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Jennifer Ross

Western Oregon University, jross08@wou.edu

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The Battle for the Legality and Legitimacy of Ayahuasca Religions in Brazil

By

Jennifer Ross
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Professor John L. Rector
@ Jennifer Ross

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Ayahuasca is a hallucinogenic concoction that is said to have been used for thousands of years by various indigenous tribes who lived throughout the upper Amazon and Andes. The term Ayahuasca is a Quechua word meaning ‘vine of the souls’ or ‘vine of the dead’. The most common method for making Ayahuasca combines the bark of the liana vine *Banisteriopsis Caapi* with the leaves of the *Psycotria Viridis*; water is added and the mixture is boiled down to a brown-colored “tea”.¹ The active ingredient in Ayahuasca that causes an altered state of consciousness is N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT). Prior to the discovery of Ayahuasca by non-indigenous cultures, Ayahuasca was primarily used in a ritual setting guided by a shaman (also called a *curandeiro*, *vegetalismo*, or *ayahuasquero*).

The purpose of using Ayahuasca was to heal both spiritual and physical ailments. The altered state of consciousness provided by the tea helped the shamans “see” the ailments of their people and by seeing them, be able to remove them. While there are still practicing shamans today, the process of syncretism that began when European religions, primarily Catholicism, began to interact with both indigenous and African religions, altering and expanding Ayahuasca use. This syncretism has led to, among other things, the creation of three established churches in Brazil that use Ayahuasca as a religious sacrament, while also considering themselves Christian. They are the Santo Daime, Barquinha, and União do Vegetal (UDV). The focus of this essay will

¹ Other names for Ayahuasca include hoasca, vegetal, yagé, and chá

be on the ways in which the relationship between these groups, as well as their differing strategies for gaining legitimacy, have both contributed to the successful legalization of the ritual use of Ayahuasca in Brazil, despite each group being drastically different in both form and function.

There are currently what I would describe as four waves of literature on Ayahuasca. The first wave that came out were travel narratives written by scientists who explored the Amazon. This began in the latter-half of the eighteenth century. The first known European to write of their encounter with Ayahuasca was the English Botanist Richard Spruce.² His first contact with Ayahuasca was in 1851 when he met with the Tukano Indians of Brazil.³ His next encounters with Ayahuasca were in 1858 when he observed both the Guahibo Indians of Colombia and Venezuela and the Zaparo Indians of Peru partaking of the same substance as the Tukano. He collected plant samples and brought them with him back to England.⁴ Spruce did not publish any of his findings until 1873 and in the interim a Peruvian geographer named Manuel Villavicencio published his experiences with Ayahuasca use in Ecuador in 1858.⁵ Another such travel guide was published in 1936 by Finnish scholar Dr. Rafael Karsten, who was attempting to give a thorough account of the peoples that he encountered in the Western Amazon.⁶ While each of these narratives is certainly colored by the perceptions of the narrators, they did spark an international interest in the scientific study of Ayahuasca. This led to scientific inquiries on the

²² Richard Spruce and Alfred Russell Wallace, *Notes of a Botanist on the Amazon & Andes: Being Records of Travel on the Amazon and Its Tributaries, the Trombetas, Rio Negro, Uaupes, Casiquiari, Pacimoni, Huallaga and Pastasa: As Also to the Cataracts of the Orinoco, Along the Eastern Side of the Andes of Peru and Ecuador, and the Shores of the Pacific, During the Years 1849-1864* (London: Macmillan, 1908).

³ Dennis McKenna, "Ayahuasca: An Ethnopharmacologic History," in *Sacred Vine of the Spirits: Ayahuasca* ed. Ralph Metzner (Rochester: Park Street Press, 2006).

⁴ *Ibid*, 44.

⁵ Manuel Villavicencio, *Geografia de la Republica Del Ecuador*, (New York: Impr. De R. Craighead, 1858).

⁶⁶ Rafael Karsten, *The Head-Hunters of Western Amazonas: The Life and Culture of the Jibaro Indians of Eastern Ecuador and Peru* (Helsingfors: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1935).

hallucinogenic effects of Ayahuasca in addition to the chemical and botanical make-up of the brew. These travel narratives also sparked the interest of readers who were seeking adventure.

The second wave of published sources on Ayahuasca came during the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and 1970s and explored the spiritual and mind-altering aspects of Ayahuasca. These accounts chronicled the effects of personal Ayahuasca use and were odysseys of travel through the mind and cosmos and back. Social and cultural change were important aspects of the countercultural movement. Many people were becoming disillusioned with society and sought answers to life's problems in other cultures and with different forms of altered states of consciousness. *The Psychedelic Reader* was published in the United States in 1965 and contained an entry about the history, use, and chemical make-up of Ayahuasca, with the intent of informing audiences about the use of various hallucinogens.⁷ Famed beat poet Allen Ginsberg wrote of his search for and experience with Ayahuasca entitled *The Yagé Letters* in 1963.⁸ These early countercultural works often took the form of very vivid and enticing personal narratives and they managed to grab the interest of a large number of people. Many retained an interest in Ayahuasca even after the countercultural movement declined, particularly scientists such as Terrence and Dennis McKenna, who studied the chemical and psychological effects of the substance.

In the 1960s and 1970s anthropologists also began to take an interest in Ayahuasca and some began life-long studies of it. Columbian anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna, whose works about Ayahuasca are widely cited, began writing of his Ayahuasca experiences in the early

⁷ Gunther Weil, Ralph Metzner, and Timothy Leary, eds., *The Psychedelic Reader* (New Hyde Park: University Books, 1965).

⁸ Allen Ginsberg, *The Yagé Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1963).

1970s.⁹ Another oft-cited anthropologist is Dr. Marlene Dobkin de Rios, who began her early career with *Visionary Vine: Hallucinogenic Healing in the Peruvian Amazon*, published in 1972.¹⁰ This book was an anthropological study of the use of Ayahuasca by shamans in the Amazon in Peru and sought to understand their culture, including how they used Ayahuasca to heal people. The focus on shamanism was a recurring theme during works of this time. At first there was more of a focus on indigenous cultures and the mystical aspects of shamanism at first. However, as time passed and more research was done, more people became aware of the degradation of the rainforests and poverty of the indigenous cultures, and more attention was paid to social and political issues than had previously been done. This came about as worldwide attention focused on the both the people of and the environmental degradation of the Amazon Rainforest. The tragedy of this region was especially highlighted by the murder of Amazonian environmentalist Chico Mendes in 1988. As Ayahuasca comes from the Amazon, and the Santo Daime is linked to environmental and human rights concerns related to the Amazon, the death of Chico Mendes brought international attention to them as well. This publicity led to the third wave of literature.

This wave of works focused primarily on the scientific and psychological aspects of Ayahuasca and its ritual use. This wave of literature was primarily produced by doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, chemists, and ethno-botanists. While less-prominent publicly than the second wave of literature, it served to keep the academic conversation about Ayahuasca open. In 1991 the UDV hosted a scientific conference on “hoasca” (that is their term for

⁹ Luis Eduardo Luna “Ten Poems on a Sunday Afternoon” in *Ayahuasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon’s Sacred Vine* eds. Luis Eduardo Luna and Steven White (Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, 2000), 172-177.

¹⁰ Marlene Dobkin de Rios, *Visionary Vine: Hallucinogenic Healing in the Peruvian Amazon*. (Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, 1984).

Ayahuasca).¹¹ Their intent was for scientists who had previously published work on Ayahuasca to work collaboratively on a study. Their goal was to prove that Ayahuasca was not harmful. While the Brazilian government had re-legalized Ayahuasca in 1986 there were still concerns by the government and the general public over the validity and safety of its use. This led to complaints being filed with the government and subsequent studies being done trying to definitively decide the issue.¹² The UDV wanted an end to this and saw science as a way to fully legitimize their claim. What was eventually published was the Hoasca Project, which through the study of UDV members of ten years or more, showed no harmful physical side effects on Ayahuasca users, and in fact showed that the users were all healthy, happy human beings that were productive and caring members of society.¹³ As scholarship on Ayahuasca expanded, through such scientists as Terrence and Dennis McKenna, Ralph Metzner, and Charles Grob, and the debate over Ayahuasca became much more political, a wider variety of publications emerged, which leads to the fourth wave of literature.

The fourth wave of literature began during the 1990s and continues into the present day (2012). A large amount of international attention has been paid to Ayahuasca, particularly as Brazil has recognized its ritual use as legal. In addition, the UDV and the Santo Daime are now both international religions and legal battles over the use of Ayahuasca have occurred in France, Canada, Holland, Spain, and the United States. The fourth wave of literature focuses on the history, legality of, and culture surrounding Ayahuasca religions. While I would not classify

¹¹ Dennis McKenna, "An Unusual Experience with 'Hoasca': A Lesson from the Teacher" in *Ayahuasca Reader: Encounters with the Amazon's Sacred Vine* eds. Luis Eduardo Luna and Steven White (Santa Fe: Synergetic Press, 2000), 154.

¹² Domingos Bernardo Gialluisi da Silva Sá, "Ayahuasca: The Consciousness of Expansion," in *Ayahuasca Religions: A Comprehensive Bibliography and Critical Essays* Trans. Matthew Meyer, (Santa Cruz: MAPS Publishing, 2008).

¹³ Dennis McKenna, "The Hoasca Project: Proposal for a Biomedical Investigation of Ayahuasca," MAPS Website, Internet Accessed on 5 October 2012. <http://www.maps.org/news-letters/v03n3/03317aya.html>.

Ayahuasca as something that everyone knows about, I would classify it as a growing field of inquiry which now has a much more inter-disciplinary approach, as well as increasing relevance now that many governments worldwide are seeking new drug policies and are being confronted by groups seeking to use Ayahuasca within their borders. Brazil serves as an example of successful relations between cultural groups and the state in implementing drug policies.

With worldwide attention now on the debate over Ayahuasca use, and the Brazilian government's landmark recognition of the legitimacy of Ayahuasca religions by completely legalizing the ritual use of Ayahuasca, a veritable explosion of works on Ayahuasca have emerged. Not only did Brazil illustrate religious tolerance, they also approved of a "drug" during a time of high anti-drug sentiment. In a sense, they redefined Ayahuasca by changing it from a drug to a sacrament. Integral to this success were the actions of the UDV and Santo Daime (and to a lesser extent the Barquinha), open-minded government officials, dedicated scientists, and the intriguing nature of Ayahuasca itself. How did they do it? How does Ayahuasca continue to retain its legal status despite random bits of opposition? How have the Ayahuasca religions managed to become international? What is the significance of these religions? What are the international ramifications of the spread of these religions? These are some of the questions that the most recent scholarship attempts to answer.

At the forefront of Brazilian scholarship are Dr. Beatriz Labate and Dr. Edward MacRae. Their compilation entitled *Ayahuasca, Ritual, and Religion in Brazil* gives enormous insights into the workings and theologies of the Ayahuasca churches as well as their histories.¹⁴ It also provides both political and cultural contexts for their development. Labate also collaborated with

¹⁴ Beatriz Labate and Edward Macrae eds., *Ayahuasca, Ritual, and Religion in Brazil* (London:Equinox Publishing, 2010).

Isabel de Rose and Rafael dos Santos in order to compile a working bibliography in multiple languages for those interested in studying or researching Ayahuasca.¹⁵ In addition, Labate has been responsible for translating numerous Brazilian works on Ayahuasca into other languages, such as English, and thus making them more widely available for study. While greatly important in the academic and social studies of Ayahuasca, Labate and MacRae have not been able to fully explore many pertinent issues, such as the perspective of the mestizo healers and indigenous shamans and the change that the Ayahuasca religions may have caused in their lives. Though they do give a nod to the syncretic aspects of the Ayahuasca religions, they do not fully detail the struggles and experiences of indigenous and mestizo shamans and healers. In addition, there is much more detailed information about the Santo Daime, likely due to the fact that they have a more open relationship with non-members than do the UDV, and the membership of the Barquinha is very small. This is a recurring problem in the literature written about Ayahuasca; it always seems to focus on one religion over the others, which in itself isn't problematic; topical studies can be very useful. What becomes an issue is the way in which the religions that are not the focus of the article are side-lined and biases are often clear. This does not allow for a complete picture of the ways in which the groups are related to each other, both in opposition and in tandem. They hardly exist within a vacuum, but the discussions of them often leave that impression.

An example of this phenomenon is anthropologist Titti Schmidt's published doctoral thesis *Morality as Practice: The Santo Daime, an Eco-Religious Movement in the Amazonian*

¹⁵ Beatriz Labate, Isabel de Rose, Rafael dos Santos eds., *Ayahuasca Religions: A Comprehensive Bibliography and Critical Essays* Trans. Matthew Meyer, (Santa Cruz: MAPS Publishing, 2008).

Rainforest.¹⁶ This book gives an excellent background on the Santo Daime and the impoverished rubber tappers of the Amazon and their battles with big business and the Brazilian government. It is one of the few sources that give a tentative historical context for the formation of the Santo Daime, not only by discussing the religious pluralism of Brazil but by also discussing the experience of rubber tappers in the Amazon. However, the UDV is glossed over and are not mentioned in the legal battle for the legalization of Ayahuasca, which is a huge oversight. Schmidt's book was meticulously researched so it is doubtful that she was unaware of the UDV's input. There is some friction between certain branches of the Santo Daime (the CEFLURIS) and the UDV, perhaps this was the reason she failed to fully explore their import. This type of partisanship directly affects the ways in which the Ayahuasca religions are written about, particularly the UDV who are often represented as rigid and uptight.

Combined with the factionalism present in the writings about the Ayahuasca religions, there are no written works by historians regarding them. While numerous authors attempt to give some sort of historical background for their discussion, there are many gaps in the study of these groups. Historical background is not the same as historical context. This paper will show the ways in which the UDV, Santo Daime, and Barquinha are all linked, despite their differences. They each developed strategies for legitimizing themselves, and while sometimes at odds, they each owe part of their success to the other groups. The UDV are very circumspect in their nature, very ordered, and have provided the legal and research means that have proven both the safety of Ayahuasca as well as the benefits it can have when used in a ritual context. The Santo Daime, particularly the CEFLURIS branch have been far more public, and although more controversial, have managed to persuade both politicians and famous people to join their ranks and support

¹⁶ Titti Schmidt, *Morality as Practice: The Santo Daime, an Eco-Religious Movement in the Amazonian Rainforest*. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007.

them. They have also linked themselves to international environmental NGO's. The Barquinha are often lost between the two other religions due to their small size and owe much to the other groups, but have also worked in their own way to support their cause. In addition to illustrating the ways in which the three groups are symbiotically connected, a brief section regarding the politics of 1980s in Brazil will be provided in order to provide context for how these religions were able to establish their legitimacy.

It should be noted that due to language barriers and the nascence of this topic as part of a historical discussion, this context should be taken as preliminary. This is new territory; rubber tapping and migration of peoples into the Amazon are fairly well-covered, but there is less information about what was going on politically and culturally at the time. There is nothing that places the formation of the first two Ayahuasca religions in the context of the Vargas regime, during which time they were formed. Neither do any accounts place the UDV's formation and development in the context of the military dictatorship that began in 1964. While those would all serve as good starting points for historical inquiry, my own research will focus on Brazilian politics in the 1980s, which is a crucial point in the process by which Ayahuasca religions sought to achieve and maintain their legality, right in the middle of the so-called war on drugs. As there is nothing like this published nor an overwhelming amount of primary source documents, the context provided at this time can only be general and is provided by piecing together a variety of sources on the general state of affairs in Brazil at that time. More research will be needed in order to be able to provide a full explanation for the reasons that each of these religions developed as they did, as well as how they each specifically interacted with the public and the government in their quest for legitimacy.

To begin there will be a brief overview of religion in Brazil and a brief description of the political situation in Brazil during the 1980s, followed by a description of the ban placed on Ayahuasca by the Brazilian government in 1985.

Religion in Brazil is both pluralistic and “syncretic.” From the beginnings of European contact with the peoples of Brazil a mixing of cultures and religions began, which was compounded by the large-scale importation of African slaves which followed. Tenets and imagery from Catholicism were mixed with African and Indigenous beliefs and rituals. The very nature of Catholicism in Brazil is itself “syncretic”.¹⁷ However, it is important to note that not all religions were treated equally. Under various governments, certain religions have been valued over others, with Afro-Brazilian religions being one of the most persecuted religions in Brazil. Any type of “witchcraft” or “sorcery” was frowned upon by the government and often subject to repression. Article 157 of the constitution of 1890 prohibited the “practice of spiritism, magic, and its sorceries, the use of talismans and cartomancy to arouse sentiments of hate and love, the promise to cure illnesses, curable and not curable; in sum, to fascinate and subjugate public belief.”¹⁸ This persecution has shaped the development of many religions, including those involving Ayahuasca, who have had to privilege certain rituals over others, at least publicly.

Another aspect of the constitution of 1890 was that it created a Brazilian republic with no official state religion. While Brazil was open to religious plurality, there were definitely distinctions being made between “good” and “bad” religions, which often had the effect of driving certain religions underground. And while the majority of the people of Brazil to this day

¹⁷ Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs: Resources on Faith, Ethics, and Public Life, “Brazil” Internet Accessed 25 October 2012. <berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/resources/countries/brazil>

¹⁸ Paul C. Johnson, *Secrets, Gossip, and Gods: The Transformation of Brazilian Candomblé*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 82-83.

claim to be Catholic, this does not prevent them from participating in other religions.¹⁹ There is a certain fluidity present but it is off-set by public perceptions of what are “acceptable” religions.

The twentieth century has seen the rise of Afro-Brazilian, Pentecostal, Spiritist, and Ayahuasca religions, which have flourished particularly after the Liberation Theology of the Catholic Church declined in the 1970s and 1980s. While there are many theories for the reason for the influx and creation of new religions but to date there has not been a definitive answer, perhaps because scholars are looking for a singular answer to a complex question. Some scholars see the rise of other churches and religions as a response to social issues, such as economic and social inequality and poverty that fail to be addressed by the state. However, this does not account for the fact that people that are not impoverished also participate in these alternate religions. The UDV, for example, is comprised of mainly upper middle-class members. Others see the rise of religious movements as a response to the increasingly urban and industrial lifestyle that people are facing.²⁰ Due to these complexities, and the linking of religion to social issues, it has often been difficult to separate the two.²¹ This makes studying them difficult. However, no matter the cause or method, there is a consensus that religion in Brazil is multi-faceted and complex, with alternate religions to Catholicism on the rise. The three Ayahuasca religions themselves are comprised of indigenous, Afro-Brazilian, Kardecist, and Catholic influences, although each of the three religions varies in the degree of each of these influences as well as the degree to which they will acknowledge them; the UDV have distanced themselves from their Afro-Brazilian and indigenous roots, whereas the Barquinha have not.

¹⁹ Edward Macrae, “The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca by Three Brazilian Religions,” In *Drug Use and Cultural Contexts ‘Beyond the West’: Tradition, Change, and Post-Colonialism*, eds. Ross Coomber and Nigel South, (London: Free Association Books, 2004), 28.

²⁰ Sidney M. Greenfield, “Population Growth, Industrialization, and the Proliferation of Syncretized Religions in Brazil,” in *Reinventing Religions: Syncretism and Transformation in Africa and the Americas*, eds. Sidney M. Greenfield and André Droogers (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2001), 55-70.

²¹ Titti Schmidt, *Morality as Practice*, 38-41.

1985 marked the end of the military dictatorship in Brazil that had been in place since 1964. The rise of social movements in the 1970s contributed greatly to the decline of the dictatorship. The liberalization of policies under President Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979) also helped.²² There were many big political issues present at this time such as violence, poverty, neo-liberal economic reforms, inflation, unemployment, the rise of grass-roots social movements and a new middle class, how to conduct elections, the list goes on. Brazil was in its first stages of becoming a democracy, and it still had a leftover legacy of corrupt politicians, a clientelistic political system, a lingering military influence, and huge economic problems.²³ This was not an easy time in Brazil. However, it was also a time of the opening up of the political system in ways that it had not been before. 1985 is also the year that saw Ayahuasca being banned by the Brazilian government. While more research is needed to gauge just how the Ayahuasca religions benefitted from the burgeoning democracy in Brazil or from the clientelistic political system, it is safe to say that they certainly managed to work within the complex system of Brazilian politics to achieve and maintain their legitimacy in the eyes of the government. The following is a chronicle of the religions themselves as well as the battle they faced in proving their legitimacy.

The first of the new Ayahuasca religions to form was that of the Santo Daime, which was founded in Acre in 1930 by a former rubber tapper named Raimundo Irineu Serra (Mestre Irineu). He had come into contact with Ayahuasca from a mestizo healer while working in the Amazon in the 1910s.²⁴ When he formed his religion, Mestre Irineu was a corporal in the Territorial Guard. Prior to this he had also worked as a civil servant for the Border

²² Ibid, 20.

²³ Alfred P. Montero, *Brazilian Politics: Reforming a Democratic State and Changing the World*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005).

²⁴ Edward Macrae, "The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca by Three Brazilian Religions," 28.

Commission.²⁵ These governmental connections, combined with his good works for the community, and his outgoing, positive personality, brought Mestre Irineu to the attention of both the poor and elites of his community. His influence was used to garner votes for various candidates and his healing skills were sought out by all classes of society. He was widely respected by all and due to his political influence, was granted a plot of land in the 1940s by Governor Guimard dos Santos, where he built his Alto Santo temple, which he named Centro de Iluminacao Crista Luz Universal (CICLU), or The Center of Enlightening Christian Universal Light.²⁶ This name was a strategic move as it served to highlight the Christian aspect of the religion, despite its close ties to Afro-Brazilian and indigenous rituals. This reflects an attempt to deflect negative attitudes toward those religions and highlight the role of Christianity in the church.

Mestre Irineu's close working relationship with politicians and community development provided an example for the other Ayahuasca religions of the ways in which political relationships and community could benefit both the Ayahuasca churches and the public at large. This influence can be clearly seen from the 1980s onward in the UDV's relationship with the government, and community works. In contrast to the other Ayahuasca using groups however, their community works clearly distanced themselves from any form of healing. In contrast to the Santo Daime and Barquinha, which embrace their syncretic roots in their rituals, the UDV has distanced itself from them as one of their strategies for legitimacy.

²⁵ Edward MacRae, *Guided by the Moon: Shamanism and the Ritual Use of Ayahuasca in the Santo Daime Religion of Brazil*. Ebook. Internet Accessed 15 November 2012.
<<http://www.neip.info/downloads/edward/acks.htm>>

²⁶ Ibid, "Chapter 3," 2.

When Mestre Irineu died in 1971, his church split, with his widow claiming the right to the Alto Santo line, and a disciple of his named Sebastião Motta de Mello (Padrinho Sebastião), creating the Centro Ectectico Fluente Luz Universal (CEFLURIS) branch of the Santo Daime, which today is the most influential of the that line.²⁷ It is also the most public and controversial of the Ayahuasca religions, which as we have seen, led to the ban on Ayahuasca.

Padrinho Sebastião was headquartered in a commune known as Colônia Cinco Mil. His attitude toward newcomers was one of openness, even toward “hippies” who came seeking adventure. In fact, it was these “hippies” that introduced Padrinho Sebastião to marijuana, which he adopted into his religious rituals. The use of marijuana kept negative attention on the group. However, Sebastião was not daunted at this time (although he later banned marijuana, perhaps due to outside pressure). He also encouraged the “hippies” to expand and create centers outside of the Amazon. These new members brought in more money and more converts. However, as the movement became urban, authorities became even more concerned about CEFLURIS.²⁸ The Santo Daime were seen as unruly and disreputable, which is perhaps encouraged the UDV’s to maintain its orderly, circumspect society, along with Mestre Gabriel’s own conservative teachings on the subject. Nevertheless, while controversial, open membership and urbanization were successful strategies for CEFLURIS, for they grew and gained power, which is important if a group needs to have any clout and subsequently be able to maintain itself despite strong external pressures.

In 1980 Sebastião moved farther into the Amazon to a place called Rio de Ouro and started another commune there, but was forced to leave when landowners arrived and claimed

²⁷ Ibid, “Chapter 3,” 4.

²⁸ Titti Schmidt, *Morality as Practice*, 59-60.

rights to the land. He finally settled in the Céu do Mapiá in 1983, where CEFLURIS is still headquartered.²⁹ While controversial to some, the Céu do Mapiá also became a hot-spot for people seeking a mind-altering experience in the Brazilian Amazon. In the 1980s several Brazilian celebrities visited and became very public converts.³⁰

The conflicts over land and rights within the Amazon, comingled with the death of Chico Mendes in 1988 and the international attention it brought, convinced Padrinho Sebastião to link his movement with environmental NGO's. This decision should not be taken as cynical; as Padrinho Sebastião had first-hand experience with both the degradation of the rainforest and the violence that was employed against its various peoples. Although it was clearly a strategic move, the CEFLURIS were affected by all of the problems they were fighting against. Therefore, the Céu do Mapiá, under the leadership of Padrinho Sebastiao's son, Padrinho Alfredo,³¹ is now linked with environmental preserves, which have been funded by both Brazilian and international agencies, and has created a separate department, known as IDA, which oversees environmental projects and operations. IDA is now considered an NGO in its own right.³² The 1992 Earth Summit, which took place in Brazil, saw the Céu do Mapiá become "the center of a million-acre ecological preserve, with the help of the Friends of the Amazon."³³ This international attention to the environment has enabled the CEFLURIS church to expand internationally, in addition to garnering funding.³⁴ The environmental orientation of CEFLURIS was another intelligent strategy. It not only expanded the Santo Daime Church, it helped to save

²⁹ Ibid, 56-57.

³⁰ Marlene Dobkin de Rios, *A Hallucinogenic Tea, Laced with Controversy*, (Westport: Praeger, 2008), 129.

³¹ Ibid, 60-61.

³² Ibid, 66.

³³ Marlene Dobkin de Rios, *A Hallucinogenic Tea, Laced with Controversy*, 131.

³⁴ Ibid, 62.

parts of the rainforest from destruction. It also allowed the group to cultivate its own supply of Ayahuasca, which eliminated the need to go into the rainforest and cut it down.³⁵

The Céu do Mapiá is known worldwide as a healing community, and also provides free health care to its neighboring communities.³⁶ Environmental activism, taking care of community, and accepting all-comers are examples of the good works and cooperation that Mestre Irineu originally developed, though it took the CEFLURIS a couple of decades to fulfill this mission. There are now believed to be around 9,000 members of Santo Daime in Brazil. The number of members abroad is unknown but the Santo Daime has churches in twenty-three countries.³⁷ The ban on Ayahuasca clearly stimulated the CEFLURIS to develop very effective national and global public relations strategies.

The second line of Ayahuasca religions was formed was in 1945 in Acre by Daniel Pereira de Mattos (Frei Daniel), a former sailor who named it the Barquinha (“Little Boat”).³⁸ Frei Daniel was a former disciple of Mestre Irineu. The Barquinha has the smallest membership of all of the Ayahuasca religions, and at the time of Frei Daniel’s death in 1958, there were only about 500 members. However, as with the other Ayahuasca religions, after the death of its founder, the Barquinha membership split and spread. There are now believed to be about 1,000 members, all located in Brazil.³⁹ Due to its small size, the Barquinha are not major players in the larger struggle for the legitimacy of Ayahuasca religions, although they certainly benefit from it. However, they do have their own strategy for survival. They provide free healing for members of

³⁵ Edward MacRae, “The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca by Three Brazilian Religions,” 33-34.

³⁶ Titti Schmidt, *Morality as Practice*, 65-66.

³⁷ Beatriz Labate, Edward MacRae, and Sandra Goulart, “Brazilian Ayahuasca Religions in Perspective,” In *Ayahuasca, Ritual, and Religion in Brazil*, eds. Beatriz Labate and Edward MacRae, (London:Equinox Publishing, 2010), 15.

³⁸ Wladimir Sena Araújo, “The Barquinha: Symbolic Space of a Cosmology in the Making,” in *Ayahuasca, Ritual, and Religion in Brazil*, eds. Beatriz Labate and Edward MacRae, (London:Equinox Publishing, 2010), 73.

³⁹ Edward Macrae, “The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca by Three Brazilian Religions,” 34.

their communities, whether members of the church or not. In this way they are in accordance with the other Ayahuasca religions who also foster good works as part of both their philosophy and efforts to gain legitimacy. They also opened up a school in 1991, in conjunction with the state's ministry of education and culture.⁴⁰ They present themselves as productive members of society who contribute to their community, much like the other two Ayahuasca religions, although they all vary in their interpretation of community and service.

The UDV was formally created on July 22, 1961 by José Gabriel da Costa (Mestre Gabriel) in the region of Guaporé (modern day Rondônia).⁴¹ Mestre Gabriel was an itinerant rubber tapper, born in Bahia in 1922, that came into contact with Ayahuasca while working in the Amazon in 1959.⁴² He was first given the tea by a mestizo shaman. After taking the tea several times Mestre Gabriel formed what he at first called the União do Vegetal (Union of the Vegetable). Now famous for their dedication to science, early on Mestre Gabriel connected the UDV to science by placing King Solomon in a central role in its founding myths. In Judeo-Christian belief King Solomon represents science and wisdom. Science has been repeatedly stressed by the UDV as a way to legitimate the use of Ayahuasca, and in 1986 they formed a Medical Scientific Department (DEMEC) as a means to this end.⁴³ Western society has been increasingly dominated by an emphasis on science as the ultimate credible way to prove the validity a drug or medical procedure. The studies conducted on Ayahuasca have proven the legitimacy of the safety of Ayahuasca use in a ritual context. In this way, Mestre Gabriel

⁴⁰ Sá, "Ayahuasca: The Consciousness of Expansion," 164.

⁴¹ Sérgio Brissac, "In the Light of Hoasca: An Approach to the Religious Experience of Participants of the União do Vegetal," In *Ayahuasca Religions: A Comprehensive Bibliography and Critical Essays* Eds. Beatriz Labate and Edward Macrae, Trans. Matthew Meyer, (Santa Cruz: MAPS Publishing, 2008), 135.

⁴² Edward Macrae, "The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca by Three Brazilian Religions," 36.

⁴³ Sandra Goulart, "Religious Matrices of the União do Vegetal," in *Ayahuasca, Ritual, and Religion in Brazil*, eds. Beatriz Labate and Edward MacRae, (London:Equinox Publishing, 2010), 115.

illustrated a sophisticated understanding of what his church would need in order to survive popular criticism, and his followers have successfully used science to their advantage.

As membership in the UDV grew Mestre Gabriel moved his headquarters to Porto Velho.⁴⁴ In 1967 he was arrested by local police for practicing his religious ceremonies. At this point in time Ayahuasca religions were persecuted and viewed with suspicion, due to their connection with Afro-Brazilian and indigenous rituals. In addition, their use of the Ayahuasca led to the public perception that they were all drug addicts. Upon the arrest of Mestre Gabriel, his disciples published a newspaper article in Alto Madeira which attempted to explain the arrest of Mestre Gabriel and the tenets of the UDV. After Mestre Gabriel's arrest the UDV leaders began to formalize their religion, interestingly, upon the advice of the police chief. In 1970 the group was officially recognized as a "legal entity."⁴⁵ This was also the point in time that the UDV added the term "Spiritist Center" to their official title, Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal. This was a way to distance themselves from Afro-Brazilian and indigenous religions by allying their name with Kardecist Spiritism, which is a European religion.⁴⁶ It is clear that early on the UDV was very conscious of its public image and sought legal as well as social acceptance as part of its quest for legitimacy.

After the death of Mestre Gabriel in 1971, the UDV split, which had the effect of spreading the religion into more regions of Brazil. Interestingly, the UDV will only recognize churches that go through their main headquarters first. Within a decade the UDV had spread to all areas of Brazil and become a primarily middle-class urban religion with a headquarters in

⁴⁴ Sandra Goulart, 107.

⁴⁵ Beatriz Labate, B. Anderson, and M. Meyer, "1960's Media Coverage of Ayahuasca and the UDV: Notes on the Article 'Na Selva, um Místico Vende o Sonho' (1968). December 3, 2008, *Erowid.org* Internet Accessed October 10, 2012 www.erowid.org/chemicals/ayahuasca/ayahuasca_info13.shtml.

⁴⁶ Sandra Goulart, "Religious Matrices of the União do Vegetal," 114.

Brasília. As it grew, its leaders created several different departments in their structure. They eventually developed a more circumspect and guarded relationship with the public and the press than the CEFLURIS, in order to separate themselves from CEFLURIS, which was often criticized publicly by television and journal articles in the 1980s.⁴⁷

The creation of four departments in charge of different aspects of its functions is also part of a larger strategy of the UDV, which is the creation of an ordered system capable of handling any issues that come its way. In addition to the Medical-Scientific Department, they have a Legal Department, a Charity Department, and a Department of Memory and Documentation.⁴⁸ This sense of order and hierarchy is also extended into the ranks of its members. There are certain channels that one has to go through in order to rise in rank within the church. In addition, moral codes are enforced; alcohol, tobacco, and other “illicit” drug use are forbidden, adultery is cause for expulsion, respect for the law is paramount, and in order to achieve the rank of Mestre one has to be married. The hoasca rituals themselves are also carried out in an ordered manner, with the Mestre drinking first, and then passing the drink around to all who are participating. The same ritual is acted out each time.⁴⁹ This type of orderliness and hierarchy are what has a tendency to alienate certain individuals and place the UDV at odds with the other churches, which are more open and free-flowing. The UDV is also more selective in its membership and makes a clear distinction between its religions and the other Ayahuasca using groups.⁵⁰ This strict orderliness not only follows Mestre Gabriel’s teachings, it is also what resonates so well with the government and helps to create an atmosphere of respectability around the religions.

⁴⁷ Titti Schmidt, *Morality as Practice*, 60.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 115.

⁴⁹ Sérgio Brissac, “In the Light of Hoasca: An Approach to the Religious Experiences of Participants of the União do Vegetal,” In *Ayahuasca, Ritual, and Religion in Brazil*, eds. Beatriz Labate and Edward MacRae, (London:Equinox Publishing, 2010), 146-147.

⁵⁰ Edward MacRae, “The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca by Three Brazilian Religions,” 37-38.

Numerous sources, including expert Marlene Dobkin de Rios have commented upon the “strong value system of family and community” present in the UDV.⁵¹ The UDV has perhaps earned a reputation for being uptight, but many people that mention being allowed into their inner sanctum have positive things to say. Others, however, are off-put. This is just another reflection on the factionalism that shapes perceptions of the Ayahuasca religions and the literature that is produced. Without a doubt the legal and research departments of the UDV have been integral in both maintaining the legality of Ayahuasca but also in legitimating it through scientific studies, regardless of public perceptions of their structure.

Like the CEFLURIS, the UDV has also linked itself to environmental concerns. It formed an NGO called the New Enchantment Ecological Development Association, which supports preservation of the rainforest.⁵² Like the CEFLURIS, the UDV has its own land on which members cultivate Ayahuasca in order to avoid deforestation of the rainforest.⁵³ Due in part to this, the UDV is also an international religion with churches in the United States, Europe, and Asia. They also foster numerous charitable works and in 1999 were granted the status of a Public Utility by the government. This is an honor that has to be re-achieved every year and is dedicated to organizations that provide valuable charitable services.⁵⁴

With this historical backdrop in mind, now a discussion of the event that sparked a new era in the religious, political, and strategic efforts of the Ayahuasca religions and their relationship to the government and the general public. This part of the narrative begins with the leader of the CEFLURIS branch of the Santo Daime’s leader Padrinho Sebastião and the

⁵¹ Marlene Dobkin de Rios, *A Hallucinogenic Tea*, 119.

⁵² Beatriz Labate, Edward MacRae, and Sandra Goulart, “Brazilian Ayahuasca Religions in Perspective,” 17.

⁵³ Edward MacRae, “The Ritual Use of Ayahuasca by Three Brazilian Religions,” 39.

⁵⁴ “Charity Work of the Center,” Official Brazilian UDV Website Internet Accessed 15 October 2012 <http://www.udv.org.br/Charity+Work+of+the+Center/The+Goog+We+Do/135/>.

negative publicity he garnered during the 1980s, for this is where things really came to a head. It also highlighted the need for adaptive strategies by the churches if they wanted to continue with their rituals.

On September 30, 1981, Eder Candido Silva, a member of the Santo Daime church, was arrested for possession of Cannabis.⁵⁵ The CEFLURIS branch of the Santo Daime, which was led by Padrinho Sebastião, used marijuana as part of their religious rituals and referred to it as Santa Maria.⁵⁶ The day after Silva's arrest, the federal police raided the group's Colônia Cinco Mil compound and confiscated "hemp plants, seeds, and leaves".⁵⁷ As a consequence, the government began persecuting Ayahuasca religions, regardless of whether or not they included marijuana in their ceremonies. While previously held in low regard and subject only to local police or governmental interference, as the Ayahuasca religions became more urban and visible, the negative attention they garnered brought the national government into the picture. According to Domingos Bernardo Gialluisi Da Sá, who was a government official in charge of investigating Ayahuasca religions, this arrest and subsequent raid, directly led to the placing of *Banisteriopsis Caapi* on DIMED's (Division of Medications) list of forbidden substances.⁵⁸ This in turn placed the UDV at odds with CEFLURIS as this was exactly the type of negative attention that the UDV did not want, particularly as the statutes of the UDV expressly forbade the use of illicit substances.

To counteract the ban, the UDV had its lawyer present the CONFEN with a petition asking them to remove *Banisteriopsis caapi* from its list of forbidden substances. The UDV also

⁵⁵ Sá, "Ayahuasca: The Consciousness of Expansion," 174.

⁵⁶ Titti Schmidt, *Morality as Practice*, 56.

⁵⁷ Sá, "Ayahuasca: The Consciousness of Expansion," 174.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 174.

refrained from using Ayahuasca until the government re-legalized it in 1986.⁵⁹ This governmental legitimization of Ayahuasca served to attract more members to the Ayahuasca religions.⁶⁰ In the meantime, the UDV and the CEFLURIS both worked with the governmental study group set up by CONFEN to study both Ayahuasca and the groups who partook of it. The study found that there were no harmful effects of the use of Ayahuasca in a ritual setting, however they reserved the right to reopen an investigation if the need arose.⁶¹ In fact, Sá in particular, found both groups warm and welcoming. He also partook of the Ayahuasca himself in order to gauge its effects. Overall Sá's impression of the groups was positive and he has written numerous works attempting to shed a positive light on the Ayahuasca religions.⁶²

The governmental certification process is amazing by the standards of the United States. In Brazil, a government official not only partook of an "illicit" substance, but spoke positively of groups of people who at that time were perceived as outside of the societal norms. It is hard to imagine this happening in the United States. This type of open-mindedness and cooperation between organizations and the government is astounding. Perhaps the members of Ayahuasca religions were just lucky and found the perfect policy window through which to advance their cause. Or perhaps this exemplifies the ways in which politics, religion, and social movements in Brazil are hard to separate. In any event, the certification process worked out well for supporters of Ayahuasca religions. For although there were several recurrent investigations into the use of Ayahuasca, in 2006 the Brazilian government officially sanctioned the use of Ayahuasca, provided it was used in a ritual context. Part of this success was due to the UDV's close working

⁵⁹ Edson Soares and Christina de Moura, "Development and Organizational Goals of the União do Vegetal," eds. Beatriz Labate and Henrik Jungaberle, In *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca*, (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011), 280.

⁶⁰ Lisa Maria Madera, "Visions of Christ in the Amazon: The Gospel According to Ayahuasca and Santo Daime," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* Vol. 3 No. 1 (2009), 87.

⁶¹ Ibid, 281.

⁶² Sá, "Ayahuasca: The Consciousness of Expansion," 161-189.

relationship with the government as well as its promotion of scientific studies. However, the CEFLURIS began to foster positive relations with the government as well and began to attempt to change their somewhat negative public image. The legal battle over Ayahuasca caused the related religions to come up with adaptive strategies for legitimization and keeping the use of Ayahuasca legal. In this battle one group, the UDV, already had systems in place for achieving legitimacy and simply refined their techniques, while another, the CEFLURIS, had to redefine its public image, while yet another, the Barquinha, had to contend with a battle essentially fought out by the two other groups.

As can be seen, although they differ in structure and presentation, the Ayahuasca religions all have strategies that are designed to legitimize themselves and the ban on Ayahuasca definitely impacted these strategies. This is not to say that these groups do not have an honest belief in their cause or their religion; merely that they have developed fairly sophisticated methods for adaptation and survival. What is remarkable is that at the core of these three religions can be seen much of the original founders' intent regarding good works, community, and political relationships, although perhaps in a modified form. It seems that the church leaders have attempted to stay true to form in a changing society, and have found no small measure of success. A strong argument could be made that the founders had an intrinsic understanding of the fundamentals of Brazilian society with all of its complexities and foibles and Ayahuasca religions should be seen as an important part of the uniquely Brazilian cultural experience. This is certainly the view of the Ayahuasca religions themselves who according to a report by Beatriz

Labate have recently, with the cooperation of Congresswoman Perpétua Almeida, requested that Ayahuasca be considered as an “intangible cultural heritage in Brazil.”⁶³

What the struggle for legitimacy by the Ayahuasca religions of Brazil illustrates is multi-fold. While originally conceived of as a fight for religious rights, the attempt to have Ayahuasca considered part of Brazil’s cultural heritage, particularly when placed in the context of the struggles of the Amazonian peoples, places this battle in the context of human rights. Numerous authors point to the ways in which the redefinition of what is considered an “illicit” drug has come about through this fight, as well as the fact that Brazil’s collaborative work with the Ayahuasca religions can serve as a model for countries to follow in their own struggles. The Ayahuasca-based religions all point to a redefinition of the war on drugs, all of which is certainly true and certainly important. However, this is only one aspect of the importance of the battle for legitimacy that these religions faced. Perhaps with this new move toward a human rights focus, the literature on Ayahuasca can be expanded to include a larger focus than just that of drugs and drug policy. The intersection of so many aspects of Brazilian society are at play in the narrative of Ayahuasca religions.

This paper has explored the ways in which the struggles for the legitimacy of Ayahuasca religions reflect the ways in which persecuted peoples can adapt to and resist the forces around them. Racism and religious persecution are inextricably linked in the strategies employed by the UDV and the Santo Daime. The UDV sought to distance itself from its multi-cultural roots, and the CEFLURIS branch of the Santo Daime limited activities that they thought were vital to their religion i.e. the use of Santa Maria, which was not granted the same privilege as Ayahuasca. The

⁶³ Beatriz Labate, “Legislative Hearings Discuss Attempt to Ban the Use of Ayahuasca in Brazil,” *Erowid.org* Internet Accessed 24 October 2012 http://www.erowid.org/chemicals/ayahuasca/ayahuasca_law26.shtml.

attempt to have Ayahuasca listed as a cultural heritage is supported by academic works being published that focus on either the legalization and internationalization of the Ayahuasca religions or on their anthropological origin. Much attention is paid to current political issues. These are important areas of inquiry and certainly deserve attention, but a more well-rounded approach could serve to legitimize the process even more, particularly by placing these groups into the larger picture of Brazilian religion and society, whose complexity and richness they so aptly reflect.

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