

# **The Seringueiro, the Caboclo, and the Forest Queen: Origin Myths of the Santo Daime Church**

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In the popular consciousness of Acre, the history of the Santo Daime church is indissolubly linked with the rubber boom that formed the region as a political entity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has also become an officially recognized part of the region's cultural heritage in the last few decades, as the church has spread throughout Brazil and overseas. For example, the Museum of Rubber in Rio Branco, capital of the westernmost Brazilian state, contains a display reuniting the symbols of the church alongside others devoted to the material artifacts of the rubber industry and the technologies of the region's indigenous peoples. The formal white uniforms, the double-armed patriarchal cross, and the maracas shaken in church rituals are presented, along with samples of the vine and leaves used in making *ayahuasca* and a squat green-glass bottle presumably containing the sacred liquid itself. To one side there is a photograph of the church's founder, an immigrant from the Northeastern Brazilian state of Maranhão named Raimundo Irineu Serra, keeping a watchful eye over museum visitors. The presence of this display in the state-sponsored museum is evidence that the history of the Santo Daime church, despite its sometimes controversial past, is now an officially recognized part of the history of the Acre.

Although the Santo Daime church is seen as linked with rubber extraction, according to amateur historian Vera Fróes (1986) and anthropologist Clodomir Monteiro da Silva (1983), the church was formalized in the 1930s, a couple of decades after Asian plantation rubber doomed the Brazilian rubber market, and at a time when founder Irineu Serra was no longer working in the rubber trade that brought him to the region. What accounts for this anachronism?

In this paper, I argue that oral histories of the Santo Daime church's origins reference specific elements of the mainstream social and economic history of the region, which serves to position the church as an inversion of the dominant order. These narratives are intelligible when read in the context of broader histories of the region because they incorporate symbols that condense archetypal experiences of rubber tappers in Acre, and position the church and its sacrament, *ayahuasca*, as keys to contesting the order established by the system of rubber tapping. At the same time that they claim

indigenous roots, however, these histories chart distinct departures from them, depicting the church's founding as the result of an authentically Christian revelation mediated by an autochthonous brew. For those in a position to appreciate them, these stories are meaningful because they refer to structures and categories held in common, playing off of or against these to situate the church's significance.

In what follow I analyze several of these narratives, attempting to put the reader in a position to begin to understand how the histories of the church are statements about and authorizations of an identity that subverts the dominant order imposed in the Acre in rubber boom. The first several of these are oral texts collected and transcribed by Fróes, an amateur historian who is also a member of the church, and by Monteiro da Silva, an anthropologist at the Federal University of Acre in Rio Branco, the city where the church began. The last text discussed, which I collected in 2002, is from an American branch of Santo Daime. As the church expanded in the 1980s and 1990s, first within Brazil and later overseas, many details of the rubber extraction culture no longer held meaning. Thus it is not surprising that the church history told to new members in the United States draws on different cultural touchstones. In the last portion of the paper I offer some thoughts on the meaning of different narratives of the church's origins in diaspora.

### **The Caboclo and the Forest Queen**

The Brazilian histories, collected in the late 1970s or early 1980s, differ slightly in their details, but in composite tell a similar tale of Irineu Serra's introduction to ayahuasca in the border region between Brazil, Peru, and Bolivia. This is supposed to have occurred when he worked as a rubber tapper and a member of a boundary survey team in the years following his arrival in the region around 1912 (Fróes 1986, Monteiro da Silva 1983). The histories are divisible in two major episodes, which I discuss in order. First, Irineu Serra, tapping rubber in a borderlands wilderness, learns about the brew from a Peruvian *caboclo* or "peasant"; later, he has visions in which he meets the Forest Queen, whom he realizes is the same as the Virgin Mary of his own popular Catholic upbringing in the Brazilian Northeast. She gives him the mission to start a church, but first requires him to go through an initiation reminiscent of that described for mestizo shamans in Peru (Luna 1986). The Forest Queen later reveals to Irineu Serra details of what become the church's rituals, just as she "gives" him hymns and teaches him to sing. This authorizes the church practice of "receiving" hymns of divine inspiration that is the source of the hymnals that are the explicit cornerstone of the Santo Daime doctrine.

The first text, which I have translated from the Spanish, was collected by the Brazilian anthropologist Clodomir Monteiro da Silva, who included it in an appendix to an article published in 1983 (Monteiro da Silva 1983). That article is in turn a condensation of the author's master's thesis of 1981, so it is likely that the interview from which this text is excerpted occurred somewhat before that date. Monteiro da Silva does not discuss the context of elicitation, but attributes the oral testimony to a João Rodrigues, whom he identifies as the "current secretary" of the Alto Santo church of Santo Daime, and thus a person qualified to speak with authority about matters of the church. "Alto Santo" refers to the rural neighborhood to which Irineu Serra moved his church in the 1940s, when he was granted a plot of land by a Brazilian military official-cum-politician who sought his influence with the lower classes, according to Brazilian

anthropologist and Santo Daime church member Edward MacRae (1992:66). After the death of Irineu Serra in 1971, several splinter groups formed, with the Alto Santo church being recognized as more conservative and regarding itself as the true Santo Daime church. This and the other texts discussed here should, I think, be understood as semi-official histories of the church. They are collaborative productions of textual histories between church officials and researchers who are sometimes also members of the church, inscriptions of oral histories that have helped establish the authenticity of the Santo Daime church as an element of the culture of the Acre region.

### Text 1

- 1 This [ayahuasca] came from far away, it came from Peru.
- 2 In history, this drink derived from the King Uascar, it passed to the King Inca, from the King Inca to a Peruvian peasant [*caboclo*] called Pizango, from the peasant to Antonio, from Antonio Costa to him [Irineu Serra].
- 3 Nevertheless, until then it was a totally wild drink. Only men had the right to drink it.
- 4 He [Irineu Serra] wanted then to specialize in it and really dedicated himself. He subjected himself to a diet of eight days, with only bland manioc and water, without the right even to smoke, and working, cutting rubber trees, extracting the latex.
- 5 At the end of the eighth day he received what was necessary.
- 6 From then, he firmed himself and spoke with the drink itself: “If you are a drink that comes to give [a good] name to my Brazil I will take you to my Brazil; but if you are going to demoralize my Brazil I will leave you.”
- 7 He never tired of telling this to people.

(Monteiro da Silva 1983:103-4)

Several themes of this text summarizing Irineu Serra’s introduction to ayahuasca deserve notice: ayahuasca is of **foreign origin**; its transmission links Irineu Serra to a **chain of indigenous power** through an **intermediate social category**; Serra engages in a **domestication** of what was a wild brew; he undergoes an **initiation** in the context of **rubber work**; receives a **revelation**; he **invokes the nation** in **interrogating** the brew; and finally, the story bears the **mark of oral tradition**.

Before discussing these themes in more detail, I present a second text that elaborates part of this story. This text is taken from a history of the Santo Daime church written by Vera Fróes (1986), an amateur historian and leader of a Santo Daime church (MacRae 1992:67). Again, the source of the text is identified as an official of the Alto Santo church and a contemporary of Irineu Serra, “vice-president” Luis Mendes. Fróes presents the text as part of her narrative about Irineu Serra’s initiation; for her, it describes a “commitment” made “upon taking the drink for the first time with the Indians” (1986:23). This text is translated from the Portuguese.

### Text 2

- 1 “Well, I’ll drink it; if it be a thing that pleases me, that serves me, that gives [a good] name to mankind I promise to take it to my Brazil.”
- 2 Instead of seeing demons, as the caboclos affirm, Mestre Irineu saw only a cross, a cross that coursed throughout the whole world.
- 3 Later he would receive the hymnal called *Cruzeiro* [cross].

(Fróes 1986:23)

As in Text 1, Irineu Serra **invokes the nation** in **interrogating** the brew; its **foreign origin** is implied; the **domestication** of the brew is framed as a **Christianization** of what is otherwise **demoniacal**; and the “reception” of **hymns** is foreshadowed.

In broad outline, these histories depict the appropriation, domestication, and Christianization of a brew associated with the wilderness and indigenously. Read in reverse from the vantage of the time when they were inscribed in the late 1970s or early 1980s, they thus depict a movement that justifies the Santo Daime church as a legitimate part of the culture of Acre, even as they claim authority by bringing together elements of regional history in a way that is also countercultural. To understand how this is so, it is necessary to engage the consensus histories of the Acre region.

*The foreign origins of ayahuasca and ayahuasca in “My Brazil”*

From a political-economic standpoint, the Acre region, and the upper Amazon in general, acquired its shape in dialectic with the voracious international market for natural rubber in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The discovery of vulcanization, the invention of pneumatic tires, and the advent of mass produced automobiles motivated a rush to the rubber-producing regions of the Amazon that is often compared to the California gold rush of 1849. Between 1872 and 1910, according to economic historian Roberto Santos (1980:99-100), somewhere between 300,000 and 500,000 migrant Brazilian *nordestinos*—Brazilians of mixed African, Indian, and European descent—tried their luck in the Amazon.

Because Brazil had fluvial access to the rubber rich regions of the upper Amazon, it had de facto possession of lands that had been officially ceded to Peru and Bolivia in the colonial era. The regions of those countries in the lowlands east of the Andes were remote and did not provide the access necessary to remove large quantities of rubber profitably. Thus, the geography of the Amazon from the Brazilian perspective was of a western frontier, in which expansion into the upper Amazon represented the progress of the boundaries of civilization, and beyond which lay only the wilds of the headwaters and the Indian tribes. The encounter of Irineu Serra with ayahuasca on the frontier is therefore doubly an encounter with the “wild”: first because the brew is said to be of indigenous origin, but also because the frontier lay in the opposite direction of all that denoted home, the city, and civilization in general.

The “wild” nature of ayahuasca is employed in the narrative as a symbol through which to claim an alternative source of power, as I discuss below. At the same time, Irineu Serra’s “interrogation” of the drink in Text 1(6) and 2(1), where he debates whether to bring it back from the wild to the Brazilian nation, minimizes the radical difference that ayahuasca represents. The fact that the nation is invoked as “my Brazil” in both texts, and that one of the texts emphasizes that Irineu Serra “never tired” of telling

people this episode underscores its importance. I speculate that this insistence on the beneficent nature of ayahuasca, not just for ex-rubber workers or for people in general, but for *the nation of Brazil*, may have been a response to the persecution of alternative spiritual practices authorized by laws against the illegal practice of medicine and the use of “venomous substances” dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (MacRae 1992:65). It may also have been meant to reassure representatives of the state that there was nothing revolutionary in the Santo Daime doctrine. The Acre, in the political contest over its borders sparked by the profits of the rubber boom, had been briefly declared an independent republic in 1902, and revolutionary sentiments outlived the boundary settlements with Peru and Bolivia, which concluded in 1909 (Tocantins 1979).

*The category of caboclo as a link to a chain of indigenous power*

I want to be clear that in talking about the caboclo, I refer not to the individuals so labeled or attributes they have or lack, but to the label itself, as popularly understood in the Amazon. The caboclo is a social category created in the encounter between the indigenous peoples of Brazil and non-indigenous Brazilians, similar to the *mestizo* of Spanish-speaking Latin America. While the term has racial connotations, caboclo combines the senses of mixed Indian-Brazilian biology and a rural subsistence lifestyle frequently marked by patron-client relations, for which reason it is often translated as “rural peasant” (e.g., Wagley 1971:91). According to the Brazilian historian Ferreira Reis, caboclos are considered to be knowledgeable of the ways of the natural world, in harmony with their environment, products of the very earth from which they eke out their living. They are suited to working with their hands and lack ambition to accumulate goods beyond the necessities for survival (Ferreira Reis 1953:118). The caboclo is not Indian, but is the descendent of the *tapuio*, or Indians who abandoned their native ways. As such, in the popular imagination the caboclo retains an essential linkage to the Indians and to the forest, despite the use of a rural dialect of Portuguese and an ongoing participation in the capitalist economy, limited as it may be in its scope and its volume of cash flow. The caboclo mediates between Indians and others by virtue of a middle position in racial and class hierarchies, as well as by a stereotypically subsistence-extraction economy. This positioning in the field of Amazonian social space makes the caboclo a conduit for the things of the forest to move to the town, and for the things of the Indian to move to nordestinos and the other urbanized Brazilians.

In the histories of the Santo Daime church (Text 1[2], 2[2], and 3, below), the caboclo is a link between the ancient Inca kings and the Amazonian rubber tapper of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The recitation of a spiritual genealogy in Text 1(2) linking a “mixed-race” ayahuasca healer to indigenous roots is common in the upper Amazon (see Luna 1986, Gow 1994, and Taussig 1980), and closely parallels the official church history told in anniversary “sessions” of the União do Vegetal, the other well known Brazilian church that uses ayahuasca. There may in fact be a widespread tendency in South America to attribute superior spiritual or magical power to “primitive” others. For Michael Taussig, the magical power of forest Indians is the source of the healing arts of highland shamans of southwest Colombia, constituting a “hierarchy of magical power” that “parallels but inverts” the social structure imposed by colonialism (1980:230; cf. Taussig 1987).

Texts 1 and 2, understood against the consensus history of the rubber boom, suggest a similar inversion. The “typical economic form” of Amazonia, perfected in the rubber boom, was a system known in Brazil as *aviamento* (Santos 1980:158). As part of

the chain that connected the individual rubber tapper to the system of international capital (Santos 1980:156-60), *aviamento* also constituted a series of distinctions of structural positions. Under *aviamento*, international investment capital entered the country in the downriver cities of Belém and Manaus, fronted to powerful *casas aviadoras*. These companies would then front equipment and the use of steamboats to rubber camp owners, who would recruit workers, transport them upriver, and supply them with the equipment they needed to begin work as *seringueiros*, or rubber tappers. Thus, the career of a rubber tapper began with debt, paid back to the *patrão* back in rubber, a situation that frequently led to exploitation (Souza 2002:80-81). The system of *aviamento* put the *seringueiro* in the rubber camp, put the tools in his<sup>1</sup> hand to tap rubber, and put him in an international chain of social relations stretching from the forest to the streets of New York and London. His exclusion from the flow of capital, his dependence on the *patrão*, and his position as the extractor of latex let him know that he was located firmly at the bottom of this hierarchy, and that his value was the ability to produce rubber.

The marginal position of the rubber tapper was inscribed in the spatial form of the rubber camps, as well. Since Brazilian rubber extraction was never “rationalized” into plantations, rubber camps were built around the distribution of wild *Hevea* trees in the forest. Even in rubber-rich areas such as the Acre, workers had to walk great distances along *estradas*, teardrop-shaped paths looping through the forest, to cut the rubber trees and collect the latex they exuded. The estrada is often portrayed as a site of unparalleled loneliness and misery for the rubber tapper. For example, Leandro Tocantins, a Brazilian historian of the Amazon, sees in the estrada a spatial representation of the suffering and repetition of the rubber tapper’s routine, calling it “the diagram of his existence; an arbitrary coming and going, dulling. A sterile short-circuit, disheartening. His hut, always at the mouth of the estrada, is the wall of lamentations” (Tocantins 1979:166).

Yet its position at the edge of the ordered world put him in contact with the wilderness, which is the source of both rubber and ayahuasca. Text 1(4), as well as Texts 3(1,2,9,10) and 4(6), discussed below, all connect Irineu Serra’s participation in the business of rubber extraction with his introduction to ayahuasca. I argue therefore that the estrada should be understood as the fulcrum point of two inverted hierarchies: on the one hand, it placed the rubber tapper at the nadir of the system of rubber extraction, and on the other hand, it connected him to the caboclo and made him heir to the line of indigenous power symbolized by ayahuasca. I will return to this issue in discussing the initiation alluded to in Texts 1 and 2 and described more fully in Texts 3 and 4.

#### *The visions of the Forest Queen*

Text 3 gives the most detailed version I have of Irineu Serra’s vision of the Forest Queen, his initiation, and his reception of his mission from her. The text is a transcription from interviews conducted between the Acrean anthropologist Clodomir Monteiro da Silva and Sebastião Mota de Melo, who is recognized as the founder of the branch of the Santo Daime church which, in the three decades since Irineu Serra’s death, has spread throughout Brazil and overseas. This text was published in the same Spanish-language article (Monteiro da Silva 1983) as Text 1, but it also appears in a book of loosely transcribed oral statements from various contexts that was put together by an official of the church founded by Mota de Melo (Polari de Alverga 1998), which since 1983 has been based in a community created in the forests of the western Brazilian Amazon. I have translated the text from that source, since it retains Portuguese terms such as caboclo,

which is rendered as the somewhat different *campesino*—country person or peasant—in Spanish. The publication of this text in a book intended for the more literate and middle-class people who have joined the church in increasing numbers since the 1980s marks a significant moment in the church’s making of its own history. The opening of the story marks it as a part of oral lore, as does Text 1(7). To inscribe and publish a specific performance of such a story is to make it somewhat canonical, although it remains to be seen what degree of variation can be found in contemporary oral recountings of these episodes.

### Text 3

1 The story of the encounter of Mestre [Raimundo] Irineu [Serra] with the  
[Forest] Queen I don’t know well, no, but he used to tell that he was cutting  
rubber trees when he met a Peruvian who taught him to make Daime [ayahuasca]  
and drink it. So, he drank it with this Peruvian caboclo.

2 Time went by and one day, he was cutting rubber trees with another companion  
who was called Antonio Costa. Many times they would go into the woods and  
drink Daime. One day, this Antonio Costa said: “Hey Irineu, there are two girls  
here saying that we are working to be idiots!” He responded, “Tell them to come  
talk with me, as I am here to speak with them!” Then Antonio said that they sent  
word that on such-and-such a day they would be here. The Mestre responded:  
“Then on that day I will be here.”

3 On the agreed day he made the Daime and went into the wilderness... From  
time to time he heard a voice that said: “Take Daime.” He obeyed and tilted the  
mug, and said to his companion: “Look here, I already drank a mug full, and  
you?” And Antonio Costa replied, “Man, I am also already high.”

4 So Mestre Irineu grabbed the mug and drank more, and time passed, until the  
girls arrived and said to him: “*Look, you get yourself ready, really get ready,  
because on such-and-such a day a woman is coming to talk to you. She is coming  
to teach you the way for you to raise up the Doctrine.*”

5 When that day arrived, he prepared the Daime, went into the forest and started  
to drink it. In a short time he saw the clarity coming on, expanding everything,  
and shortly a woman appeared in front of him.

6 She said to him: “Do you know me?” He said, “I know you! Aren’t you a  
woman?” She said: “But, you never saw this woman, this woman here you’ve  
never seen. It is the first time you are seeing [her].” Then he asked, “What is your  
name?” She said, “Clara.” He imagined that she could be a girlfriend from his  
hometown who was named Clara, and exclaimed: “Ah! You’re my girlfriend! You  
are...you aren’t...you are...but you aren’t.” That confusion began to form in his  
mind.

7 Then she said that she wasn’t! She was the Virgin and Sovereign Mother.

8 After that, she came and showed many things to him. And she said that they  
were to meet after a fast of eight days: “During this time your food will be blandly  
cooked manioc with water; don’t put in sugar, nor salt. Have nothing of tea, just  
manioc with water... Go on, do your time and I will appear.” And he went into  
the middle of the forest, together with Antonio Costa.

- 9        During the day, the Mestre [Irineu Serra] would cut rubber trees in the woods and the other one [that is, Costa] would stay at home cooking his manioc. By the sixth day he was wobbling around, he couldn't stand anymore of that cold manioc.
- 10       When he was cutting a tree in the creek a voice said to him: "Your companion is putting salt in your manioc pan, to see if you are really wise." He laughed and said to himself, "Look, I am divining things."
- 11       He went on home and when he arrived said: "You wanted to kill me, huh? Putting salt in my manioc!" And the other, surprised, replied: "Man! Now I am happy because I know that you are really learning something. I did pretend to put some salt in the pan to see if you know, because if you didn't know, that would mean you weren't learning anything. But I am satisfied."
- 12       On the eighth day She came and turned over everything to him, who understood that Clara was a vision of the Universal Goddess, of the Forest Queen.

(Polari de Alverga 1998:63-5)

Here again are a number of the elements, in condensed form, that were already given in texts 1 and 2: the **foreign origin** of ayahuasca; its transmission to Irineu Serra through an **intermediate social category**; an **initiation** in the context of **rubber work**; the reception of a **revelation** of his mission. Yet here the link with rubber tapping is made more explicit throughout: it is the activity in which Irineu Serra is engaged when he learns to make the ayahuasca; it is the subject of the apparent taunts of the girls who foreshadow the vision of the Forest Queen; and it is the activity in which Irineu Serra spends his days while undergoing the initiation the Forest Queen mandates. There are also more details about the initiation, including a **test** by Irineu Serra's companion to gauge his learning. Before discussing these further, I present another version of this narrative, again translated from the Portuguese. This one is published in Fróes (1986), and is attributed to Luis Mendes, then-vice-president of the Alto Santo church of Santo Daime.

#### Text 4

- 1        He drank the Daime [ayahuasca] and from where he was lying he stared at the moon. It came, it came, it came, and the moon got very close to him. Now inside the moon he saw, seated on a throne, a truly divine lady.
- 2        Then she spoke to him: "Who do you think I am?" He looked and said, "For me, you are a Universal Goddess." "Do you dare call me Satan, or this or that?" "No, you are a Universal Goddess."
- 3        "What you're seeing now, do you think anyone has seen it before?" Mestre Irineu reflected and thought that someone could have seen it, since so many made the drink, and now he was seeing it. The lady then told him:
- 4        "What you are seeing now, no one has ever seen, only you. And I am going to turn this world over to you to govern. Now you will prepare yourself, because I am not going to turn it over to you now. You will undergo a preparation for you to truly deserve it: You will spend eight days eating only bland manioc, with water



- and nothing else. Also, you cannot see women, not even a skirt of a woman from a thousand meters' distance.
- 5 ...One day passed, two, three. On the fourth day he didn't need to drink the Santo Daime anymore, because he was constantly *mirando* [feeling the effects of the ayahuasca] in the wilderness. Even the sticks moved, surrounded by many colors, and little caboclos appeared everywhere...
- 6 He was returning on a rubber tree *estrada* [path connecting wild rubber trees in the forest] when Antonio Costa at home said: "I am going to test Irineu to see if he is learning. I am going to put salt in his manioc." He grabbed the salt shaker, brought it to the lip of the pan, but didn't put it in.
- 7 There in the wilderness he saw—saw, no—they told him: "Hey! Antonio Costa grabbed a pinch of salt to put in the manioc pan. He didn't put it in, but he did it to test if you would know."
- 8 So when he got home, he made fun, saying: "So you were going to put salt in the manioc, but only pretended, eh Antonio?" "Man, how did you know? Now I know you are learning."

(Fróes 1986:23-5)

*Themes of continuity and difference in the visions*

At least four themes in these narratives stand out as signs of continuity with the popular practices of ayahuasca shamanism described in the Amazonian lowlands of Peru, west of the Acre (Luna 1986). First, it is common for aspiring shamans work with an established practitioner, undergoing a period of training in which they are isolated in the forest, observe strict dietary prohibitions, particularly against salt, and drink ayahuasca frequently. Second, sexual segregation and abstinence must be strictly observed during the training period. Third, the spirits of the drink itself are supposed to be the true source of the powers gained, not the shaman's human teacher. Fourth, ayahuasca sometimes helps people who drink it to obtain knowledge of distant events. All of these elements are present in Texts 3 and 4. According to Luna (1986:52), however, mestizo shamans in Peru say that one's power grows in proportion to the length of time the diet is kept up, and "a minimum duration of six months is generally recognized as necessary." It is possible that the eight-day initiation of Irineu Serra reflects the Christian story of the creation of the universe, which closed circle on the eighth day. What is more certain is that the dietary and sexual restrictions undergone by Irineu Serra provide the charter for the contemporary rule in the Santo Daime church, easily articulated by church members if not always observed, requiring abstinence from sex and alcohol for three days before and three days after drinking ayahuasca, and recommending the avoidance of "heavy" foods, such as red meats, on the day itself. Moreover, divine inspiration is said to be the source of the ongoing elaboration of church doctrine. It is a truism within the Santo Daime church that it is the brew itself which gives access to the spiritual realm from which teachings come in the form of hymns.

While these elements of the church histories claim similarity in its use of ayahuasca with wider features of its employ in the upper Amazon basin, other aspects insist on the difference of the church's practice. This is part of the crucial semantic work done by the histories: they legitimate the church as Christian in its essence, even as it is

centered on the sacrament of ayahuasca, whose origins are marked as indigenous. I single out three interconnected axes of difference here: domestic / wild, Christian / Indian, and traditional / unprecedented.

First, in Text 1(3), it is claimed that before Irineu Serra received his mission to make a church based on the ingestion of ayahuasca, “it was a totally wild drink,” which only men could drink. (Men and women drink it together in the Santo Daime church, although they are segregated during rituals.) In bringing ayahuasca from the borderland forests where Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil meet to the city of Rio Branco in the 1920s, Irineu Serra domesticated it, appropriating it for urban life. Next, the contrast of wild and domestic becomes one between demonic and Christian in Text 2(2), where we are told that, while the caboclos affirm that the drink produces visions of “demons,” Irineu Serra’s first vision was of “a cross that coursed throughout the whole world.” Again in Text 4(2), the lady in his vision defies him to call her “Satan, or this or that.” These features all play on the contrast between the wild, heathen spirituality of the Indians and caboclos, and the popular Catholic faith Irineu Serra shared with most migrant rubber tappers in the Acre (Ferreira Reis 1953). According to Brazilian historian of religion Riolando Azzi (1978), the popular Catholicism that dominated in Brazil until the period of the Republic (1889-) formed easy links with Afro-Brazilian and Indian spiritual practices. Yet, what is depicted in these histories is not a simple matter of forming links with indigenous tradition; the narratives are also claims to a unique renewal of Christianity originating in the forest. In Text 3(6-7), for example, Irineu Serra is confused about the identity of the woman, Clara, who appears to him, thinking she may be a girlfriend from back home. She clears up his confusion (although perhaps increases ours!) when she reveals that she is the “Virgin and Sovereign Mother,” and also the “Universal Goddess” and the “Forest Queen” (Text 3[12]). The same point is made more directly in Text 4(3-4), where the Forest Queen asks Irineu Serra whether he thinks anyone has had the same vision as him before. Considering the long history of the use of ayahuasca he admits that perhaps someone has, but she insists that “[w]hat you are seeing now, no one has ever seen, only you.” In promising to turn the world over to him to govern, the Forest Queen affirms the unprecedented and foundational character of Irineu Serra’s vision. In like fashion, in narrating the origins of the church amongst themselves and to anthropologists and historians, people of authority in the church are claiming that it derives legitimacy from a unique revelation that constitutes it as a departure from all of history, even as it is based on the ostensibly ancient and indigenous practice of drinking ayahuasca.

### *The importance of rubber tapping in the visions*

I mentioned above that Texts 3 and 4 supported my contention that the church’s histories made it out to be an inversion of the dominant order of the rubber boom. Although there is a sense in which the visions in the histories claim an interruption of history in their uniqueness and otherworldly origin, yet they are also meaningful because of the way in which they employ elements of the consensus history of the Acre, and one way this happens is through the association of Irineu Serra’s initiation with the activity of rubber tapping. It is crucial to my argument here to claim that the occurrence of the initiation in the context of rubber tapping is not merely an inconsequential background to the “real events” of the narrative, but that the combination of each of the story elements is

important to its meaning. In Text 3(2) the coming of the Forest Queen is presaged by the appearance of two girls who tell Irineu Serra and his companion Antonio Costa, who are engaged in rubber tapping, that they are “are working to be idiots.” And Texts 1(4) and 3(9) further tell us that Irineu Serra spent his days tapping rubber trees even as he underwent the intense process of initiation. What is the meaning of this “background” of the apparition of the Forest Queen and Irineu Serra’s initiation, if not to suggest that rubber tapping was part of the hardship that had to be undergone in the attaining of wisdom? The initiation involved arduous restrictions on food (Texts 1[4], 3[8,9], 4[4]) and sex (Text 4[4]) and mandated continuous labor (Texts 1[4], 3[9], 4[6]), conditions that parallel the consensus history of the circumstances in rubber camps, where food and women were said to be scarce, and labor constant. The suffering and privation imposed by the labor regime of the rubber boom is thus narratively refigured as an initiation rite whose conclusion is spiritual wisdom and salvation through the practice of Santo Daime. In the same way that Irineu Serra’s initiation proves him worthy of receiving his mission from the Forest Queen (Text 4[4]), so for the audience and tellers of these histories does the suffering of the rubber camp become reframed as a steppingstone to salvation.

### **After the first visions: ayahuasca in the city and beyond**

The foregoing account of Irineu Serra’s visions has been intended, in part, to make sense of the fact that, although the narrative histories of the church’s origins focus on a period when he was still tapping rubber, the church was not formalized until the 1930s, after Irineu Serra had relocated to Rio Branco, the capital city, and given up rubber tapping for civil service and subsistence farming (Fróes 1986). I have argued that the transfer of knowledge of ayahuasca from a caboclo to Irineu Serra linked him, and by extension his followers, to a line of indigenous power portrayed as extending back in time to Incan kings. It has also been my contention that the texts I have been analyzing depict not only continuity with this lineage, but also radical difference: Irineu Serra’s vision of the Forest Queen is clearly marked in the narratives as a break from everything that came before, and as a charter for a new religion that is simultaneously Christian and based on the consumption of a sacrament of indigenous origin. At the same time, I have argued that this break with history has the capacity to be meaningful for others, who, like Irineu Serra, lived, worked, and suffered in the rubber camps, precisely because the narratives are situated in the particular historical context that many residents of Rio Branco in the 1930s would have held in common. The narratives indexed the experiences of the seringueiro, or rubber tapper, recasting lives of apparently unredeemed suffering as initiations into spiritual wisdom and salvation.

The period of development of the church as an institution in Rio Branco is much overshadowed by the narratives about its origins in the wilderness during the rubber boom era. There is much more detail available in the texts so far published about the period leading up to the church’s founding, than there is about its process of development once it began to have an institutional existence. This silence is probably purposeful, since the narrative histories of the church’s origins are more rhetorically effective when they depict an Athena-like emergence of a fully formed church from a divine source, rather than a gradual process of development implicating, and implicated by, the political and ecclesiastical context in which it took place. History, after all, is the construction of the past for the purposes of the present.

While it is not my intention here to present the “true history” of the Santo Daime church, but rather to try to understand how its specific character is partly reflected in and partly constructed by the histories of it, I turn now to a brief discussion of the period between its foundation around 1930 and the present. In doing so, I have in mind two goals. First, although my knowledge of this period is quite limited, I aim to give the reader some sense of the context and trajectory of the church as an institution. This leads up to my second aim here: to discuss, again briefly, the spread of the Santo Daime church in the last three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a means of bringing the story up to the present in order to introduce the last text I want to analyze, a history of the church constructed for American initiates.

### *The early development of Santo Daime*

With the precipitous drop of the price of rubber after 1910, as Asian plantations began producing large amounts of latex for the international market, rubber camps began to close and, facing difficulty in meeting their basic subsistence needs, many former rubber tappers moved to the urban areas of the Acre (Santos 1980:239). The first World War and the worldwide depression associated with the New York stock market crash of 1929 weakened the rubber economy still further (Coêlho 1982:72-3), inaugurating the sort of times in the Acre, as elsewhere, when people seek to understand their misery as having both a reason and an end.

In 1930, according to José das Neves, an informant of Vera Fróes identified as the “current councilor” of the Alto Santo church, Irineu Serra held the first *trabalho*, or “work” of his church (Fróes 1986:27). Most of the features that would later be used to typify the church in the Rubber Museum display were yet to be introduced: the *farda*, or church uniform; the music, featuring most prominently the maraca or gourd rattle, but also usually the guitar and often other instruments; and the hymns, which today are explicitly recognized as containing, or actually *being*, the *Doutrina*, or doctrine of the church. These elements, again according to Neves, were introduced in the years 1935-40.

The hymns are of particular interest here because of the way they indicate both continuity with and difference from the ancient line of ayahuasca use already discussed, as well as for their continuing centrality in the church. The following text, collected by Fróes and attributed to Luis Mendes, then-“secretary” of the Alto Santo church, narrates the origin of hymns within the church. Again, I have translated it from the Portuguese.

### **Text 5**

- 1        Before he had *chamadas* [“calls”] and he executed them whistling.
- 2        The first hymn he received was in a vision of the moon... One day, the Forest Queen said, “Look, I am going to give you some hymns, you will quit whistling and learn to sing.” “Oh, don’t do that, no, my lady,” said Mestre Irineu, “as I cannot sing anything.” “I will teach you!” she insisted.
- 3        Then one day he was looking at the moon and she said to him, “Now you will sing.” “But how?” asked Mestre Irineu... “Open your mouth.” “But how?” “Open your mouth, didn’t I tell you?”
- 4        He opened his mouth and started singing [the first hymn of his hymnal] “Lua Branca” [“White Moon”].

(Fróes 1986:25)

Irineu Serra, at the behest of the Forest Queen, gives up his **whistled melodies** for **hymns**. This narrative contains the same movement from a practice marked as wild and indigenous to one more domesticated and Christian that was a principal theme of the other texts already examined. Whistled or chanted melodies are a prominent part of the practices of mestizo ayahuasca shamans in Peru, and are used to call on particular spirits for assistance in healing, protection, and the like (Luna 1986). Inspired by the Forest Queen, Irineu Serra moves from these forms to hymns marked by their European rhythms (waltz, march, and mazurka) and ubiquitous references to figures of Catholic cosmology, most especially Jesus Christ the Redeemer, the Virgin Mother, and the Eternal Father. Following this initial inspiration, Irineu Serra develops a whole book of hymns called the *Cruzeiro* (Irineu Serra 1999), or Cross, as mentioned in Text 2(3). Irineu Serra's hymnal is of fundamental importance to the church, and it is sung numerous times throughout the year on designated occasions in church rituals. It is a central tenet of the church that the hymns and the music that accompanies them are "received" from the *astral*, or spiritual dimension, and are thus merely channeled through humans, not invented by them (cf. Fróes 1986:27). Most church officials since Irineu Serra have received their own hymnals, and these have permitted a sense to flourish that the church's *Doutrina* is constantly evolving and being elaborated upon. At the Alto Santo church, for example, a group of hymnals has been proclaimed to be the "Third Testament" of Christianity, while the branch founded by Sebastião Mota de Melo, from whom comes Text 3, has developed its own hymnals. The role of hymnals in the Santo Daime church deserves more attention than I can give it here. I merely reiterate that it is in the performance of the hymns that the church doctrine is said to manifest itself, and that this manifestation is a connection between the material and spiritual worlds akin to processes described in Peruvian mestizo shamanism (Luna 1986), but which are marked as a domestication and Christianization of that tradition.

Brazilian anthropologist and Santo Daime church member Edward MacRae (1992:65-6) has speculated that the process of domestication and Christianization that I have argued is a principal theme of histories of the Santo Daime church was a kind of compromise developed in response to persecution. MacRae claims, without giving details, that the church was in fact persecuted under laws against practicing unauthorized medicine and using toxic substances, as I mentioned earlier. This claim is corroborated by an interview with José das Neves, cited above on the development of the church in the 1930s, which appeared in the Federal University of Acre local history journal *Varadouro* in 1981, and which appears to be a more complete version of the interview presented in Fróes (1986). Be that as it may, the situation appears to be more complex than MacRae implies. For example, such persecutions appear to have occurred despite the close relationships between Irineu Serra and the military officers and politicians Guiomard dos Santos and Fontenele de Castro, each of whom served as governor of Acre in the 1930s and 1940s (Souza 2002:172-3). Given that Irineu Serra was close enough to these men to have been granted the land to start his Alto Santo church by dos Santos in 1945 (Fróes 1986:27), it seems likely that persecution of the church waxed and waned with shifts in political power from one party to another.

The involvement of the Catholic Church in the political scene of the Acre is likely important in the institutional history of the Santo Daime church as well, but similarly murky at present. What is clear is that the Purus river, the major route of access to the Acre, was the last of the major tributaries of the Amazon “to receive the benefits of evangelization,” as Pedro Martinello (1978:65), puts it. This Italian priest-turned historian of the Catholic Church participated in, then wrote about, the mission established in the Acre. Founded in 1920 by the Italian order Servants of Mary, this mission alienated both the lower classes and the politicians of the Acre in its early years, imposing its clerical Roman Catholicism on the popular Luso-Brazilian practice that predominated among the migrant laborers from the Northeast and criticizing regional politicians from the pulpit. While the church attained a rapprochement with the political elite in the 1940s, it was not until the Liberation Theology of the 1970s that it became really concerned with the plight of the rubber tappers and lower social classes in general (Souza 2002). From its establishment up through the 1970s the Catholic Church in the Acre zealously fought what it perceived as the moral scourge of alternative religious practices such as the Freemasons, Protestants, communists and Spiritists, preaching against them and even holding a book burning in 1945 (Souza 2002:124-5). These campaigns alienated many people in the Acre not only from the local Prelacy, but also from the Church itself (Martinello 1978:108). It seems very likely that the Santo Daime church, which was becoming more institutionalized in the late 1930s and 1940s, represented for many people in Rio Branco a locally based alternative to the foreign-run Catholic Church. Where the Servants of Mary showed little regard for the conditions of the poor people of the Acre, the Santo Daime church integrated their experience of the rubber boom and collapse into a practice that reflected Brazilian popular Catholicism as well as the indigenous sources of power that lay behind the genealogy of ayahuasca.

#### *Expansion of the Santo Daime church*

Following the death of Irineu Serra in 1971, the Santo Daime church underwent a process of division as contesting claims to succession of church leadership were advanced (Frões 1986, MacRae 1992, Polari de Alverga 1999, Mortimer 2000). In the 1960s and 1970s, government programs to encourage the “development” of the Amazon had constructed roads into the basin, making it possible to reach the Acre from the southern parts of the country without having to travel to the mouth of the Amazon and upriver. Increased access to the region also increased awareness about the Santo Daime church throughout the country, and in the 1970s a growing number of itinerant spiritual seekers from the Brazilian middle class sought out the church. One branch of the church in particular interpreted the legacy of Irineu Serra as one of extreme openness to those who came as seekers, and welcomed all comers to the community it established in the rural periphery of Rio Branco. This church, led by Sebastião Mota de Melo, was involved in a new wave of persecutions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, in the wake of which it relocated to the forest in the state of Amazonas, establishing a community on an affluent of the Purus river in 1983. Under the leadership of Mota de Melo, this branch of the church took literally the mission, announced in one of Irineu Serra’s 129 hymns, to “indoctrinate the whole world” (Irineu Serra 1999:97), and began expanding to key cities of the south in the 1980s, attracting principally middle-class Brazilians. The church’s expansion continued after Mota de Melo’s death in 1990, when leadership passed to one

of his sons, and spread overseas. Despite the often-contentious legal status of ayahuasca (which was officially condoned for religious use by the Brazilian federal government in the mid-1980s), today there are branches of the Santo Daime church in other countries in South America, as well as in Germany, Spain, Holland, France, the United States, Canada, and Japan. This membership is overwhelmingly middle class and educated, and has made the church's flagship community, Mapiá, an active pilgrimage center where they travel to reaffirm their faith, as one church official told me. The church has an official website at [www.santodaime.org](http://www.santodaime.org), where the curious can learn about the church in Portuguese and English, and initiates can access news of happenings within the church.

A result of the changes undergone by the Santo Daime church since the 1970s has been to create a sharp contrast in socioeconomic class between members of the church drawn from the local populations of the Acre and Amazonas, and those who come to it from further away. While this process has many ramifications, I offer a preliminary analysis of a church history collected from an American branch of Santo Daime, with the goal of comparing its salient elements to those already analyzed in the local narratives. My hypothesis, again, is that the specific configuration of elements in the narrative will be constitutive of its meaning, and will position the church's significance in relation to the backgrounds of its authors and audiences. This text was collected in the fall of 2002 from a church in the eastern United States, and has been edited for brevity.

### **Text 6**

- 1 The Holy Daime is a religion whose origins and center are in the Amazon rainforest of Brazil. Its historical antecedents date back at least to the Inca Indians...
- 2 According to legend, when the Spanish conquerors came to South America looking for "gold," the relatively low level of their spiritual evolution led them to seek and take the golden metal that was in abundance in that region. What they couldn't grasp was that the real gold, the golden realms of nonphysical reality that the Inca initiates could enter through their religious practices, was accessed by the drinking of a sacred tea....
- 3 [M]any Indian tribes all over the Amazon basin have extremely similar spiritual practices centering around the drinking of an almost identical sacred brew.
- 4 And until the early part of this century, these practices were exclusively the province of the Indian tribes.
- 5 In the late part of the second decade of this century, a young Brazilian man by the name of Raimundo Irineu Serra was invited by a friend to journey into Bolivia to participate in the ceremonies of a local tribe.... He participated in a number of ceremonies, interspersing them with his job as a border guard in the Amazon region of Brazil.
- 6 During one ritual he received a vision which was to lead him to the formation of the Santo Daime religion. He saw a vision of a woman in the Moon, who told him to go into the jungle by himself for a week, fast, pray and drink the sacred tea.
- 7 He did this, and to his total surprise, was informed that his mission was to establish a new spiritual path to be called the Santo (Holy) Daime.
- 8 He came to understand that the woman he was communicating with was in fact the Virgin Mary...

- 9 He also came to understand that she was instructing him to create a religion which would center around the direct experience of the divine forces contained both in the forest and in the Astral plane as a whole, through the drinking of the Divine tea up to now exclusively the province of the Indians....
- 10 He began conducting rituals, or “works,” in his home town of Rio Branco....
- 11 Over time the Daime became known as a “short cut,” a very intense, demanding path to which people are drawn whose souls are ready to take a leap and who require a very deep cleansing and healing to take it....

In summary this story presents important continuities with the Acrean church histories analyzed above: Irineu Serra learns about ayahuasca, an **indigenous brew of foreign origin**; and he has a vision of the **Virgin Mary**, who mandates an **initiation** that is followed by a **revelation** of his mission to create the Santo Daime church. All of the texts agree on the broad framework of the appropriation of an indigenous brew as the sacrament for a church with Catholic elements to it. Yet within this broad similarity, there is so much variation that it is questionable in what sense this is the same history.

There are elements both omitted and added to the American story, and some that are present with quite different emphasis. A partial list of details omitted includes: any mention of rubber tapping; introduction to ayahuasca by a caboclo from Peru; Irineu Serra’s status as a migrant; eating only manioc during the initiation; and debating whether to bring the drink back to “my Brazil.” These elements are the very same ones that provided most of the basis for my analysis of the meaning of the church in the context of the consensus histories of the Acre region. The theme of indigenusness, while present in all the texts has different connotations here. Where the domestication of the wild and the Christianization of the possibly demonic was a robust theme (Texts 1[3],2[2],4[2]) of the Brazilian versions, the American text is notably less ambivalent about the Indian origins of ayahuasca. There, the Indian is akin to the Noble Savage, more evolved spiritually than the European conquerors (Text 6[2]), who in their gross materialism failed to realize that the real “gold” to be had in the Amazon was not a metal, but “realms of nonphysical reality” made accessible by ayahuasca. This addition of the narrative of conquest gives Text 6 a much wider geographical scope, as does the invocation of the “Amazon rainforest” and the “Amazon basin” (6[1,3]).

Relative to the Brazilian narratives, then, the American history is characterized by a less detailed historical scope, and a widened geographical purview. These alterations are understandable as reflections of the rather different backgrounds and the diffuse distribution of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century wave of foreign adherents, for whom images of the Amazon rainforest and of spiritually adept Indians surely have much greater resonance than do rubber camps, estradas, and caboclos. Where the history of the Santo Daime church in the Brazilian narratives was intricately interwoven with the shared experiences of migrant rubber tappers in the Acre, the American version presented here appeals to themes with much broader currency, and which are likely to make some sense to anyone familiar with “New Age” tropes. No longer a spiritual practice developed as a kind of cure for a regional sociohistorical malaise, the Santo Daime church is recast in the American narrative as a spiritual “short cut” which draws people from diverse backgrounds “whose souls are ready to take a leap” (Text 6[11]).



## Conclusions

In this paper I have tried to show how the origin stories of the Santo Daime church are not senseless and fantastic myths in a pejorative sense, but rather are understandable in the context of consensus narratives of Acrean history. The themes of the caboclo and the Forest Queen are powerful elements of a symbolic alchemy in which the inferior position of the rubber tapper is transmuted into a position of spiritual privilege through the link ayahuasca provides to a line of ancient indigenous wisdom.

For ex-rubber tappers in the post-rubber boom Acre, the story of Irineu Serra's encounter with ayahuasca made otherwise unredeemed suffering into an initiation to wisdom and a chance for salvation through participation in the Santo Daime church. It spoke directly to their experience as migrant laborers in the rubber camps, forming a cohesive narrative link between the popular Catholicism they brought from the Northeast and a local spirituality grounded in the indigenous sacrament of the church. As the church spread throughout Brazil and eventually overseas in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many of the details that made the narrative histories of the church meaningful in its original context were left aside, in favor of a more general narrative that invokes ideas of indigenosity, of the Amazon as a place of spiritual power, and of ayahuasca as an intense "spiritual short-cut" appropriate for certain people.

Given the way I have set up the analysis in this paper, it would be easy to see the "original" practitioners of the Santo Daime church as more authentic than the foreign adherents who have joined the church more recently, since a major theme of my argument has been that there was a detailed congruence between representations of the sociohistorical process in the Acre and the formation of the church. For the overseas members, who might be called the "third wave" (after the contemporaries of Irineu Serra and the Brazilian initiates of the 1970s), it would seem that meaning of the church is less a product of their shared experiences, less germane to their position in the global economy, and therefore inauthentic or even exploitative. Indeed, Roger Bastide (1978[1960]) has made just this kind of argument in comparing the middle-class *umbanda* groups from southern Brazil with the *candomblé* of Northeastern Brazil. For him, the *candomblé* is an authentic adaptation of African spirituality to the oppressive conditions of the Northeastern sugar plantation economy, while *umbanda* is an appropriation of Afro-Brazilian symbols, such as spirit possession, which lacks a substantive connection to the relations of production of its practitioners. Alternatively, one might conceive of even the "first wave" of the Santo Daime church as a usurpation of symbols of indigenosity that is "ethnologically spurious," as American anthropologist Weston LaBarre (1975[1938]:xiv) has labeled non-indigenous use of peyote.

Neither of these perspectives is satisfactory, however, because each of them sets up a practice as authentic, as against another practice that is not (Handler and Linnekin 1984). LaBarre, for example, insisted on seeing the "peyote cult" as an expression of a deeply-rooted pan-Indian "narcotic complex," which kept him from what I think is the more interesting discussion of the late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-rise of the peyote churches as part of the creation of pan-Indianism, rather than an as expression of it.

What is needed, however, is more than the declaration that, since any practice is inauthentic by virtue of being constructed, all practices are authentic by virtue of expressing their context. The American narrative of the origins of the Santo Daime church needs to be contextualized with other middle-class, Western appropriations of

exotic or indigenous others, such as the “modern primitive” movement discussed by Rosenblatt (1997). If the participation of foreigners in the Santo Daime church speaks more to their own culture than to that of the South American indigenes and rubber tappers, as Rosenblatt claims of the tattooed and pierced “modern primitives,” what does it say? The American narrative should not be evaluated in light of the Brazilian context, but in terms of the logic of its culture of origin, and of the practices of those who produced it.

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#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> While there were certainly female rubber tappers in later years, the consensus history of the rubber boom, claims that “future seringueiros in the golden era of rubber almost never brought families” with them (Coelho 1982:74). Likewise, in the early days women are supposed to have been scarce in the rubber camps and objects of much jealous dispute (Tocantins 1979:166), but clearly there were women in rubber camps, as tappers, prostitutes, and wives—sometimes kidnapped Indians (Souza 2002:37-38).

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