” Indian groups to his study of the mail-order materials of the Esoteric Circle of the Communion of Thought, or CECP. This

organization taught such New Thought principles as the determinative power of thought and the “spiritual communication” of “analogous mentalities” of similar intent.

In an unpublished text he wrote about 1950 to secure a government pension as a pioneer of Acre, Felizardo proclaimed:

I, with the help of the study of esotericism, was able to discover in myself a force that is vulgarly called magnetism. This force has come since I was a child, but I completely ignored it... [I]n many cases, I, not understanding it, gave it the very vulgar name that... all of humanity, or almost all, applies to this great divine virtue..., “Devil,” when this force is nothing if not the true God. Vibration to aid humanity itself.

That Felizardo found the CECP teachings so useful in his work with Indians is all the more intriguing when we consider that his experiences included drinking ayahuasca with them, and that the very same group played an important role in Irineu Serra’s career.

The Master’s House

In this context of Acrean colonization as a broad mission of implanting civilization in the jungle, Irineu Serra’s career as a spiritual leader takes on larger outlines, and his work becomes legible as part of the same processes that brought the Indians into the nation, except that its focus was the domestication, not of Indian persons, but of the indigenous forest powers accessed through ayahuasca. (Indeed, today he is celebrated as one founder of Acre’s unique culture.)

Ayahuasca use was not uncommon in the rubber camps in the forest, but Irineu Serra’s work with it was distinguished by this act of domestication: he attached his name to it, brought it into his house, rebaptized it “Daime,” and made it the basis for his reputation around town. So complete was the identification of Alto Santo with the drink that the congregation was known

as “the people of Daime,” and Irineu Serra himself was sometimes called “the father of ayahuasca.”

This interesting phrase points to the way that Irineu Serra was credited (or blamed) for bringing ayahuasca from the wild forest to the peri-urban environment, but it also signaled the fact that the social formation that arose around his work as healer, community leader, and arbiter of disputes was built on the idiom of kinship. It was, more precisely, founded on the institution of the Brazilian *casa*, or house. Daimistas at Alto Santo never talk of joining the center or being converted; instead, they speak of “arriving in the Master’s house.”

The fact that Alto Santo takes this form is significant when we consider the general importance of the house in Brazilian culture. Anthropologist Roberto DaMatta argues that the house is, to this day, the primary institution involved in the creation of Brazilian personhood. Given Brazil’s tumultuous history of changing governments, constitutions, and currencies, he writes, it is “still the only permanent, trustworthy source of social identity” in Brazilian culture.

Naturally any house needs a qualified householder, so stories told at Alto Santo about Irineu Serra’s life history tend to follow a pattern that suggests his fitness to be just the kind of moral leader who gathers and keeps people around him—a “big man.” They depict the transformative journey of a rebellious youth from Maranhão state who, travelling to the forests of the Amazon, found a divinely ordained mission that changed his whole life, making him (as one version has it) “a true man in the dominion of the forest.”

MI and Military

These stories emphasize, to a degree I found quite surprising at first, the importance of Irineu Serra's military service. Typically they suggested a kind of "double initiation" in which Irineu Serra's work for the commission charged with surveying the Peruvian border led to his contact with the mysteries of the forest, including ayahuasca. Joining nationalism and spiritual vocation, the narratives set him up as a figure powerfully connected to forest spirit forces (by virtue of his work with ayahuasca) as well as to the civic powers in the city, embodied in men like Guiomard dos Santos, the mid-20th century governor and senator of Acre whose friendship with Irineu Serra—one "big man" to another—is the subject of many biographical tales. These connections to power, in turn, are what enable Irineu Serra to minister to his people.

These tales' emphasis on the military stems from its hegemonic status as bearer and protector of civilization. At the time, military service was, for a poor, black person like Irineu Serra, one of the few means of creating the cross-class alliances that were essential to "be somebody." If this was generally true, it was doubly so in rural areas. In a 1942 novel about Acre—the same roman à clef that called Irineu Serra the "father of ayahuasca"—the narrator remarks that

"Acre is a land where the yellow uniform of the [Military] Police maintains its traditions of prestige in the sympathy of the women. To be a soldier of the Police is the path of any young man who wants to make a career" (Medeiros 1942:118).

The military offered not only the possibility of a career in the banal sense of a job, it also promised to transform disadvantaged and excluded rubber tappers into citizens through its power as "a civilizing agency, capable of taking man out of the state of nature...into a state of

culture, making him a ‘man’” (poor Northeasterners were seen—even saw themselves?—as needing to be civilized just as much as Indians) (Arneide Cemin 1998:222).)

Irineu Serra’s followers believed that his military service supplied an essential model of social order, which he incorporated into his ritual work with ayahuasca. As one woman put it, through his service, he “learned a little of the regulations in order to be able to maintain his sect” (Cemin 1998:212). (You might say they saw the Positivist social pact, and liked it.)

While it is not certain when or how Irineu Serra gained exposure to esoteric philosophy, the weight of evidence suggests he may have been introduced to it through his military service, perhaps in his survey work in the forest, or else as a member of the “Circle of Regeneration and Faith.” This group was the first urban ayahuasca-using group in Acre. With a name reminiscent of the CECP, it seems already to have combined ayahuasca and esotericism with military-style ranks among its members in the 1910s, when Irineu Serra was a member of it in Brasileia.

Other evidence suggests that esotericism influenced the developing Doctrine of Santo Daime. For example, esoteric terms like “astral”—the transcendent space of spiritual experience—appear in hymns of early followers dating to the 1940s. Also, membership certificates in the Alto Santo archives support oral histories that tell of a mass affiliation of Alto Santo members to the CECP in the 1960s, but Irineu Serra, to judge by his member number, joined officially at least several years earlier.

Conclusion

Like other esoteric groups, the CECF sought to establish a communion of like-minded souls whose collective efforts, although dispersed geographically, might harmonize with one another, bringing positive effects into the lives of practitioners, and benefits to the human social world more broadly.

In a key discussion from the CECF's central text, called *Instructions*, this communion is described like this:

[W]hen you emit [your thoughts] with the intention to do good to other men, they will join together with some mental current [*corrente*] of analogous nature, and mix themselves with it.

They augment this current, which constitutes a single mass proportional to the number of mentalities that emitted their thoughts with identical intention.

In this manner you [pl.] contribute to the production of an invisible, yet true mental force, which constitutes a positive link of union and of communion amongst yourselves and beings of a mentality analogous to yours.

There is a puzzle in this for me because it implies nearly the opposite of personhood as the hierarchical house model, under which Irineu Serra was likened to a “shady tree” extending over his people. I want to suggest that this way of phrasing the matter asserts the value of individual autonomy—it's like a number of monads emitting waves that interact with one another, a good Enlightenment vision of society abstracted into currents and fluids. And yet this all takes place under the aegis of the “Master's House,” with its relational, hierarchical way of generating persons.

If DaMatta is right about the tension between Brazil's hierarchical social forms and its individualist civic ideals, we should expect to find it in Daimista practice as much as elsewhere. In this light, there is a special role for ayahuasca as an exogenous element taken in, both at the cultural and individual level: the fact of its origins in the wild forest may be important because it thus represents a force which, coming from outside Brazilian civilization, might therefore prove efficacious in addressing tensions within it.

Might it not be that Daimista practice performs, with respect to indigenism, the same work as Comtean Positivism, but on a spiritual, rather than sociological level?

This is an idea whose implications might be further explored to good result.

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