

“To bring a good name to my Brazil”: Santo Daime and the domestication of ayahuasca¹

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Street, House, Other world

Let me begin with an observation by anthropologist Roberto Da Matta about the Brazilian *casa*, or house:

[The *casa*] is still the only permanent, trustworthy source of social identity in a country that has been a Kingdom, a Constitutional and Absolutist Monarchy, an Old Republic, a New State, a liberal democracy, parliamentary regime, military autocracy with a controlled congress, a New Republic, and today a nascent liberal State; a State that has been ordained by at least six constitutions in the past 45 years, and five currencies!" [Da Matta 2000 Estado casa rua, p. 360]

When we discuss the *casa* in these terms, it should be clear that what is meant is a whole sphere of Brazilian social life, and not merely the architectural forms of the house, or some other limited aspect of domestic existence. In fact, in Da Matta's good structuralist account of Brazilian culture, the *casa* contrasts with the official world of the *rua*, or street, and both are relativized by the transcendent “other world” in a complex Da Matta calls the “Brazilian ritual system.”

Da Matta calls our attention to the kaleidoscopic change in the forms of the Brazilian state— itself proper to the domain of the “street”—in order to emphasize the enduring importance of the *casa* as the generator, not of mere individuals or citizens, but of relationally-embedded persons. The key to the interpretation of Santo Daime that I will offer is the understanding of its founder's career as a kind of Brazilian “Big Man”—a house-holding *patrão* capable of encompassing those who arrived at his *casa* and mediating their relationships with other “Big Men,” including

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governors, military officers, and, in this patriarchal system, that Greatest Father of all, the Christian divinity.

Santo Daime origin narratives

Santo Daime is a Christian esotericist sect founded in the 1930s in Acre, a territory in Amazonian Brazil, by an Afro-Brazilian former rubber tapper named Raimundo Irineu Serra. In sessions with ayahuasca, rechristened “Daime,” Irineu Serra and his followers used prayer, song, dance, and sometimes silent meditation as tools for spiritual work on behalf of humanity. In the 1940s, Irineu Serra established his house on an escarpment overlooking Acre’s capital, Rio Branco. He named it Holy Heights, or *Alto Santo*, and cultivated his spiritual doctrines there until his death in 1971. Since then, his widow has taken responsibility for the congregation, which has remained a local phenomenon even as others have carried the name Santo Daime across Brazil and the world.

Alto Santo discourse about Daime’s origins depicts ayahuasca as formerly a wild drink, proper to the jungle, that Irineu Serra was able to bring to the town for the benefit of the (Christian, non-indigenous) people there. This translation from forest to city was authorized by the Virgin Mary herself, who appeared to Irineu Serra in a series of visions and gave him his mission as a Christian healer using the indigenous drink.

Such narratives constitute part of what “everyone knows” at Alto Santo about Irineu Serra and Daime. A whole cycle of legitimating stories exists, recounting not only his visions in the forest, but also his friendships with military and civic authorities, as well as the incorporation of European-style esotericism in Daimista practice. The general tenor of the narratives supports an

honorable and relevant role for Irineu Serra in Acrean history, tracing his connections to important figures of the “street” world and linking him to Christian divinity. Today these narratives are often deployed to mediate Daimista participation in official ceremonies that treat Santo Daime as Acrean cultural heritage; we witnessed a number of such performances during our fieldwork in 2006-7.

Scholarly interpretations of these narratives have tended to analyze them into other terms, imputing to them instrumental ends by claiming, in various ways, that Irineu Serra and his followers grasped hold of this kind of discourse intentionally, in order to achieve legitimacy that they otherwise could not, owing to the profound stigma of their ayahuasca use (as well as crypto-African elements in their rituals). At the risk of making something of a straw man of some of my colleagues’ work, in this paper I want to suggest what I think is a richer alternative to such instrumentalist accounts.

Irineu in Peru: “To bring a good name to my Brazil”

A key narrative complex in Alto Santo discourse tells how Irineu Serra came to work with ayahuasca. During his early years in Acre he spent a lot of time in the forest, working both as a rubber tapper and as a member of a border survey crew sent to mark the boundaries between Brazil, Bolivia, and Peru. Alto Santo discourse tends to connect this service on behalf of the nation—in which the physically large and morally reliable Irineu Serra was charged with guarding the crew’s cash box—with a concurrent apprenticeship in nature, whereby Irineu Serra became steeped in the mysteries of the Acrean forests and learned the secrets of the indigenous people (or, in the local vernacular, he learned “where the swallows sleep”). Out of this double

schooling in the ways of the street and the ways of the forest, Irineu Serra brought the power that would make him master of a house of healing.

One series of narratives about this period portrays the mestizo use of ayahuasca as morally suspect and in need of transformation: Irineu Serra's hosts for the nocturnal session call for the Devil to give them financial success, but he, imitating their calls, sees only crosses filling the skies. Another group of stories relates how Irineu Serra, continuing his work with ayahuasca on his own, was visited by a "Lady" who turns out to be an aspect of the Virgin Mary, and who gives him his mission to help humanity through spiritual work with ayahuasca, as Daime.

In parallel with this discovery of a Christian patroness of the drink, Irineu Serra has a moment of truth in the forest of a more nationalistic flavor. As one old-timer put it:

There in the jungles of Peru he grasped the jagube vine in his hand and spoke to it, saying 'if you come to bring a good name to my Brazil, I will bring you with me; but if you come to dishonor my Brazil, I will leave you here.'

One way to understand these narratives of Irineu Serra's encounter with is to see them as post hoc means to justify introducing to the Brazilian nation a recognizably dangerous and suspect element. From this point of view, the ultimatum issued to the vine by Irineu Serra is meant to mark his overriding loyalty to the nation, and to ease concerns that his practice with ayahuasca might run counter to Brazilian values or to the principles of civilized society in general. The troubling implication of such a view is that Daimistas themselves doubted the moral propriety of their practice and offered such accounts as cover—à la syncretism—for the truth of the matter. In a culture like Brazil's that values sincerity—understood as the correspondence of word and intent—this is a highly problematic stance to impute to Daimistas.

Narrative parallelism: Domesticating the wild for civilization

When people visit Amazonian Daimista centers today it is often as part of a journey away from civilization toward a more authentic nature. Such a narrative fits so well with preconceived notions of this “jungle potion” that it is easy to forget that Daimista practice began with a rather inverse movement, from forest to city. Narratives of the moment of truth with the vine in Peru are so important precisely because they remind us that moral concern for the relationship of the nation and wildness is at the root of Daimista self-regard.

I think we can achieve a deeper understanding of the place of these narratives in Daimista practice, and of the place of Daimista practice in Acrean and Brazilian culture, if we view the domestication of ayahuasca and of Acre’s indigenous people, not merely as analogous processes, but actually as two aspects of a single project of domesticating the wild for the benefit of civilization.

Acre’s social geography lent itself very well to the representation of wildness. Located between the Andean cordillera to the west and the lower Amazon basin to the east, Acre’s prime rubber country lay, even late into the 19th century, in a no-man’s land little explored by Brazil or its Spanish-speaking neighbors, whose commercial efforts in the area were hampered by a lack of easy export routes.

As the rubber boom grew, indigenous peoples living in the region were inevitably affected by it. The difficulty of the jungle terrain and its inhabitants’ dangerousness appear repeatedly in accounts of efforts to implant the rubber industry. Rubber camp operators often viewed Indians

as impediments to economic development, and thus to national progress—as environmental challenges to be conquered, like the dense forests and wild beasts.

Such mercenary interests got the jump on things in Acre, but a robust state presence soon followed, as the rapidly expanding global market for rubber made Acre the focus of geopolitical bickering. A brief armed conflict between Brazilian and Bolivian forces at the turn of the 20th century ended with Brazil paying to retain Acre. The region's military annexation and its management as a federal territory until 1962 would mean a starring role for the armed forces in constructing Acrean society. Comtean Positivism, elevated to a statist religion in Brazil and widespread amongst the military elite during this period, informed the government's nascent indigenist policy as it sought to guide the implantation of civilization in the jungle. Among its most influential proponents was the backlands explorer and military officer, Marechal Rondon. The namesake of Acre's neighbor state, Rondon interpreted the Positivist message of social evolution to extend to Brazil's indigenous people, and sought to bring them into the nation, sometimes literally wrapping them in the flag for photo opportunities that highlighted the Positivist motto, "Order and Progress."

Rondon's own maxim for interaction with Indians—"Die if necessary, but never kill"—chartered a bold stance for indigenists throughout Brazil; in Acre, it represented an important counter principle to those who insisted on Indians' essential otherness, and would simply kill them as so many dangerous forest beasts. As rubber tappers and Indians conflicted in Acre, there developed a class of "Indian tamers" (*amansadores de índio*) distinguished from "Indian killers" by their efforts to normalize ties with indigenous groups through establishing trade relations. At its most successful, this "taming" process, also known as "catechism," brought groups of Indians under the personal dominion of the "catechizer," who effected their rebirth as Christian persons in

Brazilian society. In the case of one famous catechizer, Felizardo Cerqueira, the personalistic character of the transformation was given literal form with the tattooing of the initials “F.C.” on the arms of many of what were called “his” Indians. While such markings have disturbing implications, some of “Felizardo’s Indians,” interviewed years later, nevertheless boasted that the tattoos were the “first documents” conferring on them Brazilian citizenship.

In this way, with a mixture of violence, paternalism, and affection, many indigenous people in Acre were brought into relationship with tapper society—that is, made from “wild Indians” into “tame” ones—through the institution of the house and the mediation of a patron-type figure.

Irineu Serra as “Big Man” / Householder

What I want to suggest with this is that discourse about Irineu Serra’s life trajectory should be understood as endorsing him as the kind of person who could head his own house, by demonstrating his relationship to persons of importance both bureaucratic and divine. Rather than catechize Indians as Felizardo did, however, Irineu Serra’s ritual practice shone a “light from the forest” upon the already-baptized, giving them rebirth within his house, not as Brazilians but as specifically Acrean people. To my mind, this way of seeing things is quite different from explaining Daimista origin discourse as easing the stigma of ayahuasca use, primarily because it focuses on the positive construction of identity, rather than the concealment of shame.

The notion that Daimistas sought to hide elements of their practice that were opposed to Brazilian cultural values and categories borrows far too much, it seems to me, from the set of assumptions that accompanies contemporary drug discourse. Among the more robust tropes of

such discourse is that “drugs” present a threat to the integrity of the nation by diminishing the moral responsibility of drug users. Such discourse has, in fact, played a role in Santo Daime cultural politics since the late 1960s and early 1970s, but I am convinced that tensions around this issue piggybacked on more fundamental questions of wildness and morality.

With the space to explore this further, I would examine more closely the presence of esoteric organizations in Acre. Of especial interest is the fact that Felizardo and Irineu Serra both belonged to the Esoteric Circle for the Communion of Thought, an international group based in Brazil, and seem to have interpreted their respective encounters with Acrean indigenusness through its teachings, particularly about misunderstood telluric forces.

The domestication of ayahuasca as Daime meant a certain indigenization of Acrean Christianity. Narrative moments like grasping the vine in Peru make clear that these forces lie across the boundary of the “other world”—in this case, the mysterious forest, and that there is power (as well as danger) in the crossing of these boundaries. Irineu Serra’s *casa*, situated between forest and city, continues to be relevant not only to the people who participate in it, but also for Acre’s efforts to identify and celebrate its own cultural identity.