

## Ayahuasca and the Vines of Politics – Danny Nemu<sup>1</sup>

After bubbling away quietly for centuries in the Amazon, ayahuasca began seeping out through the foliage. A powerful visionary tea and traditional tool of the indigenous medicine man, ayahuasca was adopted by rubber tappers who arrived in what is now the Brazil-Bolivia-Peru borderland during the rubber boom at the turn of the 20th century. Various syncretic sects emerged, including Daime, a mix of folk Catholicism, indigenous shamanism and European esotericism, where practitioners celebrate the saints' days by drinking ayahuasca and singing devotional hymns around a central altar. The practice spread around Brazil in the 80s, then to the USA and Canada, through Europe and as far as Japan, where I encountered it in the early years of the millennium. Like other "ayahuasca religions" with an international profile, such as the União de Vegetal (UDV), Daime has been subject to legal challenges, sensationalistic media reports and religious persecution fuelled by prohibitionist agendas and antipathy towards new religious movements.

One of the active components of ayahuasca is DMT, which is common in nature, produced by over 200 known plants, and acting as a neurotransmitter in rat brains (Strassman, 2013). Its presence in human blood and urine suggests that it is likely produced in the human brain as well (Riceberg and van Vunakis, 1978). Over 200 plant species contain DMT, many of them growing wild and profusely or sold in garden centres. Daimistas cook the leaves of one of these, *Psychotropia viridis*, together with the *Bansiteriopsis caapi* vine to make sacramental ayahuasca, or Daime. The vine, called King Jagube, is beaten with mallets by twelve men in rhythmical unison, singing hymns or maintaining a reverent silence. Put poetically, King Jagube wakes up the Queen in the leaf, which gives light to those who consecrate the tea. Biochemically speaking, DMT is orally inactive, being broken down quickly by monoamine oxidase enzymes. The enzymes are inhibited, however, by harmaline and other compounds in the vine, allowing DMT to produce its visionary and inspirational effects on the brain.

While DMT is internationally scheduled under the 1971 Single Convention on Psychotropic Substances, the law on ayahuasca is unclear. During the first European court case, where Dutch Daimistas were charged with possession and transportation of DMT in 2001, the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) sent a fax attesting that plants containing DMT were not prohibited, and neither were "preparations of these plants, including ayahuasca" (Labate & Feeney, 2011). The court did not accept the logic of this fax, but acquitted the defendants nevertheless on the grounds of religious freedom. Religious freedom may be curtailed where it threatens health, morals or public order, but the prosecution did not demonstrate that this was the case. The ruling was upheld in February 2007 by the Dutch High Court, noting that "the strictly regulated conditions in which use occurs are a safeguard against misuse" (Waterman, 2007). Ritual norms govern the production, transportation, storage and administration of sacrament.

Attempts to control ayahuasca date back to the colonial period, when missionaries in the Amazon judged it to be demonic along with the rest of indigenous culture; but the first modern confrontation took place in the 1930s. Raimundo Irineu Serra (hereafter and forever after 'Mestre') originally encountered ayahuasca in Peru when working as a rubber tapper, and brought it back to Brazil, into a Brazilian Christian context, re-Christening it Daime and constructing a communal ritual around it. Mestre was a devout Catholic before and after encountering ayahuasca, but he was also very tall and very black in a very short, very traditional and conservative part of Brazil. Inevitably, he and his small group of followers aroused suspicion, and accusations of demonic practices were made. His community was surrounded by soldiers under orders to shut it down (Mendes, date unknown).

The group resisted and Mestre was arrested, but he made a favourable impression during interrogations – so favourable that Governor Santos awarded him a site in Rio Branco to build a

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church, Alto Santo, which stands (and dances) to this day (Maia, date unknown). Mestre later became a police corporal, and stories are still told of this impeccable seven-foot giant curing diseases, dispensing wisdom, and occasionally knocking out wife-beaters and knife-wielding drunkards with deft swings of his belt. Today in Rio Branco you can catch a bus with 'Irineu Serra' on the front, going to the district named in his honour.

Ayahuasca quickly became part of the local cultural landscape. In 1965, the Secretary of Health and Social Services of Acre declared there were no objections to ritual use (De Araújo Neto, 2008), and the church received government recognition in 1971 (Labate & Feeney, 2011). In the 1980s, however, as Daime spread to other states, *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine was hastily scheduled, but it soon became clear that this was a breach of protocol. The Ministry of Health and the Federal Council on Narcotics appointed experts to conduct a battery of tests on “sociological, anthropological, chemical, medical and general health aspects” of the ayahuasca religions (CONFEN, 1985). In a series of visits to several communities, the commission braved stingray-infested streams and other ordeals:

*“The liquid is brownish, with an extremely acrid, repulsive and nauseating taste which, in both our cases, provoked serious nausea and vomiting. In my case, it also caused serious diarrhoea.”*

The research took two years, and was extensive, scientific, even erudite, with quotes from St. Thomas Aquinas and Lévi-Strauss. No evidence of harm was uncovered in the entire history of the three sects studied; all were judged to be legitimate expressions of religion. The report also warned against use of the pejorative term “hallucination”, and noted that great care was taken to ensure that ayahuasca is only consumed in ritual. Diarrhoea notwithstanding, they found plenty of good things to report:

*“Moral and ethical standards of behaviour, similar in every respect to those which exist and are recommended in our society, are observed within the various sects, at times in an even stricter manner. Respect for the law always appeared to be emphasized... The ritual use of the tea does not appear to be disruptive or to have adverse effects upon the social interactions of the various sects' followers. On the contrary, it appears to orient them towards seeking social contentment in an orderly and productive manner.”* [my translation]

The ban was suspended in February 1986, with the panel recommending further tests (CONFEN; 1986).

After years of exhaustive test-tube shaking and psychometric testing, a 2002 statute was issued, endorsing the ayahuasca religions and formally recognising their cultural and spiritual value. Further clarifications were agreed upon in 2010, banning commercialisation and advertising, and recommending further research into therapeutic applications (Labate & Feeney, 2011). This degree of official recognition indicates a commitment to the protection of Brazilian culture in the face of rapid industrialisation and social change, but Brazil has been more guarded elsewhere. For example, the Minister of Culture petitioned the government in 2008 to recognise ayahuasca as cultural patrimony of Brazil, as are certain colonial buildings, Afro-Brazilian religions and artistic forms (Labate & Goldstein, 2008). That petition is still under consideration, though Brazil's neighbour Peru granted ayahuasca the status of cultural patrimony that same year, using wording that would be unthinkable in the context of the legislation of the global north:

*“That plant is known in the indigenous Amazon world as a sage or teacher plant, showing initiates the very fundamentals of the world and its components. The effects of its consumption constitute the gateway to the spiritual world and its secrets... [It is] indispensable to those who assume the role of privileged carriers of these cultures.”* (National Directorial Resolution No, 836 2008)

Peru also stipulated, when entering the 1971 UN Single Convention, that an exemption be made for ayahuasca; Brazil did not. Bolivia went as far as withdrawing from the Convention in order to re-enter with an exemption for coca leaves. Despite sanctioning the religious use of ayahuasca at home, Brazil is reticent to challenge prejudices held abroad, which indicates the strength of prohibitionist position in the international arena.

Daime groups operated discreetly and unmolested in the UK from the mid-90s, receiving sacrament clearly labelled as Santo Daime by post, and paying import duties on it. In its debut in the UK press, the great Amazonian purgative posed a question mentally to a journalist from *The Independent* attending a session: “Why are you here?” His response - “Writing a story” – did not seem to him to be satisfactory, and a better answer remained elusive. Indeed, his experience was somewhat confusing, as it can be sometimes even for veterans. He did, however, briefly experience life as a tree. He was respectful in the article he wrote, as most people are after a session, but it did contain a few errors, including the assumption that the religion proselytizes (Marshall, 1996). In fact, talking Daime up outside of the circle is called “propagandising” and a serious faux-pas, and extending an invitation is strictly forbidden. Newcomers must approach the Daime from their own volition, and for their own motives.

The next article came in 2001, when journalist Alex Bellos travelled to Rio Branco, visiting a brothel one night and an ayahuasca church the next:

My daime was not working. So I went outside and swigged another cup. Seconds later I flipped. I stumbled around like a drunk and began a hallucinatory trip. I became scared of the church and tried to leave, but members of the happy-clappy congregation said that I should stay since my spirit would be protected.

Weird things started happening to my body... Then my jaw began to move uncontrollably. I doubted my own identity and momentarily I forgot if I was a man or a woman

He concludes his article with a grumble about “cheap sex and dangerous drugs”, but he was well looked after (at the church if not at the brothel), with practitioners ensuring that he only left when he was in a fit state (Bellos, 2001). He slept with the lights on and wrote a less than complimentary article; but the effects of ayahuasca, indeed the effects of self-reflection, can take some time to sink in, and in 2005 he returned for more, this time praising the “gentle, kind and thoughtful” members of the community (Bellos, 2005). Subsequent articles in the British press generally followed suit, beginning with confusion, nausea or terror and concluding with a respectful call for tolerance, asking “why shouldn’t they do what they do?” (Boggan, 2008)

The authorities were less open-minded. In August 2009, customs officials across Europe began seizing ayahuasca and its raw ingredients, and seven UK practitioners were arrested. Two were charged with conspiracy to evade a ban on the importation of Class A drugs, a crime carrying a sentence of seven years. Assets were frozen, passports were confiscated. One defendant was tagged for a time, the other was effectively excluded from her profession as a social worker. *The Sun* ran “Mind-busting Jungle Drug Hits UK”, claiming that purified DMT was set to “become a bigger menace than crystal meth” (*The Sun*, 2010). *The Argus* published a defamatory piece online, spuriously linking a death to ayahuasca, though the woman had in childbirth due to an unrelated aneurysm, and not having drunk ayahuasca. That report was challenged by academics and taken down.

Media reports varied wildly. The most scandalous surrounded Peter Aziz, who was not a Daimista but an independent practitioner of sorts - his website claimed that he could cure cancer, that the sticks he sold contained the spirits of dragons and dakinis and so on (Aziz). In a documentary called “Trust me I’m a healer” he exhibited dragon’s eggs from other dimensions, sang Arabic chants and jumped around his ritual giggling as his clients screamed. He was charged with production and supply of

Class A drugs after another TV exposé in 2007 featured him taking money and his patients throwing up in a disused hotel in Weston-Super-Mare. The judge conceded that he had genuinely helped sick people, but concluded saying that "you knew it was wrong to produce this drug and you knew it was wrong to supply it, but produce and supply it you did." (Morris, 2011) This line, which would not have been out of place in a Victorian morality tale, is not entirely accurate. Aziz had sought information from the Home Office in writing well before his arrest, and the Home Office had not been able to provide it:

"I cannot say with any degree of certainty whether or not anyone would be prosecuted for possessing a plant containing DMT which is in its natural state, as there is a great deal of uncertainty around the issue and ultimately it would be for the courts to decide." (Edwards 2007)

In spite of the legal principle whereby people should not be sentenced under unclear laws, Aziz was given fifteen months in September 2011. Less than four months later, however, he was released, just before the Daime trial began.

After postponing the case for two and a half years, and spending perhaps hundreds of thousands of pounds of public funds, the Crown Prosecution Service went to court to announce that there was no evidence, leaving Daime in legal limbo. With no ruling there is nothing to appeal against, and taking a case to the European Court of Human Rights would require sums which are not available. The authorities have communicated that they will arrest anyone who tries to import sacrament, so Daimistas have substituted water for ayahuasca, and approach the divine with prayer, candles, reverence, and even sick buckets. The current remains strong, but not so strong that we forget our genders.

The defendants asked for the return of their sacrament, and received a response including a double misspelling of the word N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), on the headed paper of the Serious Crime and Terrorism division (a department that one might hope favoured officers with an eye for detail). The petition was denied, and a comment issued that the sacrament had degraded and was not fit for human consumption; but are they fit to make that judgement, if they can neither spell it nor prosecute it? Daime can be difficult to swallow at the best of times, but the US group happily drank their brew after it had been fermenting in DEA custody for nine years.

The US authorities entered the fray in 1999 as might be expected, sending DEA agents with attack rifles to raid the house of church elder Jonathan Goldman. They questioned his adult children in his absence, and when he arrived he was handcuffed and taken into custody. Twelve hours later he was released without charge, with a warning to desist (Mukasey, 2008). After nine years of petitioning the Justice Department to return his brew, he sued. In the meantime, the UDV had successfully sued the US Food and Drug Administration in 2002 for unlawfully seizing their ayahuasca. The Supreme Court upheld their religious freedom in 2006, but the ruling pertained to the UDV only; ayahuasca remained a controlled substance subject to extremely strict protocols, with hairnets and hygienic measures in the jungle, high-security storehouses and government agents performing tests in the US (Labate & Feeney 2011). In Goldman's case, the agent's affidavit documented how he had discovered eighteen plastic jugs containing 400 gallons of Daime, and carried said 400 gallons (i.e. 1.7 tonnes) to his pick-up truck (Mukasey, 2008). One often hears fantastical tales around ayahuasca, but the DEA agent's superhuman strength and magical vessels stretch credulity.

The judge was not convinced, and ruled that Daime was protected under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). The DEA was permanently "enjoined from applying or enforcing any of the laws, regulations, and treaties that govern the legal importation and distribution of Schedule I substances for the purpose of prohibiting, preventing, unduly delaying, or otherwise interfering with Plaintiffs religious use of Daime" (Meyer 2006). Since then there have been no convictions in the US, though a Colombian shaman was arrested in 2010 for possession of ayahuasca at George Bush

International Airport. He was released after one month amidst an international outcry, and though this represents a victory of sorts, charges were probably dropped because the defence had such a strong case. As in the UK Daime case, an opportunity to set a court precedent may have been lost (Oquendo, 2010).

Like the US Constitution, the European Convention on Human Rights upholds “the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion”, and this is what Dutch lawyers argued in 2001. Charges against two Spanish Daimistas were also dropped after a Brazilian bishop protested that it “would seriously violate religious freedom and the God given human dignity of those people who wish to practice this Christian religion for any government to arrest Church members.” (Don Mauro, 2000) But different cases are decided on different legal principles. An Italian prosecution collapsed in 2005 when the brew was found to contain only 0.064% DMT, less than a tenth of the amount in dry *Psychotropia viridis* leaves; consequently the judge did not consider the preparation of Daime to be a process of concentration (Menozzi, 2004). A French defendant was also acquitted around the same time on the grounds of the original INCB fax, but four months later both the ingredients and the preparation were scheduled as “sectoidal”, suggesting that ayahuasca could be an instrument of cultic brainwashing (Labate & Feeney, 2011). Notoriously intolerant on matters of religious freedom, France remains the only European country to put ayahuasca on the banned list, but the law is being contested. After a second Daime prosecution in May 2013 came to nothing, the defendants appealed against the law; over a year later the question remains open.

Ireland was the first country where a Daime case lead to a conviction, but the initial Monaghan District Court sentence was reduced drastically in 2008 after judicial review by the High Court. The fine was reduced from €5000 to €300, the three months jail sentence was dropped, and the destruction of the sacrament was postponed while a constitutional case was brought against the government for violation of the defendant’s religious freedoms (O’ Dea, 2008).

Brazil has a vibrant religious culture and a vast array of sects and shamans, mediums, healers and exorcists; but while it may appear at first glance to be a country still governed by superstition, the facts suggest otherwise. On the question of ayahuasca, the government commissioned experts from every relevant science to study the religions as practiced. The legislature followed the advice of the experts, as is proper in any democratically functioning society based on reason, and ayahuasca took its place as a respected and protected component of the Brazilian cultural milieu. But does the political machine in Britain live up to the ideals of rationalism, humanism, and science which were born here?

In 2009, Professor David Nutt was sacked as head of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), after announcing that the government’s decision to reclassify cannabis was irrational given the actual harms involved. The following year two more ACMD scientists resigned, stating that the decision to ban mephedrone was driven not by scientific evidence but by sensationalistic media reports; these included errors on Wikipedia and hoaxes reported as facts, such as a teenager ripping his scrotum off and 180 schoolchildren going off sick from one school (Lancet, 2010; Davy, 2010). Two deaths were attributed to mephedrone in March. The ban went through in April and still stands, despite toxicology reports in May revealing that the deceased had not taken the drug (BBC, 2010).

When Tony Blair banned magic mushrooms without consulting the ACMD, he broke the law of the land, but changes in the law passed in 2011 mean that the Secretary of State may legally declare any substance to be a controlled drug without consulting a single expert; the stipulation that ACMD members be scientists was quietly removed from British law in a little-noticed amendment buried in the miscellaneous section of the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act. The police were given powers to detain, search, seize and dispose of property accordingly (UK Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act, 2011). This extension of discretionary power represents a serious erosion of the Rule of Law.

Daimistas welcome scientific investigation, because when you watch 90 year-old women dancing and playing maraca for twelve hours straight through the Amazonian night, and note the absence of dementia or decrepitude in these seasoned psychonauts, it seems absurd to suggest that Daime damages one's health. The UDV cites "*ciencia*" in the service of spiritual evolution as one of its guiding principles (Labate BC, Meyer M & Anderson, B, 2009 ), and its members took part in the widely-cited and peer-reviewed Hoasca Project. They scored above average in tests of memory, recall, attention and verbal ability, and were found to be more optimistic, gregarious and confident than sibling controls (McKenna et al, 1999).

Science of a sort does inform European policy. Since May 2011, herbal medicines have been subject to the same tests as pharmaceuticals (EU Directive, 2004). Costing in the region of £100,000 per product, which is affordable for Glaxo-Smith-Klein, this effectively prices cottage industries out of the medical marketplace. The justification is that herbal remedies, like pharmaceutical products, could cause harm, which of course they can; but tested medicines may not be any safer. Pharmaceuticals, properly prescribed at normal doses in American hospitals, caused "serious adverse reactions" in 6.7% of cases, and kill around 100,000 Americans per year (Lazarou et al, 1998). Herbal medicines have, like ayahuasca, been used for millennia by doctors and grandmothers who are familiar with their dangers. Aspirin, by contrast, you can buy in the shop like sweets, without a prescription, despite the fact that a third of people admitted to hospital vomiting blood have recently taken it at a normal dose (Bertouch, 2002). Meadowsweet, from which the acetylsalicylic acid in Aspirin was originally sourced, is subject to the UN directive. Unlike Aspirin, it does not cause ulcers, because it also produces compounds which protect the stomach from the acid; such is the mystery of this remedy (Brown, 2001). Herbalists have found ways of labelling herbs to evade the rules; but this inevitably reduces the quality of both product and information.

When considering a ban on a traditional Amazonian medicine, the Brazilian government footed the bill to study it, but the considerably richer European Union demands that small companies pay impossible sums. This is not to contest specific claims that harm has been caused, but to meet standards set by a system which purports to be scientific - but the system has political and commercial dimensions which cannot be ignored, and the history of the AMCD illustrates how quietly expert scientific opinion can be removed from the debate. Harms have not emerged in nearly a century of Daime's history, but the debate over ayahuasca is not driven by reason. Nor is it a religious issue, because England is a secular country (and besides, the Bible prohibits murder and ham, not drugs). Do the authorities share *The Sun's* simple assumption that drugs are bad, and that war should be waged against bad things?

The reality is further complicated because both psychoactives and mysticism tend to attract problematic people in the first place. Given the right context, meditative or psychoactive practices can help alleviate the problems of just these individuals (as evidenced by the extremely positive results from studies into MDMA-assisted therapy for PTSD). Dr. Gabor Maté's high success rate in treating addiction with the help of a traditional shaman makes a good case for further study, but his project was closed down (Ellam, 2011; also Lucas, 2011). Drug War legislation means that while it is fairly easy for curious individuals with no understanding of preparation, dosage or ceremony to buy ayahuasca or its ingredients, experienced practitioners put themselves at great risk by organising ceremonies.

The UK arrests were part of a wave including over thirty in Spain, more in Belgium, Argentina, Chile, and two in Peru for exportation. The Spanish courts accepted the INCB's 2001 fax stipulating that ayahuasca was not scheduled. Charges were dropped in Belgium. One of very few people who was incarcerated was Alberto Varela, a Messianic Argentine who was taking out adverts and offering ayahuasca to anyone who wanted it, including children, to whom he offered special rates. He was held for 14 months in Spain before being cleared of any charges (Varela, 2014). The overwhelming majority of ayahuasca practitioners agree with the authorities that this kind of thing is terribly unwise.

The exploding popularity of ayahuasca poses problems, not least because an unscrupulous ‘shaman’ can earn the equivalent of a year’s worth of his father’s wages in an evening by administering tea to gringos with rose-tinted spectacles. Sexual ethics and expectations can also differ greatly between Burning Man festival and the Amazon rainforest, and the jungle has its own dangers unrelated to ayahuasca. While the vine has never been directly implicated in a toxic reaction, admixtures including tobacco and datura might be.

That said, the popularity of ayahuasca is unlikely to diminish any time soon. Many journalists encounter something fantastic, whether looking for spiritual secrets, scientific data, political policy or a scoop; and sometimes a reporter’s agenda changes very suddenly (because as a wise old Daimista said, “you” only drink Daime once). *National Geographic*’s most popular feature ever was a glowing report from a correspondent who overcame her long term depression during a trip to Peru (Salek, 2006). TV celebrity Bruce Parry emerged from one of the first ever televised ayahuasca sessions humbler, wiser, and grateful for “one of the most profound experiences imaginable (or more correctly unimaginable as it is almost defined by its inexplicability!)” (Parry, 2008) What other story is intrinsically ineffable? FOX News was effervescent, citing “many thousands of cases in which people have been healed of physical, mental and emotional disorders, and many curious cases of recovery from grave and even fatal disorders” (Kilham, 2011). Many Daimistas could relate, having escaped suicidal depression or abusive relationships, or lives of crime, or crippling medical conditions such as recurrent migraines, even terminal cancer diagnoses. Positive stories do appear in the media; but never with the same impact as tales of tragedy and scandal.

The arrests and subsequent events in Chile shed light on the delicate nature of the situation, and how the press influences the debate. In 2009, police raided a ceremony waving guns, and arrested the man running the session (ICEERS, 2012). He was attacked savagely in the press, and ayahuasca was vilified as a harmful drug with high abuse potential. The International Center of Ethnobotanical Education Research and Service (ICEERS) helped organise a conference in Chile, where expert witnesses gathered to present up-to-date research to Chilean ministers and policy makers. They also acted as expert witnesses in the trial. Consequently, the judge found that ayahuasca was not dangerous, not covered by the 1971 Convention, and, for the first time in law, that it had therapeutic benefits. Charges were dropped. The mainstream media reported nothing.

Ayahuasca only returned to the Chilean newspapers after the horrific murder of a 3-day old baby thrown on a fire by members of an apocalyptic cult. The media reported that the members had drunk ayahuasca at the ritual, and a book described how the leader, who was the child’s father “took perversity to the level of therapeutic art and built a sect on meditations, punches and ayahuasca” (Foxley, 2013). In fact, the group had not drunk ayahuasca during the ritual. The leader sometimes drank it himself, and had given it to a few selected followers in the weeks before the murder; but by the time ayahuasca was used he had already established a compliant sect engaged in a wide range of ghastly perversities. The Chilean media continues to be both inaccurate and highly sensationalised, more recently attributing another two teenage deaths to ayahuasca. It later emerged that their cocktail of alcohol and drugs did not contain ayahuasca; but the Chilean Public Health Institute is considering scheduling it regardless.

Similarly Health Canada responded to a Daime group applying for a permission to import sacrament by repeating an error circulated in the media about “a death in Canada as a result of the ceremonial use of Daime tea”. The tragic death was in fact that of a 71-year old First Nations elder, during a shamanic ritual held as part of a cultural exchange with Shuar Indians. Criminal charges were brought, including those of Trafficking in a Controlled Substance and Administering a Noxious Substance. The substance in question was harmaline, as the *natem* brew he prepared, unlike Daime tea, did not contain DMT. The shaman pleaded guilty, but in the event the autopsy found the cause of death to be not harmaline but “acute nicotine intoxication”, as a result of the purgative tobacco she had received (Tupper, 2011). Canadian customs first seized Daime tea in 2000. Cordial negotiations

led to Health Canada offering to grant an exemption if the Brazilian government granted permission to export (Rochester, 2009). Brazil did no such thing, however, and the offer was retracted. Exportation of Daime from Brazil remains complex, and changeable; delegates from legally-registered churches overseas have sometimes been prevented from taking the sacrament home, despite presenting all the documentation required by law. Again, this may reflect a difference in the attitudes of Brazilian policy makers regarding the situation at home and abroad.

When the press runs stories linking ayahuasca to death, sexual abuse and madness, the damage to its reputation is real, though the attribution may be spurious. Consequently government officials, who are not normally experts on ayahuasca, are concerned about the consequences of allowing its use. In 2010, the international report published by the INCB noted for the first time that ayahuasca and other plants, when used outside of their traditional contexts, are associated with “various serious health risks (both physical and psychological) and even with death”. The Board advised that governments “remain vigilant and... that appropriate action be taken at the national level where the situation so requires” (INCB, 2010). The advice was reiterated in the 2012 report, again ignoring scientific evidence about lack of toxicity, low abuse potential, therapeutic promise, and the long-standing existence of groups outside of the Amazon using ayahuasca safely for spiritual purposes (INCB, 2012).

At the time of writing, a Lithuanian Daimista is facing charges carrying a minimum sentence of two years. He was convicted by a local court and served 40 days, until his solicitor managed to free him and make an appeal to a higher court. A religious freedoms defence has not been allowed, and he is awaiting his verdict. Elsewhere in Europe, Daimistas and other ayahuasqueros have either suspended their practice or continue at risk, but despite all this there is some cause for optimism. The DEA has recently taken the unprecedented step of awarding permits to two US Daime centres in Los Angeles and Baltimore without being ordered to by the courts, and in the UK the UDV are confident that their application for a license fulfils the necessary legal requirements.

Attitudes towards drugs generally, and psychedelics in particular, also seem to be shifting. Decades passed with almost no human psychedelic research approvals granted, but that changed in 2011; and already ayahuasca is showing great promise for a wide variety of physical and emotional disturbances, such as depression, Hepatitis C, asthma and chronic pain (Schmid, 2010), and in my own case it treated a serious and potentially fatal leishmaniasis infection. Former UK Home Office minister Bob Ainsworth described current drug policy as “nothing short of a disaster”, and has joined Jimmy Carter and a growing list of Nobel Laureates and heads of state both current and former to lobby for a rethink (Hope, 2010). Neither Uruguay nor Colorado has much to report since legalising marijuana last year except increased tax revenues and decreased crime rates (Wallis, 2014). After 13 years, Portugal’s experiment in decriminalising all drugs has occasioned neither a crime wave nor a crisis of addiction (Hollersen, 2013). All this has an impact on world opinion, and perhaps states will grow bolder, following the lead of Peru and Bolivia in challenging the logic of the War on Drugs.

At least some of the media reports into calamities befalling unfortunate drinkers are becoming more nuanced, leveling blame at a negligent shaman or a hit and run driver, rather than the ayahuasca itself. After a tragedy in Colombia in 2012, for example, *The Daily Mail* was not atypical in reporting that the 18-year old had died “from exceeding the dosage of a medicinal brew called Ayahuasca” (Farberov, 2012). But most of the reports of a man who drowned during a ayahuasca session with a hypnotherapist in Northern California commented on the facilitator’s negligence, rather than blaming ayahuasca (Fruchtnicht, 2014). Hopefully this is part of a trend in media discourse, moving towards a more balanced approach as the brew becomes less exotic and more commonly discussed in public. Ayahuasca is going mainstream, with all the good and bad that that brings, with documentaries and feature films, *Blueberry* and *Avatar*, articles, travellers tales, and plenty of shamans walking paths to some strange places. This June ayahuasca was described in the fashion section of the New York Times as “exceedingly trendy”, and the article concluded with: “It was cool, but what did I learn from it?” (NYT, 2014)



There is plenty to learn, of course. Ayahuasca, like any power tool, requires a degree of composure if it is to be put to good use, and the ayahuasca world is beginning to compose itself. Groups like ICEERS are organizing conferences and creating internal regulatory systems, making lists of best practices and practitioners across the traditions. While it is no easy task to catch every cowboy, this could be the beginning of something very positive, especially for those taking their first few steps into the unknown. Top-down prohibition drives practitioners underground; if there is a way to limit the influence of messianic crackpots and reduce the number of outrageous headlines, it is through education and self-regulation, not prohibition.

People are drawn to liminal experiences regardless of the law, and journalists are drawn to sensational stories. In the great majority of cases, ayahuasca leaves people feeling sensational, brimming with health, inspiration, and trust in the benevolent forces at play in the universe.

Ayahuasca often provokes confusion and nausea when the drinker is unfamiliar with it, as if body and mind try to reject it for fear of being overwhelmed; but most people leave a session feeling much better for the purge. With time the ride becomes easier. Perhaps the body politic has struggled and retched enough, and is beginning to consider the benefits of this marvelous brew, whilst also being a little less hyperbolic about its positives. Politics, legal processes and practitioners can be inconsistent, but ayahuasca is consistent, responding according to how it is approached, returning terror or wonder in kind. Given half a chance, ayahuasca can dismantle restrictive frames of reference, and in the space that opens up, such arbitrary concerns as legal code become completely immaterial. This freedom demands, however, that the ayahuasca community produces an ethical framework to occupy the vacuum.

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He is particularly interested in the sociology of scientific knowledge, the relationship between occidental and traditional medicine, and the processes of appropriation and translation at the interface between traditional, scientific and therapeutic approaches to ayahuasca. He was on the legal team for the UK Santo Daime cases, and the librarian of the Ayahuasca Academia List.

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