

Reflections On Spirituality, Gender, and Power in my Experience with Santo Daime¹

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I have presented at previous conferences on my doctoral dissertation in psychology that focused on the experiences of gay people who used ayahuasca. My motivation for doing this research was my experience in the Santo Daime church.

Just before encountering the Daime in San Francisco, California, I had returned from a trip to India that ended with a month-long course in Tibetan Buddhism at the Kopan monastery in Nepal, where I had some strong experiences that convinced me to follow the path of Tibetan Buddhism. I was already primed by this powerful spiritual experience when I was invited by a coworker to attend a Santo Daime work, as the rituals are called, in San Francisco, and I eagerly accepted.

I went to Mapiá, deep in the Amazon rainforest of Brazil, for my second Santo Daime work in 1997, a few weeks after that. I intended to visit for one week, and ended up staying a month. When I was there, I kept my sexual orientation to myself, feeling I had enough to deal with while undergoing incredibly strong spiritual, emotional, and physical experiences with the Daime and handling the jungle environment, my inability to understand Portuguese, and a culture very different from my own. Santo Daime, as practiced in Mapiá, placed a strong emphasis on sexual segregation and virginity. Virgins were assigned to dance behind the Padrinho, and told to move to the section of non-

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virgins and married women if it was discovered they had engaged in sexual intercourse. Women were required to wear skirts with hems past the knee at all times, and to refrain from wearing jewelry or makeup. This was due to the influence of the conservative evangelical background of Madrinha Rita, the wife of Padrinho Sebastião, the deceased leader of the community and founder of the international branch of Santo Daime, CEFLURIS (now known as ICEFLU). This highly conservative emphasis is not found in Alto Santo, the church of Mestre Irineu, who was the original founder of Santo Daime. Once, when I was wearing pants after doing some physical labor at the house I was staying at in Mapiá, I was stopped along the path to the river and asked by one of the church elders if I was pretending to be a man.

I returned to Mapiá four times after that, and on later trips gradually told Brazilians who were residents about my sexual orientation. I had heard quotes read from Padrinho Sebastião that were distinctly condemning of gay people while sitting in the Santa Casa, the healing center in Mapiá, and scornful comments about gay marriage from the woman whose house I was staying at. When I asked one of the more revered female healers if she agreed with a quotation I had read in a book by Alex Polari, one of the senior Padrinhos living in Mapiá, in which he referred to gay people as “degenerates,” she replied, “we are all degenerates.”

In contrast to this, I was having my own private spiritual experiences of a very positive nature, seeing my essence as divine and myself as a beautiful reflection of God. I wondered how we could have come to such different conclusions when it seemed obvious that the Daime was revealing the truth to me. Were these esteemed elders who lived so close to nature and who appeared to have such a deep spiritual connection to the

Queen of the Forest possibly wrong? At that time, I was less critical of the Christian underpinnings of Santo Daime and was appreciating the stories of Christianity for the first time, having been raised in an atheist household. I became interested in “A Course in Miracles” and other New Age Christian ideas, which were popular in the church I attended at that time in California. The people I drank Daime with in California were all aware of my sexual orientation and I was not cognizant of any negative attitudes toward this. The Santa Cruz group was composed of body workers, therapists, hippies, musicians, and alternative spiritual seekers who were generally more broad-minded than even the average Santa Cruz non-conformist.

Visits by Padrinhos and their *comitivas* from Brazil required our group to shape up and present a more conforming image, and we were reminded not to skinny dip in the hot tub in front of this group nor offend their sensibilities in dress or comportment. I enjoyed the brief episodes of excitement the visits entailed, when our church uniforms were checked for consistency, large halls rented, and hymns that were studied for weeks in preparation were sung in all-night rituals with expert musicians. I had learned to smoke marijuana, called Santa Maria, within the church environment after giving it up since college, more than 15 years earlier, and fully appreciated its spiritual power (I have since been registered as a medical marijuana patient in California). Listening to the beautiful music and profound messages I understood through them in the ceremonies, I wanted an ever-closer connection to this group and a greater understanding of “the doctrine,” which was explained to me to be contained within the hymns.

Under the influence of Daime, I understood that “I am light, I give light, and I make everything shine,” and I was not put off, as many of my less fanatic friends in the

Daime were, by hymns that suggested I would be punished for speaking ill of my brother, or that I would suffer if I rebelled. There was, in my mind, plenty of room for interpretation and, in fact, I had suffered a lot from rebelling in my life: from self-destructive behavior, escapism, and refusing responsibility.

My dissertation research revealed that I was not alone in being able to interpret the words of the hymns and make them work for me. The gay people I interviewed took the ideas that resonated and discarded ideology that did not resonate. Friends disaffected with Santo Daime would often ask me how I could attend services with such judgmental hymns being sung in such a patriarchal and hierarchical church, with its emphasis on virginity and its polygamous male leaders. I was accused of not understanding the words, or of exoticizing the Brazilians, or of viewing their symbolism and beliefs as kitsch.

In fact, I still hear these criticisms, even as I continue to attend works as my schedule permits. Some of these criticisms came from people who favored shamanic ceremonies led by shamans singing lyrics that were completely obscure to the Westerners in attendance, based on belief systems more alien and fantastical than even Christianity (which was often woven in), but perhaps the passive nature of their participation, listening in the dark rather than singing along, made them question less their own participation in a foreign system; or, maybe, the truly exotic nature of the shamanic ceremony, with its indigenous flavor, and without the embarrassing Christian emphasis and moral exhortations, made it more acceptable to them. The treatment of women and gay people in the indigenous communities these shamans come from was often treated as a non-issue; either unknown or in some cases regarded with anthropological distance and respect for the culture. I have participated in several indigenous ceremonies, in Ecuador,

Peru, in the United States and Germany, but I miss the act of group singing, and the lights, movement, and social exchange permitted by the Santo Daime ceremony. Santo Daime was the environment in which I discovered ayahuasca, and the rituals and customs carved a particular place in my heart, despite the many uncomfortable idiosyncrasies that accompanied the church.

In 2008, the US church was rocked by a sexual scandal involving a prominent Padrinho from Rio de Janeiro who was revealed to have had a history of sexual impropriety with female Daimistas both in Brazil and North America. The refusal of the Brazilian church to sanction him for an unwelcome encounter with a Canadian woman led to his being banned by the US churches from leading ceremonies in the US for two years. He never acknowledged his deeds, and claimed that some invisible obscure forces were trying to destabilize the current and the brotherhood.

This turn came shortly after a period in which he seemed poised to become the Brazilian leader of the North American churches. In the annual meeting of Santo Daime churches in the US, his wife, one of the daughters of Sebastião, accused those who did not support his leadership of being possessed by devils. Later, after the scandal, she received a hymn (hymns are said to be transmitted from the astral plane in the Santo Daime tradition) called “Tranca Rua’s Illumination.” Tranca Rua had a place in the early history of Mapiá, and was claimed to be responsible for the sexual and other misbehavior of a man who is rumored to have been possessed by it. (This man was later castrated by members of the Daime community, which led to his death). Sebastião is reported to have tamed the powerful but misguided spirit and it became one of his chief spiritual allies.

His daughter's most recent hymn reiterates the power of Sebastião in conquering and transforming this spirit, and proclaims the power of those who subdue it.

Although the ban did not last long, the Padrinho's prominence subsequently faded in the US and these incidents opened new conversations about the cultural differences between the expectations of Brazilians versus those of North Americans, and the treatment of women. In the past, some Brazilians had implied that American women misinterpreted sexual playfulness; that the US was under the spell of "political correctness," and suffered from "moral uptightness and lack of ability to flirt and play." But those connected to Daime seemed to find it harder to minimize the importance of sexual boundaries when the behavior of the Padrinho was so blatant, and his transgressions involved intercourse with a married Brazilian Daimista who was a relative of one of his closest collaborators, among many other stories. After the Daime leader was exposed, a wealthy female benefactor and pillar of the church in California dropped out of Santo Daime in disgust. She had learned that the offending Padrinho had previously accosted a woman in the local current in her own home when she had been his hostess. Her withdrawal left a large void in the California church, and the entire community was forced to re-group.

The reevaluation of attitudes in the world of ayahuasca were also playing out in the case of a prominent Peruvian shaman who had followings in the US and Canada and was reported to have taken advantage of women who were under the influence of ayahuasca, as well as tales of other shamans in Peru who used their position to seduce or coerce intoxicated women into sexual relations they later regretted.

It was during this time that loyalties were tested and Daimistas in North America began to question their allegiance to Padrinho Alfredo's organization (Alfredo is the son of Sebastião, and current leader of the church). It was also during this period that my own interests in Buddhism and non-dualism returned, and I began to take a more critical look at Christianity and the role that culture plays in keeping women and gay people in a lower status around the world, endangering their lives and curtailing their dreams while propping up a conservative, punishing ethos. I began to doubt the idea of a god who would kill his child, and the deal Christians apparently accepted to profit from that murder. I considered that from such original seeds of confusion there might arise a host of related misconceptions, and these in turn might be magnified by the effect of ayahuasca. I decided to explore the experiences of gay ayahuasca users as a result of these circumstances, wondering how other gay people made sense of religious dogma and the cultural clashes that arose between South American culture and traditions and those of ayahuasca drinkers in North America.

Mapiá was steadily becoming more modern as I visited it over the years, as the addition of generators for electricity, flush toilets, and faster boats to transport pilgrims led up to the biggest cultural transformer of all, television. By the time of my last visit in 2005, girls were in pants and tube tops, and the sound of televisions and the accompanying loud rumble of the generators needed to power them filled the evening air. A shed with computers for the use of schoolchildren was available and, currently, a new road makes it possible to drive to Mapiá and avoid the boat trip altogether. Even in 2005, there were still no cars, but they have since arrived. I cannot speak to the current state of women's liberation or acceptance of gays there, but Madrinha Rita is still alive and is

considered the head of the church. For sure, she is a great matriarch, respected and revered, though it is hard for someone from where I sit to assess her real influence. There are many powerful and beautiful women in Mapiá; some are true healers. But, though Daime renders specific recognition for woman both in the ritual space and in the doctrine itself, their leadership often seems to be little acknowledged. Perhaps Madrinha Rita's death will mark a time of transformation of this community, where more modern ideas will be accepted and gender roles will be more fluid, in tune with contemporary times. It remains to be seen how such changes may affect the foreigner's enchantment with the primitive and magical feeling of the "religion of the forest."

Despite my delayed acceptance that Christianity was a dangerous myth that had ruined the lives of many indigenous and non-indigenous people and given excuses for so much oppression, I continued to enjoy my personal experiences in the works. I came to understand the importance of intention at last, and that ayahuasca can be a portal to the Truth, if one knows what one is looking for. I appreciate the capacity for insight I have during the works, the purification I feel at the end of a long ritual, and the positive afterglow that lets me see things in a fresh light, and I enjoy the camaraderie of my fellow Daimistas. I have witnessed ayahuasca's power to fight addiction and provide psychological healing to seekers, and have experienced these phenomena in my own life. I have also benefitted by receiving artistic inspiration from the beautiful visions I perceive during work. Many of my drawings and paintings are directly inspired by my experiences with the Daime.

Several of the ideas found in the Christian doctrine, expressed in maxims such as "Love your brother as yourself" and "the kingdom of heaven lies within," are worthy of

contemplation. It continues to be gratifying for me to sing about the beauty of the forest and the cosmos, and to praise the light that is my true nature, and my appreciation remains for those leaders who direct the church responsibly and the care they take to preserve the space of the ritual so that all who attend can have the chance to drink ayahuasca and understand their own true nature. The opportunity is also there to get lost in the fantasies of another culture, be it that of the ancient Middle East or the jungles of Brazil, glittering in the multicolored lights, and to embed oneself ever deeper in paths that do not honor some of the people who follow them.