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The Brazilian **Ayahuasca** Religions

Robin M. Wright completed his Doctorate in Anthropology at Stanford University in 1981. He is an anthropologist, scholar of religions, and specialist in indigenous religions. He has numerous publications on shamanism, mythology and the history of indigenous peoples of South America. He is an indigenist with many years of experience as a collaborator with indigenous movements and fieldwork among the indigenous peoples of the Northwest Amazon (Brazil). He has advised theses and undergraduate monographs on Brazilian ayahuasca religions and collaborated in the organization of the First Conference on the Ritual Use of Ayahuasca I CURA (UNICAMP, 1997). Besides being one of its founding members, for eight years he was the coordinator of the Center for Research in Indigenous Ethnology at UNICAMP.

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Abstract

[abstract of around 150 words and 5-8 keywords needed]

The forthcoming volume of *FIR* (2.3) represents an important advance in a research movement which—while difficult to pinpoint when it actually began—dates back to at least the 1980s, on religions derived from the ritual use of the psychoactive substance known as **ayahuasca**. The religions themselves first emerged in Brazil in the early twentieth century but only began to attract the serious attention of researchers generations later. Even then, the early research—and not simply popularized literature—was to be found primarily in dissertations and theses, or articles scattered in local academic journals, and a few notable books. These early and important studies, never translated into English, were the first to seek an understanding of the phenomena as *religious* movements susceptible to the tools of

investigation of the social sciences and religious studies. In short, what are now known as '*ayahuasca religions*' for many generations constituted an unknown and mystified terrain which begged for serious study, given the repressive policies of state and national governments that threatened to make ayahuasca **[you have this word in italics in the title and earlier – ok in roman?]** a form of drug abuse.

The study of the Brazilian ayahuasca religions can be traced back to the pioneer works of Clodomir Monteiro da Silva who in 1983 presented a Master's dissertation at the Federal University of Pernambuco on the importance of the Santo Daime movement in helping integrate recently arrived rubber tappers in the urban setting of Rio Branco, Acre (Monteiro da Silva, 1983). That same year Vera Fróes Fernandes won an award from the Superintendência da Zona Franca de Manaus (SUFRAMA) for a manuscript on the Santo Daime and its relation to Amazonian Culture, which was published as a book three years later (Fernandes, 1986). This book had a second enlarged edition in 1989 (Fernandes, 1989). Two of the new annexes dealt with the six month ban suffered in 1985 for the use of ayahuasca and the official government enquiries on the subject.

The author of one of these annexes was the Anglo-Brazilian anthropologist Edward MacRae (1989). Working in government and academic bodies dealing with official drug policy, he has since then contributed in many ways to a better understanding of the religious use of ayahuasca. In 1992 he prepared an anthropological report on the subject during a new official enquiry. In this document he defended the urban use of ayahuasca, pointing to its long history in Amazonia and to its adaptive effects, and he warned against trying to restrict its use to peoples of the rain forest (MacRae, 1994: 31-45). That same year he published a much quoted book in which he compares the Brazilian ayahuasca religious rituals to those current among Peruvian *mestizo* shamans and points out the importance of the sacred setting to the production and control of the social and individual effects of taking the substance (MacRae, 1992). During the following two years he had the remarkable research experience of acting as interpreter to Daime leaders who travelled to Europe to spread their doctrine, which personally allowed him to know them more intimately and academically gave him an understanding of the difficulties inherent in trying to adapt the Santo Daime doctrine to European values. As a result of contacts established during these travels he was later asked to act as expert witness in trials involving Santo Daime followers in Spain, Holland, Italy, Germany and the USA. He has since also published books and articles in Spanish, English and French.

In October 1995 MacRae was one of the organizers of an International Seminar on drug use and abuse at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBa), where he is

currently Professor of Anthropology at the Faculty of Philosophy and Human Sciences and researcher at the drug dependence treatment and research center (CETAD/UFBa). Alongside the main seminar, which had a predominantly clinical focus, he organized a smaller event concerned with religious and social uses of psychoactive plants¹ during which the concept of entheogens was much discussed in relation to ayahuasca, jurema and cannabis used in shamanic and religious settings. This event, which was probably the first international academic meeting of its kind to be held in Brazil,² brought together the main Brazilian scholars specializing on the subject as well as renowned foreign researchers like Jonathan Ott, Luis Eduardo Luna and Jacques Mabit. That same year (1995), an International Conference on Studies of Hoasca, sponsored by the União do Vegetal (one of the main ayahuasca sects) was held in Rio de Janeiro, in which over 800 people participated including the authorities, researchers, the lay and religious public. This conference aimed to present the results of the Human Pharmacology of Hoasca Project, which were published in important journals in English in the following years. The field of studies on the Brazilian Ayahuasca Religions seemed to have been given birth.

The movement to investigate these phenomena seriously was given another important impetus in 1997 when the other organizer of this special forthcoming volume, Beatriz Caiuby Labate, encouraged by me as Coordinator of Graduate Studies in Anthropology, had the idea of inviting scholars, religious followers, activists, legal experts, and interested supporters to participate in an international conference at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) which came to be known as the First CURA (Congress on the Ritual Use of Ayahuasca).³ Labate was then a Master's student; given her interest in studies of ayahuasca, I had encouraged her to write her Master's thesis on her researches in this area, and I suggested to her that one way of promoting the visibility of the subject in the academic world was through the organization of an international Congress, which would have the support of the Graduate Program in Anthropology. I suggested

1. *I Encontro de Estudos sobre Rituais Religiosos e Sociais e o Uso de Plantas Psicoativas* (I ERSUPP) [I Meeting on Religious and Social Rituals and the Use of Psychoactive Plants] held in Salvador (Bahia) between 5 and 8 of October 1995.

2. I am excluding here the reference to the I Conferência Internacional da Ayahuasca (First International Conference of Ayahuasca), held in Rio Branco, Acre, between 18 and 21 November 1992 during which seven of the main religious entities users of ayahuasca signed a document that initiated a dialogue amongst themselves. This conference had an important role in the negotiation of the groups with the State and was an important reference to introduce the topic to the wider public, but did not present results of academic research.

3. The title of the Congress—CURA—stands for *Congresso sobre o Uso Ritual de Ayahuasca*, and was intentionally chosen for its double meaning in the Portuguese word for 'heal', *cura*.

drawing in some of the Department's professors who, like myself, had had different experiences with psychoactive-based religions or with ayahuasca itself. One of these, Dr Mauro Almeida, Professor of Anthropology at the UNICAMP and Labate's later advisor in the Master's and Doctoral program, is a native of the State of Acre—where the ayahuasca religions had emerged among its peasant population, the majority of whom were migrants or descendants of migrants from the drought-stricken northeastern area of Brazil. Through Almeida's contacts with local rubber-working communities where the ayahuasca religions were practised, and their leadership, and Labate's contacts with researchers throughout Brazil and the few international researchers at that time, the First CURA was held in November 1997.

The publication of the proceedings of the First CURA was similarly a major step forward, and much credit should be given both to the publisher, the Mercado de Letras in Campinas, and to the research foundation FAPESP, of São Paulo, for giving editorial and financial support to two editions of the CURA volume in Portuguese (Labate e Araújo, 2002; 2004). Labate later published her Master's thesis on the *Reinvention of the Use of Ayahuasca in Urban Contexts* (Labate, 2004), (also in Portuguese **[English version not in the References – who was the publisher?]**), which, in the year 2000, was awarded the best Master's thesis in the Social Sciences by the National Association for Graduate Studies in Social Sciences (ANPOCS). In 2005 the book *The Ritual Use of Plants of Power* **[not English title in refs – use original title and put English in brackets?]**, organized by Labate and her colleague, Sandra Lucia Goulart—herself the author of important pieces on ayahuasca religions (Goulart, 1996; 2004) and co-author of the introduction of the forthcoming volume—was released (Labate and Goulart, 2005). This volume (again in Portuguese), is a collection of articles on other 'Plants of Power', a category that encompasses several other plants containing psychoactive substances used in religious experiences, or what some authors have called 'entheogens'—in Ott's interpretation 'realizing the divine within' (Ott, 1993: 104-105).

These volumes and the accompanying interest they have generated in Brazil and Latin America were incentives for a wave of new research which grows in strength and numbers as the religion itself has spread from its local origins in a distant and difficult to reach corner of the western Brazilian Amazon to a globalized phenomena with centers in Brazil, Europe, the United States, Japan, and elsewhere. Far from being a topic that interests only anthropologists, ayahuasca or 'plants of power' research is eminently interdisciplinary—psychology, history, sociology, religious studies and the humanities, all have made contributions to our knowledge. Similar to the eclectic nature of the religious belief and practice that the ayahuasca religions have generated, the study of these phenomena demand

interdisciplinary and novel approaches. As one author in the forthcoming volume has concisely described, the phenomenon has received its greatest support from those who are seeking to transcend boundaries and frontiers.

Although the ayahuasca field of research has become well-spread throughout Brazil, the topic has remained basically unknown to the English-reading public. In 1998 MacRae published a pioneer article in English on the sacred use of *Cannabis* [upper case and italics needed?] (locally known as ‘Santa Maria’, Holy Mary) among certain ayahuasca groups, concluding that the official prohibitionist policies on the use of that plant ignored the potentially important informal controls presented by the religious setting (MacRae, 1998).⁴ In 1999, one other important reference was published: the pioneer book of esoteric reports by the Santo Daime leader Alex Polari de Alverga (Alverga, 1999), a translation of his book *O Guia da Floresta* (Alverga, 1992). In 2000, Alberto Groisman, another important Brazilian researcher (cf. Groisman, 1999) defended his PhD thesis on the expansion of Santo Daime to the Netherlands (Groisman, 2000, unpublished). A few years later, MacRae translated his book *Guided by the Moon* into English but published it only online (MacRae, 2006).⁵

Despite all of this production, a solid anthropological book which integrated the several studies and perspectives on the Brazilian Ayahuasca Religions was still missing. The next volume of *FIR* (2.3) seeks to fill this gap. Articles published in Labate’s two previous volumes, ‘The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca’ and ‘The Ritual Use of Plants of Power’, along with previously unpublished articles and material from other sources inaccessible to the English-reading public have now been translated and will be presented here. The wealth of the research currently underway on ayahuasca and other plants of power will certainly be felt in every page of this volume of *FIR* (2.3).

We must remember that knowledge of the vine and the brew which is produced from the mixture of the vine with the leaves of a plant is *indigenous knowledge*, transmitted from the indigenous and *mestizo* peoples of the Amazon to migrant rubber-workers and then to interested outsiders. According to this knowledge, among the most important effects of taking the brew in ritual contexts is to open a way, variously described as a ‘trail’ or as ‘ladders’ or as a ‘rope’ that leads backward in time to the timeless past where all the ancestors are. It facilitates

4. A much more up-to-date version of this article was published later (MacRae, 2005) and re-translated into English and included in the present volume.

5. This was published at Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre Psicoativos (Psychoactives Interdisciplinary Study Group)—NEIP’s site (www.neip.info). This group reunites the main human sciences researchers on drugs in Brazil including several ayahuasca researchers who have contributed to this volume.

communication with the dead and with the deities. In that sense, it is eminently religious in the sense of 'reconnecting' to the primordial past. Beyond that, in the indigenous understanding, the brew gives one 'strength' and 'courage' to dance, to do battle with enemies (some indigenous peoples would drink the brew before going off to war). It alters and distorts all perception of space and time producing a myriad of images many of which have to do with powerful others in the indigenous spirit worlds. Another important characteristic is the rainbow of colours associated with these images; it is this beautiful world that is revealed on taking the brew. In some cases, the images have been so powerful amongst indigenous peoples that it would be no exaggeration to say that they have deeply influenced charismatic leaders to concretize their visions—in movements to heal society from the ills of witchcraft and sorcery, or even in more distant times of the past, to paint their temples and architecture with the fabulous motifs seen in their visions (for example, the ancient Moche temples of coastal South America were painted with elaborate designs and pictographs showing native specialists using sacred substances and connecting to the powers of the cosmos).

This knowledge of the plants of power was then transmitted to migrants from the East of Brazil, thousands of displaced and dispossessed, exploited and downtrodden rubber-gatherers who sought to eke out a living in the unknown and—to them—exceedingly dangerous frontier regions. What spatial and temporal references did they have in this context? They brought their own spiritual baggage; some of them were religious *virtuosos*, like Raimundo Irineu Serra, with great talent and religious creativity, a tremendously charismatic and prophetic figure who was one of the first rubber-workers to be introduced to the ritual taking of ayahuasca. From his experiences and vision of the 'Queen of the Forest' (identified with Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Catholicism), he composed a novel and dynamic blend of spiritualities that came to be known as 'Santo Daime'. The word 'Daime' is the Portuguese supplication meaning 'Give me', which, it is said, Serra uttered in his prayers while taking ayahuasca. 'Give me' what? 'Force', 'Light', 'Love'. 'Strength' was also an element important in indigenous experiences of ayahuasca; 'love' and 'light' were the building blocks of a new community sentiment for those who had been literally abandoned in the unknown. Raimundo Irineu Serra was a prophet and was considered by his followers today as the utopian 'Emperor Juramidam' providing a refuge from the affliction of the rubber bosses and the oppression of poverty. It is this utopia which his followers seek to recreate in the small villages of the forest; it is easy to understand why in all Daime communities, there are reproductions of the same photo or painting of Mestre Irineu—the Christ of the rubber-working and *caboclo* communities.

To the practice of taking ayahuasca, Serra added elements from northeastern Brazilian spirituality which he knew best: esotericism, Afro-Brazilian religiosities. The local *caboclo* beliefs and practices characteristic of Amazonia—the *encantados*, or ‘enchanted’ beings of nature—reinforced a very strong element of the new religion that was coming into being: it was a *religion of nature*. A form of naturalized Catholicism/Spiritism/Umbanda.

It is perhaps this apotheosis of nature and the possibility of using hallucinogens reminiscent of Castaneda’s account that drew the greatest amount of attention from the urban countercultural movement that led many young backpackers to visit the early Daime communities in the deep forests of Acre. One of the first and most important communities, called ‘Colony 5000’ had all the air of a utopian colony, whose spiritual guide and leader, Sebastião Mota de Melo, known afterwards as Padrinho (Godfather) Sebastião, one of the main leaders of the Daime religion after ‘Master Irineu’ (the title of ‘Master’ was given to the spiritual leaders of the various other ayahuasca based religions which developed) passed away, in fact encouraged these visits. The objective of the members of the Colony was to find a way of eking out their survival while living in harmony with nature, autonomous from the corrupt, urban way of life, and in accordance with the teachings of Mestre Irineu and especially in their further elaborations by Padrinho Sebastião. It is not surprising that this movement found strong allies in sectors of the larger movement of peasants, indigenous peoples and environmentalists.

Daime communities were certainly the most important of the ayahuasca religions in the beginning. Two other ayahuasca religions emerged which are likewise well described in the pages of this volume [[are you referring to 2.3 to come?](#)]: the ‘Barquinha’ (or ‘Little Boat’) and the UDV (*Centro Espirita Beneficente Uniao do Vegetal*, or simply ‘UDV’), the first in the capital city of Acre, Rio Branco, in 1945; the second, in the capital city of Rondônia (Porto Velho) in the early 1960s. The three religions are alike in many respects, yet each emphasizes spiritual aspects that the others do not; in that way they seem to mark differences amongst themselves. These differences occur not just in what elements are adopted and excluded but rather in the creation of distinct *ethoses* amongst the groups. The UDV is generally known as being more ‘closed’ to outsiders or ‘introverted’, introspectionist. It took years before any news reporting on the religion was permitted by the leadership; the articles presented in this forthcoming volume on UDV are thus important contributions. The rituals of the UDV seem in some ways entirely distinct from Daime: all participants remain seated after taking the brew and silently contemplate the experience of visions called ‘mirações’; the leader is a facilitator and caretaker who asks each one if he/she is experiencing a *miração* and

provides important spiritual teachings, on the doctrine of the UDV, instructions on moral behavior, obedience to the norms of family, kin and hierarchy. In the background, vocal music of the UDV is heard, or popular Brazilian music is played. All participants wear green uniforms (an element which differentiates the three religions).

By contrast, the 'Little Boat' is remarkable for the construction of space of the temple—this has been well-studied by Wladimir Sena Araújo, in his Master's thesis which I advised and was published as 'Navigating on the Waters of Daime' [**is the original title preferable with English in brackets?**] (Araújo, 1999). Instead of a cross on top of the temple, there is the replica of a boat; all the participants are dressed as sailors (the founder of this branch of Daime religions was in fact a sailor of the Merchant Marines). As the ceremony begins, all partake of the Daime brew and then sit around an immense cross-shaped table in front of a curtain. Behind the curtain is an altar, literally covered with statues and images of Catholic saints, the Holy Trinity. Many of these saints have significance for the Afro-Brazilian religion called Umbanda, which is an important element of the Barquinha religion. As the participants sing the 'psalms' of the Barquinha, the curtain slowly opens revealing the sacred—an experience of epiphany one might say—and then slowly closes. Lest it be thought that this is predominantly a Catholic ritual, just outside the main hall, specialists are performing curing rituals invoking the spirits of Umbanda. Indeed, the whole point of the religion is to cure or, as they say, to find the lost souls of the sick or deceased and to lead them back in the boat over the sacred waters bringing them 'home' to Christ. At the conclusion of the ceremony, all participants then dance out on the patio, in a peculiar style which combines music of the Brazilian northeast, called 'forro', with the incorporation of spirits. The construction of the phases of the sacred is totally different, as Sena Araújo in the forthcoming volume demonstrates so well, from the UDV and the Daime rituals.

Another important dimension of this volume of *FIR* must be stressed which relates to the legal status of ayahuasca in Brazil and abroad. The volume includes an article by the legal scholar Domingos Bernardo de Sá, who in 1986 was the president of the Committee of the Federal Narcotics Board, formerly known as CONFEN (*Conselho Federal de Entorpecentes*), which proposed the withdrawal of ayahuasca and its plant ingredients from the Health Ministry's schedule of prohibited substances, thus permitting its ritual and religious use in Brazil. Bernardo de Sá currently belongs to the national anti-drug board, CONAD (*Conselho Nacional Antidrogas*), subordinated to the President's Office, and also works for its technical-scientific advisory committee. In 2003 Edward MacRae was nominated member of the same council (CONAD), and during 2006 they both acted as members

of the Multidisciplinary Work Group [capitals needed? Is it the actual title?] set up by that Council to further regulate the religious use of ayahuasca in Brazil and were among the signatories of the report produced by the end of that year, which has been heralded as a landmark in ayahuasca policy.

The question of legality has been a difficult one for ayahuasca in the United States as well, considering that one of the first issues it confronted in the US courts had to do with biopiracy by a US company which, many years ago when such questions were rarely discussed, made off with the vine and patented it in its name. The question of control is still a long way from being resolved in the US, since anyone knows that the sacred brew can be easily obtained through the internet. Among the objectives of this forthcoming volume is the divulging of Brazilian studies on the religious use of ayahuasca as well as the protection of its legal status in Brazil and abroad.

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