

A RITUAL KEY TO MYSTICAL SOLUTIONS:  
AYAHUASCA THERAPY, SECULARISM, & THE SANTO DAIME RELIGION IN  
BELGIUM

A Dissertation

Submitted on the 26<sup>th</sup> Day of April, 2013

To the Department of Anthropology

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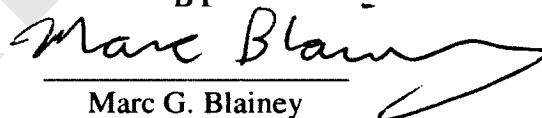
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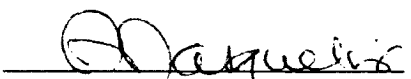
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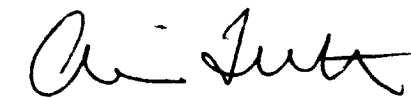
BY

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Marc G. Blainey

APPROVED:

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
William L. Balée, Ph.D.  
Director

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Adeline M. Masquelier, Ph.D.

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Allison J. Truitt, Ph.D.

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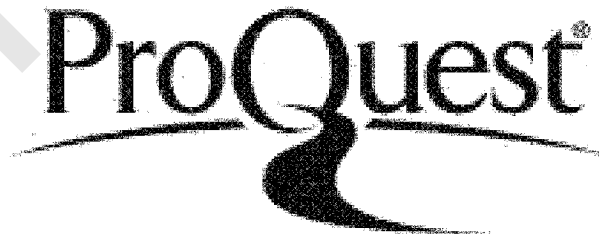


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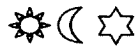
To my loving, kind, patient, brilliant, beautiful wife Darcie.

*“Thus do things change. What yesterday was still religion is no longer such to-day; and what to-day is atheism, tomorrow will be religion.”*

- **Ludwig Feuerbach**, in *The Essence of Christianity* (1957[1841]: 32)

*Os caboclos já chegaram  
De braços nus e pés no chão  
Eles trazem remédios bons  
Para curar os cristãos*

*The [Amazonians] already arrived  
With bare arms and bare feet  
They bring good remedies  
To heal the Christians*



- from hymn #75, “As Estrelas” (The Stars), received by **Raimundo Irineu Serra** (a.k.a. *Mestre* [“Master”] *Irineu*), founder of the Santo Daime

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PREVIEW

## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction: Background and Research Objectives

For over 20 years now, small groups of people across Europe have been gathering discreetly to participate in a sacred but forbidden rite. As members of a Brazil-based religion called *Santo Daime* (Portuguese for “Holy Give-me”), they claim to have found a divine source of healing by way of a potent psychoactive beverage called *ayahuasca*. In *Santo Daime* rituals *ayahuasca* is ingested as a holy sacrament, much like the wine distributed in a Christian mass. However, most governments consider this to be a criminal act, since *ayahuasca* is currently designated as a dangerous “hallucinogen.” The arrival of this new spirituality thus represents an ethical dilemma for European societies: how can the liberalist value of religious freedom be sustained if the fundamental component of *Santo Daime* religious practice is not permitted? Anthropology, the discipline that strives to account for cultural variation, is apt to intercede with regard to stigmatized populations because it can clarify otherwise obscure social phenomena. Just as prejudices of class, race, gender, and sexual orientation are unmasked through ethnographic research, firsthand documentation of ostracized faith communities can inspire public sympathy. Highlighting Belgium as a cultural bellwether of Western Europe, this dissertation will explain in empirical and empathic terms why some Europeans are partaking in *Santo Daime*.

Members of *Santo Daime* are known as *fardados* (males only or both genders collectively) or *fardadas* (females). *Fardados* from outside Brazil are nonetheless prone



to express key aspects of Santo Daime culture using the Brazilian language of Portuguese (a glossary of these terms is located in Appendix I). They wear white *fardas* (“uniforms”) when attending ceremonial Santo Daime *trabalhos* (“works”), where they imbibe ayahuasca while meditating, singing, and dancing for between 6 and 12 hours. Meaning “vine of the (dead) spirits” in the Quechua language, ayahuasca is a concoction<sup>1</sup> of plants that originated among Amazonian indigenous peoples in Pre-Columbian times (Shanon 2002: 13-14). Fardados also refer to ayahuasca as “Santo Daime” or “Daime,” illustrating how this drink is the central organizing principle of the religion as a whole (Polari de Alverga 1999).

Concurrently, this study’s focus on Santo Daime opens up a broader and deeper inquiry into how the secular ideals underlying Euro-American legal and social norms tend to exclude alternative ideas about the nature of mind and reality. In interviews, fardados said that they are attracted to ayahuasca because it induces a mystical state of awareness. Hereby, the subjective boundary between the observing self and the observed world appears to dissolve. I have experienced this stunning sensation myself in the Daime rituals, and it is astounding to say the least. Fardados interpret this not as hallucination, but as a revelation that all human selves are at one with a celestial Godhead. They believe that this otherworldly encounter catalyzes medicinal cleansings of both body and spirit. This belief is unacceptable for most Euro-American medical and legal authorities, which currently banish ayahuasca and related substances as illegal “drugs.”

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<sup>1</sup> As pointed out by Tupper (2011: 16, note 14), contrary to popular discourse ayahuasca is not a “tea,” as it is “technically...a decoction (i.e., a brew) rather than an infusion of the plants.”

## Background and Terminology

Based on stories of youths experiencing traumatic “bad trips” a half-century ago during the “psychedelic 60s,” in Western societies so-called “hallucinogens” are assumed to be inherently dangerous. Popular fears about the hippie counterculture’s promotion of psychedelics provoked a worldwide criminalization of this class of chemicals, enacted by the United Nations’ “Convention on Psychotropic Substances” in 1971 (Beyerstein and Kalchik 2003; Spillane and McAllister 2003). Since then, 184 member states have signed this UN treaty, which obliges each signatory to also legislate their own national sanctions.<sup>2</sup> Globally, the *International Narcotics Control Board* (INCB) now oversees a continuous adjudication for international prohibitions of these psychoactive materials (see Tupper and Labate 2012). Because the mind-altering molecule found in ayahuasca (*N,N-Dimethyltryptamine* [or DMT]) is also officially classified as a banned “hallucinogen,” Santo Daime rituals remain a punishable offence in most countries. Consequently, in most liberal nations where the freedom of religion is enshrined, those whose religious convictions revolve around ayahuasca now risk incarceration. Even while ayahuasca’s constituents are condemned in most places, Santo Daime has managed to earn full legitimacy in Brazil, as well as in small sections of Europe<sup>3</sup> (Holland, Spain) and the U.S.A. (Oregon). In these exceptional localities, courts of law upheld fardados’ right to practice their religion as superseding statutes that outlaw ayahuasca. On the other hand, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany have opposed this religious use of

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<sup>2</sup> In the decades after the 1971 UN Convention was passed, all Euro-American countries discussed herein signed and ratified the terms of the treaty (including European nations such as Belgium [in 1995], the Netherlands [1993], France [1971], Germany [1971], the UK [1971], as well as Brazil [1971], Canada [1988], and the United States [1971]). The total list of signatories can be found here: <http://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/MTDSG/Volume%20I/Chapter%20VI/VI-16.en.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Although full legal legitimacy has yet to be granted (i.e. legal proceedings are ongoing), Daime groups have been acquitted of previous charges regarding the possession of ayahuasca in Italy (Menozzi 2011: 386-387).

ayahuasca, arresting and in some cases imprisoning fardados for importation and distribution of an illicit substance (Labate and Feeney 2012; see also Kufner et al. 2007; Silva Sá 2010). Fardados, by contrast, reject the terms “hallucinogen” (which implies that the substance engenders delusions) and “psychedelic” (reminiscent of hedonistic use during the 1960s). Instead, they prefer the terms *sacred plant* and *entheogen*. Meaning “to generate god within” in Greek, entheogen denotes “vision-producing” substances employed “in shamanic or religious rites” (Ruck et al. 1979: 146). This vocabulary of entheogens as revealing an inner divinity is crucial for apprehending fardados’ nonconformist approach to the human condition. Fieldwork I conducted in Brazil (one month in 2008) and Europe (fourteen months from 2009-2011) was aimed at explicating fardados’ belief in the safety and benefits of drinking ayahuasca in a religious setting.

Considering the concept of “religion,” anthropologists such as Talal Asad have questioned the legitimacy of applying this concept cross-culturally as an ethnological device. In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad (1993) traces the Eurocentric construction of “religion” into a universal category used by Western scholars for explaining non-Western peoples’ institutions of the sacred (Asad 1993). He rejects as “externalist” those attempts by anthropologists to define what religion is according to functionalist (e.g. Malinowski 1939) or interpretative (Geertz 1973) schemes. Instead, he recommends that anthropologists train their efforts on understanding the “internal” aspects of religion, such as worshippers’ subjective construal of ritual embodiment and traditional disciplines for cultivating an ideal human self (Asad 2006a: 212, 234-235, 240). In speaking about his own analysis of medieval Christian monasteries (see Asad 1993), Asad underscores ritual practices as an act of “willing obedience.” He characterizes “monastic disciplines not as

something that comes from outside but as an internal shaping of the self by the self” (Asad interviewed in Scott 2006: 272). This is a compelling critique of studies alleging that the essences of particular religions can be detected via the outward traits of symbols, language, and practice. In fact, European fardados evince similar suspicions of external categorizations of religion; they prefer to accentuate the internal, subjective dimensions of the ayahuasca experience as a direct encounter with God.

Notwithstanding Asad’s sound critique of the religion concept, for practical purposes fardados do still liken Santo Daime to all other communal forms of worship normally described as “religions” (a complex issue that will be returned to later on). This shows how anthropologists must also be mindful of the perils associated with the “deconstructive impulse,” and heed Matti Bunzl’s (2005a: 534) worry that “in our discipline, we spend far too much time deconstructing the key terms of social debate and far too little time analyzing how they function in the real world.” Since the present text deals with European-born Santo Daime adherents, the Western-centric meaning of “religion” is more appropriate than it would be in say, an ethnography on Australian aborigines. Therefore, in discussing cross-cultural spiritual devotion, in this dissertation *religion* is understood to be any “organized belief in phenomena that cannot be demonstrated scientifically or empirically” (Balée 2012: 55).

The term “entheogen” serves the anthropological focus of this dissertation, which conveys fardados’ insider (emic) view that ayahuasca is a remedial sacrament. However, the theological connotations of this term are antithetical to the pursuits of scientists concerned with the psychiatric and biological effects of substances like ayahuasca. While scientific and medical researchers are not so interested in religious beliefs, they are

attentive to the therapeutic values of spiritual experiences (Winkelman 2000: 229). Thus, the term *psychointegrator*<sup>4</sup> has been proposed for strictly scientific approaches to these substances because it offers an objective standpoint from which to interpret their effects on the body and mind. While the “psychointegrative” function of ayahuasca is germane, the terms “entheogen” and “sacred plant” are relied upon throughout this dissertation. This is because the divine qualities that fardados attribute to the Daime beverage are essential to their religious practice.

### An Introduction to Santo Daime

Santo Daime was founded in 1930 by an Afro-Brazilian rubber tapper named Raimundo Irineu Serra, now known as *Mestre* (Master) Irineu. After emigrating from his birthplace in the Brazilian northeast to the Western Amazon region, Mestre Irineu began to experiment with ayahuasca, borrowing from local rituals in the rainforest. In visions he experienced through ayahuasca, Santo Daime mythology holds that otherworldly guides informed Mestre Irineu he would be responsible for establishing a new spirituality. He continued to “receive” *hinos* (hymns) and instructions for instituting this new religion throughout his life, and the Santo Daime *doutrina* (“doctrine”) began to expand around Brazil following the Mestre’s death in 1971.

While most of the approximately 4000 Santo Daime members are in Brazil, there are now followers on every inhabited continent (Labate, Rose, and dos Santos 2008: 27). Through fieldwork I determined that the first Santo Daime works in Europe were held in

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<sup>4</sup> As described by Winkelman (2001: 229): “The LSD-like psychointegrators have global effects upon awareness, behavior, emotions and cognition... This results in an integration of feelings with thoughts, enhancing insight. Activation of repressed memories permits catharsis and abreaction, facilitating resolution of psychodynamic and interpersonal conflicts. This enhanced awareness, increased emotional lability, disruption of habitual behavior patterns, and dissolution of egocentric fixations permits an alteration of psychological relationships and processes and psychodynamic reprogramming.”

Spain and Belgium in 1989. By 1990 there were Santo Daime groups established in Spain, Belgium, and Portugal. At this time there were less than a dozen European fardados. When Groisman (2000: 16, note 10) conducted a survey in 1996, he reports 29 individual Daime groups in 11 different European countries, with a total population of 324 fardados. Although Santo Daime grew by hundreds of fardados in its first six years in Europe, since 1996 its growth has leveled out to a more gradual pace. At international Santo Daime gatherings I attended in Amsterdam in 2009 and 2010, I met and spoke with participants representing 18 European nationalities. In consultation with informants from around Europe, I learned that official works are organized across 12 European countries (Austria, Belgium, England, Finland, Germany, Greece, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Wales). Independent participants also travel to Amsterdam from the Czech Republic, France, Poland, Romania, Switzerland, and Ukraine (see Figure 1). In total, there are now 36 Santo Daime groups in Europe (comprising some 600 fardados). Individual congregations refer to themselves and the wider Santo Daime community as an *igreja* (“church,” usually consecrated with the prefix *Céu do* [“Heaven of” or “Sky of”], as in *Céu do Mapiá*).

Regarding all new religious forms in Europe, it is extremely difficult to ascertain exact statistics. This is because there exists a wide variety of new religions on this continent (estimated to number over 2000 distinct groups), all of which define full-time, part-time, exclusive, or non-exclusive membership in different ways (Barker 1999: 16-18). A conservative tally calculates that Europe has 353,000 practitioners of religions founded since the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; these “new religionists” had an annual growth rate of 0.39% during the decade of 2000 to 2010 (Melton and Baumann 2010: lvii, lxxv),

indicating a slow but steady expansion for these minority religious groups in Europe. Another estimate holds that participants in “alternative” religions make up between 0.3% and 0.5% of the European population (Lewis 2004: 16). This latter estimate suggests that out of the 731 million people in Europe, somewhere between 2.1 and 3.6 million citizens are involved with a non-mainstream religion.<sup>5</sup>

The Santo Daime ideology is made up of a mix of Catholicism, New World shamanism, African spiritualities, and European esoteric theology.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars have classified Santo Daime as a form of “collective shamanism” (e.g. Groisman 2009; La Rocque Couto 1989; MacRae 1992; see Labate 2004a: 240-242), because each participant is seeking to both cure themselves and to contribute to the healing of other individuals present at the ritual. This tendency tells us something about how some academics like to highlight the shamanistic (i.e. indigenous Amazonian) elements in Santo Daime (see Labate and Pacheco 2011: 81-82). But in interviews with fardados during my fieldwork, they tend to temper the shamanistic aspects of Santo Daime with references to the major world religions. European fardados stressed how their Santo Daime experiences resemble the basic teachings of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism (Islam), Kabbalah (Judaism), and Daoism.<sup>7</sup> As will become clear throughout this text, my informants express a point of view that is more in line with those authors who classify Santo Daime as a form of “mysticism” (Dias Junior 1991; Shanon 2002; Soares 2010; see Labate and Pacheco 2011: 76). However scholars brand it, clearly the Santo

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<sup>5</sup> According to the United Nations (2007: 7), the total population of all of Europe is estimated to be approximately 731 million people, see:

<http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/wpp2006/English.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> European esoteric traditions incorporated into Santo Daime include influences from groups like the *Esoteric Circle for the Communion of Thought*, the *Rosicrucian Order*, as well as various forms of *Kardecism* inspired by the 19<sup>th</sup> century French medium Allan Kardec (Labate and Pacheco 2011: 75).

<sup>7</sup> Regardless of historical threads, experiences of mystical union or ecstatic dissolving of self are found cross-culturally (see Bucke 1995[1901]).

Daime doctrine melds a diverse range of religious traditions and metaphysical ideas into a coherent new whole. It is perhaps best to comprehend Santo Daime as a kind of *shamanistic mysticism*, since it combines the shamanistic technique of ingesting an entheogen for healing purposes with a mystical goal of ecstatically uniting self and God.

The term *syncretism*, meaning “the combination of diverse traditions in the area of religion” (Shaw and Stewart 1994: 11), can apply to the Santo Daime because of its blending of elements from several spiritual backgrounds. Such blending occurs to some degree in all circumstances of acculturation (i.e. when different cultures come into contact with one another). But as Droogers and Greenfield (2001: 31) note, “syncretism in itself does not indicate whether the two (or more) religions involved in the mixing process are influencing each other equally, or whether the process is asymmetric, with one dominating the other.” My informants rebuffed my questions whenever I asked about contrasts between different syncretic aspects of Santo Daime. Fardados describe Santo Daime as an “eclectic, yet highly organized and spiritually aligned ritual form” (Goldman 1999: xxvi). They do acknowledge that there are different religious elements composing the Daime doctrine. However, they prefer to concentrate on how these elements’ fuse into a new cohesive whole. It is therefore necessary for scholars to focus on the harmonious mixing of different spiritual traditions in Santo Daime as well as on its eclectic syncretism.

In differentiating those who have officially become fardados (after undergoing a *fardamento* initiation rite) from those who attend these works without a formal dedication, the latter are referred to by the unofficial but expedient term *firmados*.<sup>8</sup> When

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<sup>8</sup> At some Santo Daime works, I have met seasoned visitors who distinguished themselves from less experienced non-fardados with this unofficial term *firmados*. This term is derived from the ubiquitous