
Sandra Lucia Goulart

(translated by Christian Frenopoulo, revised by Matthew Meyer)

Religious Matrices of the União do Vegetal

Sandra Lucia Goulart is an Assistant Professor at Cásper Líbero College. She is also an Associate Researcher at the Interdisciplinary Group for Psychoactive Studies (NEIP). A specialist in ayahuasca studies, Goulart has also done research on the use and traffic of illicit drugs, most recently on crack consumption in São Paulo, and was sponsored by the United Nations' Latin American Institute for Crime Prevention and the Treatment of Delinquents (ILANUD). The research was part of a wider UNESCO study aimed at comparing contexts of illicit drug use and traffic in four countries, including Brazil.

Sandra Lucia Goulart
R. Barão do Bananal, 1308, ap. 24
05024-000
São Paulo – SP
Brazil

sgoular@uol.com.br

<http://www.neip.info>

Abstract

This article analyses the relations between the União do Vegetal (UDV) and other religious traditions. Narratives provided by early members and biographical details of the founder of the UDV since his childhood, reveal the presence of elements within the cosmology and rituals of this religion that are originated in various sources. These span from popular Catholicism, Allan Kardec's Spiritism, Masonry, Jewish tradition, and Afro-Brazilian religions, to popular Amazonian beliefs. The text shows how the combination of aspects of these different traditions is important in the constitution of the new religious system of the União do Vegetal. The article situates this ayahuasca religion within the field of Brazilian religiosity, indicating, for instance, parallels in its formative process with the history of other religions, such as Umbanda. The article also highlights relationships between elements of the mythology, doctrine and rituals of the União do Vegetal and the Amazonian context linked to the use of ayahuasca.

Keywords

Afro-Brazilian traditions, Amazon, anthropology, Ayahuasca, Brazilian popular Catholicism, drugs, religion, União do Vegetal.

Introduction

Chronologically, the União do Vegetal (Union of the Vegetal)—or UDV, as it is also known—is the third ayahuasca religion to appear in Brazil. The term ‘Vegetal’, analogous to the case of ‘Daime’, is used to designate both the decoction that results from the combination of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine with leaves from the *Psychotria viridis* bush, as well as for the church itself. The UDV began in the early sixties in a region near to what is now the state of Rondônia. It was created by José Gabriel da Costa. According to participants, the exact date of the creation of the União do Vegetal was July 2nd, 1961. The site was the rubber camp¹ Sunta, located on the border between Brazil and Bolivia. It was in that place where the UDV began to be organized. It was only in 1965 that Mestre Gabriel definitively moved to the city of Porto Velho, developing and more systematically structuring his ayahuasca religion in an urban setting. Initially, the name of the religious group founded by Mestre Gabriel was *Associação Beneficente União do Vegetal* (União do Vegetal Beneficent Association). In 1970, however, one year before his passing away, he changed the name to *Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal* (CEBUDV) (União do Vegetal Beneficent Spiritist Center), as it is still called to this day.

It is worth pointing out that historical events such as these possess a special significance for this religion. Similarly, other kinds of events considered important for the faithful—episodes involving the founder or leaders—have given rise to a number of special dates that make up the UDV calendar.² It is also important to underscore that, in the perspective of the followers of this religion, when we speak of the beginning or foundation of the UDV, we are not referring to its creation, but to its ‘re-creation’. This is in accordance with their belief that their Master, José Gabriel da Costa, was only remembering his previous incarnations and reactualizing his sacred ‘mission’; specifically by restoring the União do Vegetal on Earth, re-creating it.³

1. Rubber camps (*seringal* in Portuguese) are called so due to the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*), from which latex for producing natural rubber is extracted. The Portuguese term refers to an orchard of rubber trees, and also to the land (property, plot of land in a settlement, or municipality, forest, etc.) where the trees are concentrated and where those who work directly in the extraction of latex reside (that is, the rubber-tappers, as well as their bosses, who control and appropriate the labor of the former, concentrating their gains).

2. Some of the dates, such as the Re-creation of the União do Vegetal or the Confirmation of the UDV in the Astral are listed in the ‘Timeline: Mestre Gabriel and UDV’ section appended at the end of this article.

3. These prior incarnations of Mestre Gabriel are narrated in the *History of Hoasca*, the central myth of the UDV, recounted in some ritual sessions of Vegetal, such as on the birthday of Mestre Gabriel, February 10th.

José Gabriel da Costa or Mestre Gabriel, as he is called by followers, was born in Coração de Maria, in the state of Bahia, in 1922. According to my research,⁴ he left his birthplace around 1942, to go and live in Salvador, the capital of Bahia. His stay in the Bahian capital, though, was short. Mestre Gabriel joined the 'Rubber Army'⁵ in the following year, 1943. He transferred to the Amazon and became a part of the mass of Northeastern laborers who were migrating into the region to join the rubber industry at that time.

Roots of the União do Vegetal

Not a lot is known about the life of Mestre Gabriel in Bahia. Regarding his religious background, as is the case of the other founders of the ayahuasca religions, Mestre Gabriel grew up in a context strongly marked by the typical manifestations of Brazilian popular Catholicism. His family frequently participated in the regional festivities of the Catholic calendar, as well as the monthly mass, or in commemorations that occurred with less frequency, such as the feast of a saint. In the Brazilian rural context, principally up until the middle of the past century, feasts of Catholic saints were a widespread event. These feasts assembled numerous residents of a locality, or even a whole region, who ordinarily lived in a relative isolation or with little contact, due to the pattern of population dispersal. The feasts of the saints interrupted this configuration, and involved pilgrimages, *novenas*, *folias*, and processions. In these celebrations, which often lasted for several days, and sometimes even months, a group of faithful traveled a considerable distance (by boat or by land), transporting the images of the venerated saints to the homes of the inhabitants.

Hence, since his childhood, Mestre Gabriel had participated in this religious context, accompanying his parents and older siblings in the feasts of the saints carried out in the town close to the farm where they lived. Additionally, during the periods when there were no communal festivities and little contact among regional families, Mestre Gabriel's family (especially his mother) would engage in other Catholic practices, such as litanies, *novenas*, short homages to a saint, and so on, also in concurrence with the milieu. As numerous authors have explained, the existence of

4. I conducted fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation (Goulart, 2004a) from 2001 to 2002 in the city of Rio Branco, Acre state, among different nuclei of the União do Vegetal.

5. The term 'Army' and 'rubber soldier' refer to the workers recruited from the northeast by the Brazilian government to work in the Amazonian rubber camps tapping latex from the rubber tree (*Hevea brasiliensis*) to produce rubber during World War II. In Brazil, the 'rubber economy' was concentrated in the Amazon region, basically in two periods. The first, the apogee, was from 1879 to 1912; the second, shorter, from 1942 to 1945, when, due to the difficulty of access to the rubber camps in Malaysia during World War II, the extraction of Brazilian rubber was reactivated (Almeida, 1992).

these kinds of Catholic practices—to some degree independent from official Church agents—was very common in the Brazilian rural context of the time. In those far away and relatively isolated regions, priests were substituted by women who knew prayers, or by the so-called *beatos* (lit. ‘blessed’) and *penitentes* (penitents) (Pereira de Queiroz, 1973 and 1978; Galvão, 1955). According to some accounts and sources, it seems that Mestre Gabriel’s mother fulfilled, at least in part, this type of function. In Edson Lodi’s book (2004), which provides an account and biography of the youngest brother of Mestre Gabriel, this childhood context of the founder of the UDV is narrated in more detail. For instance, Antonio Gabriel (Mestre Gabriel’s brother) recounts how Prima Feliciano (Mestre Gabriel’s mother) was devoted to the saints Cosmas and Damian. As a result, she assembled her neighbors in her house on the day dedicated to these saints and, in front of a shrine (a small box, where the images of saints are kept), she led the praying of the rosary, other Catholic prayers, and the *benditos*, which are prayers that are sung in which the main verses praise the saint that is being homaged with the expression ‘bendito’ (‘blessed’). The book explains that Mestre Gabriel was the son who most accompanied his mother’s devotions, helping her, and displaying a special vocation for singing the *benditos* and for leading prayers.

This tradition relating to the saints Cosmas and Damian that Mestre Gabriel carried from his childhood in Bahia is absorbed into the ritual and mythical complex of the new ayahuasca religion that he created in Porto Velho. In the União do Vegetal, the *bendito* of saints Cosmas and Damian was transformed into a *chamada*—a term from this religion which designates melodies that are sung, solely modulated by the performer’s voice. *Chamadas* are fundamental elements in all UDV ritual ceremonies. Together with other elements, such as the questions put by participants to the group leaders, the reading of internal documents, explanations and speeches on doctrinal principles—all accompanied by the consumption of Vegetal—these constitute its basic structure.⁶ Mestre Gabriel’s brother (whose biography is also recounted in Edson Lodi’s book) was separated from him when he left Bahia to work in the Amazonian rubber camps and only met up with him again almost 30 years later, in 1971, when Mestre Gabriel decided to return to Bahia to attempt to reestablish contact with his family. At that time, he already led a relatively structured União do Vegetal group in Porto Velho. The interest of his youngest brother, Antonio Gabriel, in the UDV resulted from this trip back to his birthplace where he

6. There are around 170 *chamadas*. Many of them were authored by Mestre Gabriel. However, we must qualify the notion of authorship since, in UDV belief, all *chamadas* are ultimately ‘brought’ by a spiritual being. As mentioned, in all UDV rituals, called ‘sessions’, *chamadas* are sung, but they vary, since there are *chamadas* that are specific for certain types of ‘sessions’ (somewhat reserved).

regained contact with his family. With time, he converted to the religion founded by his brother. Antonio Gabriel recounts how, during his first experiences with Vegetal in Porto Velho, he recognized the old *bendito* that his brother used to sing in his childhood in Bahia when he heard the *chamada* of saints Cosmas and Damian. According to him, there are only slight differences between the *chamada* and the *bendito*, such as a few substituted words (Lodi, 2004: 42).

The case of the devotion to the saints Cosmas and Damian is not an isolated incident, since the UDV ritual calendar adopts various other devotions and dates from Catholicism, such as the dates dedicated to the Three Kings, Christmas, the Resurrection of Christ, and others. Also, many Christian figures (such as Jesus and the Virgin Mary) are frequently mentioned in the *chamadas* and *histories*⁷ of the UDV. It is also important to note that the UDV is always represented as a religion or doctrine of Christian principles in its documents, registers, and public positioning. It is reported that in the beginnings of the UDV, Mestre Gabriel even prayed an Our Father and Hail Mary before opening the ritual sessions with Vegetal.



Figure 1. A UDV ritual (copyright Benta Viana)

7. The transmission of mythical and doctrinal aspects of the União do Vegetal occurs through a series of stories, which constitute diverse types of narratives. They may have an informal character, even appearing humorous, similar to other narratives typical of Brazilian popular culture. There are also histories that have a more formal character, functioning as myths and that are told or mentioned under more restrictions. Some of them, in fact, are only recounted during sessions in which members with high hierarchical degrees participate.

It is true that this practice seemingly possessed, at least partially, a strategic character, seeking to lessen the alienation or stigma of a religion that made use of a brew of indigenous origin, linked to non-Christian traditions. I obtained information that the performance of these prayers was abandoned after the União do Vegetal became more 'accepted' in Porto Velho. Even so, this does not deny the factual incorporation of Christian beliefs or elements of Catholicism in the UDV religion, though it does indicate that these elements were reinterpreted according to a new set of principles and the distinct logic of this ayahuasca religion.

Thus, for example, followers of the UDV associate Mestre Gabriel with Jesus Christ or 'his teachings'. In the understanding of many UDV followers, both of them opted for the 'poor', 'simple' and 'excluded'. As Andrade recounts in his master's thesis on the União do Vegetal, in the same way that Christ chose humble fishermen to be his apostles, Mestre Gabriel chose disciples from among 'caboclos' (1995: 181–82). In fact, references to Jesus, and associations between him and Mestre Gabriel or his religious doctrine, are highlighted in the cosmology of the UDV. They even appear in the principal myth, the History of Hoasca. This history, narrated by Mestre Gabriel himself (in a recording made shortly before his passing away), is an account of the origin of Vegetal, or rather, of the two plants that compose it, the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* bush, respectively called *mariri* and *chacrona* in the UDV. It is a long narration, with several episodes, covering different historical periods. In one of the passages situated in the time of King Solomon (of the Hebrew tradition), Mestre Gabriel talks of the birth of Jesus, also mentioning the Virgin Mary, revealing a typical process of mythical logic, in which time is reversible and events and different characters may mix, as they are not conditioned to a progressive succession that would inevitably separate them.

It is also common among UDV followers to draw parallels between the birth of Jesus and that of Mestre Gabriel. The founder of the UDV was reportedly born at noon, and this fact is swathed in symbolic significance, originating a series of ritual and mythic interpretations in this religious group. One of these exegetic developments is, precisely, the idea that there is an important relationship between the time of Jesus' birth and that of Mestre Gabriel's. Thus, in informal conversations with followers who belong to the highest hierarchical ranks of the UDV, it was explained to me that, while Jesus was born at the moment in which the day was starting (midnight), Mestre Gabriel was born at its peak (noon), that is, when the sun is at its zenith. As a follower once told me, 'Mestre Gabriel was born on the peak of noon, that is, when the sun is at its peak and there is the most light'. In this sense, we can say that the birth of Jesus and Mestre Gabriel are equally important in the

views of UDV followers, as they mark crucial moments in time, determining the principal moments of the day.⁸

In addition to popular Catholicism, another significant source for the formation of the União do Vegetal religion is the Spiritism of Allan Kardec. As it is well known, Kardec (a French pedagogue) was responsible in the mid-nineteenth century for the structuring of a doctrine called Spiritism (due to the belief in the intervention of the spirits of the dead in earthly phenomena, the world of the living), which he simultaneously considered to be religion, philosophy and science. Kardec's Spiritism included a series of spiritualist and esoteric beliefs that circulated through Europe and the USA, largely beginning in the end of the eighteenth century, such as the theories of magnetism or psychism. Kardec's doctrine, also known as Kardecism, spread through Brazil towards the end of the nineteenth century, initially among urban high and middle classes. Later, it extended widely into different regions of the country and various segments of the population.

Several authors have shown that the expansion of Kardecism in Brazil involved a particular development that involved a mediation between the beliefs of the popular segments of the population and those of the urban elites that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Thus, Ortiz (1978) highlighted the importance of Kardecist beliefs in the process of adaptation of African traditions to the new lifestyle that was consolidating in the nation during the period of industrialization of the first decades of the twentieth century. Ortiz was seeking to demonstrate how this process developed into the formation of Umbanda, an Afro-Brazilian religion in which, according to him, some Kardecist notions rendered beliefs of African origin more palatable to the standards of rationality of the emerging Brazilian society—more urbanized, modern, and white. For Ortiz, this movement of integration of Umbanda into the new Brazilian social context through the adoption of Kardecist notions was framed by social class conflict. The first *terreiros* or Spiritist centers revealed these conflicts through the greater or lesser acceptance of beliefs of African origin or, instead, of Kardecist notions. Some Kardecist notions, such as 'evolution', fulfilled a special role in indicating a *terreiro's* or center's closer or more distant relationship to the values of a society that presented itself as 'white', 'rational' and 'modern'. Thus, levels of 'spiritual evolution' corresponded to levels of 'social evolution'.

8. We recall here that the association with Jesus or with his Christian teachings is also common in other ayahuasca religions. Thus, the founder of the Santo Daime, Raimundo Irineu Serra (Mestre Irineu) is constantly associated by followers with Christ, and his doctrine expressed in an assemblage of hymns is often understood as a kind of 'Third Testament', which carries on the principles of the Christian New Testament.

Other authors have also emphasized the presence of class, cultural and racial conflicts in the process of expansion of Kardecist Spiritism in Brazil, and in its fusion with other beliefs and traditions. Trindade (1991), for instance, analyzes how Bezerra de Menezes,⁹ a nineteenth-century physician from Ceará, played an important role in the process of adaption of Kardecist ideas (such as the existence of magnetic fluids) to old magico-therapeutic beliefs held by different popular segments (such as the belief in the healing powers of spirits). With time, Brazilian Kardecism acquired a distinctly therapeutic character, though emphasizing that the spirits of the dead (rather than magnetic fluids) were the true healing agents. In this way, according to Trindade, the adherence to Kardecism allowed the emerging Brazilian elite to resolve the contradiction between their aspirations for progress, rationality and modernity, on the one hand, and their link to a mentality with superstitious or magical tendencies, on the other. The theories of magnetism and psychism present in Kardecism seemed germane to aspirations for 'modernity', while the belief in the therapeutic action of spirits linked to the old mentality. Even so, according to Trindade and also other scholars (Ortiz, 1978), although the process of expansion of Kardecism in Brazil implied the blending of beliefs originally belonging to different social classes, this process was not without conflict. Different authors (Trindade, 1991; Maggie, 1992; Negrão, 1996) have shown that *terreiros* or Spiritist centers of the first decades of the nineteenth century were plagued with disputes. Manifestly expressed in different symbolic choices (types of trance,¹⁰ types of spiritual entities that descend, moderately ritualized actions, rituals that include or not the use of alcoholic beverages or animal blood, practices with more or lesser therapeutic content, etc.), they additionally revealed racial, cultural and class conflicts. Many of these analyses (Maggie, 1992; Negrão, 1996) even assert that the drawing of

9. After his passing away, Bezerra de Menezes, became a 'spirit-guide', that is, a spiritual entity who returns to Earth to guide humanity. The 'guide' communicates through 'mediums', who are people that possess the ability to communicate with the spirits of the dead. This capacity is called 'mediumship' –a gift that can be manifest in several manners, such as through hearing, visions, dreams, intuitions of the presence of a spirit, or even the incorporation of the spirit. In Kardecism, the most typical form of manifestation of the spirits of the dead is through their words. The notions of mediumship and spirit-medium come from Kardecist Spiritism, but were amply adopted in the Umbanda milieu. The term 'spirit-guide', though, is used in Afro-Brazilian religions. The meaning intended here is that of Umbanda, since in Candomblé it has a different meaning (Calvacanti, 1983; Cacciatore, 1988). In some testimonies provided by early members of the UDV who knew Mestre Gabriel personally, I was told that he incorporated the spirit-guide Bezerra de Menezes during the period in which he participated in Afro-Brazilian religions, before the founding of the UDV.

10. In this article, the term 'trance' is used primarily in the sense defined by Lewis, that is, as a state of complete or partial mental dissociation, which is often accompanied by extraordinary visions, related with aspects of mediumship (Lewis, 1977: 41).

boundaries (and of practices, beliefs and identities) among the different centers defined as more or less Kardecist or Umbandist, was marked by this type of conflict.

The expansion of Kardecism also occurred in the Brazilian Amazon region. There, it also involved a transformation of its notions when they entered into contact with beliefs from other traditions. In the ayahuasca religion created by Mestre Gabriel in the state of Rondônia, Kardecist notions such as reincarnation were blended with Judeo-Christian elements, as well as beliefs from local populations, such as indigenous or other groups that interacted with them. In this manner, in the principal myth of the UDV (the History of Hoasca, previously mentioned) it is asserted that Mestre Gabriel is the reincarnation of the first person on Earth to drink Vegetal. This event, according to the story, occurred during the times of the Israelite King Solomon. One of the most famous characters of the Old Testament is also one of main protagonists of the mythical narrative. In the latter, he is mentioned alongside tales of men and women who are transformed into plants (specifically those that compose the Vegetal), in accordance with the typical logic of mythical thought among Amazonian peoples, especially groups that use ayahuasca. The myth recounts that the first man to drink Vegetal (also called Hoasca—hence the name of the story) was a vassal of King Solomon called Caiano. Caiano, ‘the first hoasqueiro’, reincarnated several times, and in his last reincarnation returned as Mestre Gabriel. This is the reason why, according to followers of the UDV, Mestre Gabriel did not create but rather re-created (reinstalled) the União do Vegetal, because when he was incarnate as Caiano, he already had the knowledge of Hoasca and the mysteries of the union of its plants. Incarnate as Mestre Gabriel, he merely remembered his mission, understood by followers as the task of ‘restoring the União do Vegetal on Earth’.

This concept of remembering previous incarnations is quite common among UDV followers. I observed that recurring to memories of prior ‘other lives’ was common, especially when there was an intention to affirm a position of spiritual distinction or superiority. These generally coincided with the periods of other incarnations of the founder of the UDV. In this sense, the process of spiritual development in this religion involves a kind of awakening of the ‘memory’ of spirits closely linked with the history of Hoasca and the União do Vegetal. Regarding the belief in reincarnation, it is worth highlighting, additionally, that followers of the UDV frequently assert that it was a part of the original Judeo-Christian tradition. To support this notion, they even cite biblical verses that reveal a belief in the principle of reincarnation.¹¹

11. This type of association between the Judeo-Christian Biblical tradition and the belief in the reincarnation of spirits is also common in other ayahuasca religions, such as the Santo

Also, we should not overlook that, in fact, the relation between the UDV and Kardecist Spiritism is found in the official name of the religious group: Beneficent Spiritist Center União do Vegetal (*Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal—CEBUDV*). As I mentioned earlier, the original name of the group founded by Mestre Gabriel was Beneficent Association União do Vegetal (*Associação Beneficente União do Vegetal*). The words ‘Spiritist center’ were included only in 1970. Based on the testimonies of followers who accompanied this period of UDV history, we observe that the name change occurred, in part, due to persecutions and stigmatizations endured by Mestre Gabriel’s group in Porto Velho. It is said that the designation ‘Spiritist center’ was adopted after a series of conflicts with the police and other local authorities. These included, amongst other episodes, the detention of Mestre Gabriel in 1967, and a moratorium on the admission of new members for some months during 1970. According to accounts collected during my research (Goulart, 2004a) as well as other sources (Brissac, 1999), it was during these conflicts that followers and others suggested the designation ‘Spiritist center’ to Mestre Gabriel, as a way to assuage the prejudices endured by the new religion. In his Master’s thesis, Brissac cites reports stating that the term ‘Spiritist’ was adopted because there were many people in Porto Velho who ‘wanted to close down the União do Vegetal’ (1999: 76) at the time.

This episode of the adoption of the designation ‘Spiritist center’ brings the history of the UDV close to that of Afro-Brazilian religions, such as Umbanda. In fact, as several studies of the process of formation of Afro-Brazilian religions show (Maggie, 1992; Negrão, 1996), recurrence to the label ‘Spiritist center’ was very common among Afro-Brazilian religious groups, especially during the period of their emergence and consolidation. In the case of Umbanda in São Paulo, according to Negrão (1996), most of the Umbanda *terreiros* during the decades from 1920 to 1940 were registered as ‘Spiritist centers’, masking their African origins, as a way to moderate prejudices and persecution against their religious practices, since Kardecist Spiritism had more acceptance among the middle and higher classes. In addition to the UDV, other ayahuasca religions have also recurred to the designation ‘Spiritist’ or ‘Spiritist center’. This is the case of the religion known as Barquinha, which began in Rio Branco, in the state of Acre, around 1945, and spread into a series of independent groups, but which all include the designation ‘Spiritist center’ in their respective institutional names (that is, in the names under which they are registered). At the same time, as mentioned before, scholars (Ortiz, 1977 and 1978; Procópio, 1961) have claimed that notions and beliefs from Kardecist Spiritism even

Daime, in which the leaders of some groups are sometimes seen as the reincarnation of Christian saints or Biblical characters (from the Old and New Testament). Indeed, the association between these beliefs and traditions (Judeo-Christian and Spiritism) occurs, more widely, in Brazilian popular Catholicism.

became current within Umbanda as a strategy of legitimation in the context of the evolving Brazilian society of the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. The adherence to scientific discourses or to those that value the idea of science, and the defense of a 'more conscious' type of mediumship less linked to materialistic and magic forms of the religion (exemplified by the use of artefacts, alcoholic beverages, or tobacco by incorporated spirits) would be examples of these shifts (Procópio, 1961; Ortiz, 1977: 48).

The case of the ayahuasca religions has, of course, its own specificity, and in various aspects differs from the process of formation of Umbanda. While the latter began in an economically more developed and urbanized region in the southeast of the country, the former originated in the Brazilian Amazon in a later period, after the emergence of Umbanda. The cultural contexts in which Umbanda formed, on the one hand, and the ayahuasca religions, on the other, also diverge. The marked influence of indigenous traditions and the confluence of these with other traditions characteristic of the populations that migrated into Amazonia and occupied it during diverse historical moments (such as the 'nordestino' workers, i.e., migrants from the northeast of the country) led to the constitution of very singular religious phenomena in the region. Thus, elements of popular Catholicism, Masonry and the Rosacrucean doctrinal order, the diffusion of Kardecist Spiritism or esoteric groups such as the Esoteric Circle of the Communion of Thought (*Círculo Esotérico da Comunhão do Pensamento*), as well as the influence of beliefs from Afro-Brazilian religions, can be identified in diverse Amazonian religious movements, such as the ayahuasca religions. As in the history of Umbanda in São Paulo, we can perceive typical notions of Kardecist Spiritism (such as 'conscious mediumship' or the idea of a religious doctrine that is also scientific) in the União do Vegetal that were important in the process of affirmation of this ayahuasca religion, first in its place of origin and later within the wider Brazilian society.

In fact, the concept of 'science' possesses a central place in UDV cosmology, appearing in rituals, in the doctrine, in mystical elements and, generally speaking, in the speech and behavior of members. In a certain way, members understand the assemblage of doctrinal contents, the principles of the religion, and so on, as composing a kind of 'science' that constitutes the 'true knowledge' revealed by Mestre Gabriel and by Hoasca (Vegetal). In the History of Hoasca, this notion of science can be perceived in several instances. As described before, one of the central characters of the myth is Solomon who, in the Hebrew biblical tradition and the folklore of popular Catholicism, and also in esoterism, is associated with wisdom and science. In the behavior and speech of followers, this valorization of scientific knowledge or positions is expressed in other ways. As a result, of the three major ayahuasca religions, it is the UDV which has really shown a strong interest in establishing a

dialogue between its official institutions and science. In this sense, their process of institutionalization has included the constant creation of organs self-designated as scientific and which have the primary objective of establishing communication with the academic sphere. This is the case of DEMEC—Medical Scientific Department of the UDV (*Departamento Médico Científico da UDV*), created in 1986. It is mostly composed of health professionals linked to the UDV and dedicated to research on the effects of ayahuasca, especially clinical analyses. In addition to DEMEC, the Department of Memory and Documentation (*Departamento de Memória e Documentação*) is concerned with registering information about the history of the União do Vegetal and its founder. Other organs have been created more recently, including some that appear to have the mandate of debating and evaluating academic investigations on the religion (whether carried out by researchers linked to the UDV or not).

This adherence to scientific discourse and logic in the UDV occurs simultaneously with a rejection of folk healing practices referred to by the umbrella term ‘curandeirismo’. This is evident in the ritual forms of the religion, as well as in attitudes and statements given by members. It is also revealed in statements and texts intended for the broader public, or also in UDV documents, such as the book *Hoasca—Fundamentos e Objetivos* (*Hoasca: Fundamentals and Objectives*; CEBUDV, 1989), which is the first publication of the group. One document in this publication explains the purposes for the use of ayahuasca in the UDV, establishing a clear distinction between healing of the body and spiritual healing. The text explains that the UDV religion is characterized by the use of Vegetal for spiritual healing, in accordance with the orientations of its founder, and not material, that is, of the ‘body’. It very explicitly declares at one point that the União do Vegetal does not preach any ‘healing properties of the brew’ and ‘does not practice or advocate acts of folk healing (*ações curandeiristas*)’ (CEBUDV, 1989: 34).

Here, we can also draw a parallel with the case of Umbanda. Some authors indicate that the process of the constitution of Umbanda implied a distancing from a series of therapeutic practices based on phytotherapy and an empirical knowledge of sicknesses that were current in popular Brazilian religiosity since the early centuries of colonialism until the eighteenth century (Montero, 1985). The old religiosity changed with the new sociocultural panorama that had emerged since the nineteenth century with the arrival of the Portuguese royal family. This led to the gradual expansion of universities and academic institutions—especially medical schools—and also the intensification of the process of urbanization. The abandonment of more empirical therapeutic practices is a salient feature of these changes. Other religious manifestations, more adapted to the new reality, emerged in this panorama. According to Montero (1985), this is the case of Umbanda. According to this author, empirical knowledge of sicknesses is not emphasized in this religion.

Through their 'spirit-guides', Umbanda 'spirit-mediums' do not focus on specific organic symptoms when treating the hardships of patients. Instead, they focus on the general clinical condition of the sick person, seeking to eliminate the 'bad fluids' that caused the misfortune. In a general manner, Umbanda therapeutic practices thus tend to operate in the symbolic domain. Plants and herbs are used more for their mystical power functions than for their particular phytochemical properties (Montero, 1985: 55). The constitution of scientific medicine was a major conditioning factor of this transformation of popular Brazilian religiosity which, as we have said, implied an empirical therapeutic knowledge. In this sense, it constituted an obstacle to the legitimacy of the new medical knowledge seeking hegemony (Machado, 1978; Montero, 1985).

It is important to highlight that the expansion of the legitimacy of scientific medicine simultaneously included the establishment of a definition of 'quackery' for a set of practices. In fact, this was an official process orchestrated by the State when a new Penal Code was established in Brazil in 1890. Through articles 156, 157 and 158, it explicitly prohibited the practice of medicine by non-medical agents, as well as prohibiting magic and Spiritism if they stimulated feelings related with the healing of discomforts (whether curable or not), institutionalizing the repression of these practices, generally classifying them as quackery (Maggie, 1992: 43). From that moment on, popular therapeutic beliefs—even derived from the old religiosity—were no longer just seen as 'inferior' or 'backward', but actually became a crime.

Regardless of these actions, we think that the distancing from therapeutic practices based on empirical medical knowledge or a direct knowledge of plants is not, in any way, total in the Umbanda milieu, nor in that of the ayahuasca religions. In the case of the ayahuasca religions—and especially the UDV—I attempted to demonstrate in my dissertation (Goulart, 2004a) that there is a simultaneous movement of approximation and distancing from an empirico-phytotherapeutic mentality that is linked to the old Amazonian traditions of ayahuasca use. Not always, yet in some cases, this movement of taking distance is explained by an apprehension regarding persecution or stigmatization. The emphasis on the use of Vegetal for spiritual healing and not for healing the body, the attachment to a scientific discourse, as well as the recourse to Kardecist beliefs that are more appealing to a 'progressive' mentality—as well as the designation 'Spiritist center' or the option for a type of mediumship considered to be more conscious—can be understood as indicators of this type of cautiousness, rather than a total rejection of the old traditions and practices which, as we will see, in fact continue.

It is also worth pointing out that, in many cases, it is difficult to identify the original source of some notions, principles or practices found in the UDV religion. Such is the case of the notion of 'science' or the recurrent references to Solomon.

The former, as explained, may be linked to Kardecist doctrine, but equally to other sets of beliefs, such as the positivist mentality that gained importance for the nineteenth-century Brazilian society or, even, Masonry. As is known, the notion of science is quite important for the latter philosophical-esoteric organization, which has its origins in the Middle Ages (Beck, 2005). Identified with wisdom or true knowledge, science has utmost value in this organization. Similarly, and allied to this idea of science, Solomon is a central figure in the masonic universe—is, in fact, a personification of true science. Another ostensible parallel between the UDV and Masonry is the existence, in both organizations, of initiated degrees and doctrinary learning. Thus, teachings are transmitted according to ‘degrees’ in Masonry, which rank from ‘apprentice’ to ‘venerable master’. For each initiated degree there are corresponding terms of reference and speech which are kept secret from lower ‘degrees’ (Beck, 2005; Figueiredo, 1998).

This hierarchy based on secret word knowledge is also evident in the UDV, in which adepts are distributed and organized into four segments of disciples, according to their ‘degrees’ of doctrinal initiation. In increasing order of ‘evolution’ in initiated ‘degree’, these are: membership body (*quadro de sócios*), instructive body (*corpo instrutivo*), council body (*corpo do conselho*) and body of mestres (*quadro de mestres*). A disciple initially joins the membership body when entering the UDV. As the disciples in higher degrees gradually recognize the new member’s evolution, he or she can move into the other segments. Each level has corresponding specific functions. The knowledge of the doctrinal secrets, of the rites, and so on, is transmitted to few, and for this there are special Vegetal ‘sessions’ for each segment of disciples (members, instructive body, council body, body of mestres). Although the ritual form is practically identical in all these cases,¹² the exposure to a certain set of topics, stories, explanations and principles is different according to the type of session. Evidently, more elementary ‘mysteries’ are revealed—less

12. Ritual sessions of the União do Vegetal are characterized, in a general manner, by the reading of documents (such as statutes and texts authored by Mestre Gabriel), the execution of vocal chants called ‘chamadas’, recorded music (usually derived from popular Brazilian repertoires), and asking questions on doctrinal issues (which can be posed by any participant to the *mestres* of the religion). The sessions are always initiated with the distribution of Vegetal, which is given out in a line, according to the hierarchical degree of followers. Vegetal is distributed last to visitors. All those who have received their glass with Vegetal have to wait for the distribution to be completed among all participants, since all have to drink the Vegetal at the same time, upon a signal from the *mestre* leading the session. During the ritual, all participants remain seated. There is also a considerable amount of formality during the sessions, for instance, all participants must refer to one another as ‘senhor’ (‘sir’) or ‘senhora’ (‘madam’), or having to request permission to speak or to leave the room. Normally, a Vegetal session lasts about four hours.

doctrinally secret—in the sessions for lower ranks, while deeper mysteries are transmitted in sessions for higher ranks. The transmission of these mysteries involves an emphasis on the word, in which certain terms or expressions acquire a new meaning according to a reading inspired by the revelation provided by initiation into a higher hierarchical rank. Additionally, during a Vegetal session, certain words cannot be spoken and must be substituted with a synonym.¹³ It can be said that the word has ritual, magical, doctrinal power in the UDV. It is important to highlight that the language spoken in UDV rituals must always be Portuguese. Even when the ritual is being carried out in countries that speak other languages, the secret stories and the *chamadas* must be performed in Portuguese.

Still more about King Solomon. He is simultaneously one of the central figures of an important legend of Masonry and, as seen, of a principal myth of the UDV. The history of Masonry recounts that when Solomon designated Hiram as the architect to build a great temple, Hiram divided the temple builders into different categories (apprentices, companions and masters), giving each category specific signs and passwords. According to the story, some companions, desiring to usurp the signs that gave access to the master's post, rebelled against Hiram, murdering him with an axe. The story continues that an acacia bush grew above the tomb where Hiram was buried. Seeing this plant above the tomb allowed Solomon to discover the culprits (Figueiredo, 1998; Hall, 2006). Performing immediate analysis, we can discern several relations between this story and the History of Hoasca. Accordingly, in the first part of the History of Hoasca, another king—the 'Inca king'¹⁴—had servants who carried out important duties (counselor Hoasca and marshall Tiuaço) who died and whose tombs bore plants. In the second part of the History, King Solomon is mentioned. According to the story, as said before, he had a vassal called Caiano—the first hoasqueiro—and the same spirit who would later reincarnate as Mestre Gabriel. Caiano is the first person to drink Vegetal, but it is Solomon who discovers and reveals the mysteries of the brew and the plants that compose it (the *mariri* vine and *chacrona* leaf), explaining to Caiano that the bush with leaves that emerged from the tomb of counselor Hoasca is counselor Hoasca, and that the vine growing from

13. This is the case, for instance, of saying 'thank you', which in Portuguese is '*obrigado*' (literally, 'obliged') and must be substituted by '*grato*' or '*grata*' (literally, 'grateful'), since, according to followers, the term '*obrigado*' for 'thank you' implies an idea of 'obligation' or 'duty' and nobody is being 'obliged' or, rather, 'forced' to anything, but is, however, expressing 'gratitude' for a certain event.

14. In UDV perspective, this Inca king is not related with the historically known Peruvian Inka Empire. Instead, it existed further in the past, in a period considered 'before the Biblical Flood'. On other hand, some facts linked with the history of the Peruvian Inka Empire are embedded in another passage of the History of Hoasca, related with the character I-Agora.

the tomb of marshall Tiuaço is Tiuaço. The story continues saying that Solomon, the 'king of science', made the 'Union of the Vegetal' with a piece of vine (*mariri*) and with the leaves of *chacrona*.

There is another part in the History of Hoasca that recalls the masonic legend of Solomon and his architect Hiram. This is the part that mentions Mestre I-Agora. It is told that Caiano, in another of his incarnations, returned to Earth as a Mestre I-Agora, in Peru, after Christ. Mestre I-Agora had several disciples to whom he distributed Vegetal, telling them the story of the Inca king, Solomon and Caiano. At a certain moment, the disciples of Mestre I-Agora begin to envy him, then revolt and murder him, slashing his throat. This is the event that originates the people known in the UDV as 'mestres da curiosidade' (masters of curiosity), who use Vegetal 'without any knowledge of any kind'. This explains the contemporary existence of other uses of Vegetal different from the use made in the UDV.

Although we don't have records of any relationship of Mestre Gabriel with Masonry, it is known that many of the first followers of the UDV were Masons. We also have data that several of them continued their link with Masonry even after joining the UDV, not suffering antagonistic pressure from Mestre Gabriel. Masonic issues have been important in the fissions of this religion. Thus, although we cannot prove a direct link between Mestre Gabriel and Masonry, there are strong indications of the influence of this tradition in the UDV.

Alongside the relationship between the União do Vegetal and traditions such as Masonry and the Judeo-Christianity,¹⁵ it is difficult to find more evident and direct influences between this ayahuasca religion and the traditions linked to its immediate context of emergence. These are, on the one hand, the Afro-Brazilian tradition, given the UDV founder's proven participation in one of those religions; and, on the other hand, Amazonian traditions linked to the use of ayahuasca. We will confine ourselves to these topics next.

The Afro-Brazilian influence

Data about Mestre Gabriel's religious life before founding the União do Vegetal are more plentiful and precise for the period when he was already in Amazonia. Mostly, the data points to the involvement of the founder of the UDV with Afro-Brazilian religions. In my doctoral dissertation (Goulart, 2004a), I worked with information provided by people who knew Mestre Gabriel from 'terreiros', 'batuques', 'macumbas'

15. We recall that Masonry is itself a fusion of diverse traditions, which stretch from Judaism to Christian hermetism, passing through the Protestant Reform, and even alchemy, amongst others.

or 'tambores',¹⁶ situated in the current state of Rondônia. In many cases, it was the *terreiro* in Porto Velho called 'São Benedito' or 'of Chica Macaxeira' (the name of the *mãe-de-santo*¹⁷ who commanded it). The *terreiro* functioned for several decades and became an exemplar of the Afro-Brazilian religious tradition in Amazonia. The scholar Nunes Pereira (1979) visited the place in the early 1970s, identifying the influence of the Casa das Minas tradition (which was a *terreiro* inaugurated in the late-eighteenth century in São Luís, capital of the state of Maranhão).

The Casa das Minas has African origins and was founded by members of the royal family of Dahomey, from the Guinea Coast region, brought to Brazil as slaves. The Dahomean tradition is also known as 'jeje'. 'Minas' or 'mina' was a generic term for slaves brought from Guinea, thus the term 'mina-jeje'. The spiritual entities worshipped in the Casa das Minas are the 'vodunsi', who only incorporate into female participants during a dance characterized by twirling. Trance is stimulated by drums and the religion is sometimes called 'tambor de mina' (drum of mina) (Cacciatore, 1988)—though the expression 'tambor de mina' includes a broad variety of Afro-Brazilian variants. In any case, the tradition that began in Casa das Minas in São Luís, Maranhão, influenced various other *terreiros* and Afro-Brazilian temples in the Northeast and, given the proximity of Maranhão to Amazonia, was also important in the diffusion of Afro-Brazilian practices in that part of the country.

16. These terms can acquire different meanings depending on the situation, but all refer to the context of Afro-Brazilian religions, though the latter may also vary (e.g. Candomblé, Umbanda, or religions that developed in specific regions of the Brazilian northeast, such as Xangô in Pernambuco or the Casa das Minas in the city of São Luís in Maranhão). The term 'terreiro' is used in all these religions to refer to the physical location where ceremonies are carried out (which may be a house, room, or open space, with a floor made of earth or other material) and, sometimes is used as the name of the group (e.g. 'terreiro of Mãe Menininha', 'terreiro of São Benedito', etc.). 'Batuques' and 'Tambores', generally speaking, and specifically for the cases mentioned of this article, usually refer to the context of Afro-Brazilian religions from the state of Maranhão, such as the Casa das Minas, designating the ceremonies carried out there as well as the religion itself. Both terms highlight the importance of percussion instruments ('*tambores*' means drums, and '*batuque*' is the act of drumming) to provoke trance and the manifestation of spirit entities through dancing. The term 'macumba', now, has a wider array of meanings, and can be used as a generic reference to the different types of Afro-Brazilian religions or those formed in the southeastern region (such as Umbanda) and, can even be used with derogatory or discriminatory meanings in relation to these religions (implying the idea of 'black magic', 'sorcery', 'black line of Umbanda', etc.) (Cacciatore, 1988; Ferreti, 1995).

17. Designation of the leader of Afro-Brazilian religions. The *mãe-de-santo* (literally, 'mother-of-the-saint') directs the ceremonies, and is responsible for the orientation of followers (her 'sons' and 'daughters-of-the-saint') and is the 'owner' of the *terreiro*, house or center. There are also men, called 'pai-de-santo' ('father-of-the-saint').

The intense and intimate relationship between Mestre Gabriel and Afro-Brazilian religions was frequently asserted in the testimonies that I gathered, surviving beyond the creation of the UDV. According to the sources, José Gabriel da Costa had participated in different types of *terreiros*, and was ‘pai de terreiro’ (the male who has the function of commanding alongside the *mãe-de-santo* the ‘work’ of the *terreiro*) in that of Chica Macaxeira. I will attempt to record here some data about the religious biography of Mestre Gabriel and how these are understood by União do Vegetal members.

I noticed that current members of the UDV generically call the Afro-Brazilian groups in which Mestre Gabriel participated ‘macumba’, ‘umbanda’, ‘batuque’, ‘tambores’ or simply ‘terreiros’. It would seem that the *terreiro* of São Benedito— influenced by the tradition of Casa das Minas and led by the *mãe-de-santo* Chica Macaxeira—was not only where he most participated, but also the one that exerted more influence in the subsequent organization of the rituals of the União do Vegetal. It is said that, in this period of his life, Mestre Gabriel would throw ‘búzio’¹⁸ cowry shells and receive ‘spirit-guides’. Of these, ‘Sultão das Matas’ (Sultan of the Forest) was important. He is described as a ‘Caboclo’, that is, the spirit of an Indian, knower of medicines and secrets of the forest.¹⁹ Nunes Pereira (1979) refers to this spiritual entity in one of his works, observing him in some *terreiros* in the north of the country, concluding that he represents a marked syncretism between the indigenous and African traditions.

The accounts of the ‘guide’, ‘force’ or ‘Caboclo’ Sultão das Matas are a crucial point in the process of legitimation of the spiritual power of Mestre Gabriel and the consolidation of the new ayahuasca religion that he founded. In this sense, there are accounts that associate the process of formation of the UDV to an event in which Mestre Gabriel summoned his disciples to explain that, in fact, he himself was the Sultão das Matas. ‘I am the Sultão das Matas’, Mestre Gabriel emphatically

18. Small shells used in religions in Africa, and also in the Afro-Brazilian religions, as ritual elements, offerings, and principally for divining, as an oracular medium. In this latter sense, ‘throwing búzios’ (*jogo de búzios*) involves the *mãe-* or *pai-de-santo* casting the small shells to foresee, divine or explain the determinations of the deities (which in Candomblé are the *Orixás*) to consulting clients.

19. The spirit entities called ‘Caboclos’ represent the spirits of Brazilian Indians. There are several ‘caboclos’, with different personalities and names (e.g. ‘caboclo Arranca-Toco’, ‘caboclo Arruda’, ‘da Pena Branca’, ‘Cobra-coral’, etc.). According to Nunes Pereira, Sultão das Matas was a popular *Caboclo* in the *terreiros* of the Northern region of Brazil, sometimes identified with sacralized folkloric characters (Pereira, 1979: 224). It is important to note that the *Caboclos* are a part of the Umbanda pantheon but are also found in other Afro-Brazilian religions, especially those more influenced by indigenous traditions (Cacciatori, 1988). As we will see, the word ‘Caboclo’ also has other meanings in Portuguese.

declared. It is said that from that moment on, Mestre Gabriel abandoned Afro-Brazilian practices and dedicated himself exclusively to working with Vegetal, structuring a new religion around the brew. Some authors interpret this episode as a symbolic marker for the creation of the União do Vegetal and its ritual context, characterized by a rejection of the typical Afro-Brazilian possession trance (Andrade, 1995; Brissac, 1999). As a result, while trance in religions such as Umbanda and Candomblé involves a loss of consciousness, trance in the UDV is marked by an experience of 'enlightenment' of consciousness, for which the consumption of Vegetal is essential (Brissac, 1999).

However, I think that this issue deserves further analysis. Firstly, it is important to highlight that even in the milieu of Afro-Brazilian religions there is a series of degrees and stages which lead to intermediate levels of conscious or unconscious trance, which contradicts radical dualistic theoretical classifications. Secondly, the idea that the UDV ritual completely breaks with the practices of Afro-Brazilian religions is, above all, one of the arguments of the UDV's discourse in its attempt to legitimize itself and define its boundaries with respect to other religious groups. The assertion of a complete rupture between the new religion founded by Mestre Gabriel and the Afro-Brazilian milieu is, in practice, difficult to sustain. How could such a total distance be sustained between religions that, in the past, even Mestre Gabriel had actively and intensely participated in? I found in my research that, in addition to Mestre Gabriel, a large part of the initial members of the União do Vegetal had also had previous involvement in 'terreiros', 'macumbas' or 'batuques'. Their relationships seem to have been more intense, in fact, with the *batuque* of São Benedito, of Chica Macaxeira. As Mestre Gabriel occupied a high position in that *terreiro*, this led him to seek the first members of the União do Vegetal there.

In this sense, according to testimonies gathered during my research, Mestre Gabriel and the first members of the UDV sustained frequent contacts with the *terreiro* of São Benedito. It is claimed that even the *mãe-de-santo* of this *terreiro* drank Vegetal with Mestre Gabriel on several occasions, in the context of the first sessions of the UDV. The following is a quote from one of these interviews,

This was right at the beginning, before he declared the Re-creation the União do Vegetal... I think it was back in '59 or '60...Mestre Gabriel had just come back from spending time in the rubber camp and when he got to Porto Velho, he said that he was going to invite all the *macumba* people to drink some tea, a special one, it was Vegetal... A group from the macumba that we used to go to came...old Chica, Luís Lopes...Mestre Gabriel invited the *macumba* people because they were the ones who were close him at the time.

As we said earlier, the 'Re-creation of the União do Vegetal' (July 22nd 1961) was one of the main dates of the calendar of this religion; but before this date, we know

that in 1959, after drinking ayahuasca for the first time, Mestre Gabriel had been organizing some experiences with the brew that he called Vegetal.²⁰ Thus, he began to organize and direct a stable group around ayahuasca, holding regular sessions in Porto Velho, which, in a general way, had a similar basic structure to current UDV sessions. This new religious group formed by Mestre Gabriel needed legitimacy and to defend itself in the local religious field. The *batuque* of Chica Macaxeira, given its prestige, was an important opponent to this process of legitimation. In fact, I heard several accounts about episodes in which Mestre Gabriel, after having started to work with Vegetal, continued to visit his old *batuque*, even defying the *mãe-de-santo*. Consider, for example, the following account,

Somedays, on a celebration date, we would go there to Chica's *batuque*. Mestre Gabriel would gather a group and go and visit them, participate in the celebration; he always liked it... He was also co-godparent with Chica. They were friends... Once, after a Vegetal session, we went and he said, 'let's go to my co-godmother Chica's, because I want to show her the power that the Vegetal has'... When we got there, they were in activity, and old Chica was like fire! In those days she had a spanking paddle and would slap the hands of the *filhos-de-santos*... Mestre Gabriel arrived with all of us and first stood watching... Then, he went up to old Chica and, by the time we realized, he had taken her spanking paddle! Then he began to mock her! He slapped on her hands with her spanking paddle saying, 'Come here, now I am the one going to put you right'...and everybody laughing. They knew Mestre Gabriel's power, because he had worked there.

This dispute among two groups from the same local religious field—on the one side, the *batuque* of Chica Macaxeira and, on the other, the religion of the Vegetal founded by Mestre Gabriel—did not obstruct the occurrence of exchanges and mutual influences between them. The excerpts cited above show that there was an affective and historical link between the two religious groups. Mestre Gabriel and several of the first UDV members were former participants of the *batuque*. Mestre Gabriel and the *mãe-de-santo* were friends and co-godparents. They visited each other and, on occasions, participated in each other's rituals. These mutual visits persisted for some time, even after the União do Vegetal group was more established in Porto Velho. In this sense, I consider that here there was a simultaneous proximity and rupture between the Afro-Brazilian religious universe and the UDV. The proximity can be seen in the similarity between some ritual aspects of the UDV

20. We know that the brew has many names according to the region where it is consumed or the population who consume it. Thus, among the *caboclo* population in Brazil, we find names such as 'cipó', 'uasca' or 'oasca', among others. In Colombia, one of the most common names is 'yagé'. In Peru and some parts of Bolivia, the name is 'ayahuasca', of Quichua origin, which can be translated as 'rope of the spirits or souls' (Luna, 1986b). Among mestizo healers that use the brew in Peru, the name Vegetal is common (Luna, 1986b), the same name used in the UDV.

and those proper to Afro-Brazilian religions. For example, I noted that some of the *chamadas* sung during UDV sessions are similar to Umbanda songs, as well as frequently mentioning spiritual entities from that type of religion, such as Saint Barbara, Princess Janaína or Mariana, among others. I also obtained data that some of the elements used by participants during Vegetal sessions, such as the shirt worn by the leading Mestre, are derived from Umbanda, where a blue shirt of lamé fabric²¹ is used. An early member of the UDV, a contemporary of Mestre Gabriel and currently leader of a dissident group of the religion, Augusto Jerônimo da Silva or Mestre Augusto, mentioned some of these topics in an interview with me. Augusto talked about one of the first Vegetal sessions in which he participated. He was surprised when he felt the impression of having heard before many of the *chamadas* sung by Mestre Gabriel during the session.

After we drank Vegetal, Mestre Gabriel began to sing the *chamadas*... When he sang one, I thought, 'I've heard this before', it was 'Senhora Santana'... Then, he sang another one and I also knew it... At the end, when he was concluding the work with the *chamada* for divine protection, I remembered that I had heard that song in Umbanda. It was all Umbanda.

The explanation given by my informant at another point in his account about the reason for the similarities between songs²² of Umbanda which evoke the spiritual entities of the religion and the UDV *chamadas* is even more interesting. According to Mestre Augusto, Mestre Gabriel had explained to him that this occurred because the people in Umbanda had been in the União do Vegetal in other incarnations. 'Mestre Gabriel explained to me that *macumbeiros*²³ had drunk Vegetal in other lives, but then got lost and taken the wrong way. This is why, to this day, Umbanda knows many stories and songs which are similar to those of the União', says Mestre Augusto.

Despite the uniqueness of this testimony, I observed that, in other cases, followers of the UDV used similar reasoning, explaining the relation between their religion and other religious traditions using the same interpretative frame. Thus, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the following section, this same type of logic seems to be used in relation to old Amazonian traditions of ayahuasca use, which are the other

21. A fabric similar to satin.

22. In the context of Umbanda from the southeastern part of Brazil, these songs are sung in Portuguese. In the tradition of the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé, from Bahia, the language is usually Yoruba. Called 'pontos' (literally, 'points'), the term can also refer to symbols or designs drawn on the floor of the *terreiro*, as well as songs. In both cases (whether songs or drawings), they function to summon the presence of the deities or spirit entities (or 'saints' in Umbanda and 'Orixás' in Candomblé) (Cacciatore, 1988).

23. The term is related with *macumba*, that is, it refers to those that practice *macumba*.

major reference in the organization of the ritual, mythical and doctrinal complex of the União do Vegetal.

The Amazonian tradition: Masters of Curiosity and re-creation of the UDV

Above all, it was in the Amazonian rubber camps where Mestre Gabriel had the deepest contact with the complex of practices relating to ayahuasca. This began in the fifties, when the future founder of the UDV began to travel between the city of Porto Velho and a series of regional rubber camps located in the rural areas. His first experience with the brew was in 1959, in the Guarapari rubber camp, on the border between Brazil and Bolivia. There is some evidence, though, that Mestre Gabriel had some contact with the ayahuasca traditions before that. It is said, for instance, that in the early fifties he knew a man in the Porto Luís rubber camp, locally known as Mestre Bahia, who conducted 'trabalhos' with Vegetal—in this case called ayahuasca, cipó, or other names.

I believe that, in the case of Mestre Gabriel and the UDV, the contact and influence of *caboclo* or *mestizo*²⁴ culture was greater than that of the indigenous. Several studies, in fact, state that the formation of a new set of practices and beliefs surrounding the use of ayahuasca, especially those linked to therapeutic uses, occurred through a process of intense relations and exchanges between indigenous Amazonian groups or mestizo populations already influenced by Christian missionization on the one hand, and non-indigenous populations who migrated into the region mostly to work in rubber extraction on the other (Luna, 1986a; Dobkin de Rios, 1971 and 1972). Scholars disagree on the moment in which the formation of this new (i.e. not exclusively indigenous) complex of beliefs regarding ayahuasca began. Some authors speculate that it occurred some 200 or 300 years ago (Gow, 1996). On the other hand, Luna (1986b, 2004), who studied the phenomenon in the Peruvian

24. Luis Eduardo Luna (1986a) uses the Spanish term *mestizo* to refer to the Peruvian ayahuasca healers, principally in the region of Pucallpa and Iquitos. *Mestizo* has a similar connotation to the Portuguese term 'caboclo', used to refer to the cultural and physical types that developed in Brazil through processes of acculturation, exchange and syncretism between indigenous populations and whites who were in contact with them. Although the term is sometimes used to refer to physical traits (e.g. skin color), the term is more correctly a cultural evaluation. The expression 'caboclo' (or 'cabocla') is frequently used to designate the Amazonian population and their culture, also in view of the major influence of indigenous groups in the region. In this article we use the term 'caboclo culture' mostly with this meaning, intending to stress the practices and beliefs that were shaped in the relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous (white, black, or mestizo) groups in contact with them after migrating into the Amazon region.

rainforest, maintains that the period of regional rubber exploitation—from 1840 to 1914—created the conditions for an intensification of contacts between indigenous groups and the white and black populations, especially rubber workers. The use of ayahuasca for therapeutic objectives would be one of the main elements in these exchanges. Thus, populations little accustomed to the Amazonian rainforest who began to live there, somewhat isolated and in generally precarious health conditions, chose some aspects of neighboring traditional cultures that were more appropriate for their new situation. This was the case of the use of ayahuasca for healing, noting that, even though the brew was used by several indigenous Amazonian groups, numerous authors claim that the therapeutic use of the brew was likely secondary in those original indigenous contexts (Bianchi, 2005). In this sense, Luna (1986a: 35) quotes commentaries from the Peruvian *ayahuasqueiro* healers that he researched claiming that it was the ‘caucheiros’²⁵ who discovered ayahuasca, in their attempt to treat the ills that afflicted them. Other analyses relate the origin of the Brazilian ayahuasca religions with the *caboclo* (or mestizo) and rubber tapper culture (Luna, 2004; Goulart, 1996, 2004a; Araújo, 1998; Franco and Conceição, 2004; Labate, 2004).

In the União do Vegetal the influence of this cultural background appears evident and pronounced. We find analogies, for example, between terms used by members of the UDV and by Peruvian ayahuasqueiro healers, such as *mariri* and *chacrona* (Quechua terms that in the religion of Mestre Gabriel refer to the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis*, used to make the Vegetal brew). In the Peruvian ayahuasqueiro context studied by Luna (1986a), *mariri* is a type of phlegm located in the chest of shamans or healers that works like a magical magnet and which serves to extract the ‘evil’ from the bodies of the sick. Another analogy occurs with the term ‘maestro’. In Peruvian shamanism, *maestro* or *maestras* indicate the spirits of certain plants, such as ayahuasca. Sometimes the term is also used for the healer or shaman. In the UDV, the term ‘mestre’ indicates a member category that refers to the highest achievable hierarchical rank.²⁶ Finally, the name Vegetal itself suggests a parallel with the Peruvian folk healing tradition and the

25. This term, in Spanish, means the same as ‘seringueiro’ in Portuguese (i.e. rubber-tapper). *Cacho* is translated into Portuguese as ‘borracha’ (rubber); and *cacheiro* is the person who works with rubber.

26. Nevertheless, we stress that the term *mestre* is amply used in the context of Brazilian popular culture. To provide but one example, there are *mestres* of Capoeira, a type of martial art that combines dance, acrobatics, combat, sport, and so on, which emerged in Brazil among the black slave population. We know, as well, that Mestre Gabriel practiced Capoeira when he lived in Bahia.

UDV. Several healers studied by Luna are known as ‘vegetalistas’, given that their knowledge is attributed, in a large part, to the teachings of some plants, themselves called ‘plant teachers’ (*plantas maestras* or *plantas professoras*). Some of these healers also use the term Vegetal to refer to ayahuasca, as well as other plant teachers (Luna, 1986a: 60).

As an example of the relationships between the Brazilian Amazonian context and the UDV, we can mention the case of the notion of ‘enchanted beings’ (*encantos*), ‘enchanted regions’ (*encantes*) or ‘enchanted nature’ (*natureza encantada*). These are fundamental notions in the cosmology of the UDV, through which they explain the spiritualization of the beings in their pantheon and communication with them. Thus, in the UDV, nature is considered divine and crowded with enchanted beings. In their work on the culture of Brazilian *caboclo* peoples, authors such as Galvão (1955), Maués (1995) and Wagley (1977) have described enchanted beings—often characterized by an ambiguity or intermediation between the human and animal states. These creatures inhabit the depths of rivers, ‘companions from the deep’ (Galvão, 1955), who can transform into animals, plants and stones, or appear and disappear suddenly. They can cause illnesses, bad luck in hunting, and family problems, amongst other things. It is also possible to negotiate with these beings, establishing pacts or alliances between them and humans. Some recent studies have analyzed how these beliefs are integrated with the use of ayahuasca among Brazilian rubber tappers. For example, in an ethnography of the religious universe of the rubber tappers and farmers of the Extractivist Reserve of the Upper Juruá, in Acre state, organized in the late 1980s, Araújo showed how the notion of enchanted regions was closely linked to some practices of ayahuasca consumption in that context. Many of the rubber tappers researched by Araújo associated ‘cipó’—one of the names for ayahuasca in this milieu—with enchanted regions and beings, typical of the collection of Amazonian beliefs, while others declared that the brew contained ‘all the enchanted regions’ (Araújo, 1998: 70). Therefore, it is necessary to locate Mestre Gabriel’s early experiences with ayahuasca within the broader Amazonian cultural context.

In this sense, we recall that one of the principal characteristics of the tradition represented by the *ayahuasqueiro* healers studied by Luna is the use of a wide variety of plants, in addition to ayahuasca itself. The practice of these people is, therefore, based on an extremely vast empirical phytotherapeutic knowledge (Luna, 1986a). In the same way, ambiguously however, we can perceive in the União do Vegetal, as we will see, a valorization of knowledge about the forest, about plants and herbs that is typical of an old Amazonian culture in which other uses of ayahuasca are found. Thus, for example, the accounts of the early experiences of Mestre Gabriel with

Vegetal, even before he founded (or 're-created') the UDV, stress an episode in which he declared himself 'mestre' (i.e. teacher or master) after bringing back with him from a trip to Acre a large quantity of *mariri* and *chacrona*, stating that he was capable of recognizing these plants and of preparing a tea with them. Here, therefore, what testifies to his condition of 'mestre' and 'leader' of a new religion based on ayahuasca is his familiarity with an empirical phytotherapeutic knowledge.

We also underscore that, in addition to ayahuasca, another nine plants are highlighted in the ritual and mythical assemblage of the UDV. The vernacular names of these nine plants are: *maçaranduba*, *cumarú-de-cheiro* (also called *imburama* or *cerejeira*), *carapanaúba*, *apuí*, *pau d'arco*, *castanheira*, *mulateira*, *breuzinho* and *samaúma*.²⁷ Although we are not aware of possible psychoactive alterations produced by these plants, there is a tradition in the União do Vegetal that classifies them as healing plants. The infusion of all of them can be mixed with Vegetal under some circumstances, such as during a session in which there are sick people. Vegetal with these nine plants is offered to them especially.²⁸ In addition, there is a *chamada* of the nine plants, in which they are named one by one, and associated with some notions, persons, symbols, and so on, of the UDV cosmology, such as 'force', 'princess', 'prince'. Thus, the presence of a body of practices and beliefs relating to these nine plants in the UDV again points to a link between the religion and the indigenous and mestizo *ayahuasqueiro* traditions marked by an ample use of plants, which may or may not function as additives of ayahuasca.

It is said that Mestre Gabriel drank Vegetal for the first time with a rubber tapper called Chico Lourenço. Invariably, however, the practices carried out by Chico Lourenço with ayahuasca and the rubber tapper context related to them, appear as something erroneous, incomplete or even negative and inferior in the immediate discourse of UDV followers. One notion that is present in the doctrinal corpus of the União do Vegetal and which expresses this type of perception is that of 'curiosity'. The notion of curiosity is crucial in the UDV and is linked to an collection of

27. The *samaúma*, the largest tree in the Amazonian forest, is associated with ayahuasca among some indigenous populations that use the brew and is considered sacred.

28. For some years, the leadership of the *Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal* (Beneficent Spiritist Center União do Vegetal) has been publicly denying the use of Vegetal mixed with the nine plants, attempting to eliminate this practice from their ritual assemblage. The motives for this action range from an apprehension of persecution or discrimination for practicing acts of 'quackery' or 'curandeirismo' to agreements established with other Brazilian ayahuasca groups which intend to conquer and maintain the juridical legality of the use of ayahuasca.

myths in which the 'Masters of Curiosity' emerge as important persons who affirmed the spiritual leadership of Mestre Gabriel and the new religion that he founded.

In the perspective of UDV followers, the tradition of the Masters of Curiosity seems to represent, precisely, the various types of use of ayahuasca linked to the rubber tapper milieu and associated with the Amazonian indigenous and *caboclo* contexts. It is said that about two years before declaring the 'Confirmation in the Astral of the União do Vegetal', Mestre Gabriel met with 12 Masters of Curiosity in Vila Plácido, in Acre, to drink ayahuasca. In the meeting, the Masters of Curiosity themselves acclaimed him as the superior Mestre over the others. I include below an extract of a report about this story, which also includes comments about Chico Lourenço and the broader tradition of the Masters of Curiosity.

Chico Lourenço and the Masters of Curiosity worked with fantasy... They often used Vegetal to do evil on someone, to ensorcell... It was a black magic affair... When Mestre Gabriel met with the twelve Masters of Curiosity to drink Vegetal, in the force of the Vegetal, in its light, the Masters of Curiosity themselves recognized that Mestre Gabriel was a superior Master... Because they recognized Mestre Gabriel's knowledge... Only Mestre Gabriel had the answers to the questions. He was able to explain many things...

The Masters of Curiosity, and Chico Lourenço too, already knew some of the stories and some *chamadas*, but not like Mestre Gabriel did, because only he had complete knowledge.

This type of argumentation suggests the idea, widespread among UDV followers, that Mestre Gabriel was a superior spiritual leader due to the fact that he possessed knowledge that was more complete than that of the old Masters of Curiosity. The stories and *chamadas* mentioned in the extract express the doctrinal and mythical corpus of the União do Vegetal. Generally speaking, the Masters of Curiosity are considered to have fragments of this knowledge. It is also even asserted that some parts of the History of Hoasca, the principal myth of the UDV, were already known by the Masters of Curiosity. The idea is that Mestre Gabriel was elected 'superior master' precisely because he was able to explain and complete many of the elements that were a part of the old tradition of 'curiosity'.

The notion of curiosity allows, therefore, to distinguish the use of ayahuasca in the context of the UDV from its other uses, especially those from the rubber tapper and *caboclo* context, which are understood as 'incomplete', 'false', 'illusory' knowledge, opposed to the 'true' knowledge of the brew practiced by Mestre Gabriel with the União do Vegetal. The same pattern is repeated here as in the previously commented relations of the UDV with the Afro-Brazilian religions. In both cases, we can observe an attempt, realized in the myths and exegetic discourses, to resolve the contradiction of the historical and ritual proximity of both universes and the assertion, on the other hand, of the radical autonomy of the new religion. With

regards to the old tradition of the consumption of the brew, this perspective is accentuated, as it refers, precisely, to the fundamental core of the UDV: the ritual use of Hoasca or Vegetal and its symbolic implications.

The ambiguity is that, on the one hand, the old Amazonian traditions of ayahuasca are described by UDV followers as 'incomplete', 'inferior' or 'illusory', and on the other hand, the narratives rely on the religious context of *caboclos* and rubber tapper populations to assert the legitimacy of the new religion founded by Mestre Gabriel. We note, moreover, that the actual spiritual 'confirmation' of the União do Vegetal was only realized after the meeting between Mestre Gabriel and the Masters of Curiosity. Thus, according to the UDV myths themselves, it is the old Masters of Curiosity who publicly confer upon José Gabriel da Costa the status of superior Master, and only after this recognition is the União do Vegetal spiritually proven. The Masters of Curiosity, expressing the old Amazonian tradition of ayahuasca are, in this way, inserted into the History of Hoasca, just as some elements of the Afro-Brazilian religions (in which Mestre Gabriel and some of the first followers of the UDV had participated) are integrated into the doctrinal and ritual assemblage of the UDV.

Concluding considerations

On the basis of the analysis presented here regarding the cultural and religious matrices of the União do Vegetal, we can discern a noticeable articulation between the tradition of indigenous and mestizo populations of Amazonia, especially those that use ayahuasca, and another assemblage of traditions, such as the Judeo-Christian, Masonry, and even Kardecist Spiritism and beliefs from Afro-Brazilian religions. Thus, if on the one hand the influence of traditions such as Masonry or the biblical Judeo-Christian is visible in the UDV, this occurs simultaneously to the strong presence of elements from Amazonian cultures and populations. Even the notion of 'science' (which, as seen, is highly valued in the cosmology of the UDV) indicates a parallel with Masonry and Kardecism, but also remits to another different set of beliefs linked to the context of Amazonian populations. In this sense, some scholars speak of the existence of a 'science of the rubber tappers' (*ciência dos seringueiros*), which is constituted by a body of knowledge and techniques involving the environment and implies logics and principles that are different from modern Western science, such as explanations about illnesses derived from the metamorphoses of certain animals and insects (Araújo, 1998; Franco and Conceição, 2004; Almeida and Carneiro da Cunha, 2002). For Araújo, for instance, in the rubber tapper context, the knowledge about ayahuasca and its preparation expresses, in many

aspects, the broader logic of this cultural universe, remitting to principles of its science (Araújo, 1998: 70).

In the histories, mythology, *chamadas*, and morals of the UDV, we can perceive the typical mentality of the Brazilian *caboclo* context, which seems similar to Lévi-Strauss' (1989a) 'concrete' thinking found in traditional societies, characterized by classifications and associations based on sensorial aspects related to the physical environment. The meaning of cosmological elements and of words and expressions in the UDV occurs along a similar logic. In the History of Hoasca, for example, the plant called 'chacrona' in the UDV (that is, the species *Psychotria viridis*) is associated with the brew that is made from it (i.e. Hoasca). Thus, when narrating the story, Mestre Gabriel stresses the syllable 'cha' in the word 'chacrona', linking it to 'tea' ('chá' in Portuguese) which is how ayahuasca is referred to in the UDV. In this way, the plant species 'chacrona' is immediately related to the Vegetal tea. In the same way, there is a *chamada* in which Mestre Gabriel mentions the 'burracheira'²⁹ (the name given in the UDV to the effects of the brew), associating through the melody and modulation of the voice the expressions '*todos pede burracheira*' ('all ask for burracheira') and '*todos os pés de burracheira*' ('all the plants of burracheira'). In the *chamada*, Mestre Gabriel clarifies that he is singing '*pede*' ('asks') in the singular precisely to stress this association, or better, so that the participants hearing the *chamada* under the effects of Vegetal with think about stems of the vine.³⁰ Many other *chamadas* and stories of the União do Vegetal use similar mechanisms. Therefore, it seems that the religious logic of the UDV operates by combining elements from the Amazonian universe of popular beliefs, related to oral tradition, with principles, symbols and practices from other more erudite cultural and religious matrices, such as the Judeo-Christian, Masonry or Kardecist Spiritism.

29. 'Burracheira' is a term that appears to be derived from Spanish. In that language, 'borracho' means drunk from alcohol. We recall that, in this sense, the use of Spanish expressions is common in the region near the border with Bolivia where Mestre Gabriel came into contact with ayahuasca. Therefore, in this case we can also probably discern the influence of old Amazonian traditions regarding the use of the brew. This type of relationship is equally frequent in other ayahuasca religions, such as the Santo Daime of Mestre Irineu, in which expressions such as *miração* (also used to designate the psychoactive effects, especially visual, provided by the brew) reveal the influence of Spanish. Thus, 'mirar' in Spanish means 'to see' or 'to look'. Also, in several of these religions, relatively conscious parallels are established between states of drunkenness or unconsciousness produced by alcohol and mystical ecstasy expressed in visionary experiences produced by ayahuasca.

30. This association relies on a slip between the word *pede*, from the verb *pedir* (to ask), and *pé* or *pés* which is a generic term to designate an individual plant, tree or bush (in this case, the *mariri* vine which is used to prepare Vegetal). Thus, in Portuguese one says, 'um pé de' *jacarandá*, *de salgueiro*, *de abacateiro*, and so on ('one Jacaranda tree', 'one *Salgueiro* tree', 'one Avocado tree').

An anecdote about the founder of the UDV exemplifies our hypothesis. Told by Mestre Braga, it involves a recommendation left by Mestre Gabriel about the growth of his doctrine. According to the testimony, found in Brissac (1999), Mestre Gabriel warned his disciples about the possibility of the União do Vegetal becoming tampered with as it reached large cities, as 'learned and scholared' people would try to alter many things, such as the meaning or words of the *chamadas*. For this reason, Mestre Gabriel recommended his disciples always to speak 'the language of the *caboclo*', a language all would understand, both 'the more and the less learned'. His advice was not to take the UDV to the people, but to let the people come to the UDV. In this way, the doctrine would be preserved (Brissac, 1999: 72–73). We can see, therefore, that Mestre Gabriel intended 'learned' folk to adapt and adjust to the 'caboclo' mentality.

The relation of the UDV with Afro-Brazilian religions, also a popular tradition, like the complex of Amazonian beliefs corresponding to the use of the brew, is fundamental for the affirmation of this ayahuasca religion. Thus, in official discourses of its representatives, there is an emphasis on distancing themselves from elements derived from Afro-Brazilian religions. However, regardless of this legitimization practice, we can verify that, from a historical point of view, there are factual continuities between the Afro-Brazilian religious universe and the União do Vegetal. These continuities result, even, from the prior participation of Mestre Gabriel and some of the early members of the UDV in these types of religions. The self-representational myths and discourses of the União do Vegetal, however, endeavor to deny the existence of the influence of Afro-Brazilian religions upon the UDV, asserting, on the contrary, the novel character of the UDV cosmology and its superiority compared with other religions. Many of the ritual elements of the UDV (such as the type of trance) are consolidated in opposition to the 'Afro' religious universe, even though, in practice, components of the latter are put in action during the elaboration of UDV ceremonies and symbology. Such is the case of some of the *chamadas* and histories evoked during Vegetal sessions, in addition to terms and embellishments that appear within them.

Meanwhile, in relation to the traditions that are historically closer to the process of constitution of the União do Vegetal, those whose influences are easier to detect are precisely where we observe an ambiguous development on behalf the representatives of this ayahuasca religion, expressed in their discourses, attitudes, beliefs and practices. Thus, myths, speeches, pronouncements and behavior of UDV followers repeatedly assert a discontinuity with 'curandeirismo' (folk healing) and the healing properties of ayahuasca, or with the 'curiosity' of the old complex of beliefs associated with the brew, as well as with practices associated with

Afro-Brazilian religions. However, the actual myths and rituals of the União do Vegetal, in fact, reveal this link; that is, continuity with the traditions from which they attempt to distance themselves. Indeed, this is a basic mechanism that is equally present in the emergence of new religions, when they attempt to assert their differences in order to guarantee their legitimacies. Mythical logic especially follows this pattern, since, as Lévi-Strauss (1989b: 237–65) demonstrated, myths always oscillate between continuous and discontinuous structures, historical and synchronic, which belong to different domains and maintain their ambiguous character.

Timeline: Mestre Gabriel and UDV

- 1922 Birth of Mestre Gabriel, in Coração de Maria, in the state of Bahia.
- 1943 Arrival of Mestre Gabriel to Rondônia (Alto Guaporé region). Works in rubber camps.
- 1945–46 Mestre Gabriel begins to work as a nurse in the São José hospital in Porto Velho;
Mestre Gabriel attends the *batuque* São Benedito, of Chica Macaxeira.
- 1947 Mestre Gabriel marries Raimunda Ferreira (Mestre Pequeninina) in Porto Velho.
- 1947–50 Residence of Mestre Gabriel's family in Porto Velho.
Mestre Gabriel continues to attend the *batuque* of Chica Macaxeira and also provides consultations with cowry shells in his house. He receives the 'Sultão das Matas'.
Mestre Gabriel is a nurse in the São José hospital.
- 1950 Return to the rubber camps.
- 1950–65 Frequent movements between the city of Porto Velho and the regional rubber camps;
Porto Luís rubber camp—Mestre Gabriel hears about Mestre Bahia, who works with Vegetal.
Orion rubber camp—Mestre Gabriel opens a *terreiro* in which he receives the *Caboclo* spirit Sultão das Matas.
- 1959 Guarapari rubber camp (on the border with Bolívia)—Mestre Gabriel drinks Vegetal for the first time with Chico Lourenço; first trip to Vila Plácido, in Acre.
- 1961 July 22nd —Sunta rubber camp—Re-creation of the União do Vegetal.
- 1962 January 6th—Vila Plácido (Acre)—Mestre Gabriel meets with the 12 'Masters of Curiosity' and is declared 'Superior Mestre'.

- 1964 November 1st—Sunta rubber camp—Confirmation of the União do Vegetal in the Higher Astral.
- 1965 Mestre Gabriel and his family move to Porto Velho.
- 1967 Imprisonment of Mestre Gabriel in Porto Velho and publication of the article 'The Conviction of the Master' in the Alto Madeira newspaper; elaboration of the UDV statutes.
- 1970 Name change: from Beneficent Association União do Vegetal (*Associação Beneficente União do Vegetal*) to Beneficent Spiritist Center União do Vegetal (*Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal*) (CEBUDV).
- 1971 Passing away of Mestre Gabriel.

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