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## **Reinventions and controversies: the necessity of tradition and the vicissitudes of regulation**

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Ayahuasca, a divine being, a plant teacher, an entheogen, a hallucinogen, a medicine, a drug, a “juice cleanse”, cognitive tool, a commodity, a preparation, a tea. The definitions associated with ayahuasca are almost as diverse as its uses. As the authors highlight, the use of ayahuasca throughout the world is composed of many different practices - indigenous shamanism, religious groups, therapeutic use, neoshamanic groups associated with the new age movement, a particular form of tourism, and entrepreneurship, etc. Despite the variety of practices, uses and groups, they are all part of what the authors chose to call the “world ayahuasca diaspora”, or the ayahuasca boom. Thus, this volume presents has an important task: trying to understand the complexities regarding ayahuasca, as its use expands worldwide, and leads to reinventions and controversies. Issues such as tradition, identity, legitimacy, stigmatization, disputes between groups, legal prosecutions, drug policies, gain a new perspective through the ayahuasca diaspora lens. In light of the complexity of these issues, my presentation today will focus on one the aspects of the book that is dearest to me, and relates directly to my work: the controversies. I’ll divide my presentation in two parts. First, all talk about the internal controversies of the ayahuasca milieu. On the second part, I will discuss the legal controversies that some ayahuasca groups and practitioners face when their practices become the focus of governmental restraint or regulation.

In this volume, Dawson (2016) provides an important analysis to address the first problem by investigating what he calls, the retraditionalization process associated with the world ayahuasca diaspora. The author talks about a reconfiguration involving the recapitulation of traditional beliefs and practices in a way that not only lead to reinventions through a hybridization process, but can also create new traditions with the introduction of new rituals, beliefs and values formerly absent from the Amazonian imaginary. Sometimes those processes

does not occur without tensions, and the emergence of controversies raises new problems and presents new challenges. For instance, Labate and Assis highlight that the widespread of Santo Daime by ICEFLU throughout Brazil and many parts of the world lead to an entire different social dynamic that transformed it into a global religion, capable of adapting to more plural, subjective and individual conceptions. At the same time, the capacity of the institution to adapt is not unlimited and some tensions became visible as the group expanded. One of the most recent controversies refers to the disputes regarding the possibility of translating the Santo Daime hymns attested by Labate, Assis, and Cavnar (2016). In one side of the dispute, traditionalists insists in maintaining the lyrics of the hymns in Portuguese, remaining as close as possible to the ways in which those are played and sung in Brazil. On the other hand, “translationalists” argue that the translation of hymns is a positive form of cultural adaptation (Labate et al, 2016: 112). Since there isn’t a clear and institutional policy or guideline towards that matter, those visions tend to coexist and collide resulting in what the authors call “translation wars” (Labate et al, 2016: 115). In this context, disputes regarding notions of identity, legitimacy are put in motion in order to construct particular notions of tradition and orthodoxy.

Some more specific controversies can also emerge depending on the national context in which the group is inserted. As Eli Sheiner demonstrated, some concerns were raised about the adaptability of some of the Santo Daime practices to the Canadian culture, such as the spiritualization of potentially pathological behaviors (Sheiner, 2016: 89). Another example can be seen on the approach towards gender relations. As a church headed by a woman, Céu do Montreal - the name of the Canadian church - focused on the issue of gender inequality, seeking the same sort of responsibilities and duties between men and women, like the right to lead rituals and to serve the tea. As a result, the church came up against resistance with some former institutional affiliates in Brazil (Sheiner, 2016: 91). This is not a located and individual phenomenon. Labate, Assis, and Cavnar point out that, as the expansion towards new geographical, social and cultural background, some aspects of the group considered problematic or incongruent with the local context, in this case, sexist and reactionary practices, can be suppressed or “cleansed”, in a negotiation process between authenticity and local adaptability (Labate et al, 2016: 107).

Leaving the Brazilian ayahuasca religions and focusing on the local impacts of the ayahuasca boom in the Peruvian Amazon, Joshua Homan (2016) tries to understand how the ayahuasca diaspora has created new controversies in the urban Amazon and rural communities. Homan argues that ayahuasca is crucial to a multi-million dollar industry in the urban centers of the Amazon, due in part to the rise of shamanic tourism on the region in the previous decades. This new industry is affecting the social and economical lives of many individuals. For example, the shamanic tourism led to the emergence of an income gap between those who work with tourists and those who work mainly within local communities. Sometimes the access of the local community to the vegetalista can suffer, as some of them tend to expand their networks. This phenomenon is part of what Daniela Peluso described as “ayahuasca entrepreneurship”. According to the author:

“Ayahuasca entrepreneurship” refers to a set of responses to the dynamics of increased ayahuasca tourism and the marketing strategies used to attract such tourism. This phenomenon has resulted in the proliferation of shamans, ayahuasqueiros, tourists lodges, and agencies that provide the ayahuasca experience. (Peluso, 2016: 205)

Like Homan, Peluso argues that this new entrepreneurial system has had various negative impacts on local populations that have depended on ayahuasqueiros for health reasons, as they are becoming increasingly inaccessible to them due to tourist obligations. Parallel to that process, this new development has been leading to disputes between shamans, as they accuse one another of lack of knowledge, of being more interested in providing a hallucinogenic to foreigners than focusing on healing, practicing sorcery, or even criminal accusations such as drug trafficking and sexual assault (Homan, 2016: 173).

Other aspect of this process, according to Homan, is that “ayahuasca shamanism itself has been dislocated from its Amazonian roots through the commodification of its core components” (Homan, 2016: 166). Therefore, the practices of vegetalismo associated directly to the shamanic tourism and the ayahuasca diaspora has led to a sanitized version of ayahuasca shamanism, detached from its ambivalent and negative aspects of sorcery and more associated with the New Age imaginary and with the healing aspect. These structural changes in practices

and values culminates into questions regarding authenticity, coming not only from local people, but from tourists and scholars. And authenticity, as Dawson argues, is deeply connected to the notion of identity. In this light, the majority of shamans that he worked with presented some sort of claim that they either had gone through training with indigenous groups or had indigenous heritage (Homan, 2016: 176-177).

Isabel de Rose (2010) described an interesting case about the process of the appropriation of ayahuasca use by the Guarani, an indigenous group of the southern coast of Brazil. Rose details the recent history of the group's contact with ayahuasca while seeking to form an "alliance of medicines" network with a neoshamanic group called Sacred Fire, and a Santo Daime church. An interesting point in Rose's dissertation concerns the emergence of a controversy, both among the Guarani themselves and among outside agents. On the one hand, some members tried to legitimize the use of ayahuasca and other related practices by using the rhetoric of "tradition" and claiming that it was a custom of their ancestors, which was now being "rescued". On the other hand, Rose points out that some Guarani from the group itself, but mainly from other Guarani villages, did not agree with ayahuasca use, some saying that it is a "white thing" or even accusing the indigenous people that used ayahuasca of "doing drugs" (Rose, 2010: 337).

Indeed, when one analyses the complexity of the ayahuasca religions and their different manifestations, the controversies on ayahuasca shamanism tourism and the new forms its association with the new age movement, it is increasingly difficult to delineate any original traditions and long-lasting affiliations. However, it is possible to affirm that within this construction of practices and traditions, it is frequent to see genealogical constructions that always seems to be connected to immemorial indigenous or mestizo Amazonian practices. Thus, it is necessary to take Dawson's consideration seriously when he concludes that "if tradition did not exist, it would have to be invented". This necessity of "tradition", whether stated by indigenous, vegetalistas, ayahuasca religions, neoshamanic groups, seems a recurrent need as the practices and the boundaries of ayahuasca use expand in new directions. Despite the incessant

reinventions and controversies, the use of ayahuasca seems more and more inseparable from the notion of "tradition" as ayahuasca goes through a world diaspora.

Another important set of controversies emerge when ayahuasca groups or practitioners face legal challenges with national governments. One interesting case presented on the book concerns the legal entanglements of ayahuasca in the English courts. Charlotte Walsh (2016) explores the case of Peter Aziz, who supplied ayahuasca for a group of paying clients as part of shamanic rituals based on the pursuit of enlightenment and personal development. According to Walsh, Aziz was arrested after a ceremony hosted in a hotel. Later, he was prosecuted and convicted by a jury for producing a Class A drug - DMT -, and supplying it to others, which resulted in a 15 month custodial sentence. Aziz's defense was based in two main arguments: first, that the proceedings taken against him was an abuse of process. In the defense's perspective, the requirement of legal certainty as enshrined by the article 7 of the ECHR was not met, since ayahuasca's legal status was unclear. Second, even if ayahuasca was contemplated by the British drug legislation, Aziz should have been conceded an exemption from prohibition on religious grounds, according to the article 9 of the ECHR (Walsh, 2016: 243-244).

One of the interesting aspects that Walsh highlighted is the clash of narratives. In one hand, the defense portrayed ayahuasca as a shamanic healing potion with spiritual properties, and, Aziz's as practitioner of a cultural and religious tradition based on Amazonian shamanism. On the other hand, the court treated Aziz as a chemist producing a Class A drug. In this clash, the defense narrative lost and ayahuasca was considered by the English court as a prohibited substance and rejected Aziz's claims based on the ECHR. This is just one of the many legal cases around the world involving ayahuasca use that revolves around issues such as drug use and trafficking, public health, public safety, religious freedom, cultural rights. These sort of legal controversy is becoming more and more frequent as the ayahuasca diaspora gains force. In this light, not only the national governments play a key role, but international boards, NGOs, and, social actors like jurists, lawyers, scholars, have inserted themselves into the debate disputing the ways in which the narratives on ayahuasca are constructed (Walsh, 2016).

One example presented on the book is the role of the International Narcotics Control Board of the UN and its position towards ayahuasca, which was mobilized at the same time by governments and by those who defend the ritual use of ayahuasca. Initially, the board concluded in 2001 that ayahuasca was not under international control and was not subject to any of the articles of the 1971 Convention of Psychotropic Substances. However, one decade later the INCB proposed that national governments should consider controlling certain psychoactive plants, transferring to the states the discretion to decide whether ayahuasca should be prohibited or regulated. Another interesting example is the increasingly active role played by the International Center for Ethnobotanical Education, Research and Service (ICEERS). ICEERS presents itself as a charitable not-for-profit organization committed to fight the criminalization of ayahuasca and promote its regulation. Besides providing legal assistance for ayahuasca users and groups, ICEERS helped to develop the Ayahuasca Defense Fund Support Criteria, composed of 13 principles based on real life incidents that took place in the recent past (Noelen et al, 2016).

Despite these new developments with international boards and NGOs, the participation of a myriad of social actors on those controversies are not new. In a recent article, I argued that the role of scholars was crucial not only to give visibility to the debate on ayahuasca in Brazil, but also to shape the public perception of the phenomena in dispute (Antunes, 2015). In Brazil, researchers and specialists had a leading role in the public controversy, helping to define the agenda of the first public policies for the use of ayahuasca in Brazil. The set of academic arguments that prevailed throughout the controversy as they were incorporated in the public policies paved the way to consolidating the framing of ayahuasca institutions as legitimate religions and consequently set the terms for the regulation of ayahuasca. Measures such as academic research, or participation in forums for the development of public policies, contributed to give legal legitimacy to ayahuasca groups by associating the use of ayahuasca with traditional religious and cultural manifestations in the Amazon region. In this light, they also helped to define what could be understood as “ritual” use as opposed to a “commercial” use of a drug and to outline the acceptable parameters of regulation of these “religions” by the state, stipulating measures such as the prohibition of advertising and non artisanal modes of production of ayahuasca.

To conclude, I would like to highlight the contribution of the volume to grasp on those issues. As the world ayahuasca diaspora moves forward it will inevitably lead to new reinventions and controversies. These processes are usually surrounded by disputes towards the uses and appropriations of certain categories and practices, and frequently clash with the legal landscape of many modern nations. New conceptions of tradition will be created and new forms to establish legitimacy between groups and amongst groups and national governments will emerge, shaking the already unstable landscape of the ayahuasca diaspora. Therefore, this collective work presents us with a bold approach to face those developments, as it avoids simple answers to complex questions, and tries to give us a broader perspective on the issues at stake. In this light, this volume is not only an important contribution to have a grasp on the new challenges brought to us, but it also paves the way for a better understanding of the new challenges will come.

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