

Disarming the Dream Police: The Case of the Santo Daimé

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### **Abstract**

Societal oppression stems from the fear of the unknown expressed as the need to control, which also motivates prohibitions on states of awareness. Any serious discussion of freedom and democracy must, in my view, penetrate the current drug controversy, past familiar issues of addiction and trafficking to ask instead: “what legitimate authority restricts individual choices regarding consciousness?”

### **Introduction**

In the Santo Daimé we find a unique intersection of a number of fascinating societal issues: international drug law and the classification of substances being one, the distinction between “cults” and bona fide religious movements another and finally the core issue of freedom of religion. Are protections afforded under such acts as the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 (RFRA) and if so, how may these be considered in relationship to the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 and other “drug laws”?

### **Ayahuasca – Pharmacology and Origin**

For most of *ayahuasca's* thousand plus years of history its use was limited to the inhabitants of the Upper Amazon, the Orinoco Plains and the Pacific Coast of Columbia and Ecuador. (Spruce 1908) *Ayahuasca* meaning “vine of the soul” in the Quechua tongue, refers to the main ingredient: the twisting mariri vine whose botanical designation is *Banisteriopsis Caapi*. (cf. Grob 1996: 86-93). The name also refers to any one of a number of Amazonian beverages deriving from a mixture of plants containing beta-carbolines and tryptamines. The vine is the source of three mildly psychotropic beta carboline alkaloids: harmine, harmoline and tetrahydroharmine. The second ingredient is a plant such as *Psychotria Viridis*, also called *chacrana*. which contains the chemical dimethyl tryptamine (DMT), a powerful psychoactive. Usually a certain enzyme: monoamine oxidase (MAO) would metabolize the DMT present in *chacrana* rendering the DMT ineffective if orally ingested. But by the mysterious MAO-inhibiting chemistry of the vine, the DMT is activated.

The taste of the tea is strong, bitter and with a lengthy aftertaste that makes even long time drinkers contort their faces with the effort of swallowing it. Vomiting is common although not inevitable and many people do not purge after drinking, or do so only rarely. The effects vary drastically and can include visual and auditory experiences termed “hallucinations” or “visions” depending on paradigmatic assumption. As reported by subjects, the para-psychological effects are arguably the most profound as the medicine takes the participant on a journey into unconscious and spiritual domains, where insights and lessons are given in the form of a kind of supra-conscious instruction that seems to both come from within and far beyond.

### **Ayahuasca – From the Jungle to the City to Cyberspace**

As colonial developments grew in Brazil, starting back in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, so did the inevitable cultural exchange between the indigenous people of the Amazon forest, such as the *Tupinamba*, and the modern inhabitants of new towns and settlements along the riverbanks. In this way, Amazonian plant medicine, was introduced to rural and urban moderns.

Brazil, which has greater claim to the name “melting pot” than the stratified United States, is a very mixed culture, racially and culturally, partially because of the above, and because the two countries operated their slave trades very differently leading to a stronger retention of African cultural and religious elements in Brazil. The influence of the Catholic church and the constant influx of slaves coming into Brazil from Africa (as opposed to the “breeding in captivity” preferred in the U.S.) refreshed the traditions and memories of the existing slave population. (Brown, 1986) Sometime before 1606, escaped slaves began making their way from the plantations of Alagoas and Pernambuco fleeing into forested coastal mountains, establishing friendly relations with indigenous Indians and forming African-style villages or *Quilombos* where the ways of the homeland, from housing construction to musical traditions, were kept whole-cloth. The earliest Christian syncretisms in Brazil date from this period: when Palmares was finally destroyed, it was found to have religious chapels replete with iconography of the Christian Catholic tradition (Nelson, 1996, p. 545-66), despite having been completely free of colonial pressure for generations.

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a spontaneous phenomenon occurred in several different locations throughout Brazil, resulting in the independent founding of a handful of new religions that each employed the ancient beverage ayahuasca. Two of these, the Uniao de Vegetal and the Santo Daime have since spread to many locations worldwide. This geographical expansion of the Santo Daime began in the early 1970's and coincided with a post-1960's US and European climate of increased interest in both psychoactive experimentation and spiritual exploration. During this same period the nature of international travel was undergoing dramatic shifts that would ultimately result in the creation of new travel markets such as adventure tourism and eco-tourism. In these models, sophisticated travelers are seeking a more intense experience than simply visiting a famous view or foreign museum. This has been termed by writers such as Hall & Weiler “special interest tourism” of which there are now many sub-categories. Since the 1990s “ayahuasca tourism” has become a category unto itself, as illustrated by magazines such as Shaman's Drum, whose pages are filled with advertisements for guided trips to experience ayahuasca in Peru, Ecuador and Brazil.

Popular authors such as the late Terence McKenna have also been extremely influential in expanding the discussion of ayahuasca and continuing a Western literary tradition that began with the 1960 publication of the famous *Yage* Letters, a correspondence between pioneering author and lifestyle maverick William Burroughs and the then-young poet Alan Ginsberg, two of the first non-Brazilians to experience *yage* (another word for ayahuasca) in the Amazon jungle.

The influence of the Internet cannot be over-estimated. The last few years of the old millennium saw a proliferation of Web sites, private subscription lists, entheo-tourism companies, supply houses for essential ingredients for home-cooking, “trip report” and recipe databases and announcements for international conferences, all driven in whole or part by the seemingly limitless connectivity of the Web. Erik Davis, in his clever and insightful book “Techgnosis: myth, magic and mysticism in the age of information” makes a series of connections between new tech subcultures and the shamans of antiquity. In his words “those ecstatic technicians of the sacred” were the technological masterminds of their age and bear comparison to the magician-like scientists of today. Just like the Web, ayahuasca seems to suddenly be everywhere at once.

## Description and History of the Santo Daime

The Santo Daime is a 20<sup>th</sup> Century syncretism of Catholicism, African *Ifa*, or saint worship, and native Amazonian spiritism and plant-lore. In its subsequent growth and evolution it has acquired elements of other spiritual beliefs and practices such as Umbanda and Kardecism, derived from the work of 19<sup>th</sup> Century metaphysician Allan Kardec, founder of modern spiritism. Kardec is the *nom dé plume* of Denizard Hippolyte--León Rivail, an obscure figure today in his native France but staggeringly influential in Brazil.

The founder of Santo Daime was Raimundo Irineu Serra, a simple man of African descent, the grandchild of slaves and incidentally 7 feet tall as a few rare photographs dramatically illustrate. He was a rubber-tapper who came into contact with Indians in the forest who introduced him to the vision-inducing tea in the early 1920s. After several experiences he was rewarded with a vision of the Virgin Mary in her guise as the Queen of the Forest, who then entrusted him with a mission. She gave him a new name for the ayahuasca, *Santo Daime*, (literally "holy give-me") which also became the common name of the religion he was to found. (The formal and complete name is The Eclectic Center of the Universal Flowing Light.) The vision of Santa Maria also told him how to ritually prepare the tea, consecrating it to Christ and many divine beings of the forest, chief amongst them Juramidam, the imperial master.

After a few years, Irineu began to suddenly receive teachings in the form of sacred songs and attracted followers as his reputation spread. The form of the rituals was developed during these years. The works basically consist of drinking Daime, saying a series of prayers and singing the appropriate book of songs, which are regarded as a sort of third testament and basic religious study for all members. "Works" can run to many hours at a time. Sometimes, the leader will speak at certain points or give directions prior to periods of silent concentration but the usual "sermon" is basically absent.

The music of the Santo Daime is simple and yet distinct. An untrained ear could identify it after hearing a very few samples. (Available online at [www.santodaime.org](http://www.santodaime.org)). The most basic and orthodox instrumentation is the voice, the *maraca* (shaker made of a tin can filled with tiny beads) and the guitar. Melodically and harmonically, an entire book of songs (*hinario*) will generally stay in one key and its relative major or minor. The harmonic structure is usually that of the standard Western diatonic scale, although there are some very interesting chromatic variations, modal scales and unexpected deviations such as non-resolving melodies.

Everybody sings in unison at Santo Daime services led by young and/or unmarried girls, the *mimosas*, who stand or sit (depending on the type of work) in a section right behind the head of the altar, at the top of a six-pointed star floor plan, divided into wedges by gender, then age. In the very front of the Mimosa section are the *puxadoras* who are largely responsible for energizing the singing. Although a celebratory and festive mood may prevail depending somewhat on the occasion, the rituals are extremely well-regulated affairs with an emphasis placed on uniformity. In fact, there is both an every-day and festival uniform that participants wear to the Works.

Jung's assertion that the "forest" is symbolically the abode of the intuitive mind and always represents the feminine (*Alchemical Studies*, 1967) is well demonstrated in the language, image and metaphor of the *hinos*, which are drawn from nature and invoke Divine mother-figures more emphatically than the Catholic Marian devotions. The content or message typical of Santo Daime prayers and *hinos* is of an eco-theological and moral nature with a strong eschatological viewpoint. The emphasis is on right conduct, moral integrity, respect for the natural kingdom and honoring of Christian saints, Amazonian nature entities and African

deities. The present day, third millennium after Christ, is viewed as an “end-time” or time of worldwide transition, Biblical prophesy and personal transformation. The tea is sometimes called the “flower of jagube” and is understood as symbolically equivalent to the Grail mystery.

### **Is Santo Daime Regarded as a cult by public, church or government?**

The exact criteria for defining cults, new religious movements, churches, sects and so forth are ever in flux but one such “red flag” must surely be coercion, both subtle and extreme. Coercion is not present in Santo Daime. People tend to seek out and find the group, which avoids publicity, rather than the other way around. The main concern is that legal rights are secured so that those who freely wish to conduct ceremonies in their own areas are not restricted by law from inviting interested newcomers.

There is also no evidence of accumulated wealth by a charismatic leader, another typical feature associated with negative images of cults. There are some wealthy Santo Daime people from America and Europe who give sums of money to the movement to responsibly develop “eco-villages” in the forest. The legal battle is also an expense taken on by wealthy Western donors. One anonymous philanthropist in the U.S. has given upwards of \$50,000.00 towards the efforts at legal recognition in the United States.

A recent article in Britain’s Guardian newspaper reported that today, the Catholic church does not see the Daime religions as a particular threat and has quoted the bishop of Rio Branco, site of much Daime activity, as regarding the group as a “harmless peculiar local quirk whose numbers have stabilized at a small percentage of the population” (The Guardian – Scripps Howard News Service, Alex Bellos, 1998). Most Brazilians practice Catholicism in conjunction with at least one other practice, without feeling conflicted.

There is a definite degree of outside suspicion and/or hostility towards Santo Daime from some uninitiated family members who have been frightened by the ready-made label of “drug cult.” Additionally, there is a vivid tabloid culture in Brazil and there have been attempts to sensationalize stories about the Santo Daime. Lack of true scandal has largely curbed such publicity. But in the 1980s The Brazilian Federal Council on Narcotics (Conselho Federal de Entorpecentes or CONFEN, the Brazilian DEA) decided to investigate Santo Daime after it had received quite a bit of notoriety. At first, CONFEN did make the constituent plants illegal. However, their investigation resulted in an official determination that both the ancient compound and its method of usage within the church had “positive beneficial” effects in those communities wherein it had an active role. Forced to admit that there was no justification for the ban on ayahuasca or any of its ingredients, the recommendation to the Brazilian government was that it be removed from the controlled substances lists for perpetuity. This was set into law in 1992, once and for all, when formal exemptions were granted to the compound as well as the source plants.

### **The Holland Case**

In October 1999, a ceremony being held by the active Amsterdam group was raided by Dutch police who confiscated 1.75 litres of the tea and arrested and held the leader, Geraldine Fijneman, in custody for two days. Although she was released and the concoction determined to have too low of a DMT content to warrant concern (3 grams), Fijneman and her lawyer Adele van der Plas chose to take the matter to court anyway, as “a way of forcing a judicial decision about the matter that, if it were favorable, would permit the holding of Santo Daime rituals in the country” in the words of van der Plas. Her claim in court was that he drink was fundamental to the practice of the religion and that prohibiting it would violate the European

Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Liberties which guarantees freedom of religion unless there is a genuine threat to public safety, public order, health and morality, or the rights and freedoms of others. The court was forced to agree, and Santo Daime is now practiced openly in Holland.

## **U.S. Drug Laws**

The Convention of Psychotropic Substances of 1971 was the international equivalent of the United States's Controlled Substances Act of 1970. This is the origin of the legal device of "scheduling" various substances which the DEA calls "the legal foundation of the government's fight against the abuse of drugs and other substances." Both DMT and LSD, which had barely been identified and studied by 1971, and by no means with predominantly negative conclusions, are listed in the 1971 Convention documents as Schedule I substances, meaning having a high potential for abuse, no accepted medical treatment and a lack of accepted safety under medical supervision. To be removed from the list is an arduous procedure involving numerous government agencies, none with an expertise in entheogens. A faster, more effective method of achieving exemption for religions using concoctions such as ayahuasca may be found in claiming protection under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA)

## **Freedom of Religion in the United States**

Early pilgrims were puritans who hoped to build a moral society in the new world. The puritan influence is still felt strongly in the US today with the fundamentalist right wing Christian movement its present-day heir. But the authors of the constitution were free-thinking, Platonist intellectuals who saw the church as a shackle and an aid to ignorance. Freedom of religion is the first right mentioned in the first amendment to the constitution which was adopted in 1791 with nine others, collectively known as the "Bill of Rights." and begins, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...". It was designed primarily to prevent the forcible establishment of a state religion, with the right to worship freely deriving logically from that rule. This contrast between the early settlers and those who drafted the philosophical foundations of the new country, plus the fact that religious freedom for one group (colonizers fleeing oppression) was bought at the expense of another (native American Indians fleeing colonizers) underscores that a complex contradiction has existed in the national psyche since the beginning.

It is apt therefore, that the Supreme Court cases most relevant to the present discussion are those concerning the Native American Church, which uses peyote, another powerful Schedule I "hallucinogenic." In 1978 the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was passed (AIRFA) in response to conflicts that arose between Federal and State laws and the practices of Native Americans, who were not deliberately or even knowingly "breaking the law" but simply living as they had always done.

These protections were tested by an important case that went through various courts in the late 1980s and early 1990s: *Smith vs. Oregon*. Originally about unemployment compensation which had been denied to two workers at a drug rehabilitation center, fired when found in possession of peyote, the case took on larger ramifications when the pair argued that the denial of benefits was in effect a form of religious persecution and infringed their first amendment rights because they were Native Americans who used the peyote ceremonially. The case dragged on through various appeals processes until it finally reached the Supreme Court which handed down a very controversial decision that received much criticism from civil liberties advocates, constitutional law experts and religious leaders and weakened the AIRFA. The fine point seems to have been that the person's religious *belief* was not directly

being violated, but rather that the issue concerned *practices* that were against generally applicable laws that were not enacted with the objective of suppressing a particular religion. The rather tortuously ratiocinated conclusion was that “although it is constitutionally permissible to exempt sacramental peyote use from the operation of drug laws, it is not constitutionally required.” (Smith vs. Oregon)

A few years later and prompted by the Smith decision, the tide turned again with the 1993 enactment of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) which guaranteed the free exercise of religion and recognized that the Government should not “substantially burden a person’s exercise of religion.” A Pentagon spokeswoman went on the record saying “if they’re using peyote in their religious practice, it’s a sacrament not a drug just as sacramental wine is not considered a drug.”

In 2002, the first case directly concerning ayahuasca and freedom of religion was decided in New Mexico. It began with the 1999 seizure of several bottles of ayahuasca imported from Brazil for use by the members of a UDV group located in Santa Fe, New Mexico. No criminal charges were filed but neither was the tea returned. In response, the UDV chapter filed a lawsuit alleging that the government’s confiscation of its sacrament was unconstitutional and violated the RFRA as well as international laws and treaties. Judge James Parker found that although the government’s actions did not violate the UDV’s free exercise rights under the First Amendment, the seizure of the church’s sacrament does appear to violate the RFRA. This is the most positive legal development thus far in the United States.

## **Conclusion**

There has always been a desire by the ruling elite to restrict certain privileges and secrets to its own class. In the same way that literacy used to be a restricted skill, substances that afford alternative experiences of reality have been similarly forbidden to the masses while exploited for their own purposes by the rulers. Myths and fairy tales concerning magic potions that must be stolen by heroes from sleeping giants are just codified versions of this timeless double standard. So, theophagy, literally “eating God”, is hardly a new concept, although both Santo Daime and the UDV are new religious movements that employ the practice. By means of examining the worldwide archeological record, painted symbols and glyphs, botanical evidence, traces of sacred beverages at ritual sites and the clues retained in folklore it is revealed that mystical revelatory states were often achieved with the aid of potent plant medicines similar in effect to psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, peyote and ayahuasca. This holds true from the megalithic peoples, to the Essenes of Christ’s time, from the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece to the Soma “sacrifice” described in the Indian text the Rg Veda. It has been plausibly suggested by many theologians, scholars, philosophers and researchers, that the practice of ingesting psychoactives is fundamental to the ancient forms of organized ritual worship that developed into the world religions we know today. As researchers such as Gordon Wasson, John Allegro and others have written, the Holy Eucharist of Catholicism and the Shabbat wine of Judaism are but symbolic echoes of ancient rituals that once involved genuine psychoactives. The effort to control the availability or punish the possession of mind or mood changing substances is probably almost as old. Ancient Persia tried to first ban alcohol over two thousand years ago, and as recently as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, possession of tobacco was punishable by death in Russia. (Edwards)

Dorothy Lee wrote that “Among many groups agriculture is an expression of man’s religious relatedness” to the universe. Coaxing abundance from the plentiful earth may thus be viewed as a magical act of devotion. If this world view is as basic to people’s of the world entering the agricultural phase as it would appear, then it seems obvious that psychoactive plants and concoctions would receive special attention. Rather than react with horror or fear to the

sensory enhancements and non-ordinary consciousness that ensues from eating a psilocybin mushroom, as an interrogation subject in a CIA experiment might, a person of this ideology would filter the experience through the lens of deep reverence and religious feeling for nature and its products. Both conquistadors and secret agents are already steeped in the doctrine of mastery over nature and operate from a base viewpoint of xenophobia and fear of the unknown, so while the former once judged naked dark-skinned persons as savages, their potent folk medicines continue to be regarded by the latter as nothing more than depraved and frightening poisons.

Antonin Artaud, the anarchistic theatre innovator, made a journey to the Mexican Highlands in the early 1930s specifically to participate in the peyote rituals of the Tarahumara Indians and had this to say in the resulting work "The Peyote Dance": "Once one has experienced a visionary state of mind, one can no longer confuse the lie with truth. One has seen where one comes from and who one is, and one no longer doubts what one is. There is no emotion or external influence that can divert one from this reality."

I believe that it precisely this effect, whether in the peyote ceremony or the ayahuasca churches that the government fears and tries to suppress. It is doubtful that this effort will succeed in the long run, as the history of prohibitions clearly demonstrates. Ayahuasca religions have been with us since the beginnings of human culture. They will more than likely be there at the end of it as well.

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### **Web Sites & Databases**

Information about Entheogens, Personal Accounts, Chemical Information  
[www.erowid.org](http://www.erowid.org)

The official site of the religion with lots of information and now with streaming audio.  
[www.santodaime.org](http://www.santodaime.org)

Information about psychoactives in religion.  
[www.bluehoney.org](http://www.bluehoney.org)

The Agape of the Eucharist  
[www.dhushara.com/book/sac/sacrame.htm](http://www.dhushara.com/book/sac/sacrame.htm)

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#### **Liquid Light of the Santo Daime: Plant Medicines and their Potential for Personal and Cultural Transformation Via Direct Experience of the Divine**

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In this paper, I explore the syncretic Brazilian faith *Santo Daime* (literally the "Holy Give-me") and present it as an example of a 20th Century Creation Spirituality Tradition that speaks with the wisdom of Indigenous Mind in the language of the Cosmic Christ. I find that in its usage of the ancient plant medicine *ayahuasca*, from the Amazon forest, and merger of several distinct cultures and



religions, it promises to redeem Christianity from the spiritually crippling separation from nature it has undergone in centuries past. It is beyond denying that the dominant culture of today is infected with rampant materialism from which sore spreads an enormous array of social dis-eases. My finding is that a revival of Creation-centered faith, such as the *Santo Daimé* represents, is just the salve needed to heal this collective wound.

I first became interested in *Santo Daimé* after meeting people who had traveled to Brazil and experienced the rituals and then began listening to and studying the hymns. Soon after, I was able to attend a few meetings in Holland before deciding to visit the community of *Ceu do Mâpiã* in the Amazon rainforest. Using myself as a sort of case study, I have utilized the *Daimé* both for its medicinal and metaphysical properties, linked as they are. I have found that this beverage is a genuine sacrament and that as such it possesses vast potential for benefit in a spiritual revival which honors the earth and invites the participant into both a deep study of the self and a direct experience of the divine. With its calls of: "Give me light! Give me strength! Give me love! Give me truth! Give me justice! Give me peace! Give us union!"; with its thanking of the Sun, Moon, Stars, Earth, Wind and Sea, the *Santo Daimé* invokes a new era in which balance may be restored between human and the rest of nature, between spirit and matter, between "law" and justice.