

Book Review

LABATE, Beatriz Caiuby

2004 *A reinvenção do uso da ayahuasca nos centros urbanos*. [The reinvention of the use of Ayahuasca in urban centers.] São Paulo: Mercado das Letras/Fapesp. 535 pp. In Portuguese.

By Marcelo Ayres Camurçaⁱ

Translation revised by Christian Frenopoulo

In the preface to their book,ⁱⁱ the sociologists of religion, G. Filoramo and C. Prandi, point out that there is a process currently underway of an infinite multiplication of studies of religions, with a consequent specialization and continuous expansion. The work of the anthropologist Beatriz Caiuby Labate, in the Brazilian context, seems to confirm the position of the two authors. In the book reviewed here, *The reinvention of the use of Ayahuasca in urban centers*, as well as in her previous one, *The ritual use of Ayahuasca* (co-edited with Wladimir Sena Araújo), she shows us in vivid colors, both a relatively unknown reality that emerges from her research, as well as the emergence of an academic area of studies: the '*Brazilian Ayahuasqueiro field*,' the Ayahuasca Religions and the '*Ayahuasqueiro network*.' The neologism that the author introduces –as a category that promises to find a place in the anthropology of religion– derives from *Ayahuasca*, a word from the Quechua language, which designates a potion, the decoction of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* liana and the *Psychotria viridis* leaf, which produces the chemical substance dimethyl tryptamine (DMT) that acts as a neurotransmitter on the Central Nervous System, leading to visions and trances, interpreted as a religious or spiritualized experience.

It is a psychoactive plant used by healers, shamans and "*vegetalistas*," in the South American indigenous context. In Brazil, its use has led to the rise of religions formed by a national population –the Santo Daime, the União do Vegetal and the Barquinha– combining the "sacred" brew with the prevailing religious traditions of the country, namely, popular Catholicism, the Afro-Brazilian religions, Kardecist spiritism and esoterism. In this book (originally a master's thesis in anthropology, defended at Unicamp university and winner of the ANPOCS prize for best dissertation in the year 2000), however, it is not the *Ayahuasqueiro religions* that are the central focus of the author's concern (which, by the

way, are well presented in her previous book, in an revealing article by Labate, "*The Brazilian Ayahuasca Religions*"), but the "*neo-Ayahuasqueiro*" groups and individuals that in the urban context associate the consumption of the brew with a reflexive positioning of the self, individualization, subjectivity and emotionalism, re-inventing it in combination with oriental meditation techniques, body therapies, psychotherapies, in a post-modern and New Age fashion.

In agreement with Mauro Almeida, who wrote the preface to the book and who was the author's thesis supervisor, this process shows the "reinvention of a reinvention" (p.13), as the Ayahuasqueiro religious framework is already a Brazilian syncretic combination, layered above the popular religions described above. And, taking this a little further, I think it shows a *cascade of reinventions*: on the first level, the use of the potion by Amazonian indigenous peoples; on a second level, its appropriation by South American popular healers; and on a third, the creation of Brazilian religions based on the consumption of Ayahuasca, which have spread out to the cities to incorporate middle-class urban strata with their contribution, into the Amazonian rubber-tapper culture, and in its most recent form, the reinvention of the use of the tea by the *neo-Ayahuasqueiros* who articulate the mixed cosmology of the Santo Daime together with therapeutic and other New Age practices and orientalist trends.

A diffuse network of Ayahuasca users has spread out from the "inner core" of "Daimist" religions, through experimentation of consumption linked with holistic therapies, neo-shamanism, theater, music, psychedelic tourism and to New Age practices of the most diverse shades. Following the course that starts from this point, Beatriz Labate's ethnography shows us the *reference niches* (which are, and for this reason, *eclectic*), such as the group led by the holistic therapist Janderson, which is organized around rupture and permanency in relation to the Daime framework, attracting a whole range of "spiritualist" demands from the urban middle class, and settling them in his Therapeutic Center and his rituals called the "Way of the Heart." This is implemented through workshops on shamanism, psychotherapies and meditations in the manner of the Holistic Centers described by J. Guilherme Magnani in his studies on *neo-esoterism* in the cities.ⁱⁱⁱ

On analyzing this ongoing circulation of de-territorializations and re-signification processes of rituals and cosmologies into new contexts, Beatriz Labate makes a subtle

analytical differentiation between the traditional and the modern spheres, placing them in terms of *tensions* and *inter-penetrations*. While, on the one hand, there is a dynamic of diversification and fragmentation from the Ayahuasca matrices, these developments remain connected to the referential narratives of the "traditional" Daime religions. The practice of banishment and re-creation, intertwined with recognition of affiliation with the Daime lineage, is constant in the discourse of Janderson and his followers. On the one side, a critique of the all-too-"pious Christianity" of the Santo Daime (p. 120), of the "militarism" imposed in the supervision of rituals, their rigidity and conservatism and, on the other, the permanency of original meanings, such as the recognition of the divine essence of the tea and the search for a guarantee of the "original" source of this sacred drink in authorized rituals of the "Daime religions" and in those people distinguished to be "godfathers" or "masters," to whom "spiritual" deference is shown.

The facet of attraction and repulsion between traditional and modern, in reference to the Santo Daime, configuring the processes of identity and distinction between Ayahuasqueiro religious devotees and *neo-Ayahuasqueiros*, has been noted in one of the seminal works on the New Era in Brazil by Anthony D'Andrea. He says,

"There tends to be a confusion between the psychologized discourse by the elite segments of regular participants of the Santo Daime (whether Daimist or not) with the 'doctrine' (the system) itself. The point is that Santo Daime can only be considered as linked to New Age processes if it is appropriated individualistically and reflexively by the individuals. In this sense, many Daimists and the founders of the movement (Master Irineu and Master Sebastião) definitely did not seek to constitute an individualist-reflexive system."^{iv}

Within this dynamic of polarity and complementation, the author distinguishes two domains, the "Ayahuasqueiro field" and the "Ayahuasqueiro network," in constant communicative flux, where the former can be seen more within the classic modality of Bourdieu's theory, with an authorized center of production of symbolic goods legitimized by agents as such, in relation to consumers; and the latter in the *rhyzome* "network" feature, following Deleuze and Guattari, where any point may be connected to any other, with no center or point of origin (p. 307).

This does not mean to say that the "traditional" model is not also *eclectic*, incorporating dimensions from other contexts, though these contributions end up being conditioned to a structured system of "internal controlled diversity" (p. 113). Nor, on the other hand, that the *neo-Ayahuasqueiros* (such as Janderson and his group), with their

dynamic of intense plasticity, where anything is possible, also do not have "control mechanisms" based on a (provisional) "system," with rituals and hierarchies, that are self-constructed and self-founded on the leader's own personal path and his collaborators' through the various realities making up this "system" (Daimist religions, New Age therapies and orientalisms).

The course of this fluidity of kaleidoscopic itineraries becomes palpable to the reader through the precision of ethnographic description provided by the author: rituals, cosmology and life-histories of "Way of the Heart" group members. This is presented according to a "network" paradigm, due to its functioning as a "hostel" and "resting place" for "spiritual" wayfarers, whilst it also incorporates its diversity all within itself.

Within Janderson's group, while the divine properties of the Daime (brew) are maintained, it is not the central focus of devotion that it is in the Daime religions. Here, it is seen as a path, amongst others, for self-knowledge and "illumination." It is taken as an "accelerator of processes" (p. 367) for meditation, regression, breathing, etc. In this sense, its use may be combined with an infinity of "neo-esoteric" techniques within a logic which, according to Leila Amaral, is articulated "through the incorporation of ritual, mythical and magical elements of diverse traditions whilst breaking with the orthodoxies of its original codes and thus inhibiting any possibility of inclining in any certain cultural direction in the relations and articulations which are made."^v

Now, I would like to cite in a somewhat liberal way the various practices, techniques and performances in Janderson's group, his Holistic Center and in the "Way of the Heart" that stand out in Labate's ethnography. These are: primal therapy of psychologist Artur Janov, the deconditioning of the Russian mystic Gurdjieff, the rebirthing of Leonardo Orr, Stanislav Grof's holotropic breathing techniques, bioenergetics body therapy of the psychiatrist A. Lowen, meditation with the Osho disciples, yoga, Tantrism, the Indian game Maha'Lila, Tarot reading, Mandala design, the Sat-Sangs, meetings of disciples with the Master, musical oracles, neo-shamanism, psychotherapies, "Ouija board" and "talking board" medium work, nutritional diagnosis and guidance, work with floral remedies, etc.

In deepening her understanding of what she called the *neo-Ayahwasqueiro* phenomena, interpreting it within a contemporary cultural (post-modern) context, Beatriz

Labate proceeds by introducing an *ethical* position to the problem, in regards anthropologists and anthropology taking a position *in defense* of the groups they study (though still within the *ethos* of the discipline, in defense of relativism and multiculturalism). Her analysis, stemming from the theories of Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, acutely perceives the marginal and frontier condition lived by the neo-Ayahuasqueiros (in as far as it involves taking this psychoactive potion), considering the way that the brew has succeeded in obtaining *legality* in the country, that is, through its use in a *religious* context and extrapolating this into therapeutic, artistic, commercial use, etc. (p. 97). The re-appropriation of the tea by these individuals and groups, who flexibilize the ritual/religious use of the Daime religions, leave it in an uncomfortable position, both in regard to the original religions and to the medical and judicial rationalities, and, finally, also to those sectors of the New Age universe that reject the use of psychoactive substances as a way of "awakening consciousness." The discomfort which these "non-places" –to use Marc Augé's expression– provoke in established "fields" is explained from within their own framework questioning the notion that knowledge, world-views, beliefs and practices have to be subsumed to specific domains.

In achieving a more precise formulation of the nature of her object, the author defines her position, vindicating that *Ayahuasqueiro New Agers* should not be anathematized as, she argues, on the one hand, the definition of what is a religion, tradition or ritual can not be seen through an *essentialist* filter (p. 98), having to take into account the "native point of view" of the representations they make of themselves; and, on the other, that there is a real concern among *neo-Ayahuasqueiros* for avoiding a hedonistic use of the substance, hedging it with rules and control mechanisms, framing it within discursive and symbolic elaborations based on philosophic and therapeutic references that constitute their "cosmologies" and beliefs. In doing this, Labate places herself within the "anti-prohibitionist" perspective of anthropologists critical of a *dualism* that naturalizes their own consumption practices as licit and legitimate (whether coffee, alcohol, heroine, *Cannabis* or Daime) (p. 100) and "demonizes" that which seems exotic. She argues that the more effective form of avoiding practices using psychoactive substances which are damaging to the health of individuals (both physical and psychic) is not the external and institutional

control by the legal-police system, but rather self-control exercised by the communities themselves which springs from their own social-cultural-religious bearings (p. 99).

Following good anthropological practice, she makes her own place from which she speaks explicitly, boldly defending (from a discussion within the style of our discipline on the themes of distancing, on the control of bias, etc.) the quality of results obtained from "native anthropology" (p. 30). She thus defines herself as an "Ayahuasqueiro anthropologist," connected to the phenomena from within and from without (p. 53). However, as Mauro Almeida notes in the preface to the book (and who shares her perception), in regard to her underlining of the relevance of *experience* as the only possible way of establishing "communication with the alterity of metaphysical realities" (p. 17), the author "almost never dedicates herself to 'recovering' her own experience, instead conserving a tone of objectivity and of discrete sympathy with the Ayahuasqueiros" (p. 17). I will merely make one comment in which I would say that she has an *acknowledged* sympathy, not however in the "native" sense because she has taken on the "uniform" of one of the Ayahuasca Religions (p. 29), but in the anthropological manner, as someone who has learnt (from experience "in the field") to understand the internal logic of this (*neo-Ayahuasqueiro*) "otherness," even if this brings criticism and includes heterodox practices in relation to the system to which she personally adheres to. I believe she has placed herself in the *Ayahuasqueiro field*, seeing in it as a community of positions constituted by the meanings (distinct and similar) attributed to Daime –here completely within the anthropological *métier*– but also recognizing the magnitude of meaning that emanates from the phenomena, and, in this particular, fully reserving her own personal experience, preferring to translate this recognition into an anthropological understanding which "believes in the beliefs of its natives."

Thus, her perceptions concerning a *phenomenology* of the experience of the sacred with Ayahuasca are seen in the light of the best tradition of anthropological theory, from categories such as: symbolic efficacy, contrastive identity, social consensus, hierarchy/individualism, rites of passage, limitedness, performance etc. and her posture of involvement (identity) with the Ayahuasqueiro alterity, within the text of the book is always circumscribed to "ethical and political aspects involved in the anthropological enterprise" (p. 53). This happens when, in accordance with these assumptions, extremely

creative experiments are done in her field work, such as reading the text of her thesis with informants, the inclusion of passages authored by the subjects themselves (in a practice similar to that which Maurice Leenhardt introduced in his research with Melanesians, later brought back with the post-modern view of James Clifford) and the researcher of the group helping them, in return, with academic knowledge and with their legal and economic claims in regards to society at large (p. 53-60).

Thus, one can conclude that, besides the precise ethnographic detail and the academic rigor in her text, Beatriz Labate's book falls within the perspective of what I call "militant anthropology," with an explicit two-way traffic: firstly, in her effort to implement a new area of study in Brazilian anthropology (as evidenced, despite her youth, in the publication of this book, the other previously mentioned and yet another one going to press, "*The ritual use of plants of power*," in partnership with Sandra Goulart), and also by her diligence, as shown in the authority of her anthropological research, in giving a legitimacy to the *Ayahuasqueiro* phenomenon (its agents, its groups, etc.) within society and before the Brazilian State.

The way she allowed herself to be shown on the back cover is symptomatic of the academic *persona* of this young "Ayahuasqueiro anthropologist," already so active in leading research projects on this matter. She has a copy of the book in her hands and in the background, rather than having shelves brimming with books, as many intellectuals like to be seen with, she is back-dropped instead by the exuberant green of the forest.

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ⁱ Doctor in Anthropology, National Museum/UFRJ, and supervisor for the Post-Graduate Program in Sciences of Religion (PPCIR) at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF).

ⁱⁱ FILORAMO, G. & PRANDI, C. *As Ciências das Religiões*. São Paulo: Paulus, 1999.

ⁱⁱⁱ MAGNANI, J. Guilherme. *Mystica Urbe. Um estudo antropológico sobre o circuito neo-esotérico na metrópole*. São Paulo: Paulus, 1999.

^{iv} D'DANDREA, Anthony. "O self perfeito e a Nova Era: individualismo e reflexividade em religiosidades pós-tradicionais.", Masters dissertation, IUPERJ, 1996, p.191.

^v AMARAL, Leila. "Um Espírito sem Lar: sobre uma dimensão 'nova era' da religiosidade contemporânea". In *Circuitos Infinitos: comparações e religiões no Brasil, Argentina, Portugal, França e Grã Bretanha*. Otávio Velho (org.) São Paulo: Attar Editorial, 2003, p.48