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The Lived Religion of Two Daimista Women in the Context of the Transnationalization of Santo Daime: Notes about a Feminized Religion

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Abstract: In this article, I discuss the experience of two daimista female leaders located in The Netherlands and in Japan. The reason why their stories are here is because of the prominence of Santo Daime in these countries per world region (Europe and Asia), where the leadership of these women have great projection in the daimista transnational field. The data discussed here were collected through in-depth interviews by using the life history technique. The objective was to analyze how these women experience this religion outside its context of origin. Their religious background appeared as something very important to their lived religion, showing cultural elements with which Santo Daime ends up having to negotiate in the religious global flows. Also, it seems that the feminization of Santo Daime is not only about women's entrance in this religion, more than that, it is about a feminized way to live and experience religion. Over all, there is a reflexive relationship between Santo Daime and these women because their lives are changed by this religion just as their agency contributes to changes in the core of it and its transnationalization process.

Keywords: Santo Daime; women; transnationalization; feminization



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1. Introduction

From the 1980s onwards, it is known that Brazil became part of the flows of global religions by exporting various religions to the world (Rocha and Vasquez 2016), as is the case of Santo Daime. In that same decade, this *ayahuasqueira* religion, founded in 1930 in the Amazon region, started crossing the borders of the forest, reaching the Brazilian South and Southeast, as well as other countries in the world. According to Glauber Assis (2017), Santo Daime is currently present in more than 46 countries and in all inhabited continents, with the Igreja do Culto Eclético da Fluente Universal Light (ICEFLU) as the protagonist of this transnationalization. It is important to point out that in these countries, with the exception of Australia¹, Santo Daime is not a religion of immigrants (Assis 2017).

The ICEFLU was founded by a rubber tapper called Sebastião Mota de Melo, considered by most daimistas in Brazil and around the world to be the successor of Raimundo Irineu Serra, the founder of the daimista religion. The leadership of Padrinho Sebastião also marks the beginning of an expansionist movement in Santo Daime, which is characterized for being very reflexive. In other words, the transnationalization also provoked changes within this religion. Since Santo Daime started configuring itself in other contexts, this religion has been negotiating its identity in a modern and globalized world shaped by the secularization (Assis and Labate 2014), the international war on illegal drugs (Labate and Feeney 2011) and the new configurations of gender relations resulting from feminist waves (Valamiel 2022).

The structure of Santo Daime is based on functions distributed between men and women since its foundation, which would characterize this religion as highly gendered (McGuire 2008). That is, a religion that offers forms of belonging mainly based on gender, which acts directly in people's experiences and sense of belonging. For this reason, by

entering the global flows, Santo Daime seems to be very porous to negotiations related to gender, especially because of its adherence by a religious clientele that seems to demand for feminized religions (Valamiel 2023). It is possible that, as a consequence of the transnationalization of Santo Daime, functions traditionally distributed by gender within this religion have become more flexible. This can be seen since the 1990's, when women started being able to play ritual leadership roles (Assis 2017). Also, it is interesting that the importance given to other roles played by daimista women, including the traditional ones is rising and being transmitted among women, especially outside Brazil. These elements reinforce the importance of women in the negotiations made by Santo Daime to remain in the modern world and could be part of what I'll be calling here as a growing process of the feminization of Santo Daime.

What can be observed is that the transnationalization constitutes the very identity of Santo Daime (ICEFLU) and that looking at women in this process is of great importance. It is not just an addition, nor just correcting a blind spot, as Linda Woodhead (2001, 2008, 2013) points out when referring to the importance of feminist and gender studies in the broader field of sociology of religion. It is also about paying attention to the relevance of female agency in the transnationalization of their religion in a reflexive way by understanding women as an important part of the presence of Santo Daime in global flows and as subjects affected by this movement.

This text is part of my doctoral thesis that is still in progress. Methodologically, it is based on the available literature on the transnationalization of Santo Daime and also in-depth interviews in which I used the life story technique (Portelli 2016) with two *daimista* women: L., current leader of the church Céu de Santa Maria in The Netherlands, and A., leader of Santo Daime ceremonies that take place in Japan. The reason why I chose their stories is because of the prominence of Santo Daime in their countries per world region (Europe and Asia), where the leadership of these women have great projection in the daimista transnational field. It is also worth pointing out that my insertion in this research is hybrid, since I am a *daimista* woman and researcher. This did not keep me out of conflicts and negotiations with a relatively closed field given the marginality of Santo Daime in global flows due to the international war on drugs that were made illicit (Karam 2013). For that reason, I chose to use only the initials of these women's names in order to preserve their identity.

The presence of L. and A.'s story here is also part of an effort of looking at the religion as lived (McGuire 2008) by daimista female leaders of Santo Daime groups and ceremonies. The subjectivities of these women are creative places for religious experiences and expressions that do not end in themselves, but are directly and indirectly related to the social. In that regard, I understand that the data collected also reinforces the hypothesis of the occurrence of a feminization of Santo Daime carried out in its transnationalization, which may indicate the great relevance of women in this process. In this sense, how do two daimista women living their religion as leaders of groups and ceremonies in such different countries, live and incorporate such a feminized religion? Besides that, how do they contribute to a growing process of feminization of Santo Daime?

In the first topic I'll be explaining how Santo Daime became a transnational religion and its global implications. Also, the impacts of transnationalization in the core of this religion and in the roles played by daimista women will be part of the beginning of this article. Then, it is time to start a discussion about the relations between women and Santo Daime in the global flows based on the literature about women and/or gender in the context of Santo Daime and in the broader *ayahuasqueiro* field. After that L. and A.'s stories will be presented and analyzed as part of a feminization of religion process within Santo Daime.

2. Santo Daime as a Transnational Religion

Santo Daime can be understood as a religion that belongs both to the Brazilian religious field and to the wider *ayahuasqueiro* field in particular. The identity of Santo Daime as a

religion, however, tends to vary among its adherents. On the one hand, for some, it is considered a “doctrine”, a “spiritual school” and, therefore, something that would break with the idea of an institutional religion. On the other hand, in the Brazilian public space and for a part of other daimistas in Brazil and in the world, Santo Daime is a religion (Valamiel 2021) and it needs to be so in order to guarantee its legitimacy in the use of *ayahuasca*², which in this religion, is called *daime*. The origin of this tension has already been previously discussed by Assis and Labate (2014, p. 17) when they identify that once entering the global religious flows, Santo Daime also enters a global religious system in which:

“religion is, on the one hand, a distinct social sphere, centered on an institutional configuration, in which a group needs social legitimation to be understood as such. On the other hand, religion becomes an increasingly plural, subjective and individualized phenomenon (Beyer 2007). In this new landscape, Santo Daime starts to be re-signified and effectively constitutes itself as a ‘religion’, in a reflexive and cyclical process that not only determined its expansion, but also impacts ‘traditional’ daimista nuclei of the north of the country (. . .)”.

In Brazil, the last resolution referring to Santo Daime is n° 1 of 2010, published on 26 January in the Diário da União³. In 2020 it has circulated in the Chamber of Deputies, Bill No. 179/2020⁴ proposed by the Congresswoman Jéssica Salles (MDB) that aimed to regulate the use of *ayahuasca* but without any dialogue with *ayahuasqueiro* groups and indigenous peoples. For this reason, the bill was heavily criticized by these groups, with the exception of the União do Vegetal (UDV), the only *ayahuasqueira* religion which remained silent on the matter⁵. The bill was withdrawn from the procedure in February 2022, which means that the principles established by resolution 001/2010 continue to function, among many things, as a basis for international legal negotiations involving *ayahuasca* (Labate and Feeney 2011).

At the international level, the final opinion issued by the INCB (International Narcotics Control Board)⁶ regarding the use of *ayahuasca*, points out that the drink passes from international control to the national control of each country, so that it will be up to each government to take action about the subject. Santo Daime has used the religious freedom law to guarantee the legitimacy of the use of *ayahuasca* in daimista ceremonies in Brazil and in some countries around the world, such as The Netherlands, until 2019 (iceers.org). Despite this, as well as in The Netherlands itself, seizures have already happened in Germany (Balzer 2005), Belgium (Meeus 2018), France⁷, Canada⁸, Italy (Menozzi 2011), Spain⁹, the United States (Haber 2011), Portugal (Valamiel 2021).

Since the legal barriers involving Santo Daime outside Brazil reside primarily in the use of *ayahuasca*, most researches about this religion in the global context (Groisman 2004; Hanegraaff 2011; Van den Plas 2011; Meeus 2018; Balzer 2005; Rohde and Sander 2011; Blainey 2013; Menozzi 2011) focus on the legal constraints involving the use of the *daime* and its negotiations with the State. Most of these discussions reveal some of the dimensions of Santo Daime’s transnationalization which are very important, but they leave a series of other aspects uncovered.

It is good to point out, therefore, that Santo Daime is composed by people who relate not only to the State, but also to the *daime*, the religious institution and to each other, sharing their beliefs, practices and meanings. When it comes to the body, the experience with *daime* brings a set of sensations, visions and even vomiting, as part of the experience of a ritual that transports the participants to an inner journey surrounded by the mysteries within the forest and its plants which have the power to heal and teach (Albuquerque 2008). Santo Daime inevitably blurs the boundaries of Western conceptions about the religious phenomenon and its limited coverage of the complexity of the religions of the global South (Morello 2019), especially in its diasporic context. It is important to remember that ‘people make up the so-called religious clientele of Santo Daime and that they are a fundamental

part of its transnationalization, promoting ruptures, continuities, discontinuities, changes and negotiations that weave the contours of this religion in the world.

In general, and speaking about religious clientele, it is known that the process of becoming a global religion came with some changes in the profile of the new adherents of Santo Daime: from rubber tappers with little or no formal schooling to highly educated middle-class people (Assis 2017). In numerical terms, there is still very little data on the Santo Daime clientele, which has been part of the motivations towards the institutionalization effort of Santo Daime—and not always well received by all daimistas—currently promoted by ICEFLU.

According to data I collected from the institution's Technical-Scientific Department, the number of people associated via the hot site is 325 men and 319 women, which is way far from contemplating all the associated churches in Brazil and the world. On Instagram, for example, the ICEFLU's page has now 10 thousand followers from all over, which includes not only associated daimistas, but also those non-associated and daimistas from other institutions or even "independent" daimistas (who don't belong to any major institution or particular group). The number of people formally associated to ICEFLU also corresponds to the beginning of an associative campaign that has not yet started abroad, according to this department in a personal communication during field research. Regarding these data, it is curious that, although the current number of associates via hot site registers a male majority in the institution, on ICEFLU's Instagram profile, the engagement of women is 51% and men, 49%. Another relevant aspect of this expansion process is that in countries such as The Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Scandinavia¹⁰, United Kingdom¹¹, Israel, Canada, the United States, Japan, among others, women have occupied a prominent place as leaders of daimista groups and ceremonies (Valamiel 2022).

It is important to stress that the relation between Santo Daime and women in the global flows is not limited to leading groups and rituals. The importance of traditional roles and elements related to women has been increasing as a consequence of the transnationalization of Santo Daime and has become an important part of some daimista women's charisma. They are: kinship relations, the good performance of functions that involve musical skills, especially singing; dedication to activities considered sacred in and out the ceremonies, such as midwifery, caretaking of church space, hymnals¹², as well as offering and receiving hymns, educating children, making *fardas*¹³, good performance in *fiscalização*¹⁴, in addition to taking care of the group's vegetable garden and kitchen. In some cases, the condition of mediums has added to the charisma of some women (Assis 2017). One fact is that these elements point to the existence of spaces for women within Santo Daime and their growing appreciation. More than that, one can also see the expansion and pluralization of these spaces as a consequence of the transnationalization of this religion. For a better understanding, an overview about Santo Daime's gender organization needs to be presented.

3. Santo Daime's Gender Organization: An Overview

In Santo Daime, the difference between the genders is traditionally marked by the difference between the sexes, which organizes clothes, distribution of functions and roles as well as appears in the arrangement of bodies in the saloon: men on one side, women on the other. Also, about the space and the gender implications in its organization, in most of the Santo Daime churches, there are bathrooms and rooms called *quartos de cura* separated by sex. In that sense, the interaction between men and women during a ceremony is mediated by the rite and is understood as a complementarity relationship of energies that are necessary for its equilibrium.

The difference between men and women in Santo Daime is also shown in the *fardas*: men in pants, women in skirts; and, furthermore, women wear more elaborate clothes than men. As part of the white *farda* specifically, women use colored ribbons, the *alegrias* that are attached to the shoulders and hang loose, moving along with the body. The *alegrias* were also used by men in the beginning of the religion but were taken out of it when Mestre

Irineu was still alive (Moreira and Macrae 2011). The female white *farda* is very singular and is also composed by a crown used by women during the ceremony. According to what I could experience in the field, the crown represents de Queen of the Forest's presence in each *daimista* women. The male white *farda*, however, follows the pattern of formal clothes used in the west: it consists in a white suit, tie and two green ribbons attached to the sides of the pants.

Traditionally, the leadership or the “command” of the ceremonies in Santo Daime takes place from a perspective of a heterosexual couple (Assis 2017). In general, especially in Brazil, the commander of the works, the *padrinho* is a man who conducts the entire ritual. When married—which also means symbolic capital in Santo Daime (Assis 2017)—his wife, the *madrinha*, is responsible for the female side. If the *padrinho* is not married, the role of leading the female side is assigned to a woman who stands out for her charisma within the group. Since the *padrinho* is the general commander, his authority also tends to prevail over the *madrinha*'s authority and, therefore, over the female side (Assis 2017). The group commander is usually responsible for opening and closing ceremonies. Women, in turn, traditionally have the function of starting the prayers, as well as the hymns sung throughout the ritual.

With regard to the *daime*, its distribution in the ceremony is also commonly carried out by men. Men also traditionally control where the drink is stored, the amount to be served during ceremonies (which can vary from person to person) and know how to distinguish different types of *daime*. To produce the drink, there is a rite called *feitio*¹⁵, which has its organization completely marked by the sexual order present in this religion. In most Santo Daime churches located in Brazil, making *daime* is a collective process. Even so, most of the knowledge about the production of the drink belongs to men, who traditionally transmit this knowledge to other men. Thus, during the *feitio*, women who are not menstruating participate in the collection and cleaning of the *rainha* leaves that will be added to the *jagube* vine, harvested and prepared by the men (Arrais and Albuquerque 2019).

Despite being such a gendered religion and with gender roles distributed in an apparently conservative way, with the transnationalization of the Santo Daime, these roles have become more flexible, plural and have been gaining new degrees of importance and resignifications. In addition, they speak of a process of feminization of Santo Daime whose germ was already found in the very core of the religion, as I'll be discussing in the next topics.

4. Women and Santo Daime in the Global Flows

The thesis by Evgenia Fotiou (2010) on shamanic tourism in the city of Iquitos, Peru, brings important contributions for reflections on the process of feminization of Santo Daime. In her analysis, there is a process of feminization of *ayahuasca* as a result of the drink's entry into global flows. According to her, this has been taking place with the appropriation of shamanism by outsiders. That is, *ayahuasca* as a typical drink of Amazonian shamanism—which is mostly dominated by men and until then used in shamanic wars and in erotic contexts (Boschemeier 2015; Fotiou 2010)—is now being perceived by some groups as woman and mother; as a source of healing, caregiver and a mediator of interpersonal relationships. *Ayahuasca* has also become part of many “sacred feminine” ceremonies.

Historically, the researches about the relationships between people and *ayahuasca*, especially those on the Amazonian traditions, have left women's agency uncovered (Boschemeier 2015; Fotiou 2010). According to these authors, most researches were carried out by men, which also reveals the impact of the researcher's subjectivity on their work. Ethnographies made mostly by male authors tend to focus on male activities, especially in societies where gender differences are strictly demarcated. Therefore, *ayahuasca* was historically researched by men and written as being exclusively used by men, which presents a tendency that is still present in more recent works on shamanism (Boschemeier 2015; Fotiou 2010). The invisibility or even timid appearance of women in these studies could also be explained, according to McCallum (2020), by the fact that in some native Amazonian

traditions, men would learn from the experience with *ayahuasca* important qualities for hunting and war. Women, in turn, by not engaging in these activities, would inevitably become more distant from the drink. It doesn't mean however, that they were banned from drinking *ayahuasca*, as it occurs among the Kashinawa (Fotiou 2010).

A little different from native Amazonian *ayahuasca* traditions, the founding myth of Santo Daime seems to partially break with the view of *ayahuasca* as a male-dominated drink. The myth about Mestre Irineu receiving the so-called “holy doctrines” directly from the Queen of the Forest (Moreira and Macrae 2011), resulted in the incorporation of this figure as one of the main spiritual authorities of this new Christian religion. In addition to the presence of the feminine as female saints and a female force in Santo Daime, it also draws attention Mestre Irineu's proximity to several women, such as Dona Percília. She was one of a few people who knew how to read and write in the beginning of the religion (Moreira and Macrae 2011), for that reason, she was responsible for writing the hymns received by Mestre Irineu and also for evaluating the “legitimacy” of the hymns received by other people (Moreira and Macrae 2011). There was also the significant presence of Maria Vieira (maiden name), better known as Maria Damião (because of her husband's surname) among the list of “Mestre's *companheiros*”. According with Edson Lodi (2021) Mestre Irineu also prepared Peregrina Gomes—his widow, to become his successor in charge of the rituals carried out by the current CICLU-Alto Santo.

In addition to the women mentioned above, after Mestre Irineu's death, the so-called “experimentalist phase” (Assis 2017) of Santo Daime had Sebastião Mota de Melo as its forerunner. He was also responsible for founding the Vila Céu do Mapiá community, current headquarters of ICEFLU. The leader was described by historian Vera Fróes Fernandes (2019) as someone who “recognized the value of women” (p. 178) and who “exalted the role of women, considering them a divine presence, similar to the Sovereign Virgin Mother, the Queen of the Forest”, (p. 179). In the author's reports, the leader also appears as a great supporter of the work of midwives. In the same direction, according to Maria Betânia Albuquerque (2021), Sebastião Mota de Melo emphasized that humanity would be experiencing the beginning of the time of women, because they can naturally exercise the Christian teaching of “love your neighbor”. In the global and “post-expansionist” context (Assis 2017) of Santo Daime, as mentioned above, daimista women have had the possibility of also occupying spaces within the religion previously reserved only for men, as is the case of leading groups and ceremonies or even performing *bateção de jagube*¹⁶ during the *feitio* (Arrais and Albuquerque 2019). In international contexts the *daime* is often imported from Brazil. For this, the liquid is reduced, so that when it arrives at its destination, it will be diluted by the commander of the church/group (Assis 2017; Valamiel 2021). It is possible to notice that as one of the results of transnationalization is the creation of another stage of *feitio* through which the control of *daime* is becoming more permeable and accessible to women since they can be commanders now, as I could notice in Portugal (Valamiel 2021, 2022).

Along with this, with greater prominence and appreciation of “female roles”, an “effort to compose with women in administration is taking place at ICEFLU” (Cabral 2022). This attempt also appears as a response to recurrent allegations of sexual and psychological harassment suffered by women in the broader religious and *ayahuasqueiro* field¹⁷. “Composing with women”, in this case, also becomes strategic as an attempt to care for women and to protect the institution—which is quite fragile—from the destabilizing consequences of these types of accusations involving its members.

For some of the female leaders of *daimista* groups and ceremonies outside Brazil that I was able to interview for my thesis, being a woman would be a “facilitator” in the management of churches and in the reception of followers. It happens, however, that many times, these women prefer some type of maintenance of tradition. Being “traditional” in some aspects would mean greater alignment with the roots of their religion, and therefore legitimacy gain in the broader Santo Daime field. Something similar was seen by Castro and Caixeta (2021) about Muslim women in Belo Horizonte and also by me on my previous

research about Santo Daime in Portugal (Valamiel 2021, 2022). It is important to point out that despite of the importance of being traditional, *daimista* women have been acting as mediators when it comes to the relations between Santo Daime and the public spheres, facing lengthy legal battles to legitimize this religion outside its country of origin, as it happens in Portugal (Valamiel 2021) and in The Netherlands (L. 2022).

Obviously, there are contradictions involving the traditional and new roles produced by the insertion of Santo Daime in global flows. If, on the one hand, female *daimistas* from the South, Southeast and non-Brazilians began to play the role of leading daimista ceremonies and groups, it is unusual for native daimista women from the Amazonian region to play this role. According to Glauber Assis (2017), women born in the Vila Céu do Mapiá community, but not belonging to the founding families, have a low possibility of social mobility. They often work as maids, cleaners and/or launderers of clothes for daimistas (men and women) from the South and Southeast as well as from other countries around the world (Assis 2017). For them, marrying a foreign daimista can mean improvements for their family and their lives (Assis 2017). On the other hand, to the foreign daimistas, marrying a Brazilian woman, especially from the Amazon, can mean gaining symbolic capital in the international daimista field.

In general, interactions between women and religions reveal new aspects of the plurality of female experiences that are produced and that also produce and shape institutional power. To study that, it is necessary to overcome the dichotomy between submission and oppression present in Western feminism, taking into account that some women choose submission as part of their devotional activity (Mahmood 2005; McGuire 2008). Furthermore, we cannot expect that the forms of liberation within patriarchy would be less plural than those of oppression (Spelman 1988). When it comes to the few studies on the relation between Santo Daime and women or gender written by Chaves (2003); Benedito (2019), women are always seen in a place of subalternity. In a different way, I have verified other possible relations, which should also include the context in which these women are, as well as issues related to race, class, sexual orientation, nationality, among other intersectionalities. For this, it is necessary not to restrict women's agency in religion only as a negative experience (Singh 2015); that is, subaltern, with subjectivities and agencies reaped.

For some women, religious and/or spiritual communities are important paths for negotiating new identities and relationships that have the power to transcend the limits placed by sexism, racism and other social norms (McGuire 2008). According to Meredith B. McGuire (2008), the social sciences of religion also made a mistake by generalizing theories based on male experience, which indicates the importance of looking at women now. In this sense, the focus on lived religion allows for greater depth beyond the curtains of formal rituals, making it possible to perceive that the religious experience is intrinsically linked to expectations of gender, the self and the relationship with others.

The following topic brings the voices of two non-Brazilian daimista women who have lived Santo Daime for over thirty years in very different contexts. Through the experience of L. and A. and by paying attention to their lived religion, one can notice their own creation of meaning around religious belonging, as well as the impacts of their actions on the very existence of religion in their countries.

5. Two Non-Brazilian Women as Leaders of Daimista Groups/Ceremonies

During 2022, I had the opportunity to interview, as part of my doctoral research, two non-Brazilian daimista women who are around their 60 years old: L. and A. These women, as I already mentioned above, perform the role of leading daimista groups and ceremonies in their respective countries—The Netherlands and Japan. In The Netherlands and in Japan, Santo Daime is a very small religion that doesn't even reach (and could be very far from) a thousand members. Unfortunately, due to the difficulties of institutionalization and the little existing research on this religion, there is no exact number of its adherents in these countries. In Japan, there is no such thing as a formal Santo Daime church, but many Japanese daimistas who are spread all over the country and when having conditions (which

means, having especially the *daimê*) to organize a ritual, get together. This organization is always made by A. who also keeps in charge of receiving the *daimê* in the country and commanding the rituals. A. informed me that there are around one hundred *daimistas* in Japan and although the number of men and women seem to be equal, there are more men than women in the group. In The Netherlands, according to L., Santo Daime has around one hundred and fifty *daimistas* distributed in two existing churches. In Céu de Santa Maria, L. is the actual commander and according to her, the number of men and women also seem to be even, but there are more men than women. The groups mentioned here are the ones with greater projection in the international Santo Daime field per world region (Europa and Asia) mostly due to the charisma of its leaders which is also transferred to the group and for concentrating more *fardados*.

Santo Daime arrived in both of these countries around the 1990's. In The Netherlands it was brought by Dutch people and in Japan, by the Japanese. Later on, The Netherlands and Japan started receiving Brazilian *daimistas* from South, Southeast and the Amazon which established a flow that connected people from Europe and Asia with Brazil through the Santo Daime religion. Curiously, although the groups from The Netherlands and Japan don't have a direct relationship between them, both have a really interesting thing in common: the leadership of women as commanders of *daimista* groups and ceremonies.

Having said that, their trajectory also tells of the process of configuration of these religious diasporas. Both got to know Santo Daime in the 1990s, took part in the organization of the first *daimista* ceremonies in their countries and also had the opportunity to participate in Santo Daime ceremonies in Brazil, especially in the Amazon region and in other parts of the world. Although they don't know each other, L. and A. share some similar and some very different aspects of their *daimista* experiences.

L. is currently Geraldine's successor in one of the largest Santo Daime churches outside Brazil. Geraldine was also a female Dutch *daimista* leader whose charisma spread in the global *daimista* field. Her devotion and dedication to the transnationalization of Santo Daime made her the most popular non-Brazilian female *daimista*. According to L., Geraldine would have passed the role of leading Céu de Santa Maria on to her before dying. In her experience, being a woman and leader of a Santo Daime church does not seem to be something that is perceived with strangeness in The Netherlands, quite the contrary.

"Since the beginning Geraldine found it [the church] so everybody was used to it [women as *daimista* leaders] in Holland and to see the beauty of a woman leading a church and ... the soft power of the women. (...) Madrinha Geraldine gave me this ... Actually, when she was alive, we did most of the things together but in the end ... In the last year she was alive she was quite sick so I took over already everything and she was still there, always with me and now I feel that she is very close to me too". (L. 2022)

Kregting et al. (2019) conducted a study on the religion and gender gap between men and women in The Netherlands. They could observe that when it comes to belief in God and prayer frequency, there is a large gender gap and women appear to be more religious in these aspects, although when it comes to church frequency there is no great gap but women are still more frequent in church. According to Watling (2002) the significant presence of women in the religious field in The Netherlands has influenced religious transmission and how religion negotiates changes and can embrace different models of femininity. In that scenario, men's religious authority is challenged and new possibilities are opening. Until the last third of the 20th century, Dutch women were seen as housewives and mothers, thus having a determined role. From the 1970s, women's roles in The Netherlands were strongly influenced by feminist movements which affected the Dutch religious field with the emergence of women religious authorities (Watling 2002). When arriving in The Netherlands around the 1990's, Santo Daime started establishing mostly by the agency of women who took care of everything needed for the ceremonies, including bringing Brazilian *daimistas* from the Amazon who transmitted all the knowledge needed first hand. Many of them staid in Geraldine's house with their families and with other European

daimistas who would come visit and enjoy the opportunity to be close and learn from these people. To help with everything concerning these visits, there were many women.

“Every morning we [S. and a few more women] went to the house of Geraldine. We went first to the bakery and then we made the breakfast and then we used to prepare the table, wash the laundry, make the shopping and receive all the guests. I was specialized to ironing . . . I used to hate ironing, but at the house of Geraldine there was a high pile of cloths, sheets, *fardas*, like shirts . . . Everything. All the visitors from Brazil always came to Geraldine’s house and she was hosting all the stars of Brazil. I met everybody! I’ve been washing the underwear of Padrinho Alfredo and everybody else, so I know how their underwear look like!”. (S. 2023)

Céu de Santa Maria church through Geraldine’s and L.’s agency also worked to make Santo Daime accessible to *daimistas* not only in The Netherlands but also in most parts of Europe and even the Middle East. In that way, Santo Daime was mostly presented to people in Europe by female *daimistas* and this kind of leadership became part of the identity of this religion in the global flows. Along with that emerged what is understood by L. as a feminine way of leading which uses the “soft power of women” (L. 2022).

In A.’s experience, the process of becoming a Santo Daime leader in Japan was conflicting, so that she would have suffered retaliation on the part of men:

“I organize everything . . . I bring the *daimé* from Brazil, I contract and I pay, I book the places, and I make sure everything is here. We open the ceremony and I say something like ‘*em nome do pai, de deus poderoso*’. I say the start but when we close, they [men] kept asking ‘who is going to close?’ And for me is not a big issue, you know . . . I say ‘ok, I can do’. I was doing like this before, but some people, some guys didn’t like it. So . . . I asked the guys ‘can I close the works?’ and there were some guys there from the very beginning and if I asked one of them to close the works all the time, they would start thinking they were the commanders. (. . .) So, one day I said ‘if you ask who is the chef, I’m the chef of this work’. I stood there and I still close the works by myself. If I was a man, maybe I didn’t have to think about it, but since I’m not, I always have to think about this kind of things”. (A. 2022)

Murayama and Baffelli (2020) have pointed out how women have been historically banned from sacred space in Japan given the idea that women would represent a “pollution” of this space. That indicates an exclusion of Japanese women in sacred spaces based, according to the authors, on a code of purity. In that sense, women would pollute the sacred space in Japan especially due to their reproductive functions since the ninth century (Murayama and Baffelli 2020). Although in the second half of the nineteenth century the Meiji government tried to abolish women’s exclusion from these spaces, that still remains in most religious traditions and is supported by locals (Murayama and Baffelli 2020). Since the 2000’s, however, women started fighting against sexual discrimination inside Buddhism and in other mainstream religions in Japan (Gross 2005). In that way, some of the traditional religions in Japan started to reflect conservative gender roles and became seen by some Japanese women as not adequate to their needs. When it comes to the new religious movements, according with Murayama and Baffelli (2020), in some cases, female roles have been gaining religious significance and, as far as I’ve been observing, in the transnationalization of Santo Daime’s process, they are turning essential. Because of the importance of religious female roles in these contexts, women are becoming the most active members of the religion. In Japan, however, although the Santo Daime’s presence occurs through a woman’s leadership, it has to negotiate with cultural boundaries linked to the idea of “women pollution” that may still remain.

In spite of this conflicts, the figure of a Brazilian woman of Japanese descent and with great charisma consolidated within Santo Daime who lives in the Vila Céu do Mapiá was able to legitimize and officialize A.’s leadership. The legitimization of A.’s leadership

by a Brazilian woman of Japanese descent seemed to overcome the conflict. That also brings Nipo-brazilianness as an important religious capital capable of legitimizing daimista leading roles in Japan, which is an interesting extension of Bazilianness as a religious capital in Santo Daime groups outside Brazil (Valamiel 2022).

“One day Clara called me and she said ‘you know, A., what is very important? *Humildade*¹⁸ is very important ... ’” in that time they [the men] didn’t like me to organize the work, so I always felt some pressure. Clara knows our church very well (...). But one thing that she said is that it is very important to have *humildade* (...) and after I talked with Clara, I felt it was coming a lot of work for me again. Sometimes there are things that come and are complicated, so I hesitate ... But all the time Clara’s advices are coming and I try (A. 2022). The teaching of Clara about humility when leading seems to relate with the soft power mentioned by L. and reinforces that more than having a female leadership, there is a feminine way of leading expected from these *daimista* women. How these women experience that?

L. and A., despite their common position come from different countries with distant cultural origins. These backgrounds wove part their religious trajectory. L., like her predecessor, Geraldine, had their childhoods in the 1950s and 1960s in The Netherlands, marked by a Christian-Catholic upbringing that they later rejected. A., having lived during this period in Japan which has a Buddhist background, told me of her lack of familiarity with Christian-Catholic symbols. Unlike Geraldine and L., A. grew up in a communist family that she classifies as being non-religious. It is curious, however, that despite their different religious trajectories, both later adhered to a Christian religion that praises the sun, the moon, the stars and the forest alongside Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and other Catholic saints.

“I was more into the eastern ... In the relations with *Oriente* and I had bad experience in my youth with Catholicism ... So, in the beginning ... And also, when we were praying the ‘pai nosso’ in Santo Daime it was very difficult because I was very conditioned from before! But Santo Daime showed me that God is love and ‘alegria’ and ... And ... Jesus is our light! (...) I can say that Santo Daime taught me how to have a real relation with this (...) Santo Daime renewed my relationship with religion, with Jesus and Mary. That was different from what I learned in the catholic church!”. (L. 2022)

“(...) I don’t know but somehow, I had a holy experience ... I ... Because we are not based in Catholicism and I didn’t know about Jesus ... I only knew the name, but in that time, somehow in the *miração*¹⁹ the *Virgem Maria* came to me with many, many angels ... it was a very, very holy experience I had. And ... Since that I kept doing Going to Daime”. (A. 2022)

L. and A. also told me during the interview that before knowing Santo Daime, both of them had a very good affinity with the spiritualist movements originating in India, especially with the guru Rajneesh Osho, in L.’s experience. This Dutch woman, after a long period without a religion, became a devotee of the guru, from whom she learned about meditation and other spiritual practices. During this same period, A. was able to tell me about her experimentations with other psychedelics as part of a spiritual quest. Both L. and A. mention, however, that only with the Santo Daime, it was possible to have a spiritual experience. In their words:

“With Osho we learned a lot, we talked a lot about having faith and having trust or something like that and having love and ... In Santo Daime it became more of an experience of trusting, of having faith More aspirational ... No much by hearing about it but you could really feel in the works also and ... To feel this love and to feel the ‘firmeza’ and everything! So, what I actually heard a lot by Osho, I expericed in Santo Daime”. (L. 2022)

“I didn’t know this was religion and something great was that our group was kind of a hippie group ... you know? So, we had already experienced in India,

smoking ganja, mushrooms, but I didn't know about Santo Daime 'If I take this drink, what is going to happen to me?' That's all, but then I understood it was something holy". (A. 2022)

Currently, as leaders of *daimista* groups and ceremonies, these women are in charge of organizing the rituals, which implies importing *daime*, renting spaces, scheduling, paying bills, receiving people, among other necessary things. Despite recognizing themselves as leaders, both say that their function is above all to "take care" and "organize". It is because of what they do, that they are in this position. And even though they occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of their groups, they always point out how they are working for the *daime*. In that sense, although L. and A. are in the position of leadership in Santo Daime, they show submission to the *daime* because they work for it.

Both had a professional life, they are not married and don't have children, so their most intimate relationships are within the Santo Daime community. "These relationships are my treasure! I have no family, I don't have much money, I mean, this is my family ... Because of them I can keep going." (A. 2022). Based in L. and A. interview, one can also suggest that they can play female roles in Santo Daime that they don't usually play in other dimensions of their lives, especially when it comes to community. Inside this religion, when taking care and organizing everything, they become leaders and are respected as authorities.

6. Santo Daime as a Feminized Religion

The trajectories of L. and A. bring the experience of two women who live their religion in diaspora. Their experiences could indicate an accentuation of the feminization of the religion (Woodhead 2001, 2008, 2013) of Santo Daime as part of its transnationalization process. According to Linda Woodhead (2001, 2008, 2013), the "privatization of religion" remains an important interpretation of the Weberian paradigm of secularization, but it needs to be revisited from the perspective of gender. In this sense, for her, religion would have undergone a process of "feminization" in the modern world, shifting its center of gravity to relationships. This would happen because, for her, in the Western world, women were historically excluded from the public space and, as a consequence of the social configuration structured by secular patriarchy, women and religion were relegated to the domestic space, which, in turn, ends up becoming far from the regulations of the modern iron cage of rationality, impersonal relationships and bureaucracy (Weber 2004).

Religion has suffered and is undergoing considerable transformations made by female agencies since it started migrating to the private sphere. As a reflection of this transformation, it began to offer a space for relationships of care and intimacy. Here, "God" would become less distant, taking the place of "mother", "friend", "lover", that is, someone with whom one can talk and feel (Woodhead 2008).

"In relation to the Latin American charismatic upsurge, a number of studies including those by David Martin (1990); Burdick (1996); Bernice Martin (1998) reveal the ways in which charismatic Christianity transforms gender relationships not only by empowering women, but by domesticating men. Salvatore Cucchiari (1991) has expounded the same theme in relation to Sicilian Pentecostalism, maintaining that its "cross-gender God is a crucible in which new models of masculinity/femininity are being forged (p. 88)" (Woodhead 2008, p. 7).

In a first reading, it is possible to oppose the analysis of Linda Woodhead (2008) and her reading from the idea of privatization of religion, especially if we take as true, the return of religion to the modern public scene (Casanova 1994, 2008). In fact, the author seems to leave open the female agency itself in the publicization and institutionalization of religion that is also happening in the modern world. Another point is that gender structures have become more flexible in the West, however, it is important to take into account that Linda Woodhead (2008) looks at the hard core of modern social organization, which is marked by the institutional separation resulting from secularization, where women and religion have historically been relegated to the private sphere, even though new arrangements have

been built. Feminized religions, however, become attractive and are lived by women and men. What happens then is that these religions adopt, in essence, characteristics of what was traditionally constructed as “feminine”, such as care for community.

Based on this idea, L. and A. narratives speak of an encounter with an already feminized religion, in which not even the language barrier or geographic distance become an impediment to “feeling” and “truly understanding” the experience. With this, the interlocutors seem to access similar points where the relation with the religion would lead to a true encounter with divine love. In this direction, the Catholic Christian symbols were presented to these women in a feminized way by Santo Daime and became attractive to them due to the possibility of maintaining intimate relationships with a sacred and with a community which they could relate themselves with. This reinforces the importance of the existence of feminine and feminized symbols within religion as representations linked to the positionality of “women”. This, however, don’t circumscribe L. and A. femininities to a Virgin Mary model in their personal lives. That is, even though A. had a very intense experience with the Virgin Mary, she is divorced for the second time and, like L., has no children. Both had their personal and professional lives independently of a hetero-affective marital relationship and they exercise their leadership in Santo Daime without sharing it with men. However, their leadership in their groups needs to be soft, humble and caregiver. That leaves a reflection: In what ways are we talking about the feminization of religion—which implies a structural shift in terms of the role of religion in society, and in what ways are we talking about a shift in the agency role and status of women in society? Probably both, and they relate to each other producing a plurality of arrangements according to the religion, its context of origin and diaspora, besides its clientele and their cultural background.

In a similar way to Santo Daime, the transnationalization of Buddhism also made it possible for western women to perform previously exclusively male functions (Gross 2005). According to Rita Gross (2005), almost half of western *dharma* teachers are women. This would indicate, for the author, a motivation arising from second-wave feminisms that has had a considerable impact on the social organization of religion, and especially on the religious experience of men and women.

Although it is structured in a binary way, where functions are distributed according to gender, Santo Daime, since its origin, demarcates the existence of places for the feminine within the ceremonies and its importance to maintain the balance between masculine and feminine. That does not, of course, cancel differences in power between genres in each context. Still, by having “women’s places” so demarcated, in addition to a feminized language, this religion reinforced its welcoming character for L. and A. Again, this does not mean that there are no barriers within Santo Daime and conflicts related to the new roles played by women, as it happened with A. What is interesting is that although this Japanese woman faced male opposition to her leadership, she managed to remain in power through the charisma from a Brazilian who is of Japanese descent which gave her great support. Clara and her teachings about “humility when leading” were also important for A., because she learned about a particular way of leading in Santo Daime. It is noteworthy the affinity of this teaching on “leading with humility” and the great value of soft leadership in L. experience: both point to a feminized way of exercising this function.

It can also be seen from L. and A. stories, that their leadership relied on the charisma of *damistas* women like Geraldine and Clara, respectively. That can possibly show that the transnationalization of Santo Daime also has, as part of the process, a movement of transferring charisma between women. In the narratives presented here, the connection of these women with Brazilian men and women, especially the residents of Mapiá are also presented as important religious capitals (Assis 2017) that tend to be transmitted between women. That points out to a probable network of knowledge about *daime* increasingly transmitted between women internationally.

7. Conclusions

Since the emergence of *ayahuasqueira* religions, especially Santo Daime, it has been possible to notice a significant movement of women entering the *ayahuasqueiro* field, which has historically been predominantly male. That does not mean that women were banned from rituals until now, that is, even though the drink was mostly used by men in the native Amazonian traditions, in some indigenous groups like the Kashinawa women can have access to drink if they want (Fotiou 2010). What happens, then, is that more than having women in ceremonies, as a consequence of the globalization and the use of *ayahuasca* by outsiders, this drink has been turning into something that is part of the subjects' relationship with the sacred that is no longer distant, but now provides care, healing and community. Here, I understood this process as part of the feminization of religion (Woodhead 2008).

L. and A.'s lived religion was treated here as one of the expressions of the feminization of Santo Daime. From the stories of this two daimista women who are leaders of ceremonies and groups located in countries that Santo Daime has more prominence per region (Europe and Asia), I sought to discuss the possibility of a growing feminization of Santo Daime as part of its transnationalization process. That is, the feminization of religion movement presents itself as very significant in global religious flows and exerts structural changes in Santo Daime especially because this religion is very porous to that. That said, the present analysis suggested, as part of this process, the possibility of a growing importance of female roles and also the pluralization of these roles in Santo Daime as a result of its transnationalization.

In the experience of L. and A., Santo Daime seems to offer roles that they were not playing before and that they do not play in other dimensions of their lives. In the religion, when they are organizing rituals, receiving and taking care of people, they are doing the main work needed to the transnationalization process of Santo Daime. That turn these women into leaders that lead softly; that also is, they play a leadership that is not authoritarian and seem to fit into a demand of a specific religious clientele. In The Netherlands that didn't find resistance and fit well, however, in Japan, A.'s leadership found men's resistance to it. Interestingly, even when finding barriers to women leadership in Japan, A. could maintain her position by having Clara's support.

Santo Daime is constituted by transnationalization and so it is by the social phenomenon of feminization of religion since its foundation by Mestre Irineu. What the data I've been collecting has shown is that to continue being part of the global flows of religion—which are very affected by the feminism's waves, Santo Daime will keep feminizing.

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Notes

- ¹ Recent data, collected during my thesis research on the role of women in the transnationalization of Santo Daime, which is still in progress.
- ² It is a drink of Amerindian origin, commonly called *ayahuasca*. It is usually made from the cooking of the Amazonian plants Banisteriopsis caapi and Psychotria viridis (Moreira and Macrae 2011; Assis 2017). What we know as *ayahuasca* receives the most varied names among the various indigenous peoples where it is consumed, such as among the Aruák, Tukano (Luz 2002), Kaxinawá (Keifenheim 2002), Yawanawá (Platero 2018). In addition to being consumed among indigenous peoples, this drink became part of the life of many rubber tappers who worked in the Amazon region, participating in the exchange between cultures present in that scenario from rubber tappers, indigenous people and *caboclos*. This drink contains some percentages of the substance dimethyltryptamine, which has been subject to international control since the Vienna Convention of 1961, which placed it as a type A substance.
- ³ Resolução n.1, de 25 de janeiro de 2010. Disponível em: https://www.bialabate.net/wp-content/uploads/2008/08/Resolucao-Conad-_1_25_01_2010.pdf accessed on: 10 March 2022.
- ⁴ Projeto de Lei 179 de 2020. Disponível em: https://www.camara.leg.br/proposicoesWeb/prop_mostrarintegra?sessionid=1DD521F824868EC0540E4F4E45868988.proposicoesWebExterno2?codteor=1859786&filename=Avulso+-PL+179/2020 accessed on: 20 March 2022.
- ⁵ Perspectivas indígenas sobre o “Marco Temporal” e o PL da Ayahuasca. Disponível em: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yADUokKgs40&t=16s> accessed on: 20 March 2022.
- ⁶ Contribution of the International Narcotics Control Board. Disponível em: http://www.incb.org/documents/Publications/E-Publication_FINAL.pdf accessed on: 21 March 2022.
- ⁷ A batalha pela liberdade do Santo Daime na França. Disponível em: <https://chacruna-la.org/a-batalha-pela-liberdade-do-santo-daime-na-franca/> accessed on: 28 February 2023.
- ⁸ Como a nossa igreja do Santo Daime recebeu uma isenção para o uso da ayahuasca no Canada. Disponível em: <https://chacruna-la.org/como-a-nossa-igreja-do-santo-daime-recebeu-uma-isencao-para-o-uso-da-ayahuasca-no-canada/> accessed on: 17 April 2022.
- ⁹ Um apelo contra a demonização atual de grupos ayahuasqueiros na Espanha. Disponível em: <https://chacruna-la.org/apelo-contra-demonizacao-da-ayahuasca/> accessed on: 28 February 2023.
- ¹⁰ It doesn't refer to the whole region, but to one specific country. Due to negotiations regarding the protection of the identity of my interviewees, it wasn't possible to specify what country in Scandinavia.
- ¹¹ It doesn't refer to the whole region, but to one specific country. Due to negotiations regarding the protection of the identity of my interviewees, it wasn't possible to specify what country in UK.
- ¹² Santo Daime is a musical religion. In this religion, people understand that they receive hymns—which are songs usually sung in the ceremonies—from the spiritual world. When having more than one hymn, a person has a hymnals.
- ¹³ “Farda” is how daimistas call the clothes they use in the ceremonies after the initiation in this religion, the “fardamento”. There are two kinds of “farda” the “white farda” and the “blue farda”. The first one is use in ceremonies considered celebrations and the second, for ceremonies of “concentração”, “cura” and others.
- ¹⁴ “Fiscalização” is a role played by both men (on the maleside) and women (on the female side) during daimista ceremonies. The fiscal's function is to help maintain the ceremonies' order, that is, they take care of the setting and also of participants that may be needing it.
- ¹⁵ “Feitio” is how daimistas call the rite of preparing the daime.
- ¹⁶ Consists in beating the vine until it will ready to boil in the cauldron with the *Rainha* leafs. This function is traditionally played by men while women take care of cleaning the *Rainha* leafs.
- ¹⁷ ‘Vi muitos abusos sexuais em grupos de ayahuasca’, diz antropóloga. Available in: <https://tab.uol.com.br/noticias/redacao/2020/09/25/pesquisadora-brasileira-defende-vitimas-de-abuso-em-grupos-de-ayahuasca.htm> accessed on 13 January 2023.
- ¹⁸ *Humildade* stands for “Humility” in english.
- ¹⁹ Visions people can have during a experience with daime.

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