

The Ritual and Religious Use of Ayahuasca in Contemporary Brazil

Edward MacRae

Ayahuasca, a psychoactive brew made from the Bannisteriosis caapi vine and the Psychotria viridis leaf, has been used for many purposes by the native inhabitants of the Western Amazon since time immemorial. Conceived of as a means of opening the human perception to the spiritual world, this brew has been mainly used by shamans for a series of purposes such as: the diagnosis and treatment of a large variety of ailments, divination, hunting, warfare, and even as an aphrodisiac. Although its use probably originated among the inhabitants of the rain forest, ayahuasca was taken to the Andean highlands and can now be found in many of the Brazilian large urban centers, as well as in Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, United States, a few European countries, and even in Japan.

The use of ayahuasca by Amazonian tribal societies and by mestizo healers on the outskirts of Amazonian cities like Pucallpa, Tarapoto and Iquitos has been well-documented by a large number of scholars such as Reichel-Dolmatoff, Josep Maria Ferigla, Luis Eduardo Luna, Marlene Dobkin de Rios, and Jacques Mabbit. The focus of this discussion is the religious use of the brew by Brazilian urban dwellers, often of middle class origin. For in that country there are, at the moment, over eight religious groups using ayahuasca as a sacrament during their rituals. Although their belief systems and ceremonies may be quite varied, they have much in common. Therefore, the focus on the Santo Daime group may be taken for the others as well.

Before one can understand the functioning and the cultural significance of this religious group, one must take into account some of the particularities of

Brazilian culture and religiosity. Brazilian society is the result of a rich mixture of European, Indian, and African elements. The Portuguese colonization of the region concentrated itself mainly along the Atlantic coastline and although its influence extended itself into the interior, almost to the Andes, only recently have the distant frontier and Amazonian rainforest areas been fully integrated into the life of the nation. In spite of the fact that Portuguese incursions were often able to break down traditional Indian social organizations, very little was officially put in their place. Even the presence of the Church was sporadic and unsystematic in most of that region, giving rise to the development of many unorthodox religious movements which mixed Indian, Catholic, African, and assorted esoteric elements.

The result is that, although the majority of the Brazilian population is nominally Catholic, there is a widespread tolerance and even active participation in a wide variety of sects or cults of different origins. In spite of this apparently free and easy attitude toward religion and of the rapacious materialism that governs social interaction, most Brazilians seem to have some feeling for spirituality and although they may have difficulty in explaining what they actually believe in, few will call themselves atheists.

It is in this context that we must view the founding of the Santo Daime movement in 1930, in Rio Branco, capital city of the then Acre Territory. The founder of this movement was a Black rubber tapper called Raimundo Irineu Serra, who had come to the Amazon from the state of Maranhão in Northern Brazil in 1912. It is probable that he was first initiated into the use of ayahuasca by a Peruvian mestizo healer. However, after some time he began having visions in which a female figure, who he associated with Our Lady of the Conception, gave him instruction on healing and handed him a new religious doctrine. It had a pronounced Catholic flavor although incorporating spiritualist and esoteric elements such as the notions of reincarnation,

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the law of karma, and the cult of assorted elemental spirits.

Mestre Irineu, as he came to be known by his followers and clients, became famous for his healing powers and after some time his influence began to spread in Rio Branco. His initial following was made up of displaced rubber tappers who, after the decline of the Amazonian rubber boom, had been forced to migrate to the cities of the region, where they faced great difficulties integrating into urban society. However, soon his influence was widespread throughout the city and even politicians came to him in search both of healing and electoral support. With the help of such well-placed friends, he was eventually able to acquire a plot of land where he built a church and started an agricultural community with his followers.

During his lifetime, and after his death in 1971, his movement suffered several defections and splits. Nowadays there are several separate religious organizations that trace their origins to him, but most are quite small with little more than a hundred followers each. There is, however, an exception which is the group started by another Amazonian rubber tapper, Sebastião Mota de Melo, better known as Padrinho Sebastião. Unlike the other Daime leaders, he was very welcoming toward young newcomers from outside the Amazon area. As a result, a number of centers were then set up in the southern metropolis and now the group he began has more than 5000 followers. Of the ayahuasca using groups, it is second only to the União do Vegetal, which was started in the sixties in Porto Velho, capital city of the Amazonian Brazilian state, Rondonia. The founder of this religious group, known as Mestre Gabriel, was another ayahuasca-using healer who had originally been the head of an Afro-Brazilian possession cult, which he later renounced. He had no connection with Mestre Irineu, and his organization took on quite a different form, where a marked Masonic influence may be detected. Yet both the Santo Daime and the União do Vegetal display many doctrinal and ritual similarities which attest to the importance of the common Amazonian cultural background from which both emerged.

Although, from a pharmacological point of view, ayahuasca may be considered a very potent psychoactive agent, rich in DMT and other alkaloids, the ample

use of it by these religious organizations does not seem to lead to any apparent ill results, as attested by recent medical studies of long-time users. This is probably due to the strict ritual control built around this practice and to the fact that the brew is rarely taken extraritually.

Every Daime ritual or "work" is thought to be an opportunity for learning, healing, and the indoctrination of the spirits present either in the "material" or in the "astral" planes. There are different rituals for different occasions and different needs. These are the "hinarios," the "healing works," the "concentrations," the "masses," and the "makings" (see MacRae 1998:105). They all involve taking the brew and entering into an altered state of consciousness in a social and physical setting designed to contain and guide the "voyages." Anthropologists, like Couto, have considered them to be "rituals of order" that promote group and hierarchical cohesion and a search for harmony both within and without.

Many factors contribute to this, such as:

- A) Dietary and behavioral prescriptions that must be observed during the three days that precede and that follow the taking of the drink, setting the stage for an unusual event that escapes the daily routine;
- B) Hierarchical social organization in which a "commander" or "god father" is recognized as the leader of the seance, with the help of a body of "controllers" who are responsible for the maintenance of order and obedience to the commander;
- C) Control of the dosage of the drink taken by participants;
- D) Ritual spatial organization and behavioral control. There is a central table/altar where the double armed Cross of Caravacca and other religious symbols mark the sacred nature of the event. All those taking part are given a specific place in the room, usually a rectangle drawn on the ground, where they must remain, grouped by sex, age, and, in certain more traditional areas, sexual status (virgins and non-virgins).

Uniforms of a sober cut stress the unity of the group and help maintain a mood of seriousness. The movements of those taking part are rigidly prescribed and

one of the main duties of the "controllers" is to ensure obedience to the posture recommended for the seated "works" (raised heads and relaxed and immobile arms and legs) or the correct performance of a few simple steps during the ceremonies that include dancing.

Another important element of control is the music that is sung and played during most of the ceremonies, which helps harmonize the group through marked rhythms and voices in unison. The ritual use of music harks back to ancient shamanic customs from which the ritual taking of ayahuasca originates. Singing and the use of percussion instruments with a strong, repetitive beat, are powerful aids in bringing about altered states of consciousness, and are thought to act as a way of invoking spirits. The words of the "hymns" that are sung direct the "voyages" in the desired directions and help relieve mental or physical ill-feelings.

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

Norman Zinberg, on studying different patterns of drug use, pointed out that even the most addictive substances, like heroin, can be used in a controlled, noncompulsive manner, so long as this use is subject to a series of social sanctions and social rituals that reinforce given sets of values, rules of conduct, and standardized ways of producing, consuming, and dealing with effects (Zinberg 1984:5). More recently, Jean-Paul Grund, carrying out research among heroin and cocaine users in the Netherlands, further developed Zinberg's theory by proposing a "feedback model of drug use self-regulation" which includes two further elements: drug availability and life structure (Grund 1993:247). The Daime and other ayahuasca using religious organizations seem good examples of these models. Not only do they adopt ritual procedures for the

taking of the brew that fulfill all the prerequisites laid out by Zinberg, they also regulate their followers access to the substance and provide them with doctrinal guidance on the structuring of their lives, the controlling elements Grund added to the drug regulation model.

When they were originally set up, these different ayahuasca-based religious movements played an important role in helping migrants from the forest adapt and integrate into their new urban environment. Nowadays, however, a great part of the new followers come from a different socio-cultural backgrounds. They are, generally speaking, young adults with secondary or university level education and with lower middle-class incomes. Although they may face different problems from those of the rubber tappers newly arrived in the city, who made up the bulk of the original members

of these religious groups, they have their own adaptation and existential problems. In Brazil today, the young of all classes are suffering the consequences of a social and economic crisis that has lasted for over a decade and led to large scale unemployment, inflation, and the near disappearance of what used to be a relatively prosperous middle class.

Apart from the resulting situation of diminished expectations, these young people also have to cope with the very quick cultural changes occurring around them with regard to sexual and work ethics, and the break-

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down of traditional family organization and values. In this increasingly hostile milieu, belonging to such a religious group provides many with a sense of social, psychological, and spiritual identity.

The disciplined use of ayahuasca also provides them with a safe, well-mapped route to the kind of transcendental experience that many search for in a compulsive use of alcohol and drugs. Thus, taking part in these religious groups tends to be a particularly effective way of dealing with alcoholism and drug addiction, since, rather than just saying no to any kind of induced alteration of consciousness, they show how to do it effectively and in greater safety. One could, quite appropriately say that, in their own way, they have been adopting harm reduction methods since they were founded.

As long as the use of ayahuasca was confined to the distant Amazonian region it was out of sight and out of mind for the metropolis-oriented Brazilian authorities and opinion makers. However, the spread of these movements among the urban middle class youth soon had the local moral entrepreneurs on the rampage. In 1986, pending further studies, the government decided to ban the use of ayahuasca. However, an official liberal-oriented study group was established, and, after six months research, produced a paper calling for the repeal of the ban on a nationwide level. Among other arguments they pointed out that no damage to health was caused by the use of the brew, and that the members of the different religious groups had been found to be orderly and lead their lives according to accepted social values.

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

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