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## Between Ecstasy and Reason: A Symbolic Interpretation of UDV Trance

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### Introduction

The following discussion takes up symbolic elaborations of myth and ritual as expressive channels for institutional meanings activated by the psychoactive sacrament used in the União do Vegetal, an ayahuasca religion born in Brazilian Amazonia. Called *vegetal* or *hoasca*, the decoction is prepared with the leaf of *Psychotria viridis* and the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, which contain, respectively, the alkaloid dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and the beta-carbolines harmine, harmaline, and tetrahydroharmine. The vine's alkaloids inhibit the action of monoamine oxidase (MAO) produced in the human organism, which prevents the psychoactive effects of the leaf's DMT when it is taken orally. Thus, both substances are active constituents in the human body.

I take the definition of the group's use of the drink as an elaboration central to the religion's theology, which is based on the category of *burracheira* (the desired effect of the drink), and whose teachings effect a linkage of archaic and modern cosmologies. I emphasize this movement's efficacy in attracting middle-class adherents, the social segment in which religiosity is most notably expanding.

Known as a "religion of the forest," the União do Vegetal has, in its historical formation, a hybrid constitution among three sociocultural spaces that have contributed to the construction of its form of trance: Amazonian rubber camps, Porto Velho (capital of Rondônia state) and Brazil's center-south region. In the early 1970s, during the military

dictatorship, middle-class youths from Christian families—often identified with the counterculture, the theater, leftist political movements, backpackers, students, and so on—left São Paulo and Brasília in search of unusual experiences, embarking on journeys, described in adventurous tones, to the Brazilian states of Acre and Rondônia to try the ancient tea (Lodi, 2004). Along with their bags, they brought back tales of transformative experiences, the fruit of the spirituality born from the call of a mysterious drink. These youths—today in their fifties and sixties—hold, along with the individuals “from the origins” (the “*caboclos*”<sup>2</sup> from Amazônia), the highest offices within the UDV hierarchy.

The founders of the UDV centers in Brazil’s major cities belong to a socioeconomic segment different from the one that was gathered in Acre and Rondônia during the period in question; one formed primarily of semi-literate individuals, ex-rubber tappers who were experiencing rapid transformation of the rustic culture in which they lived.

The meeting of distinct social classes, with the economically more powerful class placing itself under the indoctrination of the less favored one, was a union that bridged the gap between groups with conflicting interests. The indoctrinating *caboclos*, with their forest experience, exercised a fascination on the young travellers in the 1970s who, in an inversion of Brazilian social structure, viewed them as *mestres*. The group’s self-representation turns on three fundamental axes: a valorization of nature and of the rural world, expressed in the “*caboclo* culture” of the “*mestres* from the origin”—the contemporaries of the founder—performatized in ecological mysticism and “*caboclo* simplicity”; a legalistic internal organization based on the bureaucratic logic of the state, which provides a positive model of routinized and rationalized action (Weber, 1999); and forms of communication that interpellate the subject by means of its interiority, through the centrality of “self-knowledge” as a spiritual and moral goal of the adept.

The production of UDV trance (the *burracheira*), takes place through a process of reinvention and rearticulation of meanings that frequently blur boundaries when the goal is to compose a legitimated whole (Montero, 1994). The present discussion aims to analyze the productive tension arising from the multiple inheritances lending meaning to the use of ayahuasca in this group, constituted through resonances among various systems and codes (Carneiro da Cunha, 1998).

The UDV was officially founded in 1961, in the Sunta rubber camp on the Bolivian border with the state of Rondônia in northern Brazil. The religious journey of José Gabriel includes the manipulation of extraordinary forces (Fabiano, 2012), and service as an *ogã* [a close assistant of the leader—*trans.*] in an Afro-Brazilian *terreiro* (Brissac, 1999), and at a *mesa de cura* [a form of spiritual healing séance—*trans.*] in the rubber camp, where he incorporated entities (Goulart, 2004). The UDV's founding represents a break with his Afro-Indian-Brazilian past, and the establishment of a form of trance centered on his messianic figure.

I believe that the hybridism between magical and religious knowledge is organized hierarchically, depending on the context, between the elements of forest mystique and a bureaucratized, ascetic morality (Goulart, 2004), an argument to which I will return after description and analysis of the ritual. In what follows, I invert the canonical logic of anthropology, where the myth comes before the ritual, and, in order to facilitate symbolic interpretation of the *burracheira*, I use the capillarity between the two in a model description of UDV ritual.

### **The Ritual and the Myth**

Data for the analysis were collected in ethnographic fieldwork, conducted between 2006 and 2008, that was the basis for my doctoral thesis.<sup>3</sup> The ritual form used as a reference is that of the “scale sessions,”<sup>4</sup> which are held on the first and third Saturday of every month

in each “nucleus” or administrative unit, as the space for religious activities is known. The “vegetal hall” [*salão do vegetal*] is illuminated by various electric lights, which, with the generally light-colored floor and walls, create an environment similar to that of an auditorium, where a ritual scene similar to an assembly takes place.

The ritual scene is composed of disciples dressed in forest-green shirts with distinction embroidered upon the left pocket, a sign of the “place” of each one in the hierarchical structure. Men wear white pants, and women wear orange pants or skirts, all of them with immaculately white socks and shoes. The green, yellow, blue, and white colors of the uniform, according to a founding *mestre*, clearly refer to the colors of the Brazilian flag. In its public discourse, the União do Vegetal emphasizes patriotism and respect for authority, and on commemorative dates, the flag is hoisted to the sound of the UDV anthem.

The ritual scene is arrayed around a table adorned with an arch at one of its heads, from which the *mestre* who is “conducting the session” speaks. On the arch is written DIVINE STAR UDV UNIVERSAL; the one who conducts the session speaks beneath it—a place conferred upon disciples in the “Instructive session” who are able to connect to the force that comes from the heights (the “power” [*poder*]) and to transmit it in words, opening a channel for the “light that orients, comes from God, and is for all.” Once the session is open, whether the disciple is male or female,<sup>5</sup> beneath the arch he or she is called “*mestre*” and referred to, invariably, with masculine pronouns. To be chosen to “direct” [*dirigir*] a session is to be in a position where the disciple has privileged access to the “light and force” [*a luz e a força*] of the spiritual guide. A firm and loving performance is expected, with skillful control of one’s thoughts during the *burracheira*, knowledge of the doctrine, choice of the correct words in the transmission of teachings, willingness to answer questions posed by members, and knowing what can and cannot be said.

Behind the arch on the table, a line of chairs abutting the wall is occupied by members with distinct spiritual responsibility, nearly always destined for “graduated” [*graduados*] members (Instructive Corps, Counsel Corps, and Cadre of *Mestres*), who constitute a kind of “connecting wire” [*fio de ligação*], an invisible current supporting the “progress of the session” [*andamento da sessão*].

The chairs around the table are filled by members who are not implicated in the support provided by the “wire” behind the arch, but they also confer distinction. It is expected that disciples who are invited or who obtain permission to sit there know how to behave themselves appropriately. The other chairs in the hall may be used by members of any hierarchical grade and by “visitors.”

At precisely eight o’clock in the evening, the Assistant *mestre* announces, in a firm voice, “All stand to receive the *vegetal*.” It is the Assistant’s responsibility to attend to the smallest details of the movements of those present to guarantee the due progress of the session, a function considered fundamental to the activity of the *mestre Dirigente* (Directing *mestre*).

The *vegetal* is distributed in a hierarchically-organized line, from the *mestres* to any “visitors.” The disciple is advised to drink the tea with open eyes. At the *sessões de escala*, ingestion follows the same order as distribution, beginning with those who make up the “Instructive” corps. The cup is held in the right hand, at shoulder height, and an invocation is said: “May God guide us on the path of light, forever and always, amen Jesus.” After this, the “others” drink: that is, the Cadre of Members [*Quadro de Sócios*]<sup>4</sup> and non-members, using the same invocation. Following the “distribution of the vegetal,” a member selected beforehand announces: “*My brothers, I ask your attention to a set of documents that govern the União do Vegetal*,” and begins reading passages from the organization’s documents, to be followed by another, higher up in the group’s structure, who gives an “explanation” of what

is read. This phase lasts, on average, about 25 minutes, and provides guidance both within and outside of the session.

The text that is read excerpts the UDV's Statutes and Articles of Incorporation [*o Estatuto e o Regimento Interno*]. The reading in session underlines aspects of the relations among members, and between them and the institution, as well as some key points of cosmology related to the *Mestre* and to the “mysteries” of the drink. Following the reading and explanation of the documents—an obligatory part of the *sessão de escala*—absolute silence reigns in the hall, broken only by the voice of the session leader, who intones the series of “opening *chamadas*” during a period of about 15 minutes, depending on the length of silence between one *chamada* and the next. *Chamadas* are devotional chants, performed a cappella, similar to those used to invoke the presence of spiritual beings in Afro-Indian-Brazilian sects such as *Pajelança Cabocla* (Galvão, 1952), Bahian *Candomblé* (Bastide, 1958), Amazonian *Mesinha de cura* (Gabriel, 1980) and Northeastern *Jurema* (Assunção, 2006).

The sequence of *chamadas* begins with *Sombreira*, *Estrondou na Barra*, and *Minguarana*. The *Chamada do Sombreira* tells of the “shadow” that comes with the “light,” a reference to the negative side of being revealed by the divine light. *Estrondou na Barra* evokes the force of the mythic figure *Tiuaco*, “the great king in the hall of the vegetal,” marshal of King Inca, consubstantialized in the *mariri* vine. *Minguarana* is divine nature, which, through the appeal of the session's guiding *mestre*, grants the power to “see” the “mysteries” to those who have not yet attained the condition to “enter.” Mestre Gabriel, in telling the Story of Hoasca, explains this *chamada*. He explains that when he performs it, he is not calling [*chamando*]<sup>6</sup> but rather teaching “how to call when it is needed, teaching those who do not yet have this right” how to access it at the source. In the midst of this invocation,

one hears a series of verses that mention Jesus and the Most Holy Mother covering all with her mantle and, lastly, the “oratory” is opened “with the Divine Holy Spirit.”

The session leader stands and, walking counterclockwise (the “direction of the force”), asks those closest to the table: “How are you, brother (sister)? Is there light? Is there *burracheira*?” The effect of the series of questions, answered positively, is to “turn on the force.” “I now ask those whom I have not yet asked: Is there light? Is there *burracheira*?” The *mestre* sits once more and performs the *Chamada do Caiano*, a reference to the “first *hoasqueiro*,” invoked to illuminate his “*caianinhos*” [“little Caianos”] and give them “degree” [*grau*], a hierarchical category expressing a member’s evolution through spiritual principles and levels of status. Mestre Caiano is called to guide those present, and to influence the *mestre* conducting the session, who, by means of the extraordinary contact represented by the arch on the table, is able to see what appears on the “spiritual plane.”

The next *chamada* reflects a particular hierarchical principle with respect to the others, indicating its importance: the *Chamada da União* must be done by the Representative of the nucleus, whether he is leading or not, except when the session is conducted by a *mestre* superior<sup>5</sup> to him. This is the *chamada* of the union of the *mariri* and the *chacrona*—the vine and leaf that compose the sacred tea—with the *mariri* as the “king of force” and the *chacrona* “queen of light.” The initial phase of the session concludes with the *chamada* of *Guarnição* [“Garrison”]. The first verse suggests recognition and solicitation: “My first *mestre* is God, the second is Solomon, author of all science, give us thy protection [*guarnição*].”

The opening *chamadas* are obligatory, and as the session proceeds, others are “done” [*feitas*]. The sequence is not random: “it guides the disciple within the session,” teaching the path of spirituality, understood as a way to access one’s “evolution” [*evolução*], a term that points to Kardecist cycles of reincarnation, distinguished from Hindu *karma* by its correspondence to the principles of Christian morality.

The session's rhythm grows in effervescence under the influence of the a cappella canticles and their imagetic elaborations of enchanted nature, a valued aspect of members' experience, and one that should be complemented, according to doctrine, by normative suppositions regarding consciousness and behavior. It is the adept's duty to seek the "science of the self" [*a ciência de si*], and not an encounter with the spirits of others, incarnated or disincarnated. This self-centered exhortation, however, for all its frequency in ritual, does not elide the value of the *chamadas* that activate the "spiritual battalion" of the *Mestre*—the mythic figures whose help is sought in the course of the session because of their curative properties (Brissac, 1999; Goulart, 2004).

Instrumental music played on the sound system joins other *chamadas* in filling out the ritual sequence, in which auditory phenomena are capable of transformation into myriad images and unforeseeable scenes. The exuberant esthetic of the *chamadas* contrasts with the subsequent phase, expressed in pedagogical language, relating to the moral teachings that permeate the play of question-and-answer in the sessions.

Around nine o'clock, the *mestre Dirigente* announces that the session is open to whomever would like "to call [that is, perform a *chamada*], to speak, to ask, just ask permission." Without delay comes a voice:

"*Mestre?*"

"*Yes.*"

"*Sir, will you permit me to ask a question?*"

"*Yes, sir (madam). You may ask.*"

The question must be asked standing up, and afterward, one returns to the initial position. Topics may include the *chamadas* performed, and, if a "Story" [*História*] is told, questions should prioritize its exegesis. Existential questions, dear to the principles of the *doutrina*, are frequently heard. Oral expression is expected to be straightforward and simple.



Word choice in the hall is very important, demonstrating one's knowledge of the power that sound-images have, and the care that must therefore be paid to it. In the "time of the *burracheira*," "the word frees," and the mind speaks from within, from the heart, in contrast to the "ego," a term that designates behavior that is inauthentic to the human essence, a spurious sentiment brought about by error.

The use of undesirable forms of speech is corrected by the leader, and the question must be rephrased, as the "*burracheira* is guided by the word," according to doctrine. Protecting oneself and others is the role of everyone under "the light and force of the *vegetal*" and a value that demands emphasis on the disciple's verbal apprenticeship. The disciple must "examine" words that are charged with "mystery" [*mistério*] to understand their true meaning. The symbolic system attributes concreteness to sound-images, transforming them in action; be it the rationalized word of institutional documents or the enchanted word of the *chamadas*, the act of verbal expression is a potentializing force in the elaboration of ritual (Munn, 1976; Leenhardt, 1979; Tambiah, 1985).

"*Mestre*, what is obedience?" was a recurrent question, around which answers tended toward the following counsel: in life, a person is always obeying something; what is important is knowing what (or whom) one is obeying. On the one side is imperfection, which brings pain and suffering, and on the other is the reward that comes from the "straight path."

The *burracheira* presents itself to the disciple as a privileged channel in the process of the "spiritual journey," where one is obligated to self-reflection. To see oneself, according to doctrine, the person should begin with the family circle and relations of friendship. The ideological triad "work, family, and religion" points to solid affective links as a precondition for one's development in the world.

Various explanations exist for the lack of *burracheira* and the appropriate steps for a member to take in this situation. In any case, more concentration in the session is advised, as

well as quieting the mind to be sensitive to the *vegetal*, and having more confidence in the *Mestre*. The absence of *burracheira* is also playfully attributed to those with “thick hides,” whose layers of hurt, resentment, and other negative feelings impede the work of interior “examination” facilitated by the *vegetal*. For them, repeated sessions may be needed for the work of the *Mestre* in the person’s consciousness to be carried out, little by little.

I have heard *mestres*, imbued with the simplicity and clarity inherited from the *mestres* “from the origin,” say during a session that disciples with a “thick shell” should drink more, that the quantity should be greater, “you shouldn’t be afraid.” I have also heard from adepts that the absence of *burracheira* indicates a lack of “worthiness” [*merecimento*], and that for this reason, the *Mestre* did not offer the “strange force.”

In sessions, the expression “at the *mestre*’s discretion” [*“a critério do mestre”*] is sometimes appropriated to account for the absence of *burracheira*, since, if the *Mestre* “has wisdom,” is “in the tea,” if “he gives what a person deserves and can withstand,” as adepts say, this would explain the will of the founder in denying *burracheira* to those who, out of personal resistance, do not allow self-examination. Other times, the lack of *burracheira* is an illusion on the part of one who, out of anticipation to see a prior experience repeated, lacks the sensitivity to perceive what is, at that very moment, being “reached” [*alcançado*].

“Let’s go, my brothers, let us ask ... we are the ones who make the session,” “the grade of the session is our responsibility,” I heard on occasions of the “high time of *burracheira*” in the hall, when the leader spurred the audience to participate. A thematic link should run through questions posed during the session, since, with the exception of superficial queries that are answered quickly (with mention of their impropriety, at times), it is a time of indoctrination. *Chamadas* are invoked in answer, or to add to or enrich an explanation, whether dealing with the mythic or everyday frame. The *mestre* may perform them himself, or he may ask someone to do it; there are also those who ask permission to “do

a *chamada*,” which should be followed by several seconds of silence, as the “force” continues “circulating through the hall of the *vegetal*.”

If the subject under consideration peters out, other lines of questioning become possible, and in the interval, the Directing *mestre* may choose to play smoothly melodious music. Pop songs authorized for play in the session are selected based on the “mystery of the word,” are usually in Portuguese, and carry positive existential messages and beautiful imagery.

Frequently, the *mestre* refuses to answer a question about *chamadas* or *histórias* presented in the session, explaining that such a topic can only be discussed in an Instructive session, owing to the care necessary with the “memory,” a term of initiatory significance referring to the remembering of the spirit’s journey in the world under the *Mestre*’s teachings, and leading to “knowledge of oneself.” The disciple must await the next “degree session” (the Instructive session), or, in the case of the Cadre of Members, keep “examining” until arrival at the “place” to achieve the answer.

Illusion, vice, mistake, and error are common themes of questions and of testimonies—both volunteered and solicited by the *mestre*—as are patience, confidence, work, and above all, family. To “become better” is to “evolve spiritually,” which is possible through searching one’s “consciousness,” the “science of oneself.”

According to the UDV’s “Fundamentals and Objectives,” “The tea facilitates mental interiorization, producing clarity of consciousness and heightening perception” (Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal [CEBUDV], 1989, p. 30). The constant search for “clarity” demonstrates the desire to “evolve” and to “better” oneself, a personal decision that is highly valued, and awakened and amplified by the *burracheira*. The intention of the disciple is, ideally, to want to know, to want to see “reality”—a constant in testimonies of those who transformed themselves through “the teachings of the *Mestre*.”

Knowledge of oneself is spiritual knowledge, and the affect is primordial, integrating the being in the world in relationship to everything that is. The weight and intensity of contact with the elements of the cosmos make steadfastness of intent and action indispensable. “*For the Union, what is right is right, and what is wrong is wrong; what is right cannot be wrong*” (A Palavra do Mestre, n.d. [CD recording circulated among members]). The doctrine exhorts “steadfastness of thought” [*firmeza no pensamento*], underlining the importance of lessening doubt through acquaintance with the good and the bad.

Discussion of administrative issues begins the closing of the session. The appointed secretary stands at the side of the table and reads a text, written in bureaucratic language, relating the Center’s announcements and communicating occasional warnings, demotions, suspensions, or the reassignment of members to their “place” in the hierarchy.

The practical and administrative matters raised by the organization’s officials continue as organizers of activities announce the “events” [*promoções*] to be held at the centers as a way to raise funds for the Administrative Unit: there are luncheons, book clubs, expositions, workshops, guided tours, etc. Tasks to be done around the grounds of the nucleus or outside it are discussed in order to prioritize what is most urgent; once this is done, volunteer labor is requested.

Around 11:30, the conclusion begins with the announcement that the time has come for all to sit up, shake their heads, and open their eyes, as it is time to “bid the force farewell.” At that point, the session leader walks clockwise through the hall, opposing the direction of the “force,” and asks, addressing one of those questioned before:

“*How is the brother (sister)? How was the burraqueira?*”

“Well, thank God” and “It was good” are the ritual responses.

Then the leader says: “*All those whom I didn’t ask, I ask now: How was the burracheira?*” and the disciples respond, “*it was good,*” in a sequence that “bids farewell to the force,” with Minguarana carrying away the visions and the *burracheira*.

The disciple who offered explanations earlier announces the levying of the “tithe” [*dizimo*], an unspecified sum to be paid by those who vomited in the hall, and which is meant to cover the cost of buying cleaning supplies, which is not included in the monthly dues. Some disciples arise, and deposit small amounts of money in the container on the table. There follows an interval of several minutes, during which those assigned to snack duty begin to work; people get up, converse, exchange hugs, sit in others’ chairs, stand around, laugh, cry, go to the bathroom, or simply stay in their places.

At five minutes before midnight, a bell is heard, and all return to their seats, assuming a posture of respectful silence. The *chamada* “Stroke of Midnight” [“Ponto da Meia Noite”] is intoned, highlighting the passage of time and the arrival of a new day. Some announcements may still be made at this time, following which the *mestre* closes the ritual [*fecha o oratório*] with the Divine Holy Spirit, and a slow and marked “A-Deus” [lit., “to God”] ends the session.

## **The Myth**

The History of Hoasca is held to be the story that tells what is most important to the doctrine, and becoming familiar with this and other narratives of the UDV motivates members self-identified as ones who “want to know the origin of things.” The male *conselheiro*, to obtain the “degree of *mestre*” enters an “application”; that is, he submits himself to evaluation of his personal and institutional conduct, and, if approved, advances to the final phase, reciting the History of Hoasca in a session. If the ritual performance is successful, he “receives” a shirt with the Star embroidered on the breast at a subsequent

session. In addition to the History of Hoasca, a *mestre* must have command of certain liturgical procedures, such as “opening” and “closing” a session, but it is the performance of the narrative about the origins of *vegetal* and the reincarnations of the *Mestre* that will determine the ascension of the *conselheiro* to the degree of *mestre*.

In interviews and informal conversations, I suspended emphasis on the anthropological value of the myth, scrutinizing instead reception of the ritual assertion of its historicity, and observed various perspectives. I saw how affirmations lacking what modern science defines as “objective truth” were perceived in a group of bureaucrats, journalists, therapists, academics, doctors—in short, among members of the “affluent middle class” of the nucleus where I focused my work, in the Federal District, the site of Brazil’s capital, Brasília.

The variety of informants’ positions with respect to the historicity of the myth is not ritually shared, and may be summarized as follows: there are those dedicated to confirming the historicity of the tale, propounding other, unofficial temporal registers; most commonly, they described themselves as “examining” the question. For others, if the story is important because it teaches values, its verifiability is irrelevant. For a smaller group, the History of Hoasca is a myth, and Mestre Gabriel a great shaman, able to synthesize Brazilian religiosity.

The UDV origin myth narrates the journey of the tea on earth, linking it intrinsically with the history of the spiritual journey of the founder, Mestre Gabriel. It is told at commemorative sessions (open to visitors), or at the discretion of the *mestre* who leads the session. It was recorded in Mestre Gabriel’s own voice,<sup>6</sup> and is divided into four parts, interspersed with passages from some of the opening *chamadas*, which tell the stories of figures from the UDV cosmology, and generally feature reciprocal transformations between the spirits of humans and non-humans.

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“Before the universal deluge,” there was a King called Inca, who governed wisely, thanks to the counsel of his mysterious Counselor Hoasca, who knew all. One day, Hoasca died, and the King, stricken with grief, buried her. From Hoasca’s grave was born a tree that the King reckoned was Hoasca, and thus he called it. He made a tea from the leaves of the tree, and gave it to his marshal, Tiuaco, in an effort to help the latter discover the secrets of the Counselor. Feeling the presence of Hoasca, Tiuaco succumbed and died. He was buried next to the King’s Counselor, from whence grew a vine. The kingdom, after the King’s death, grew deserted.

Many years passed, and Solomon, King of Science, heard the story of King Inca and his Counselor, and went, along with his vassal, Caiano, to find the graves. He found the tree and vine growing there, and recognized them as Hoasca and Tiuaco. Solomon announced the vegetal union [*união do vegetal*] and exclaimed, “The *mariri* will give us strength, and the *chacrona* will give us light.”

Solomon taught Caiano the mysteries of divine nature. He made a tea from the plants and, intoning magisterial words asking that he encounter the powers of Hoasca, he offered it to Caiano. Caiano drank the *vegetal*, felt the force of Hoasca come near, began to suffocate and, following Solomon’s teachings, “called” [*chamou*] for Tiuaco, “the great king in the hall of *vegetal*.” Caiano also learned the secrets of Divine Nature, gaining the ability to open the enchantments of Minguarana to him, but only through the power of the request. Thus Caiano became “the first *hoasqueiro*.”

Ages later, the spirit of Caiano, which is the same as that of King Inca, returned to Peru with the name Iagora [“What Now”], whom all call on in times of need. Iagora is an

indigenous emperor born after Christ, and who “calls” on Jesus and the Virgin of Conception. Known as King Inca because he told the story of King Inca and his Counselor Hoasca, Iagora was beheaded by disciples who rebelled and went out in the world, originating the “*mestres* of curiosity,” who lack “knowledge.”

The return of the spirit in its fourth incarnation happened in Bahia, and José Gabriel, a simple man of the people living in an Amazonian rubber camp, “remembers” his “mission”: to “balance the *vegetal*.” He becomes *Mestre*, opens “the oratory with the Divine Holy Spirit,” and explains that oratory is to pray [*orar*], to explain, to say what is necessary. He teaches that, when we need to, we call: “I call Caiano, I call *burracheira*.” Gabriel teaches, but he doesn’t call, because “Caiano am I, the *burracheira* am I...” At the end of the narrative is heard, in the *Mestre*’s voice, “*Burracheira* means strange force; that is why I do not have *burracheira*...because I am the *burracheira* and nothing is strange to me...”

### **An Interpretation of the Myth**

We see that Hoasca and Tiuaco exist prior to the components of the drink. This means that the leaf and vine are generated by spiritual beings, updating the cosmological principle of the spirit’s preeminence over matter. The tea called *vegetal*, as a fount of knowledge, configures successive transformations and unions: the esoteric mystery of Hoasca’s feminine wisdom transmuted by the leaf of the *chacrona*, from which comes the “light”; the marshal Tiuaco, a mixture of indigenous knowledge fused with the military authority of a marshal, transmuted by the *mariri* vine, source of the “force.”

The Counselor and the Marshal symbolize the chemistry of the drink’s components: Hoasca gave life to the leaf responsible for the visionary effect which, according to doctrine, is the feminine principle, the “light”; Tiuaco is translated as the masculine principle, the “force.” Tiuaco is a figure with a double function, as his presence is prerequisite to the action



of Hoasca's power, in addition to contributing his "force" to it—a metaphor for the betacarbolinic alkaloid of the vine, responsible for the intense effect "on the matter" [*na matéria*], among them, the "purge" of the tea, symbolized as "cleaning."

According to the myth's logic, when the *vegetal* is prepared, the spiritual components of the leaf and vine receive meanings given by Solomon, demiurge and catalyzer, as "Solomon is the key to the Union," since the *vegetal* implies something beyond the "light and force"—namely, the "wisdom" [*sabedoria*] and "knowledge" [conhecimento] tied to it. Therefore, beyond mere chemistry or pure experience, the normative precepts given to Caiano by Solomon are fundamental, and internally differentiate the UDV from that which is called "curiosity": incomplete knowledge, external to the institution. The term "curious" [*curiosas*] arises among the *caboclos* of the Lower Amazon as a reference to the work of midwives, who were said to know more than the doctors, "due in part to a special knowledge that most of the *curiosas* believe they have" (Galvão, 1952, p. 116). "Curiosity," like magic, can be understood as a category that indicates the power to manipulate forces not articulated in a systematized order, being first a power generated by anarchic means.

In its third incarnation, the *Mestre*'s spirit returns to Peru as the King Iagora, an Amerindian, yet part of the Christian conquest, as he is imbued with the logic that he inserts in the *chamada* "Minguarana" in reference to the Virgin of Conception and to Jesus. Iagora is killed by his subjects, who break the unity, "creating force" instead of following the "creative force"—a reference to the "curious," followers of another spirituality, distant from the "high spiritism" with which the brotherhood identifies. Internally, "high spiritism" is identified as "auto-spiritism," generator of "self-knowledge" and not related to the "low spiritism" used in religious discourse as a category of accusation (Maggie, 1977; Ortiz, 1978; Giumbelli, 1997).

"Curiosity" is perhaps the clearest of the conflicts projected on the myth, and is opposed to the "Science of Solomon," generating classificatory effects between the

institution and groups not sharing a “knowledge” defined by an essence of the social as a form of opposition to the profane (Douglas, 1986), an “ungoverned use of *vegetal*.” The fourth incarnation of King Inca takes place in Bahia, and José Gabriel comes along, with the mission of “balancing” the *vegetal*. Gabriel says, in the origin narrative, “I came to open the oratory with the Divine Holy Spirit,” emphasizing the Christian quality of his mission and the importance of orality in transmitting divine knowledge. The Christianization of this magical-religious practice may have been influenced by the strong presence of Pentecostal evangelizing missions on the border with Bolivia (Vilaça, 2002), where Gabriel lived in the 1940s and 1950s.

King Inca, Caiano, Iagora, and Gabriel are aspects [“*destacamentos*”] of the same spirit, but the latter three are distinct from the first because they drank the *vegetal* and became *Mestres*. While King Inca depended on the counsel of Hoasca, the other aspects of this spirit came, thanks to Solomon, to have direct access to the source of knowledge, exercising a power over it. The History of Hoasca ends with the affirmation that Gabriel himself is the *burracheira*. There we can see that *Mestre* and *burracheira* have a metonymic relationship that was not present with Caiano and Iagora. This is the revelation that the powers of the *vegetal* depend upon the presence of the *Mestre*’s spirit in the tea—a spirit that is consubstantialized in various entities.

The identification of Solomon as the King of Science amongst rubber-tapper *ayahuasqueiros* in Brazilian Amazonia is also recognized in Santo Daime, in the form of a star. In Brazil, King Solomon is a well-known entity in the *giras* of Catimbó, the Northeastern Jurema (Assunção, 2006), constituting an element common to both Afro-Indian-Brazilian mediumistic trance and to the urban matrices of Brazilian ayahuasca use. Native discourse seems to associate King Solomon with Masonic tradition, a link sometimes replicated in academic work (Goulart, 2004). However, according to his contemporaries,

Mestre Gabriel “worked” [*trabalhava*] at mediumistic consultations in the rubber camps, and in Porto Velho he was *ogã* at the *terreiro* of Chica Macaxeira, precursor of the Afro-Brazilian tradition of *Tambor de Mina* in the capital of Rondônia, in northern Brazil (Brissac, 1999).

The penetration of the Biblical king in mediumistic sects, which do not hold the Christians’ sacred book as canonical, can be illustrated by the book of Solomon, which features Babylonian and Chaldean magic, demonstrating Solomon’s non-Christian wisdom (Sachs, 1988), a quality that Le Goff (1999) finds in records regarding this king of the Jews. Thus, the author of three Biblical texts—Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Wisdom—partakes, fundamentally, of the vast religious content that José Gabriel elaborated in forming the UDV.

Key passages for understanding the UDV myth can be found in the Bible, which offer clues as to the kind of relationship between Solomon and Hoasca, the mysterious Counselor of King Inca. At the end of Song of Songs, two verses figure as an apology: a man rejoices because he has a grape vine (his wife) that is worth more than the best vineyard of Solomon (Song of Songs 8:11-12), an allegorical form for knowledge anthropomorphized as a woman. In the Bible (Wisdom 7:14), that which Solomon obtained from the feminine-spirit-turned-wife-and-counselor takes us to that which Hoasca possessed, tracing a parallel between both feminine entities as sources for producing intoxicating liquids. Hoasca is the principle of knowledge—its anthropomorphization—as well as the wife of Solomon, offered to him by God. King Inca did not have the privilege of possessing his counselor; she was another, apart from him.

With the possession of feminine figures by Solomon in both myths, king and wisdom become a single thing; as the King of Science says, “I went about seeking how to take her to me” (*Wisdom* 8:18). This “knowledge” that makes him king includes religion and state, but it

has mystique at its source—that is, the mysteries of nature as an expression of Law, of Wisdom, and of Justice.

King Inca owes the power to govern with wisdom to the “knowledge” of Hoasca, the mysterious female namesake of the sacramental object. Recalling Weber (1946), for whom the kingdom is a consequence of charismatic heroism, extraordinary knowledge resides in Hoasca, which makes the King “victorious.” In the UDV, the religious power of Solomon transmits an instituted order that seems to say that it falls to men to complete the knowledge begun by women, which suggests an inextricable, yet hierarchical, relationship<sup>7</sup> between Nature and Knowledge. Thus, the transfer of Hoasca’s powers and mysteries is exclusively to beings of the masculine sex, who alone may reach the “degree” of *mestre* in the UDV. The veridical quality of the myth justifies the exclusion of women from the “degree of *mestre*,” along with their valued function as counselor in support of the *mestre*.

### **By Way of Conclusion**

In the following, I take up again central aspects of UDV theology anchored in trance, and I emphasize the fecundity of religious and non-religious influences in the growth of the institution among the middle class in Brazil and the world. By founding the UDV at the start of the 1960s, Mestre Gabriel made a symbolic break with his Afro-Indian-Brazilian past (Brissac, 1999; Fabiano, 2012), organizing an ecstatic ritual oriented by the doctrine of “spiritual evolution” through “consciousness of self” and of self-control that catapults the adept through degrees of the stratified order. It is possible to glimpse, in this passage through various spiritualist influences, a reduction in emphasis on the cure of the body in favor of curing the spirit, in a religious enterprise identified with the concepts of evolution and progress, through which it is legitimated.

The UDV has, in its veins, the mark of its first disciples’ desire for ascension and recognition; laborers in the capital of the state of Rondônia, in the 1960s, they incorporated

elements of military and state organization in the group's ritual and hierarchy. This symbolism would be reinforced during a process of rapid institutional growth, beginning in the mid-1980s, when members of the affluent middle class from populous urban areas leapfrogged to the top of the hierarchy.

In native cosmology, the gradual purification of the religious subject corresponds to members' institutional ascension, symbolized in the category "degree" [*grau*], through which continuities are traced between the spiritual and social place of the adept in the stratified group. The term "Spiritist," which, in Brazilian religious history, was associated by medical discourse with mental anomalies and criminality (Giumbelli, 1997), runs from Kardecists to Umbandists, and is used to identify UDV adepts. However, the UDV stands apart from both Spiritist traditions in not conceiving possession as part of its doctrinal framework, where the encounter "in consciousness with the dimension of the *Mestre*" is an ascension of the spirit in the direction of itself, defined by the category of "mental concentration." Thus, the three axes that typify the UDV—the magical-religious, the stratified religious order in expansion, and the cultivation of the self—permit analysis of the modern process of multiplex religious currents that include mediumistic trance in their theological formulations.

From indigenous influence comes a characteristic idea about the drink: that through it, humans can communicate with invisible forces. Under ecstatic effects, the initiate learns to move such forces, making them work under his or her guidance. Shamanism anticipates the movement of power between the two worlds, that of the shaman and that of the cosmos. In the UDV, the movement between the two worlds is undertaken primarily by the session's directing *mestre*, who receives the emanations of the *Mestre*, and thereafter by the others, in accordance with their "degree." This hegemonic notion does not rest easy with some members, who see their relationship with the *Mestre* as direct, and independent of the institutional recognition of "degree." In any case, such cleavages diverge from the concept of

shamanism and *vegetalismo*, and reinforce the Christian polarity between good and evil in the religious field (Hertz, 1980).

Therefore, the supposedly shamanic relationship of the “people of the forest” is far from what happens within the religious group, since it becomes part of a syncretic, yet hierarchical whole, self-identified as ancient, and linked to the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition (Fabiano, 2012). Expansion of the UDV in Brazil and in the larger world adds, to the Christianized, Afro-Indian-Brazilian elements, influences of the New Age and the so-called “New Religious Consciousness” [*Nova Consciência Religiosa*], which dialogue, in a non-uniform way, in a field called “spiritualist.”

The construction of the *burracheira* throughout the UDV’s expansion illuminates a trance permeated by the enchantment of a divine mother and a *mestre* who works in the adept’s consciousness, and at the same time, it highlights a representation of the value of individuality and its regimes of truth. If Christian free will is mediated by interiority with relation to the love of Jesus, in the UDV, the inextricable relation between the object of communion and the spiritual guide gives rise to the systematization of conduct necessary to “self-knowledge” as “key” to “spiritual evolution.” In this scenario, there arises a structure with a stratifying basis, founded in metaphysics and the individual morality that organizes social relations, which enjoys credibility, becoming an institutional pillar that makes way for projects of personal advancement.

The fault lines of UDV teleology, according to my analysis, point toward hybrid roots of its cosmology and ritual, between public and private, enchantment and rationality, or between tradition and modernity. The adoption of some aspects of a conservative morality, internally identified with the *caboclo*, by the urban middle class majority, carries the value of the “straight path,” similar to Christianity of a Pentecostal mien, notorious for offering mechanisms of moral regulation. This notion is instituted by the values of abstinence and

constancy expressed, above all, by the sanctioning of heterosexuality, of work, and of the constitution and maintenance of the nuclear family. These are fundamental actions to the group's religious objective of "spiritual evolution," through which men and women ascend, spiritually and institutionally, in an asymmetrical way, since, as we have seen, access to the sacred corresponds to the hierarchy of "degree," in which the status of *mestre* is forbidden to women.

In the universe of these symbolic exchanges, I emphasize that the UDV is oriented, in the private sphere, by values that delineate an interesting relation of opposition between the drink and the re-elaboration of the moral customs of that segment identified with Brazil's urban counterculture, beginning in the 1970s. In public, the group continues to seek connections that sit easy with its rational and legalistic ethos (at least as compared with the other ayahuasca lineages), drawing nearer to the hegemonic face of modern urban society, where it has experienced its most significant expansion. This trend has engendered a sophisticated legal and political apparatus in support of international expansion, one capable of taking on laws against the use of the substance (Labate & Jungaberle, 2011).

The UDV has 140 *núcleos* in Brazil, the USA, Spain, the UK, Switzerland, and Portugal, with 12,000 registered members (Soares & Moura, 2013). The legal challenges it has faced along the way were discussed by Labate & Jungaberle (2011) and Bernardino Costa (2013) in articles that clarified the problems and successful strategies of formal organization in the USA and Spain. Among the social actors involved in the institution's struggles for legal recognition in those countries (which lasted five and seven years, respectively), figured academic authorities and legal specialists, showing the importance of economic and social capital in confronting international administrative barriers.

I argue that UDV trance must be understood within a religious logic that is anchored on the plane of modernity, without losing its hues of mystical tradition. *Vegetal*, as an

instrument that directs a bureaucratically organized moral rationality, promotes “self-knowledge” [*autoconhecimento*] as an “evolved” form of contact with extraordinary forces. Thus, the *burracheira* is an interesting religious instrument, consisting of enchantment, rationality, and subjectivity, and whose teleology, I emphasize, corresponds to models of development and progress.

In this situation, the group’s identity gives rise to dualities, and here it is most important to point to the symbolic productivity of the slippage between the secularity of the bureaucratic order and the religiosity of the insurgent mystical visionary. The recent institutional proposal for a dialogue with science (Bernardino-Costa, 2013), analyzed in Labate and Melo (2013), seems to point to a public affirmation of the relationship of the UDV with the world of science. The institution, despite nurturing a “discreet” profile (CEBUDV, 1989), has, since the early years in Rondônia, cultivated successful relations with the secular sphere, especially in legal and scientific circles, which shows the internal relevance of secular ways as instruments for achieving legitimacy in the religious field.

I understand the native ethos, through the meaning given to trance and the sophisticated administrative model, as erasing modern ontological boundaries by uniting belief and the state, magic and political power, visionary forces and self-knowledge. The *burracheira* communicates, in a single operation, values of a morality articulated between the religious, enchantment, statist bureaucracy, and subjectivity, synthesizing diverse spheres of power, and recalling what Dumont teaches us (1980) about dualistic internal tensions, which, far from being unproductive, provide a hierarchical and necessary coexistence of opposites.

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<sup>2</sup> [*Caboclo* is a complex and multivalent social classifier. Most commonly it is used adjectivally to denote indigenous persons, customs, and technologies. In light of its positive value in the UDV, the term's frequent usage as a pejorative allonym is significant (see, e.g., Wagley, 1953). –*Trans.*]

<sup>3</sup> For more details on the project and on relations with the group's leadership, see Melo, 2010; Labate and Melo, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> There are other kinds of session: instructive, commemorative, extra, *de acerto* [for addressing interpersonal conflicts—*trans.*], and of the cadre of *mestres*.

<sup>5</sup> Of about 48 sessions I attended during fieldwork, four were directed by women.

<sup>4</sup> All members are called *sócios*, but those that make up the “cadre,” so named, are at the base of the hierarchy.

<sup>6</sup> *Chamada* is the nominal form of *chamar* (“to call”), suggesting invocation as a key function of these musical forms.

<sup>5</sup> The degree of *mestre* is itself hierarchically structured, with the Mestre Central, Mestre Geral Representante, Mestres of the Conselho da Representação Geral (those who have been Mestre Geral Representante)) and Mestres of the Conselho da Recordação at the apex.

<sup>6</sup> The doctrine emphasizes the oral transmission of knowledge, but the institution may record the sessions. Formally, the circulation of these recordings in the group is prohibited, but the recording is sold in markets in Porto Velho, and was offered to me as a fieldwork gift by a member.

<sup>7</sup> See Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1976, on the same principle in Desana accounts of yagé's origins.

**INSERT PHOTO 3**

