

## The ritual use of ayahuasca by three Brazilian religions<sup>1</sup>

Edward MacRae, Ph.D.<sup>i</sup>

Professor in Anthropology -Federal University of Bahia -UFBa

Associate Researcher - Centro de Estudos e Terapia do Abuso de Drogas- CETAD\UFBa

The native inhabitants of the Western Amazon have used Ayahuasca, a psychoactive brew made from the Banisteriosis caapi vine and the Psychotria viridis leaf, for many purposes since time immemorial<sup>ii</sup>. Conceiving of this brew as a means of opening the human perception of the spiritual world, shamans have used it for a large range of purposes such as: the diagnosis and treatment of a large variety of ailments, divination, hunting, warfare, and even as an aphrodisiac. Although its use probably originated among the inhabitants of the rain forest, ayahuasca was taken to the Andean highlands and can now also be found in many of the Brazilian and other South American large urban centres as well as in the United States, Holland, Spain, Italy and even Japan.

---

<sup>1</sup> In; Drug Use and Cultural Contexts “Beyond the West Coomber,R. & South, N. , London, Free Association Books, 2004 pp. 27-45

The use of ayahuasca and other so called 'teacher plants' by Amazonian tribal societies and by Mestizo healers on the outskirts of Peruvian Amazonian cities like Pucallpa, Tarapoto and Iquitos has been well documented by a large number of scholars such as Reichel-Dolmatoff, Josep Maria Ferigla, Luis Eduardo Luna, Marlene Dobkin de Rios, Jacques Mabit and many others.

The use of this psychoactive brew by Brazilian religious groups has also been the subject of many studies, mainly in the field of the anthropology of religion, dealing with classical anthropological themes such as cosmology and ritual, shamanism and trance. Others emphasise the comparative approach, dwelling on the relation between cultures (Amazonian and urban) and on the comparison of symbolic systems (Labate 2002:266). This article aims to provide a brief overview of this material and to call attention to the elements of this ritual use that make these religions a good example of what, following Norman Zinberg, might be called 'controlled use' of psychoactive substances (Zinberg 1984:5).

Before one can understand the functioning and the cultural significance of this religious group, one must take into account some of the particularities of Brazilian culture and religiosity. Brazilian society is the result of a rich mixture of European, Indian and African elements. The Portuguese colonization of the region concentrated itself mainly along the Atlantic coastline and, although its influence extended into the interior and almost to the Andes, only recently have the distant frontier and Amazonian rainforest areas been fully integrated into the life of the nation. In spite of the fact that Portuguese incursions were often able to break down traditional Indian social organizations, very little was put in

their place in an official manner. Even the presence of the Church was sporadic and unsystematic in most of that region, giving rise to the development of many unorthodox religious movements, which mixed Indian, Catholic, African and assorted Esoteric elements.

As a result of this, although the majority of the Brazilian population is nominally Catholic, there is widespread tolerance and even active participation in a wide variety of sects or cults of different origins. In spite of this apparently free and easy attitude towards religion and of the rapacious materialism that governs social interaction, most Brazilians seem to have some feeling for spirituality and although they may have difficulty in explaining what they actually believe in, few will call themselves atheists. The precariousness of the public health system provides further encouragement for a large proportion of the poor (and even many rich people) to resort to spiritual healers when faced with illness.

## The Santo Daime

It is in this context that we must view the founding of the Santo Daime religious movement in 1930, in Rio Branco, capital city of the, then, Territory of Acre. The founder of this religion was a Black rubber tapper called Raimundo Irineu Serra, who had come to the Amazon from the state of Maranhão, in Northern Brazil, in 1912. It is probable that he was first initiated into the use of ayahuasca by a Peruvian Mestizo healer while working in the forest in the mid 1910s. After taking ayahuasca for some time he began having visions

in which he saw a female figure, which he later came to associate with Our Lady of the Conception, whom he also called The Queen of the Forest. She gave him instructions on healing and handed him a new religious doctrine which had a pronounced Catholic flavour although it also incorporated certain Amerindian, African, spiritualist and esoteric elements such as the notions of reincarnation, the law of karma and the cult of assorted elemental spirits.

Several years later, after living in different parts of Acre and after taking part in the setting up of an ayahuasca centre in the town of Brasileia, he eventually moved to the regional capital where he started up his own church. Mestre Irineu (Master Irineu), as his followers and patients knew him, became famous for his healing powers and after some time his influence began to spread in Rio Branco. His initial following was made up of displaced rubber tappers who, after the decline of the Amazonian rubber boom, had been forced to migrate to the cities of the region, where they faced great difficulties integrating into urban society. In a few years his influence became widespread throughout the city and even powerful local politicians came to him in search of healing and electoral support. With the help of such well-placed friends, he was eventually able to acquire a plot of land where he built a church and started an agricultural community with his followers. His church and the area around it, which were at the top of a small rise, came to be known as ‘Alto Santo’ (Holy Heights) and his followers as ‘daimistas’.

Acre was very sparsely inhabited at that time and was yet to undergo the process of colonization that has now made it into an integral part of the Brazilian nation. Rio Branco was a small frontier town and its outskirts, where the Santo Daime movement developed,

were still covered by the forest. Some anthropologists argue that the doctrine spread by ‘Mestre Irineu’, played a key role in the transition from life in the isolation of the forest to urban conviviality, undergone by the local population after the end of the rubber boom (Monteiro da Silva 1983). As such, the Santo Daime doctrine is an integral element in Acrean culture, even though most of its inhabitants may nominally profess to be Catholic.

Mestre Irineu’s contribution to a more Westernised use of ayahuasca included the replacing of the ambiguous traditional Amerindian and Mestizo shamanic power ethic for the traditional Christian values of unconditional love for one’s neighbours and the veneration of Catholic saints. As for the ayahuasca brew, which he renamed Daime<sup>iii</sup> or Santo Daime (Holy Daime); he likened it to the Christian sacrament, considering it to be ‘The Blood of Christ’. His doctrine allied beliefs associated to traditional ayahuasca shamanism to old practises of Popular Catholicism, but this mixing of traditions leads to changes in the meanings attributed to them. Thus while the Santo Daime doctrine may be understood by its followers as ‘the doctrine of The Virgin and of Jesus Christ’, and Mestre Irineu appears as a messenger of Jesus, at the same time Christ is seen to be closely associated to a plant. The old shamanic logic was now associated to typically Christian themes like ‘eternal salvation’ and the rejection of worldly concerns (Goulart 2002:336).

Mestre Irineu also developed a series of new rituals he claimed to have received in his visions. They almost invariably involve the sacramental use of Daime and display marked Christian influence, although Amerindian and African traits are also to be detected. They vary according to the occasion and may be celebratory ‘hymnals’, meditational ‘concentrations’, exorcisms, ‘healing works’, funeral ‘masses’ and ceremonies during

which the sacrament is ritually prepared (MacRae 1998:105). Mestre Irineu left few documents and his church has no official scriptures apart from his hymns, which are considered by his followers to be a Third Testament.

It is said that all of his doctrine is contained in these hymns, and that they only reveal their full message when heard under the influence of Daime. This has led the Santo Daime teachings to be called a ‘musical doctrine’. The hymns are conceived of as having been received by Mestre Irineu from God and the Virgin and are remarkably similar to those in the Catholic Church. They reflect a belief in Jesus Christ as the Saviour and reiterate traditional Catholic values and social standards. Every Santo Daime ‘work’ starts and ends with the Lord’s Prayer and the Catholic ‘Hail Mary’.

The Church rituals, which are invariably accompanied by the singing of hymns, frequently involve communal dancing as well. In this case they continue to be highly structured performances, with fixed steps and predetermined places for all, with a rigid separation according to sex and age group.

After Mestre Irineu’s death, in 1971, his movement suffered several defections and splits. Nowadays there are several separate religious organizations that trace their origins to him, but most are quite small with little more than a hundred followers each. Each tends to stress the fact that it maintains Mestre Irineu’s teachings in all their purity, accusing the others of introducing illegitimate novelties. Several call themselves ‘Alto Santo’ and claim to be the only ones to justifiably do so.

Of all the break-away groups the one to have become best known is the Centro Eclético Fluente Luz Universal Raimundo Irineu Serra (CEFLURIS), started by another Amazonian rubber tapper, Sebastião Mota de Melo, now better known as Padrinho (Godfather) Sebastião. He was considered a powerful spiritual healer himself and headed a community in another part of the Rio Branco outskirts, which was known as ‘Colônia Cinco Mil’. In the mid 1960s he went to Mestre Irineu in search of his own healing. After taking the brew for some time, he was given permission to hold his own Santo Daime ceremonies among his followers. On Mestre Irineu’s death he declared his independence from the new leaders of the Alto Santo community and gradually introduced a series of doctrinal and ritual innovations of his own.

Unlike the other Daime leaders, Padrinho Sebastião was very welcoming towards young newcomers from outside the Amazon area. As a result the size of the congregations increased and from the 1980’s onwards a number of centres were then set up in several southern metropolis like Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Florianopolis, Belo Horizonte, as well as in more rural districts. More recently, especially in the 90’s, Santo Daime churches following his spiritual line began to be set up abroad and are now to be found in many South American and European countries, in the United States and Japan. CEFLURIS is now the biggest of the churches that claim to follow Mestre Irineu and has now more than 5000 followers around the world.

Stressing his autonomy in regard to the Alto Santo, but remaining faithful to the old shamanic Amazonian traditions, Padrinho Sebastião occasionally introduced other ‘teacher-plants’ in his works. He emphasized that in order that they might grant access to spiritual

secrets they should be correctly used in a prescribed ritual manner and not as mere profane entertainment. Of these other entheogens<sup>iv</sup>, the one he most used was Cannabis, which he had been introduced to by some of the young hippie newcomers he received in his community. According to Padrinho Sebastião, the spiritual name of this plant was ‘Santa Maria’ and he claimed that it corresponded to the feminine spiritual force of the Virgin Mother, counterbalancing the masculine Daime, which corresponded to God the Father<sup>v</sup>.

For some time, Santa Maria was used in ‘concentration works’, with a specific ritual aimed at healing<sup>vi</sup>. Although the more casual profane use of the herb came under frequent criticism in the community it nevertheless continued to occur. In October 1981 the Federal Police invaded the Colônia 5.000, and its sacred ‘Santa Maria Gardens’, as the Cannabis plantations were known, were burned and some the leaders, including Padrinho Sebastião, prosecuted. This also gave rise to a series of official measures against all groups using ayahuasca, even those who strongly disapproved of the use of Cannabis and considered it to be a mere ‘drug’. This persecution culminated with an explicit prohibition of the use of ayahuasca, which was placed for some time on the Brazilian official list of illicit substances. This led Padrinho Sebastião to suspend the use of Cannabis in official rituals and to recommend his followers to do likewise.

He later led his followers to a distant area in the neighbouring State of Amazonas where they stated the village ‘Céu do Mapiá’, in the heart of the rainforest. For CEFLURIS, Santa Maria, although banned, continued to be regarded as sacred and its semi-ritualised use persists to this day in informal gatherings of some of his followers. Although certain ritual elements are normally observed, as there are few formal occasions for its fully

ceremonial use, the prescriptions governing its use cannot be firmly established and so there is no limit in terms of time of day or place for smoking use and it often verges on mere recreational use.

On occasion their persistence in the sacred and profane use of Cannabis has led certain of his followers to have trouble with the police and even to be sent to jail, thus helping increase the prejudice and ill will with which his church is frequently seen by the other ayahuasca religions in Brazil (MacRae 1998:325—338). In Holland, on the other hand, where Cannabis use is not subject to repression, the local followers of Padrinho Sebastião hold Santa Maria rituals regularly, and during a period when the use of ayahuasca was banned in the country, even used it very successfully as a substitute sacrament (Groisman 2000).

Every Daime ritual or ‘work’ is conceived of as an opportunity for learning and healing and as well as for the indoctrination of the spirits present either in the ‘material’ or in the ‘astral’ planes. Although there are specific rituals for different occasions or different needs, they all involve taking the brew and entering into an altered state of consciousness in a social and physical setting designed to contain and guide the ‘voyages’. The emphasis on self-control has led anthropologists to consider them to be ‘rituals of order’ promoting group and hierarchical cohesion and a search for harmony both within and without (Couto2002).

Many factors contribute to this controlling effect, such as:

- a) Dietary and behavioural prescriptions that must be observed during the three days that precede and that follow the taking of the drink, thus setting the stage for an unusual event that escapes the daily routine.
- b) A hierarchical social organization in which a 'commander' or 'godfather' is recognized as the leader of the session, aided by a body of 'controllers', who are responsible for the maintenance of order and obedience to the commander.
- c) A control over the dosage of the brew to be taken by participants, since the drink is poured by an experienced member of the group who takes into account the participant's state of consciousness, size, age, sex and any other relevant information.
- d) Ritual spatial organization and behavioural control. There is a central table\altar where the double armed Cross of Caravacca and other religious symbols mark the sacred nature of the event. All those taking part are given a specific place in the room, usually a rectangle drawn on the ground, where they must remain, grouped by sex, age, and, in certain more traditional areas, sexual status (virgins and non-virgins).

Uniforms of a sober cut, to be worn by all, stress the unity of the group and help maintain a mood of seriousness. The movements of those taking part are rigidly prescribed and one of the main duties of the so called 'controllers' (fiscals) is to ensure obedience to the posture recommended for the seated 'works' (raised heads and relaxed and immobile arms and legs) or the correct performance of a few simple steps during the ceremonies that include dancing.

Another important controlling element is the music, sung and played during most of the ceremonies, which helps harmonize the group, through marked rhythms and voices in

unison. This use of music, although inspired by Catholic ceremonies, also harks back to ancient shamanic customs from which the ritual taking of ayahuasca originates. Singing, dancing and the use of percussion instruments with a strong, repetitive beat, are powerful aids in bringing about altered states of consciousness, and are thought to act as a way of invoking spirits. The words of the ‘hymns’ that are sung direct the ‘voyages’ in the desired directions and help relieve mental or physical ill feelings.

The hymns also help in the interpretation of the ‘mirações’ (visions or experiences people have during the Daime ‘works’). They help to create connections between the lived experiences and the magical or mythical symbols, with which they become invested, something of great importance in maintaining the unity of the group. The Catalan anthropologist Josep Maria Fericgla, working on the Indian use of ayahuasca, considers this to be a psychic or spiritual function of symbols that was lost by Western societies when they abandoned their traditional ways of organizing unconscious drives and using these ‘sources of renovation’ for individual and collective benefit. (Fericgla 1989:13).

Whereas the Alto Santo churches usually have small followings, mostly drawn from the poorer sectors of society, the CEFLURIS churches nowadays are more middle class and relatively more prosperous. In recent years they have reserved some of their financial resources to develop plantations of *Bannisteriopsis* and *Psychotria*, so as to diminish somewhat their dependence on predatory gatherings in the wild, a practice still common among the small Amazonian churches. Nevertheless, in spite of their veneration for the ‘Queen of the Forest’ it is still common for ‘daimistas’ of all groups to adopt the method used before the surrounding forest was burned down to make room for cattle raising and

organize parties to enter the forest and bring back the vines and the leaves needed to produce a batch of Daime large enough to last them for a number of weeks.

CEFLURIS, however, has made a serious effort to concentrate most of its ayahuasca production in the Céu do Mapiá village, around which they have made fairly large plantations of *Bannisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*. Although not yet enough to make all the brew needed to supply the numerous followers of the group, spread around Brazil and the world, these measures have, nevertheless, relieved CEFLURIS from the need to constantly search for new sites in the forest where the plants might be found growing wild. Due to the policy of concentrating most of its production of ayahuasca in this area, there are now a number of people living there who have specialized in this activity and derive their livelihood from it. Although the ritual production of Daime and its distribution around the country consume much time and labour, leaving a relatively small profit margin, and this method is more efficient and less damaging to nature, nevertheless, CEFLURIS is left open to accusations of ayahuasca trafficking, on the part of other ayahuasca groups that are better able to produce their own supplies locally.

## The Barquinha

This is another religion whose origins may be traced back to Mestre Irineu, although its founder is considered to be Daniel Pereira de Matos, the son of former slaves and a sailor, master of many trades (including boat building, tailoring, carpentry, bricklaying, shoe-making, poetry and music making). In his youth he was a sailor and left his native

State of Maranhão, to travel, like many others, along the Amazonian waterways, in search of a better life in Acre and eventually settled in Rio Branco.

When he first arrived there, he led a very irregular life and was noted for his bouts of drunkenness and for composing and singing songs about love, friendship and desire. All this changed after he experienced two episodes of revelation. The first one occurred when he fell into a drunken slumber not far from the River Acre and had a vision of two angels who brought him a blue book with instructions. The second revelation came some time later, while he was undergoing healing in the Santo Daime church led by Mestre Irineu, and received a similar message.

This led him to start his own religious group in 1945, using ayahuasca that was given him by Mestre Irineu. Initially he set up a small chapel in the forest on the outskirts of Rio Branco, where he attended the poorer members of the community such as rubber tappers and hunters (Figueiredo 1996:41). He called this chapel 'Capelinha de São Francisco' (The little Chapel of Saint Francis) and when, shortly after his death, it was rebuilt and increased it became known as 'Barquinha' (Little Boat). It has continued to grow but remains in the same place and in 2002 was considered to have about 500 followers (Araujo 2002: 501). After his death, in 1958, as happened with Mestre Irineu's followers, his congregation split up and at present six different religious groups in the Rio Branco area trace their original inspiration to his teachings<sup>vii</sup>. Other new groups are in the process of consolidation in the State of Acre and there are also affiliated centres in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia States. Altogether at the moment there must be some 1,000 Barquinha followers.

Whereas Mestre Irineu's church modelled itself somewhat on the military organization he had known in his youth, former sailor Daniel Pereira de Matos imparted a more nautical imagery to his. One example of this is the idea that the followers of the religion are 'sailors in the holy sea' aboard the 'little boat of the Holy Cross'.

Of all the ayahuasca religions, this is probably the richest in terms of imagery and ritual. Like the others, it demands that regular participants in its ceremonies follow a series of dietary and behavioural prescriptions and wear uniform, in this case of a vaguely nautical style. There are five different types of uniform to be worn in different rituals( Figueiredo 1996:113). Music plays a great part in the rituals but, unlike what happens in the Santo Daime rituals, where all those taking part are expected to join in the communal hymn singing, it is the leader who sings alone the long Barquinha 'psalms', invoking the assistance of Catholic saints, Afro-Brazilian and Indian-Mestizo spiritual beings.

True to the shamanic origins of its doctrine, much of the Barquinha activities are directed towards the healing of assorted ills that may range from severe physical diseases to problems of a more psychosocial nature such as alcoholism or unemployment. Unlike the other ayahuasca religions, there is also a strong emphasis on removing evil spirits and countering witchcraft.

The Barquinha is the ayahuasca religion that deals most comfortably with episodes of spirit possession attributing a central role to this type of trance in some of its rituals and in its general doctrine. This in turn lends a special importance to certain members of the

group who perform as mediums during the ceremonies and exert varying degrees of authority in the centre's spiritual and profane affairs.

In Barquinha ceremonies one may simultaneously come across spirit possession and shamanic flight, as well as intermediate forms of altered consciousness. This counters the position, held by Mircea Eliade (apud Lewis 1977:56) and followers, that these two different types of trance, one considered to be of African origin and the other Siberian and Amerindian, are essentially different and mutually exclusive. In Barquinha ceremonies spirit possession may occur while at the same time the medium undergoes a shamanic flight and loses neither consciousness nor memory, as would be expected in more orthodox cases of possession trance. In other cases, part of the participants may go through a shamanic flight while others undergo spirit possession.

One of the main Barquinha rituals, the 'Trabalhos de Caridade' (Charity Works) is a good instance of this. Here Daime is taken by a number of participants who then seat themselves, either around a large cross-shaped table by the altar (senior members) or on pews or chairs ranged in traditional church style. They then proceed to enter into deep meditation to the sound of prayers and 'psalms', recited and sung by the presiding leader. Meanwhile, in a back room another group of participants, made up of well-trained mediums, having taken ayahuasca, undergo spirit possession and, in their new personae, proceed to attend to people who come in search of healing. They do this by dominating and indoctrinating the dark suffering spirits who are conceived to be the cause of the patients' ills. The spiritual beings operating through the mediums are thought to tap the energy emanating from the front of the church to use in these spiritual struggles.

In another type of ceremony, performed in an open area adjoining the church building, participants dance under the effect of Daime in a fairly free manner, as if inviting spirit possession. Most of those present will go through classical shamanic flight experiences, while some may eventually pass on to a possession trance. This also implies in shifts between expanded consciousness and total unconsciousness and forgetfulness. So wide is the range of states of consciousness that may occur that these ceremonies are recommended as good training in self-knowledge and mediumship.

The Barquinha centres, although generally independent of each other, are all located in the Rio Branco region and their followers are drawn predominantly from the local poor. This may help to explain the prevalence of certain characteristics, of African and Indian origin, which are often ignored or rejected by the middle-class ethos now prevailing in some of the other ayahuasca religions. Their relative smallness and poor social and economic status also make it more difficult for them to organize less predatory manners of producing the brew, which they too call Daime. Since they do not own expanses of land in which they might have extensive plantations of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*, they must resort to gathering them in the forest where they grow wild. As a result of the severe deforestation occurring in the region, and the growing demand for the ayahuasca ingredients, the ritualised gathering expeditions must now go increasingly further afield.

The União do Vegetal

This is the newest of the Brazilian ayahuasca religions but it is also the one with the largest following, counting with an estimated number of 8,000 associates. Its founder was José Gabriel da Costa or, as he later came to be known, Mestre Gabriel, a rubber tapper who migrated from his native North Eastern State of Bahia to Guaporé (now State of Rondonia) in the 1943. During his many travels in this Amazonian area by the Bolivian border, he underwent much hardship and privation. Eventually he became known as a spiritual leader and a healer and for a time was head of an Afro-Brazilian religious group where he also performed as a medium undergoing spirit possession. In 1959 another rubber tapper, who belonged to a tradition of Mestizo shamanism, introduced him to ayahuasca. After taking the brew three times he felt ready to make his own ayahuasca and to use it in religious ceremonies of his own (Brissac 2002:536).

Some time later, in 1961, he renounced his activities as a spirit possession medium and declared that he was recreating an ancient order that he had known in previous incarnations and which he called the União do Vegetal. The following year he moved to the regional capital Porto Velho where he continued his spiritual practices till 1971, when he died (Brissac 2002:537).

The new religion took on the official name of Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal (Benevolent Spiritist Centre Union of the Vegetable) and during the following years a number of new affiliated centres were set up in many different parts of the country, notably in urban centres outside the Amazonian region and, more recently, in Europe and North America.

A new type of member began to be recruited and the organization took on an increasingly urban middle-class character, which was further stimulated by a policy of rigid

selection of those who were to be allowed to take part in the ceremonies. Since all members are expected to contribute with a fixed proportion of their income, the organization soon became quite prosperous and their concern to make socially acceptable their religious use of what was commonly viewed as a hallucinogen led to the adoption of fairly conservative political stances and to the official rejection of any healing activities. Their concern to keep on good terms with the medical profession has also led them develop a more scientific stance and to support research efforts to study the physiological effects of the brew<sup>viii</sup>. They are also quite zealous about establishing a clear difference between themselves and other ayahuasca users who not only maintain the old shamanic claims about the curative properties of the brew, but, in some cases, accept spirit possession in their ceremonies or admit the concomitant ritual use of other plants, namely tobacco and cannabis.

The União do Vegetal (or UDV as it is commonly known) considers itself to be an initiate order and its doctrine is transmitted orally in a highly selective manner which establishes a hierarchy of initiates is established consisting of four ranks, of which the highest, that of the 'Mestres', has five further subdivisions (Gentil 2002:518). This reflects their belief that spirits undergo a process of evolution during a succession of incarnations. It has an eclectic doctrine where African and Indian notions mingle with European Spiritism and Popular Catholicism. During different types of ceremonies, religious teachings and secrets are gradually revealed to the followers (Andrade 2002).

Much attention is given to language and there are strong prescriptions regarding words that may or may not be used. Thus the brew is known as 'Hoasca' or 'Vegetal' and it

must be ‘drunk’ (bebido) and never ‘taken’ (tomado), the more common usage in colloquial conversation in Brazil. This also means that when the ceremonies take place in other countries, they must be carried out in Portuguese.

Members of the ‘União’ may progress through the ranks of the hierarchy according to their ability to memorize the teachings in exactly the same words as they were imparted, and in accordance to their compliance to the religious statutes and to their maintenance of ‘appropriate’ behaviour in their everyday life. Members are subjected to constant ‘monitoring’ and misbehaviour, regardless of the culprit’s rank, is frequently punished with demotion, suspension or expulsion. Parameters governing appropriate behaviour are fairly conservative and include abstinence from drink, tobacco, sexual misdemeanours as well as dancing or attending the ceremonies of other ayahuasca religions. In order to reach the higher echelons members must be married and, with the sole exception of the founder’s widow, must be male.

During the ceremonies all members must wear uniform. This consists of a green shirt for most, with letters or a star embroidered on the pocket to identify the different ranks. A very few high-ranking members wear blue shirts. While all men must wear white trousers, women may wear either skirts or trousers, as long as they are the appropriate yellow.

The ceremonies are fairly simple and tend to follow a general pattern. There is a central table around which sit the higher-ranking members. At the head of the table the presiding ‘Mestre’ often sits under an arch. There are few religious symbols and, apart from

an occasional cross, candle or vase with flowers, the table is usually kept bare. Other participants of the session sit in a wider circle around the table, regardless of rank or gender.

The brew is distributed among all those present, each having his own cup, but it may only be drunk once all have been served and a ritual formula pronounced. The following half hour, while the brew has not yet begun to take effect, is taken up by the reading of the rules and statutes of the União do Vegetal. At the end of this time a 'call' is usually made to summon spiritual guides to preside over the ceremony. The 'Mestre' then proceeds in the anticlockwise direction the 'force' is deemed to take, asking each individual participant if he is feeling the effects of the brew and then the session is considered to have really begun. During the next few hours the leader intones different 'calls', verses meant to attract different spiritual beings and to affect the course of the voyage embarked on by the participants. During the session the 'Mestre' may order one or more further distributions of the drink.

The effect of the brew is known by the followers of this religion as 'burracheira'<sup>ix</sup>, which was considered by Mestre Gabriel to be a 'strange force', or the presence of the 'force' and the 'light' of the Vegetal in the consciousness of those drinking the brew. It is a trance in which there is no loss of consciousness, but enlightenment and the perception of an unknown force. There is a heightening of the person's feelings, perceptions and consciousness (Gentil 2002:537). At a given moment during the session, the presiding 'master' announces that he is willing to answer questions. The participants may then ask him questions about different doctrinal points that may be puzzling them. 'Speaking under

the force', the master usually proceeds to give fairly elaborate answers, often couched in vivid and poetic imagery and occasionally adopting a sermonizing or chastising tone. Under the state of consciousness brought about by the brew, these questions and answers take on a multidimensionality that endows every word and every image with many layers of meaning able to reach the most unconscious recesses of the mind.

The ceremonies alternate between such moments of teaching and indoctrination and others of introspection and meditation. At certain points the silence may be broken by the 'callings' intoned by the leader or by recorded music, which aim at deepening or lightening the voyage. The music is generally New Age or popular songs whose rhythm and words are deemed appropriate. On occasion, recordings may be played of Mestre Gabriel himself giving lectures, or União do Vegetal secrets may be revealed to those deemed fit for promotion to the higher echelons.

As often happens in all ayahuasca religious ceremonies, during the session some participants may feel unwell or suffer from bouts of diarrhoea or vomiting. They may then be helped by more experienced members of the group, previously appointed for this task who may accompany them out of the room to go to the toilet or to wash up. These episodes are quite common and are usually considered to be a form of spiritual and physical cleansing<sup>x</sup>.

After about four hours the session is deemed to end and the 'Mestre' again proceeds in an anticlockwise direction, this time asking each participant how his experience had been. The answers are laconic and follow a standard formula. He then returns to the

head of the table and pronounces a closing prayer. After this the participants are free to talk to each other and spend the next half-hour informally, discussing the ceremony among each other, while they partake of some light food and refreshments (Henman 1986:229).

The União do Vegetal is particularly careful about the production and the distribution of the brew. Since its members take very seriously the injunction that ayahuasca must not be commercialised, there is a strong emphasis on every regional centre attempting to be self-sufficient as regards producing the brew. In order to rise to the higher ranks of the hierarchy, members must learn the intricacies of planting, harvesting, cleaning and cooking the ingredients. Every centre strives to have its own plantation of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*, although on occasion they may receive supplies from other regional centres or from the Amazon itself. This self-sufficiency makes members of the União do Vegetal very critical of the way the other religions are dependent on shipments of the component plants or, more commonly, of the brew itself, coming from their regional religious centres close to the forest.

### Ayahuasca religions as aids to social integration

As long as the use of ayahuasca was confined to the distant Amazonian region it was out of sight and out of mind for the metropolis-oriented Brazilian authorities and opinion makers. However, the spread of these movements among the urban middle class youth soon had the local moral entrepreneurs on the rampage. In 1986, pending further

studies, the government decided to ban the use of ayahuasca. However a set of favourable occurrences led to the setting up of a liberally oriented official study group which after six months research produced a paper calling for the repeal of the ban on a nationwide level. Among other arguments they pointed out that the members of the different religious groups had been found to be orderly and to lead their lives according to the accepted social values and that there had been no proven damage to health caused by taking the brew. Such findings have been further confirmed by several other studies conducted since then by Brazilian and foreign scientists who continue to consider the brew to be relatively harmless (Andrade et al. 2002, Aranha et al. 1991, Callaway et al. 1994, Costa et al. 1995, Grob et al. 1996, Mackenna et al. 1998).

The orderly functioning of these religious organizations helps validate a more tolerant approach to the drug question which places less emphasis on the purely pharmacological aspects of the question and gives more attention to the physical, social and cultural setting in which the use of psychoactive substances occurs. In spite of occasional problems that may always be expected to occur when large numbers of people come together for religious purposes, whether or not these include the ingestion of consciousness altering substances, the ayahuasca religions seem to confirm the effectiveness of social control in determining the consequences of drug use.

When they were originally started in the Amazon, these ayahuasca religions played an important role in helping migrants from the forest adapt and integrate into their new urban environment. Nowadays, however, most of their followers come from a different socio-cultural background. They are, generally speaking, young urban adults with

secondary or university level education and usually lower middle-class incomes. Although they may face different problems from the original members, who were in their majority very poor rubber tappers who had recently settled on the outskirts of Amazonian towns, they have their own economic and existential problems. In Brazil today the young of all classes face a rapidly changing society, growing unemployment and a breakdown in the old family structures. Sexual and work ethics have undergone deep changes and traditional religion has lost much of its cohesive function<sup>xi</sup>.

Young people in Brazil have to cope with the very quick cultural changes occurring around them with regard to the sexual and work ethics as well as the breakdown of traditional family organization and values. In the face of this somewhat hostile milieu, belonging to such a religious group provides them with a sense of social, psychological and spiritual identity, which for many is very familiar and similar to their very early indoctrination to traditional Christian doctrine.

The disciplined use of ayahuasca also provides congregates with a safe, well mapped route to the kind of transcendental spiritual experience that many people seem to be searching for in the compulsive use of alcohol and drugs. Thus, taking part in these religious groups tends to be a particularly effective way of dealing with alcoholism and drug addiction. In this regard, rather than trying to forbid any kind of induced alteration of consciousness, the ritual use of ayahuasca allows certain experiences of the kind. But at the same time it provides a powerful structuring religious framework within which the congregate may work through personal and difficult life issues in a safer setting. One could, quite appropriately say that the ayahuasca religious doctrines and practices intrinsically

provide very desirable and effective harm reduction strategies which have shown themselves to be of great social and psychological value to the congregates.

The American psychiatrist Norman Zinberg proposed a model for controlled drug use in dealing with issues of drug and alcohol abuse which emphasized the important role played by social sanctions and social rituals that reinforce given sets of values, rules of conduct and standardized ways of producing, consuming and dealing with effects (Zinberg 1984:5). Zinberg's proposal can be viewed not simply as a model, but rather as standard for defining or redefining the underlying assumptions regarding "drug use." Thus, to the extent that certain substances are considered "drugs" when used under a given set of circumstances, and as "non drugs" in other circumstances, the drinking of ayahuasca as a sacrament would be the classic example of the "non drug" use. The sense of purpose with which the brew is taken, alongside the ritualistic and highly structured ceremonies, reflecting the Christian doctrine with its indigenous nuances, all ensure that the social taboos that accompany the typical drug user must function in a different manner in this case.

More recently, the Dutch anthropologist Jean-Paul Grund, carrying out research among heroin and cocaine users in the Netherlands, further developed Zinberg's theory by proposing what he calls a "feedback model of drug use self-regulation" that may help us establish the demarcation between what is common called a "drug" and a sacramental use of plants that contain psychoactive properties. His model takes into account two further elements: the availability of the substance and life structure (Grund 1993:247). The ayahuasca using religious organizations seem good examples of these models. Not only do

they also adopt ritual procedures for the taking of the brew that fulfil all the prerequisites laid out by Zinberg, but they also regulate their followers' access to the substance and provide them with doctrinal guidance on the structuring of their lives, the further controlling elements added by Grund to his model. The prohibitionist zeal that leads government authorities to exert pressure and on occasion even ban rituals involving the taking of entheogens is counterproductive for, as Zinberg maintained, controlled use is a result of social learning and requires suitable social and cultural conditions to develop fully. Here dealing with rituals which are not only social but religious as well, we see how they can be quite effective when allowed to develop in a licit manner even when dealing with potent substances like ayahuasca. On the other hand, when their banning makes it difficult for them to become fully institutionalised, as is the case with Santa Maria, their controlling influence is weakened and it is more difficult for them to prevent undesired effects. Further evidence of this is the fact that, in contrast to the "wild" use of Santa Maria, we find that in CEFLURIS the Daime is never used out of a strictly ritual context, except for when it is used in small doses as a remedy.

## . Bibliography

Andrade, A.P.'Contribuições e limites da União do Vegetal para a nova consciência religiosa' in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds.), *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas,SP:Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp,2002)pp543--567.

Andrade, E. N.; Brito, G. S.; Andrade, E. O.; Neves, E. S.; Mckenna, D. Cavalcante, J. W.; Okimura, L.; J.; Grob, C. S. Callaway, J. C et alii. 'Farmacologia Humana da Hoasca: estudos clínicos' in, in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds.), *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas,SP:Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp,2002)pp 621--630

Aranha, C., Travaini, G; Correa, M. A. (1991). 'Aspectos botânicos e taxonômicos das plantas Banisteriopsis sp. e Psychotria sp' Presentation at the Primeiro Congresso em Saude do Centro de Estudos Médicos - União do Vegetal. São Paulo, Brasil, 30 th may—2nd june, 1991.

Araújo, W. S. '*Navegando sobre as ondas do Daime- história, cosmologia e ritual da Barquinha*'. Campinas, Editora da UNICAMP, 1999.

**Araújo, W. S.** 'A Barquinha: espaço simbólico de uma cosmologia em construção' in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds., *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas,SP:Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp,2002) pp 495—512.

Brissac,S. 'José Gabriel da Costa: trajetória de um brasileiro mestre e autor da União do Vegetal' in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds.), *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas,SP:Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp,2002)pp525—542.

Callaway, J. C.; Airaksinen, M. M.; Mckenna, D. J.; Brito, G. S. & Grob, C. S. (1994). Platelet serotonin uptake sites increased in drinkers of ayahuasca. Psychopharmacology 116: 385-387.

Callaway, J. C.; Mckenna, D.J. et al. (1998). Pharmacokinetics of Hoasca alkaloids in healthy humans. Journal of Ethnopharmacology 65 (1999): 243-256

Couto, F.R. – ‘Santo Daime: rito de ordem,’ in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds., *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas,SP:Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp,2002) pp339--366.

Fericgla, J.M. - 1989 – ‘El Sistema Dinâmico de la Cultura y los Diversos Estados de la Mente Humana - Bases para un Irracionalismo Sistemico’ - *Cuadernos de Antropologia* - Barcelona - Editorial Anthropos -1989 pp.

FIGUEIREDO, E.,et. alii *Mestre Antônio Geraldo e o Santo Daime*. Rio Branco: BOBGRAF: Ed. Preview, 1996.

Gentil,L.R.B. ‘O uso de psicoativos em um contexto religioso: a União doVegetal’ in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds., *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas,SP:Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp,2002) pp 513—524.

Goulart,S.L. ‘O contexto do surgimento do culto do Santo Daime: formação da Comunidade e do calendário ritual’ in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds., *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas,SP:Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp,2002) pp313—338.

Labate, B.C. 'A literatura brasileira sobre as religiões ayahuasqueiras' in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds., *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas, SP: Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp, 2002) pp229—274.

LEWIS, I. M. *Êxtase Religioso* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1977).

Luna, L. E. *Vegetalismo: Shamanism among the mestizo population of the Peruvian Amazon*, (Stockholm, Almquist and Wiksell International, 1986).

Gentil, L.R.B. 'O uso de psicoativos em um contexto religioso' in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds., *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas, SP: Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp, 2002) pp513—524.

Gordon Wasson, R., Hofmann, A., Ruck, C.A.P. *El Camino a Eleusis-Una solución al enigma de los misterios*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1980, 240 pp.

Grob, C. S., D. J. McKenna, J. C. Callaway, G. S. Brito, E. S. Neves, G. Oberlender, O. L. Saide, E. Labigalini, C. Tacla, C. T. Miranda, R. J. Strassman, K. B. Boone (1996). Human psychopharmacology of hoasca, a plant hallucinogen used in ritual context in Brasil: Journal of Nervous & Mental Disease. 184:86-94.

Groisman, A. *Eu venho da Floresta. Um estudo sobre o contexto simbólico do uso do Santo Daime*, Florianópolis, Editora da UFSC, 1999.

Groisman,A. *Santo Daime in the Netherlands: An anthropological study of a New World religion in a European setting-* Dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy to the Department of Anthropology, Goldsmiths College, University of London, 2000,295pp.

Grund, J.P.C *Drug Use as a Social Ritual- Functionality, Symbolism and Determinants of Self-Regulation* ,Rotterdam, Instituut voor Vesslavingsonderzoek,1993.

Henman,A.R. ‘Uso del ayahuasca en un contexto autoritario. El caso de la União do Vegetal en Brasil,’*America indígena* vol XLVI, num1,enero-marzo,1986, 219—234.

MacRae, E. *Guiado pela Lua- Xamanismo e uso Ritual da ayahuasca no culto do Santo Daime*, São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1990.

MacRae, E. ‘A importância dos fatores socioculturais na determinação da política oficial sobre o uso ritual da ayahuasca’, in; *Drogas e Cidadania- Repressão ou Redução de Riscos* , Zaluar, A. (org.), São Paulo, Brasiliense, 1994, pp.31-45

MacRae, E. *Guiado por la Luna- Shamanismo y uso ritual de la ayahuasca en el culto de Santo Daime-* Quito, Ediciones Abya-Ayala, 1998, 175 pp.

MacRae,E. ‘Santo Daime and Santa Maria- The licit ritual use of ayahuasca and the illicit use of cannabis in a Brazilian Amazonian religion’,*International Journal of Drug Policy*,9 (1998)325—338..

McKenna, D. J., & Callaway, J.C., Grob, C. S.. ' The Scientific Investigation of Ayahuasca – A Review of Past and Current Research'. *The Heffer Review of Psychedelic Research* 1998 (I):65-77

Monteiro da Silva, C. *O sistema de Juramidam, culto do Santo Daime no Acre; um ritual de transcendência e despoluição* , Recife , master of arts dissertation presented to the Institute of Human Sciences, Federal University of Pernambuco, 1983.

Monteiro da Silva, C. 'O uso ritual da ayahuasca e o reencontro de duas tradições. A miração e a incorporação no culto do Santo Daime', in B.C. Labate and W.S. Araújo (eds., *O Uso Ritual da Ayahuasca* (Campinas,SP:Mercado de Letras; São Paulo: Fapesp,2002)pp367--398.

Sá, D.B.G.S. 'Ayahuasca, A consciência da expansão' in: *Discursos Sediciosos (Crime, Direito e Sociedade)*, Ano 1, número 2, 2º semestre 1996, Rio de Janeiro, Instituto Carioca de Criminologia

Zinberg, N. *Drug, Set and Setting,-The basis of controlled intoxicant use* \_ New Haven, Yale University Press, 1984, 277 pp.

---

<sup>i</sup> I wish to thank Beatriz Labate for reading the first version of this article and for her very constructive comments.

ents

<sup>ii</sup> Chemical analysis shows that *Banisteriopsis caapi* contains the beta-carboline alkaloids: harmine, harmaline and tetrahydroharmine. *Diplopterys cabreana* and the *Psychotrias* have the hallucinogenic alkaloid N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT). This substance, when taken alone and orally, is inactive, even in high doses, owing to the action of the monoamine oxidase (MAO). Analysis has shown that, although the beta-carbolines found in the mixtures are in too low a dosage to manifest their hallucinogenic properties, they seem to play a role in the inhibition of MAO, thus freeing the DMT from its action and allowing it to show its psychoactive properties. Users of the brew explain this process by saying that the vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) carries the "force" while the leaf (*Psychotria viridis*) brings the "light". This is a phenomenological understanding of the way the brew works. Things become less clear when one takes into consideration certain claims that the *Banisteriopsis* may reveal hallucinogenic properties when brewed alone, or when smoked or chewed. Apart from their psychoactive effects, the components of ayahuasca have a large range of emetic, antimicrobial and anti-helminthic effects, which make them effective in the fight against ascarid worms, as well as protozoaries such as trypanosomes and amoebas. This

would explain the use of the brew as an emetic and as a laxative, to cleanse the organism of all impurities. The brew is also said to be useful against malaria (Luna 1986: 57-59).

<sup>iii</sup> Although there is some dispute about the origin of this name, most scholars accept the native explanation that it refers to the Portuguese expression ‘Dai-me’, meaning ‘Give me’, frequently found in the hymns sung during the ceremonies when requests are made to the spiritual world for light, strength, and love. For an alternative view see Monteiro da Silva (2002:367-398).

<sup>iv</sup> ‘Entheogen’ is an alternative expression suggested by Gordon Wasson and others to avoid the pejorative connotation implicit in ‘hallucinogen’. Deriving from the Greek ‘entheos’ it means ‘that which generates the experience of the divine within’ and in a strict sense should be used for those drugs that produce visions and which can be shown to have been used in religious or shamanic rites. In a broader sense the word may be used to designate other drugs, be they natural or artificial, that induce alterations in consciousness similar to those produced by the ritual ingestion of traditional entheogens (Gordon Wasson et. Alii.1980:235)

<sup>v</sup> It is interesting to note that Amerindian and Mestizo shamans usually consider ayahuasca to have a feminine energy (Luna 1986).

<sup>vi</sup> It is said that ‘Santa Maria is not marihuana’, and great care is taken to ensure that the sacramental nature of the use is preserved, even when the pressure from everyday life for a more informal profane use of the plant is very strong. One of the ways to ensure the distinction between the two different usages is through the adoption of a special vocabulary

to deal with Santa Maria that is different from that normally used in the marihuana subculture.

<sup>vii</sup> It is difficult to be precise about the number of Barquinha churches and followers since some of the groups are relatively small and new ones keep cropping up.

<sup>viii</sup> See McKenna, D. J., et alii (1998), Grob, C. S., et alii (1996), Callaway, J. C., et alii. (1998), Callaway, J. C. et alii; (1994), Aranha, C., et alii. (1991). Andrade, E. N.; et alii. (2002).

<sup>ix</sup> ‘Burracheira’ seems to be a Portuguese corruption of the Spanish ‘borrachera’, meaning ‘inebriation’. However, members of the União do Vegetal have another understanding of the matter.

<sup>x</sup> The emetic effects of ayahuasca are so common that in Spanish speaking countries it is sometimes called ‘la purga’ (the purge)

<sup>xi</sup> The recent growth of Neo-Pentecostal churches, imported from the USA or spawned locally, is a much more marked phenomenon in Brazilian society than the development of the ayahuasca religions, but both developments seem to serve similar functions, as ways of helping people from different social classes to cope with the acute economic and cultural challenges of modern life.