

Ayahuasca Use in a Religious Context

The Case of the União do Vegetal in Brazil

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The original version of this paper was presented at the 45th Congresso Internacional de Americanistas, in the symposium "Shamanism and the use of plants of the genus *Banisteriopsis* and its additives", organized by Prof. Luis Eduardo Luna, which took place in 1985, in Bogotá, Colombia. The text was later translated into Spanish and published as: "Uso del Ayahuasca en un Contexto Autoritario. El Caso de La União do Vegetal en Brasil", *América Indígena*, vol. XLVI, núm 1, enero-marzo de 1986. The original text was slightly revised by the author in 2008. While some social and legal contexts for ayahuasca use in Brazil have changed since 1985, this paper has historical value as one of the first academic examinations of the UDV.

Abstract: Most accounts of the consumption of ayahuasca have focused on well-established cultural patterns found in the Amazon basin. The União do Vegetal - a syncretic cult originating in the Brazilian state of Rondônia in the early 1960s - has spread well beyond this geographical range, and today possesses local groups in many of Brazil's major cities. The organization's progressive ethos and generally moralist bent has provided a means of acquiring legitimacy in a period of strong official disapproval of the use of "drugs". This study seeks to situate the growth of the cult in terms of its social composition, ritual practice, and ideological content.

Introduction

In 1978, while visiting Brasília, I met a journalist who introduced me to the União do Vegetal, a group normally referred to by its adepts simply as the UDV. Since the early 1970s, travelers returning from Rondônia and Acre had spoken to me about the growth of ayahuasca-based religions in the distant western frontier region of Brazil, but I was surprised to discover a missionary núcleo outside of the confines of Amazonia.

I resolved to join this group, as it was many years since I had last had the opportunity to experiment with the hallucinogenic drink - known in Brazil as oasca, vegetal, Santo Daime or simply cipó (a generic term for forest vine). The initiation process involved drinking oasca at sessions in Brasília, and subsequently with another group in São Paulo. Though I left Brazil shortly after these events, I had further contacts with the UDV in the early 1980s: principally in Rio Branco, Acre, but also in Manaus, and in Campinas, São Paulo.

Historical Background

The origins of Brazilian oasca or vegetal use lie in the expansion of rubber tappers into the upper drainages of the Madeira, Purús, and Juruá rivers, where encounters were made with various Indian groups (notably the Caxinawá) and mestizo Peruvians and Bolivians who also were adepts of the drink. A pattern of isolated back-country oasca consumption became established in the early part of the 20th. century, and was assimilated into the religious life of the local state capitals, Rio Branco and Porto Velho. The Santo "Dai-me", (subsequently Santo Daime) cult became established as early as the 1930s in Alto Santo, on the outskirts of Rio Branco.

According to [Pereira](#) the use of oasca was also adopted in this period by at least one other religious house in Porto Velho, a group whose ritual practices were based on West African

vodun cults transmitted to the area via the state of Maranhão.

The original transcendental content of indigenous oasca use thus came to be supplemented by many disparate elements: Kardecist spiritualism, evangelical Protestantism, baroque folk Catholicism, and afro-Brazilian religiosity - each of which had themselves already undergone a complex process of religious syncretism. In this historical process, the UDV was a relative late-comer; it was founded in Porto Velho only in 1962, by José Gabriel da Costa (1922-1971), who was recognized as the Mestre Superior ["Superior Master"] by eleven other rubber-tappers who belonged to an informal circle latterly known as the Mestres de Curiosidade ["Masters of Curiosity"]. Mestre Gabriel established the basic hierarchical system which characterizes the UDV, and fired it with a missionary zeal which has led ultimately to the setting up of numerous local branches, mainly in the states of Rondônia and Acre, but also in numerous Brazilian cities outside the region: Brasília, Manaus, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, Fortaleza, Campinas.

The remarkable fact about UDV expansion is that it should have occurred during a period - the late 1960s and 1970s - when political repression was at its height in Brazil, and the growth of religious cults was subject to considerable surveillance by the authorities. The UDV was not spared this attention, though it turned it to its own advantage. In 1967, the police chief in Rondônia attempted to close down the centre in Porto Velho and ban the use of oasca but was not successful.

To this day, the threat of legal action against the UDV is regularly rekindled by statements from local and Federal police forces, and samples of their drink are routinely dispatched to forensic laboratories in an attempt to discover its active principles. Though DMT and the harmaline derivatives do not at the moment form part of the official list of illicit substances, their inclusion in the relevant schedule of the Brazilian anti-drugs laws would only be a question of simple bureaucratic amendment. [DMT is prohibited in Brazil, [see](#)] Despite the current political liberalization in Brazil, such a move would be unlikely to disturb the public consensus on the need for an all-out "war on drugs", itself based on the prohibitionist hysteria promoted in the local media by the American Drug Enforcement Administration.

The immunity of the UDV is all the more surprising in view of the sort of recruits it has attracted in the major cities in the last fifteen years. These were composed partly of Federal employees returning from a period of service in Amazonia, and included a number of young Air Force officers who no doubt acted to protect the organization from the attentions of the Brazilian Federal Police, military intelligence, and the Serviço Nacional de Informações (SIN). Many of the new adherents were also young, middle-classes professionals likely to have had a history of previous experimentation with other drugs, notably marijuana and the illegal hallucinogens (LSD, mescaline, psilocybin). The cult strongly disapproves of all such substances, and likewise discourages even the legal "vices" of tobacco smoking and alcohol drinking. This unambiguous anti-"drug" stance may have served to screen it from official harassment, preventing the sort of confrontation with the authorities occasionally witnessed at the Santo Daime church of Colônia Cinco Mil, in Acre, where marijuana is admitted into the ritual under the name of Santa Maria.

The ever-present threat of official repression has obviously had a marked and continuing influence on the ideological context of UDV religion. The emphasis on the naïve moralism of its original founders - indeed, the very high status accorded to such humble figures by the new middle-class leadership in the major cities - has both served to maintain the original fundamentalist character of the cult, and is used to keep in check many of the more exalted elements attracted to oasca drinking from a background in UFO sightings or Eastern mysticism. On the other hand, the nationalist and positivist attitudes always present in Brazil, and promoted

as the official creed of the military regime, have also been incorporated into the UDV along with its new middle-class membership. This fact is reflected in the following statement:

"We work united with all other Brazilians under the symbol of Peace and Progress... Our members include persons from every social and intellectual level: engineers, doctors, member of the Armed Forces, government employees, teachers, psychologists, businessmen, lawyers, economists, sociologists, social workers, dramatists, journalists, university students, taxi drivers, pharmacists, construction workers and dentists...."²

Not only does the ranking of the occupations accord well with the general nation-building ethos of the time, but also it is notable for the exclusion of any references to rubber-tappers or rural workers of any description, despite the fact that the document was published in the state of Acre, and presumably for a local readership. Even the reference to a single working-class group - construction workers - smacks of a certain tokenism, and in no way diminishes the overriding impression of a progress-loving, upwardly mobile group of citizens controlling the destiny of the UDV.

Social Organization

How have the contradictions underlying the composition of the UDV worked themselves out? On the social level, how has a rural movement of humble origins assimilated this new, middle-class urban membership? There is no doubt that military officers, professionals and leading bureaucrats have been given an important image-management role in establishing a responsible profile for the UDV, thus preventing its assimilation either into the old traditions of rural millenarianism, or into the more modern strands of "alternative" ecological and religious radicalism. At the same time, within the group itself a complex hierarchy has evolved to maintain the leadership of the original followers of Mestre Gabriel. One of his successors is Mestre Raimundo Carneiro Braga, who now holds the title of Representante Geral ["General Representative"] and officiates over the headquarters of the organization in Porto Velho. Each local branch in turn has a Mestre Representante ["Representative Master"]. The mission of such figures is to officiate at regular sessions, maintaining the purity and integrity of the cult, and to prevent the secrets of oasca preparation falling into the hands of those incapable of using it correctly.

Beyond the titular leader of each group, the membership is organized into four levels, each designed to mark a step in the acquisition of insight into the mysteries of oasca. The fully-initiated make up the Quadro de Mestres ["Masters' Board"], being followed by the Conselheiros ["Councillors"] who together form the Corpo do Conselho ["Council Body"]. Below them come the Corpo Instrutivo ["Instructive Body"] and finally the ordinary sócios or members. Having drunk oasca once with the UDV one may apply to become a member, but access to the higher rungs requires regular participation, and the heeding of spiritual advice from superiors. To take the example of São Paulo, a relatively new group, there were at the time of my contact in 1979 two Mestres, not more than half-a-dozen Conselheiros, and about forty regular members, of whom perhaps half were recognized as belonging to the Corpo Instrutivo.

The valorization of the original traditions of the UDV, as well as the continued control of the group by Mestre Gabriel's direct disciples, is maintained by restricting access to the Quadro de Mestres. Only a small number of the new middle-class members ever attain this rank; the few that do, are generally quite elderly practicers who have managed to win the confidence of the original Mestres, and become fully conversant with the group's teachings and oral mythology. Such a process is very time consuming. The UDV's only written document is a list of statutes - its doctrine, prayers, and mythological accounts form a liturgy which is only ever recited in full detail during a session of oasca-drinking. In this emphasis on oral transmission, at least, the UDV

provides evidence of the ultimate indigenous origins of its practices.

Myths of Origin

One might suppose that the mythology of the UDV would have been inspired by one of the Indian groups inhabiting Brazil's western frontiers. This does not appear to be the case, however, and the identifiable elements would suggest rather that the UDV acquired its esoteric lore from contacts with mestizo Peruvians and Bolivians. Three principal figures appear in UDV mythology:

1. King Solomon: "Salomão... o Rei... o Imperador" ["Solomon... the King... The Emperor"]
2. Tihuaco: "É o Marechal... a força... o mariri" ["He is the Marshal... the strength... the mariri"] [mariri is the name of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine]
3. Mestre Caiano: "O In-Caiano... a reencarnação do Rei Inca... o primeiro oasqueiro" ["The In-Caiano...the reincarnation of the Inca King... the first oasca drinker"]

Solomon points to the Old Testament and Christian element in mestizo folklore, while Tihuaco and the reference to the Inca suggests an inclusion of highland Quechua elements absent in Brazil, but widely distributed across the border. The relationship between these three figures is complex. King Solomon is generally credited with providing the mystical "key" to the use of the hallucinogenic drink. He did this twice, at least: once to the mythical hero Mestre Caiano, the reincarnated Inca King, and once to the historical figure of Mestre Gabriel, who is seen not as the creator but as the recreator of the UDV - an esoteric group which had already existed in mythical times, when it was led by Mestre Caiano. At the beginning of a drinking session, therefore, it is the spirit of Mestre Caiano who is called, as a guide to the state of awareness produced by the drug.

Tihuaco lies at the origin of the *Banisteriopsis* vine itself while a woman named Oasca is associated with the origin of the second ingredient in the drink, the *Psychotria viridis* plant. In some versions of this myth Oasca appears as wise woman, counselor of the Inca King. When she died a bush was born out of her grave. After some time Tihuaco was born, and he became the marshal of the Inca King's armies. One day, when walking with the Inca King, Tihuaco came across a beautiful bush and asked him what it was. Inca King replied this was Oasca. They attempted to prepare the drink from the Oasca bush alone, and Tihuaco drank it. But when he did this, its power overcame him, and he died.

On his death Tihuaco's body gave rise to the first *Banisteriopsis* vine, known as mariri to the adepts of the UDV and considered to contain the "strength" (força) which he exerted as a marshal. This is a source of confusion to new members of the UDV, since in the most definitive account "ayahuasca" (as opposed to oasca) is given as the Indian name for the *Banisteriopsis* vine and also the drink derived from it. This account continues: "... Later on, in a different era, the Inca King was reincarnated as Mestre Caiano, vassalo ["subject"] of King Solomon. King Solomon taught Mestre Caiano the need to mix chacrona (*Psychotria*) with mariri (*Banisteriopsis*) in order to produce the União do Vegetal..."

Unity and Diversity in the Preparation of Oasca Considerable emphasis is placed in the UDV on the symbolic attributes of the union between "light" (luz) of *Psychotria* and the "strength" (força) of *Banisteriopsis*, between the drink and the person who partakes of it, between the various adepts of the drink themselves, and between man, the natural universe, and the mystical cosmos. Furthermore, the precise blend of "light" and "strength" is amenable to controls at the time of preparation, since each type of religious feast requires a different emphasis, often in association with the Christian calendar.

The different varieties of *Banisteriopsis* and *Psychotria* are themselves considered to contain different concentrations of the active principles. A wider, more rounded leaf of *Banisteriopsis* called *caupuri* is used in Manaus, being considered (physically) "very strong" by the groups from Acre/Rondônia, who generally employ their own native type, the narrow-leaved *tucunacá*. These are likely to be no more than different geographical races, or possibly varieties of *B. caapi*, and both are cultivated by the UDV outside of their natural range. A third type, *mariri caboclo* ["Indian or rustic *mariri*", perhaps a different species of *Banisteriopsis*] is considered too toxic in effect, and it is not generally employed in the UDV.

Psychotria is divided into seven types, some of which may have species rank, considering the many different members of this genus in the Brazilian flora, and the widely differing ecological environments in which they grow. *Chacrona verdadeira* ["true *chacrona*", almost certainly *Psychotria viridis*] was known among the first groups of oasca drinkers in Rondônia, and is the type commonly cultivated but the UDV, even in the semi-arid environment of Brasília. *Chacrona cabocla* ["Indian or rustic *chacrona*"] is said to be native to the tropical savanna or cerrado or central Brazil; it could be any one of more than a dozen species of *Psychotria* identified in the cerrado flora. At least three other leaf types are also described in terms of morphological characters that may indicate varietal or species-rank differences within *Psychotria*: the *orelha de onça* ["jaguar's ear"] with its pronounced venation and half-curved habit, the long, obovate *língua de vaca* ["cow's tongue"] and wide-leaved *caianinha* ["small *caiana*" or banana plant], the latter two being both from the area around Manaus.

Whatever the varieties of the plants employed, it seems likely that the methods of preparation are relatively standard, involving a conceptualization of various strengths, or *pontos* ["grades"] that the drink approaches during the cooking process. Oasca is prepared in the UDV in advance of the ceremonial occasions on which it is used, being cooked up in large aluminum pots of as much as twenty liter capacity, which contain the beaten *Banisteriopsis* stems and fresh *Psychotria* leaves laid in a series of alternating layers. Expertise in this process of preparation ["preparation"] involves a certain amount of immediate experimentation; with visual appearance, taste and effect being used to recognize the various *pontos* as they are reached. Generally speaking, the same liquid is used for three successive batches of fresh plant material, finally acquiring the consistency of a thick brown concentrate, which is passed through cloth sieves to strain out any fibrous residues. Different strengths - as well as differing ratios of the two plants themselves - are recognized in the final drink. Some samples are stored for several years in closely-sealed bottles, a fact which defies conventional wisdom on the short shelf-life of oasca preparations.

Ritual Practices

The union of diverse botanical elements in the oasca drink is also mirrored in the unusual religious syncretism which makes up UDV ritual. The group's full name is Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal, and many elements show the influence of nineteenth-century spiritualism. These include the use of a central table (*mesa*), as the focus for what is called a *sessão* (which has overtones of "séance" in Portuguese, as well as meaning simply a "session"), the need to keep both ends of the table permanently occupied during this period to prevent the entry of malignant influences, and the use of properly-worded *chamadas* ["calls" or melodic incantations] to bring down tutelary spirits such as that of Mestre Caiano.

There is a reluctance to name evil as a force - a thing is either good, or it simply "is not useful" (*não serve*) - a fact which is surprising in view of the numerous Christian elements incorporated into the cult: prayers such as the Our Father, occasional sign of the cross, and an overriding

concern with charitable behavior and moral righteousness. Unlike the Santo Daime cults of Acre, however, many of the more celebratory aspects of Christian, African and indigenous religiosity - hymn singing, dancing, and the regular beat of maracá rattles - are absent in the UDV, a fact which makes many of their gatherings into somewhat somber occasions, when compared with other Brazilian phenomena of a similar sort.

A typical session takes place in the early evening, though sometimes the daylight hours of the afternoon are preferred. Most halls are simple, whitewashed rooms, with bright electric lights and a photograph of Mestre Gabriel, the founder of UDV, hanging next to paintings of the visions experienced while under the effects of oasca (these latter seem to be an element introduced by the new urban membership, many of whom have artistic inclinations). The ritual proceeds in the following manner:

1. The officiating Mestre demands the attention of members, who are arranged with the higher ranking individuals at the central table, and the others on benches against the walls. All stand in silence as he recites a short prayer, then the glasses are poured out and each member comes forward to the head of the table to drink his or her dose. The order of serving is determined by the internal hierarchy of the group, with the Mestres and Conselheiros drinking first, and being served larger doses than the novices. Individual prayers, like a grace before meals, are recited by some of the participants before drinking.
2. A period of approximately half an hour, in which the drug begins to take effect, is occupied by the reading of the UDV's statutes and regulations. These include the ruling that all machetes should be left outside the hall (a touching survival from the group's original social context), the instruction that all regular members should attend sessions in a green jacket emblazoned with the letters "UDV", the prohibition on drinking alcohol during sessions and the obligatory reference to the 1967 police case and its ultimately felicitous outcome. This period normally ends with a preliminary prayer or chamada to Mestre Caiano, asking him to guide the proceedings in the path of light.
3. As the effect begins to become apparent - both in the subjective distortion of the visual field, and in the occasional outburst of coughing or vomiting by some of the members - the officiating Mestre begins to work counterclockwise round the room, laying a hand on the shoulder or crown of each participant, and confronting them with the following questions:
 - Como vamos, irmão?" ["-- How are we, brother?" - the first person plural acts as an intimate and friendly form of address in Portuguese]
 - Tem borracheira?" ["-- Has the effect come on?" - borracheira is distinguished from bebedeira = "drunkenness", and provides further evidence of an original cultural influence from the Spanish-speaking side of the frontier]
 - Tem luz?" ["-- Is there light?"]
 The standard answer to the first question is "bem" ["well"], and to the other two a nod or simple affirmative. Any answer indicating psychical malaise or an incipient "bad trip" will cause the Mestre to offer encouragement, support, or a moral homily about the need for inner purification. Any failure to feel any effect at all - which is not uncommon, in fact - may cause the Mestre to return and ask the questions again, later in the session. Having completed his tour of the hall, the officiating Mestre formally opens the session with another chamada to the mythical Mestre Caiano.
4. During the following hour or two, in which the effect peaks, various members recite chamadas or sing low, plaintive chants in which the words luz ["light"] and força

["strength"] appear prominently. Such interventions alternate with long periods of silence, and the majority of the participants take little interest in the outward activities of the other people present. The majority remain with their eyes closed, either slumped in a corner or on a bench, or else with their heads resting on the table in front of them. Should anyone get up to go outside, he or she must ask the Mestre for permission, and should move round the table in a counterclockwise direction. Gradually, as the effect diminishes, the periods of silence become shorter, and occasionally a piece of recorded music (either orchestral, or with a pronounced esoteric "message") is played on a simple sound system. Not infrequently, a second dose is offered to some of the participants at this point, which allows a prolongation of the introspective period for some, or its overlapping with the subsequent phase.

5. The second half of the session is normally introduced by the officiating Mestre by means of a short sermon, couched in terms of righteous living and the need to follow the "light". Occasionally, this leads to quite involved theological or ethical discussions - such as one which I witnessed, prompted by a member who questioned the Mestre about the difference between justice and vengeance. Awe-struck accounts of personal illumination are also heard, but with rather less enthusiasm than stern moral arguments, or vociferous denigrations of other drugs as "vices", and the previous ways of life as "lost". The psychological warmth, and the relief and bonhomie produced as the result of the diminishing effect of the oasca, combine at this stage to produce a sense of euphoria, all the more pronounced since it is based on the sharing of a common perception of transcendental realities.
6. Approximately four to five hours after the original drink was taken, the Mestre returns in a counterclockwise direction round the hall, asking:

"-- Como foi a borracheira?" ["How was your experience?"]

Most members reply "boa" ["good"] or ótima ["excellent"], with an occasional rueful mais ou menos ["so-so"] prompting a knowing look from the Mestre, and an encouragement to persevere in the requisite soul-searching. In the unlikely case of someone saying péssima ["awful"], the Mestre will stop to discuss the matter briefly, and most probably will arrange for more detailed counseling to take place later. Having returned to the head of the table, the Mestre then recites a prayer in which the spirit of Mestre Caiano is dispatched, and the session formally closed. Thereafter, hot tea is served and the group breaks up into small circles indistinguishable from any other more profane social gathering. Post-mortems on the session are often engaged in - but in a light-hearted spirit, not obsessively. Eventually the conversation turns to forthcoming sessions and other matters, and the members begin to drift away.

Visions, Healing and "Bad Trips" The visionary contents of the oasca experience are not generally subject to a great amount of collective discussion, since it is felt that the message of such experiences is largely personal, and should be used to illuminate moral dilemmas whose precise dimensions remain in the private realm. During the period of the most intense effect of the drink, members therefore concentrate on their own visions or mirações (another word which suggests Spanish-speaking origins), characteristically described in terms of experiences of flying over forests and fabled cities, and of abstract images -- pulsing geometrical shapes with a distinct core or centre, often conceptualized as the source of life, or as an immanent presence of the godhead. Though plant and animal imagery abounds, visions specific to the UDV cosmology - such as encounters with King Solomon, Tihuaco and particularly Mestre Caiano - are relatively rare, and may denote that the individual who has experienced them has been singled out to become a Mestre.

This process of learning to recognize the culturally-prescribed visions, in order to communicate better with transcendental realms, bears many points of comparison with the shamanism of other Banisteriopsis-based systems - though in the UDV the emphasis is less on becoming a healer of other sick people, and more on healing one's own soul in order to serve as an example. The strictly medicinal aspect of the UDV's work resides not in any healing ritual, but in the belief that regular drinking of oasca (encouraged in the cult even amongst children and pregnant women - what is considered legal in Brazil) serves to maintain the body in a healthy state. Miraculous cures are reported among the adepts of the UDV, and they are ascribed to the power of the drink itself together with the power of Mestre Gabriel.

Physical health is seen to mirror psychic well-being; through repeated doses of oasca, one's consciousness passes through a series of peneiras ["sieves"] which strain out erroneous conceptions, selfish vices and unworthy thoughts. It is this concept of mental hygiene which also underlies the UDV's interpretation of "bad trips". Not only are psychological categories - paranoia, schizophrenia, etc. - banished from the vocabulary describing unpleasant reactions to oasca, but also little attention is given to the demonology of Western, African or indigenous religions. Should a vision be characterized by Satanic symbolism, or by that of the morally ambivalent exu messenger-gods drawn from the African pantheon, or again by the feline and reptile imagery of native American belief systems, the adept of the UDV is merely encouraged to view these manifestations as "lower spirits", impediments that must be transcended on the path to the true light.

The concept most closely approximating the ideal of a "bad trip" in the UDV is that of peia or cacete [literally, a "beating"]. To go through a peia or receive a cacetada while under the influence of oasca is taken as a sign that something inside the person must be out of tune with the cosmic order. Sometimes this is manifested as a physical symptom; thus, the act of vomiting is seen as an expulsion of pernicious matter, as an act of purification. Similarly, the strong disapproval of cigarette smoking in the UDV becomes manifest in the belief that smokers will almost inevitably vomit during sessions, proving that their bodies are anxious to be rid of the physical intoxication which results from smoking.

The peia principle works in a very similar manner when applied to psychic phenomena. Disturbing imagery, panic and paranoia are all conceived in terms of the mind harbouring ideas which "are not of any use" (não servem). It is consonant with the pronounced tone of self-improvement in the UDV that the responsibility for a "bad trip" is laid firmly at the door of the user's own behavior or mental state, and not attributed to the wider material circumstances of a person's life. The arena is personal, not political.

Toward Fragmentation

The process of moral screening made evident in the progression of a novice member - through initial "bad trips", to more serene experiences, and ultimately to visionary encounters with the tutelary spirits of the UDV - provides an explanation of the manner in which the internal politics of the group relate to the broader contexts of Brazilian society. While not disputing that the use of oasca does, indeed, bring users into closer contact with their more intimate hopes and fears, and that the result of these encounters does often help such users "find themselves" in existential terms, the control of access to the means of self-enlightenment by such groups as the UDV raises important questions about the control of consciousness, and about the manifestation of power in religious cults of this nature. At what point does the criticism of "vanity", "prejudice", "presumption", and "revolt" - expressed in Araripe³ for example - and UDV's emphasis on obedience, hierarchy and legalism become no more than anti-intellectual obscurantism, and a

tool for reinforcing social and political conformity? Furthermore, how far do the rigid rules of the UDV serve not only their legitimate function, that of sorting out serious members from the large number of purely casual adherents, but also a less noble end - that of establishing a set of narrow moral parameters and maintaining a hegemony over the use of oasca in the major cities of Brazil? Up to what point can the religious setting guarantee a "proper" context for drug consumption, free of the abuse of power, gender domination, personal ego trips and so on?

The UDV's scarcely-concealed disapproval of other Brazilian oasca-based religions, such as the Santo Daime groups, is hardly evidence of a broad-minded and ecumenical approach to the valorization of the drink. At one session I attended, when I was called to provide a description of the indigenous use of the Banisteriopsis-containing kahuí of the northwestern Amazon, I found that most of the more senior membership reacted in a largely foolish, deprecatory and ethnocentric way. Their denigration of the Indians' spiritual "backwardness" only served to make apparent the obvious threat which they perceived in the existence of alternative traditions of oasca use, and the challenge which this posed to their continuing hegemony. After the ceremony had been concluded, however, many of the more junior members of the groups expressed their interest in the indigenous context of oasca drinking, and comforted me with a series of rather unflattering remarks about the intransigence of their superiors.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the 1980s have witnessed the emergence of numerous cracks in the previously tight controls which the UDV had exerted over the use of oasca. The Santo Daime cults have begun to set up branches in some of the major cities, where they are recruiting among adepts of oasca disillusioned with the UDV. Furthermore, having observed how the drink is prepared in the traditional cults, many younger members have begun to collect or plant Banisteriopsis and Psychotria themselves, creating a potential for the emergence of numerous splinter groups with belief systems more in accord with the increasingly liberal and questioning spirit of Brazil in recent years. Particularly in Acre and Rondônia, some oasqueiros have even taken to selling bottles of the preparation to all comers, with the result that the merely recreational use of oasca may become relatively commonplace.

Of course, such a development is not in itself greatly to be regretted, though the loss of an exact cultural context for the use of oasca could lead to many of the aberrations associated with the spread of the illicit hallucinogens in the 1960s. Indubitably, this possibility will strengthen the hand of those authorities (the Brazilian Federal Police, and their masters in the DEA) who would like to see a complete ban of the use of oasca - initially in Brazil, and subsequently in the Andean countries as well.

In view of current policies toward the traditional use of coca and marijuana, such a development could only have the most alarming and counterproductive effects: destroying the regulated context of a well-established drug habit, even with its possible limitations, and replacing it with yet another poisoned fruit, another aberrant outgrowth of our society's misconceived "war on drugs". For this reason, one can only hope that the likely fragmentation and proliferation of oasca-based cults in Brazil will be able to strike a delicate balance: between the need for a precise cultural context and meaning to its use, and the twin pitfalls of indiscriminate license and rigid sectarian discipline.

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