

Santo Daime and Santa Maria – The licit ritual use of ayahuasca and the illicit use of cannabis in a Brazilian Amazonian religion

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Abstract

Several Brazilian religious groups make controlled ritual use of the Indian entheogen ayahuasca, which is legal in the country. But a parallel use of cannabis, by one of these groups faces serious legal obstacles that inhibit the development of ritual controls. The contrast between the licit and illicit use of these substances presents a paradigmatic model of the counterproductive effects of repressive drug legislation. © 1998 Elsevier Science B.V. All rights reserved.

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Psychoactive substances have been puzzling and fascinating humankind since its earliest days. Archaeological research has shown their use by pre-historic peoples for a variety of magical/mystical/medicinal purposes. Historical records report their use in ancient times in Mesopotamia, India, Persia, Egypt, Africa, China, Japan, Europe, and in PreColumbian America, for instance. The use of alcoholic drinks, of course, has always been quite generalised and thanks to its special place in the

hegemonic Western culture is now to be found even in countries where traditional values condemn their use, as happens in North Africa.

In most cases the use was of psychoactive substances socially integrated and, up to the end of the fourth century of our era, there are few records of their being seen as a cause of social problems. This was when Christianity became an official religion in the Roman Empire and all that seemed to harken to ancient pagan practices and knowledge was condemned and subjected to violent persecution. Thus most of the existing medicinal knowledge was rejected, and with it the use of most of the very rich ancient pharmacopoeia. The

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suspicion against botanical lore led to a generalised rejection of the use of many plant species and even spices were viewed with reserve. Alcoholic drinks, wines and beers, were the only psychoactive substances to be tolerated. All other substances, even opium until then greatly prized for its many medicinal, religious and recreational uses, were considered to pertain to the devil and those found using them were considered to be witches, subject to torture, mutilation and death. Similar consequences threatened those enjoying the psychoactive properties of that most useful of plants: hemp or Cannabis; although it was only in the supposedly rationalist twentieth century that it was considered necessary to outlaw the plant itself whatever the use it were put to.

At the end of the Middle Ages, with the weakening of the Church hegemony and the cultural changes brought about by the great voyages of discovery, some of the botanical knowledge preserved in non-Christian regions was brought to Europe. Over a period of time; spices, tobacco, coffee, chocolate, tea, opium, were integrated into the local cultures and rather than being seen as problems, became highly prized and profitable commodities. Nevertheless other psychoactive substances like Cannabis in Europe and a vast array of vision-inducing plants used in the Americas by Indians in their religious rituals, continued to be persecuted. From the 17th to the end of the 19th century Indians who insisted in communing with their traditional sacraments such as peyote, *Amanita muscaria* and morning glory had to reckon with the possibility of hideous torture and brutal execution (Ott, 1995).

During the nineteenth century excessive alcohol use began to be seen as a social problem, associated with the unruly working classes and the exploited immigrant groups in the Americas. The discovery of morphine, cocaine and heroin, however led to a generalised use of medicines based on these active principles with total official endorsement and it was only in the early twentieth century that the use of psychoactive substances other than alcohol began to be seen as a serious threat to the health of the mainstream population. But the early temperance and anti-opium campaigns were mainly headed by religious and polit-

ical leaders, brandishing moralistic and racist slogans. The involvement of doctors in the movement to control drug use was initially, to a large extent, a ploy to impose their own professional interests in a field then dominated by pharmacists, patent medicine manufactures and herbalists (Escohotado, 1989). Even so, it was members of this profession who were some of the greatest victims of the early American legislation, the 1914 Harrison Act, as many were arrested for prescribing opiates to patients who were under maintenance treatment for drug dependence.

However, with the development of institutionalised scientific medicine during the twentieth century, doctors came to be invested with the ultimate authority over the discourse on health matters including the use of psychoactive drugs. Modern pharmacology followed a totally biological approach to the understanding of the effects produced by these substances and to this date it is often thought that this is the only possible scientific way to understand the subject, although psychologists also usually heard on the matter.

Legislative efforts to deal with the question led to an extension of the list of proscribed substances, and although each of these had their own particular chemical characteristics, manner of use and political reasons for banning, the symbolic effect of the legislation on the public mind was to equate all of them under the heading of 'illicit drugs' and to attribute to them a demonic nature not unlike the medieval view of the pagan pharmacopoeia. This in turn affected scientific thought and by the early seventies it came to be generally assumed that these substances could never be taken on a long-term, regular basis without causing serious harm. It was also believed that these substances were almost always used by people with profound personality disorders. Drug research came to be influenced by a moralistic view that all illicit drug use was therefore 'bad', inevitably harmful, or psychologically or physiologically 'addictive' and that abstinence was the only alternative. Studies of drug consumption tended to equate any type of drug use with abuse and seldom took occasional or moderate use into account as a viable pattern.

When nonabusive use was acknowledged, it was treated as a very brief transitional stage leading either to abstinence or (more likely) to compulsive use (Zinberg, 1984). The weight of legally inspired prejudice becomes more obvious when one takes into account the fact that research on alcohol had long been comparing different patterns of consumption in order to understand how control of the substance taken into the body could be developed, maintained or lost. It was only after the mid-seventies that this approach applied to illicit drug use led the scientific community to recognise the importance of the wide range of using patterns. Since then researchers like the late Norman Zinberg and Jean-Paul Grund, among others, have called attention to the need to take into account, apart from the pharmacological action of the substance itself, the 'set' (i.e. the attitude of the person at the time of use, including his personality structure) and the 'setting' (the influence of the physical and social setting within which the use occurs).

Zinberg makes a distinction between 'controlled' and 'compulsive' uses. The first has low social costs while the second is dysfunctional and intense and its social costs are high. The difference between them is that 'controlled' use is governed by values and rules of conduct (social sanctions) and patterns of behaviour (social rituals) shared by groups of users. These are called 'social controls' and function in four basic and overlapping ways:

- defining acceptable uses and condemning compulsive ones;
- limiting use to physical and social settings that are conducive to a positive or safe experiences;
- identifying potentially negative effects. Rituals embody the precautions to be taken before and during use;
- compartmentalising different types of substance use and supporting the users' non-drug-related obligations and relationships (Zinberg, 1984).

Apart from the values and rules of conduct, which Zinberg called 'social sanctions', there are also the 'social rituals': stylized, prescribed behaviour patterns surrounding the controlled use of the substance and having to do with the meth-

ods of procuring and administering it, the selection of the physical and social setting for use, the activities undertaken after administration, and the ways of preventing untoward effects. Rituals serve to buttress, reinforce, and symbolise the sanctions (Zinberg, 1984).

Grund studying the risk behaviour of injecting drug users in the Netherlands introduced two other variables influencing self regulation: substance availability and life structure. According to him substance availability, rituals and rules and life structure are a trinity – interactive factors in an internally coherent circular process, in which these factors are themselves modulated (modified, corrected, strengthened, etc.) by their outcomes. It is thus a 'feedback circuit' that determines the strength of self-regulation processes controlling use (Grund, 1993).

From this point of view it is interesting to think about the controlled use of 'entheogens', still current among many groups, especially among North and South American Indians, but also among mestizo members of the rural population and, more recently, even among the urban middle classes. Here the observance of traditional taboos and rituals seem to provide paradigmatic examples of Zinberg's and Grund's theories.

Among these peoples these plants are often called 'teacher plants' and they are felt to give the user direct access to the spiritual world and to storehouses of wisdom not otherwise available to them. Thus, it is common for shamans to claim that their knowledge of the healing power of plants and the correct ways of using them was given them in dreams or visions produced by the ingestion of entheogens.

One of the most widespread of these entheogens is ayahuasca. This is a psychoactive brew made from the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the *Psychotria viridis* leaf which has been used for many purposes by the native inhabitants of Western Amazonia since time immemorial. Its psychoactive properties are given by alkaloids such as harmine, d-leptaflorine, DMT and harmaline, which appear in varying concentrations. Conceived of as a means of opening the human perception of the spiritual world, this brew has been used mainly by shamans for a series of purposes

such as the diagnosis and treatment of a large variety of ailments, divination, hunting, warfare, and even as an aphrodisiac. Although its use probably originated among the inhabitants of the rain forest, ayahuasca was taken to the Andean highlands where it received the name by which it is best known and which means in quechua 'vine of the spirits'.

In the last few years it has become the central sacrament of a number of syncretic religions that originated among Amazonian rubber tappers and then spread to the urban middle classes, initially in Brazil but now reaching several European countries, the USA and even Japan.

The oldest of them is an eclectic mixture of popular Catholicism, Spiritism, African religiosity, and Indian shamanism, known as 'Santo Daime', after the name its founder Raimundo Irineu Serra (or Mestre Irineu, as he is known) gave ayahuasca. He was a poor migrant from Northeastern Brazil who spent many years working in the Amazonian forest. During this time he came across a shaman who gave him ayahuasca to drink, causing him to have many visions, including some in which a woman appeared who was initially considered to be a forest spirit and later identified with the Virgin of the Conception, in a characteristically syncretistic Amazonian manner.

During many visions she repeatedly appeared to him and offered to teach him how to use ayahuasca to become a great healer. As part of her teaching she imparted to him a new religious doctrine based on the ritual taking of ayahuasca which continued to be elaborated in visions he kept having for the rest of his life. This then became the basis for his teachings for those who came to him for healing and after some time came to form a church in the remote town of Rio Branco in what was then the territory of Acre.

The followers of this religion maintain that their sacrament is not a drug, but 'Christ's blood' or 'a holy being', of great power and even with a will of its own. Thus, it is believed that every time someone takes the brew he has the opportunity to enter into direct contact with God and, if he is deserving, he might then be able to find solutions for problems he is facing and even be healed of

fatal illnesses, as many followers claim to have been.

As if to underline the divine nature of the brew, its preparation is always done in a ritual manner and all those taking part drink Santo Daime before starting the procedures. This leads daimistas (as the Santo Daime followers call themselves) to say that 'it is the Daime that makes the Daime'. As long as there is obedience to the founder, Mestre Irineu's instructions, and all the correct ingredient are used in an atmosphere of harmony, then 'all Daime is good'. In other words, not much attention is given by the doctrine to matters directly related to pharmacological concerns like degree of concentration, dosage, etc. Mestre Irineu taught one way of making Daime, which guarantees a certain homogeneity in the chemical composition of different batches, produced in different places and at different moments of time. The few differences that were admitted to exist were related to aspects more of a spiritual or cosmological than material nature. He recommended taking into account the phases of the Moon and the environment in which the brew had been made, kept, transported and consumed. The Daime is believed to absorb the 'energies' of its surroundings, allowing them to manifest themselves during the rituals in which it is taken.

More recently, with the growth in the number of followers, certain changes were made in the cooking process, in order to use the raw material in a more efficient manner, avoiding waste and cooking some batches a little more, so as to concentrate them for easier transport. Nevertheless, the ingredients used are still the same and differences in concentration are taken into account when the Daime is served during the rituals. But daimistas have always been aware of the fact that the same dosage of the brew, taken from the same batch, will have different effects in different moments on the same person, so little attention is normally given to such questions of a more pharmacological character. Many daimistas even dislike giving too much attention to such details, since this implies in leaving aside the divine nature of the Daime and treating it like 'just another drug'.

Every Daime ritual or 'work' is thought to be an opportunity for learning and healing and for the indoctrination of the spirits present either in the 'material' or in the 'astral' planes. There are different rituals for different occasions or different needs. These are the 'hinarios', the 'healing works', the 'concentrations', the 'masses' and the 'makings' or 'preparations' (see MacRae, 1992). They all involve taking the brew and entering into an altered state of consciousness in a social and physical setting designed to contain and guide the 'voyages'. Anthropologists, like Couto, have considered them to be 'rituals of order' that promote group and hierarchical cohesion and a search for harmony both within and without (Couto, 1989).

Many aspects of the ritual setting contribute to this, such as:

1. Dietary and behavioural prescriptions that must be observed during the three days that precede and that follow the taking of the drink, thus setting the stage for an unusual event that escapes the daily routine.
2. Hierarchical social organisation in which a 'commander' or 'godfather' is recognised as the leader of the 'work', with the help of a body of 'guardians' who are responsible for the maintenance of order and obedience to the commander.
3. Control of the dosage of the drink taken by participants.
4. Ritual spatial organisation and behavioural control.

There is a central table\altar where the double armed Cross of Caravacca and other religious symbols mark the sacred nature of the event. All those taking part are given a specific place in the room, usually a rectangle drawn on the ground, where they must remain, grouped by sex, age, and sexual status (virgins and non-virgins).

Uniforms of a sober cut stress the unity of the group and help maintain a mood of seriousness. The movements of those taking part are rigidly prescribed and one of the main duties of the 'guardians' is to ensure obedience to the posture recommended for the seated 'works' (raised heads and relaxed and immobile arms and legs) or the correct performance of a few simple steps during the ceremonies that include dancing.

Another important element of control is the music which is sung and played during most of the ceremonies, which help harmonise the group, through marked rhythms and voices in unison.

The ritual use of music harks back to ancient shamanic customs from which the ritual taking of ayahuasca originates. Singing and the use of percussion instruments with a strong, repetitive beat, are powerful aids in bringing about altered states of consciousness, and are thought to act as a way of invoking spirits. The words of the 'hymns' that are sung direct the 'voyages' in the desired directions and help relieve mental or physical ill-feelings.

The hymns also help in the interpretation of the experiences people have during the sessions. They help to establish links between the lived experiences and the magical or mythical symbols with which they become invested, which is of great importance in avoiding the break up of the group. The Catalan anthropologist Josep Maria Fericgla, working on the Shuar Indian use of ayahuasca, like Victor Turner considers this to be a psychic or spiritual function of symbols that was lost by Western societies when they abandoned their traditional ways of organising unconscious drives and using these 'sources of renovation' for individual and collective benefit (Fericgla, 1989).

However, the spreading of this religion and others that also use ayahuasca among the middle classes of the large Brazilian cities outside the Amazon region, the publicity involving the conversion of media celebrities to the Santo Daime, and the moral panic over drug use, led a division of the Brazilian Ministry of Health to place ayahuasca in the list of forbidden drugs in 1985.

One of the ayahuasca using religions, the Uniao do Vegetal, then petitioned the Federal Narcotics Council demanding the annulment of this measure. The council adopted an unusually enlightened approach and set up multidisciplinary work groups made up not only of lawyers and policemen but also of doctors, social scientists and psychologists. Over a period of two years this group visited numerous ayahuasca using religious communities, examined and interviewed their followers and read newspaper reports.

Among their findings it was noted that ayahuasca had been used by these religious groups for decades without untoward social harm. Among the users of the brew the predominant moral and ethical standards were similar to those found in mainstream Brazilian society. The rural communities were considered to be well integrated into their environmental setting and harmoniously aggregating individuals of different age groups, social classes and social backgrounds. In spite of their distance from the Amazon the urban communities were found to follow closely the doctrinal practices originating in the rain forest. Although the brew was classified as a hallucinogen and as having other effects apart from those common to this type of substance such as vomiting and diarrhoea, it was considered that no medical abnormalities had been detected by the work group and recommendations were made for further and more detailed clinical studies. Following the work group's recommendations, the use of ayahuasca for religious purposes was then endorsed by the Federal Narcotics Council and since then has been considered totally legitimate from a legal point of view although still occasionally subject to social prejudice on the part of people who insist on seeing the followers of the ayahuasca religion as mere drug addicts (MacRae, 1992).

Keeping within the Santo Daime universe it is useful to compare the fortunes of the legally accepted ayahuasca with another sacramental substance also worshipped by the followers of one of its branches but which remains illegal: Santa Maria or Cannabis.

In order to understand the violent polemics this has aroused it is necessary to go back to the internal disputes that tore apart Mestre Irineu's flock after his death in 1971 in the town of Rio Branco, capital of the extreme north-western Brazilian state of Acre. It is quite common for such organisations, centred around a charismatic leader to have great difficulty in finding a successor for him after his death. The Santo Daime Church was no exception and its doctrinal emphasis on the personal revelations afforded by the taking of the brew possibly stimulated the factionalism with different aspirants to leadership claim-

ing to have been divinely appointed. While most of these had been longtime followers of the founder, one of them, a charismatic spiritual healer even prior to meeting Mestre Irineu and taking Daime for the first time, Sebastiao Mota de Melo, was a relative outsider. Unlike the others, he did not live in Mestre Irineu's neighbourhood and had only been taking Daime since 1965. Popularly known as Padrinho Sebastiao, he was the leader of a community of his own, a relatively long way away, called Colonia 5000; and had been given permission by Mestre Irineu to make his own Daime and to hold his own ceremonies with his group. As a sign of his allegiance he was expected to give a certain amount of the Daime he made to Mestre Irineu and to attend a few special ceremonies with his followers at his master's church. But in 1974 he finally broke away from the original organisation and started his own independent church at the Colonia 5000, ceasing to pay his Daime tribute and holding all the major ceremonies at his own centre. This in itself was enough to sour his relations with the rest of the Santo Daime followers, but greater provocation was to come.

This was a time when Brazilian society was undergoing radical changes due to the 'modernisation' policies of the military dictatorship intent on opening the country to modern capitalism based on advanced technology and crisscrossing the country with roads. Economically the country was going through a boom that was heralded as a sign that Brazil was on its way to becoming a world power, however politically and culturally it was in a very bad state. A largely student based left wing guerrilla movement had been violently squashed, the prisons were full of political prisoners, the media were under heavy censorship and Brazilian culture was undergoing a radical Americanisation. Faced with the defeat of organised political opposition, part of the country's youth resorted to more individualistic forms of resistance, adopting the hippie, and New Age ideas that only then began to reach Brazil. Free love, drug experimentation, mysticism, hitchhiking, etc. became escape valves for the frustrations of many young people, usually urban and often of middle class origin. The Amazonian region, newly pro-

vided with roads and improved means of communication attracted many who had opted for a life 'on the road'. Some went there on their way to Macchu Picchu, one of the hippie Meccas. Soon the news of a potent Indian brew, supposed to give instant access to spiritual realms began to spread and a steady stream of long-haired, drug-taking, rebellious youth began to flock to the different Daime groups.

However, the original followers of both Mestre Irineu and Padrinho Sebastiao were very poor rubber tappers, often illiterate and imbued with the Amazonian popular values, which although differing in many ways from orthodox Roman Catholicism (mainly with regard to a more animistic approach to religion, borrowed from Indian shamanism and from the African cults as well as from old European peasant religiosity), shared most of its more traditional and, often, already discarded norms and rules of day to day conduct, such as the rigid gender roles, the emphasis on the importance of hard work, the respect for hierarchical authority, political and moral conservatism, etc. So their general reaction to these visitors was of rejection and few were allowed to partake of the ayahuasca ceremonies. The notable exception was Padrinho Sebastiao, who sympathised with these outsiders and, invoking Jesus' predilection for the outcast, welcomed them to his community even if this shocked some of his more conservative followers. This acceptance however did not imply in a weakening of the austere doctrine he taught, and in many cases, after a period living in his community, some of these visitors became fully converted to his views, getting themselves haircuts and adopting many of the Amazonian rural values.

Nevertheless, these conversions did not necessarily imply in a total abandonment of old practices, especially when these were not perceived as antagonistic to the Santo Daime doctrine or as directly affronting the customs of the community. Such was the case with the use of certain drugs, especially those perceived to be 'natural' like Cannabis and mushrooms, whose use was quite unfamiliar to most of the members of the community, who until then had been living in great isolation. Thus they had not yet been contaminated by the

anti-drug hysteria rife in the more metropolitan urban centres and which, in 1976, led to the passing of new a draconian Narcotics Law, in force to this day. For the members of Colonia 5000 in the mid 70's the smoking of marijuana was not an issue although a few had heard tales about its supposed diabolical nature, and of its only being used by outlaws. Their main concern was with alcoholism, endemic in the region and a personal problem for many of the veterans, who considered the Santo Daime as responsible for their having given up excessive drinking. Tobacco smoking, though discouraged during rituals, was a socially accepted practice and quite widespread.

On the other hand, many of the new young converts had originally been attracted to the religion because of its uses of a psychoactive brew as its main sacrament. Their conversion, although implying many changes in their value systems had also led them to view consciousness alteration through substance use not only as socially acceptable but also as a sure way of acquiring spiritual knowledge and development. As they lived in a hut a little apart from the rest of the community, a few were able to continue to smoke secretly and even grow a little marijuana for their own use.

Once they had gained acceptance in the community, some of them showed Padrinho Sebastiao how to cook certain psychoactive mushrooms which grew abundantly in the area in the cattle dung. He took a liking to these and in keeping with traditional shamanic practice decided to start a study of this new plant, in order to learn its spiritual secrets and its healing properties. For some time mushrooms were used frequently by the members of the community and a few times they were even incorporated into the Santo Daime ritual. Alfredo, Padrinho Sebastiao's son and present leader of the group, even received a hymn about a spiritual being incarnated in those mushrooms called Cogu-Rei (Mushroom King) (Ovejero, 1996). After some time, however, Padrinho Sebastiao decided to end his studies of this plant, considering its side effects to be prejudicial.

On another occasion, during a Daime session, shortly after Padrinho Sebastiao's formal declaration of independence, one of the marijuana using newcomers felt an irresistible need to confide his

secret to Padrinho Sebastiao. According to his own account, feeling unable to remain in the room, he decided to go out for fresh air. Outside the church he met Padrinho Sebastiao and promptly told him all about it. Far from being angry, the old man told him he had recently had a dream in which a strange warrior on horseback and wearing a black cape had told him he was about to move to another spiritual line. When he asked what line this was, he was told he would find out for himself. A little later he had had another vision of a garden being tended by an angel who showed him a plant he did not know and said: 'This is for healing'.

Padrinho Sebastião then asked his young follower for a little marijuana to study. For some time he kept the use of the plant restricted to himself, his wife, the youths who had presented him with the plant and one or two close followers. After a while, he came to the conclusion that while ayahuasca worked with the spiritual energy of Christ, Cannabis had the energy of the Virgin and he then renamed the plant Santa Maria. He explained that he had been instructed to 'take the herb from the mouth of the devil and return it to its proper mistress, the Virgin Mary'. Thus began a series of instructions that he imparted to his followers on the proper sacred use of Cannabis, distinct from the profane manner it was being smoked by those who simply wanted a 'buzz'.

Emphasising its specific character, this new religious use was to have a different vocabulary from the profane street use, so that like Santo Daime, Santa Maria should never be considered a 'drug'. Not only was the name commonly used in Brazil 'maconha', rejected and substituted for 'Santa Maria', but all the other terms used in connection with it, like the standard urban Portuguese word for 'to smoke', or hippie slang expressions for cigarette papers and the top of the female plant very prized for being rich in THC, were substituted by other expressions of a more local flavour.

Ideally it should only be used in rituals similar to the Santo Daime ones, to be held every two weeks. But the specificities of its pharmacological nature and of its effects, the fact that initially there was probably resistance on the part of members of the community in fully equating it with

ayahuasca and that for a long time (three years according to da Silva, 1985) its use was restricted to a few people, meant that a more informal manner of use developed in which it was simply smoked in a circle. But even here a few rules are observed to mark the group ritual nature of these procedures which were different from the standard hedonistic and individualistic uses of Cannabis. The ceremony is sometimes called 'the consecration of Santa Maria' and in some cases may even involve the reciting of the Roman Catholic prayer 'Hail Mary'. During the ritual the partakers should remain silent and orderly while the cigarette is being consumed. It must always be passed to the person to the right of the last smoker and be kept in constant circulation until it is totally consumed and each user should limit himself to three puffs, mentally invoking the Daime symbols sun, moon and stars; make a sign of the cross and pass it on. If silence is not kept, then the smokers must at least keep the conversation on a high spiritual level, and avoid using it in parties or mixing it with the consumption of alcoholic drinks. Santa Maria should also never be used while eating, and a reasonable amount of time should be allowed to pass before food is consumed. Padrinho Sebastiao's followers are also expected to only use this herb among themselves, refraining from smoking with those unaware of its sacred nature. Street marijuana, bought from drug dealers ought to be avoided, due to its contamination with heavy energies absorbed from the underworld environment and there are prescriptions as to the correct manner of growing, tending and harvesting the plant so as to emphasise its divinity.

After some time, its use, jointly with Daime, in healing in ceremonies became common. The two substances taken together are considered to produce very good effects. Santa Maria taken after Santo Daime can lead to a feeling of 'un-blocked', propitiating visions, and acts as a soother in moments of difficulty during the 'voyage'. They were considered to belong to the same spiritual realm and as being able to unite their children on earth and to transform and liberate them on the 'astral plane'. In accordance with the daimista doctrine that divides the world in two

great categories, while Santo Daime represented the male principle, Santa Maria was the female one and should be used to invoke the help not only of the Virgin but of all the other female saints and elemental spirits.

The plant's medicinal properties were also explored empirically. A tea made from its green leaves and from its roots was used in the treatment of flu, fevers, indigestion, vomiting, diarrhoea, headaches, 'neurasthenia'. Smoked it served as an anaesthetic, and as a relief for pains in general, being used to help in child birth, and as a relief for haemorrhoids, hernias, colics, depression, fatigue, nausea, dizziness, insomnia, high blood pressure, asthma etc. Its ashes were thought to have antiseptic and cicatrizant properties and were used topically in pomades to treat mycosis, wounds, ulcers and eczema. In compresses it was used on bruises, tumours, boils and fevers. A tincture was also made from it and used for colics, indigestion and spasms (da Silva, 1985).

The other ayahuasca taking groups in Rio Branco already viewed Padrinho Sebastiao with suspicion owing to his separation from the original Santo Daime group and to the hospitable manner he received what they considered to be a bunch of disreputable hippies. But they became particularly incensed by his adoption of Cannabis as a new sacrament. Although this plant had long been in use in Brazil, it had always been associated with Black culture, owing to its original introduction in the region by slaves from Western Africa. As many other elements of African origin in Brazilian culture, it was stigmatised and considered to pertain to the devil. (In fact, to this day some still call it 'the devil's weed').

From 1934 onwards Cannabis was placed in the first official Brazilian list of narcotic substances and thus began a campaign with a clearly racist slant presenting the use of the plant as a public problem and focusing the workings of the disciplinary punitive system on the social areas occupied by the Black population. This served to maintain and reinforce racist stereotypes and the construction of a Cannabis Problem is considered by some to have contributed in an important way to the consolidation of the political and economic domination of the Afro-Brazilian population

(Adiala, 1986a,b). As often happens in situations of racial oppression, this prejudice was even internalised by Black people who commonly associate its use with a life of crime. Mestre Irineu's followers themselves adhered to these ideas even though their leader himself had been a Black man and had come from a part of Brazil, the state of Maranhao, where the African influence is particularly great and where the use of marijuana was until recently totally integrated into the popular culture, being used for both recreational and medicinal purposes. Even Mestre Irineu himself has been alleged to have used the plant, in certain special occasions, for healing, although today this is vehemently denied by most of his followers (da Silva, 1985).

On the other hand, Padrinho Sebastiao's recognition of the spiritual nature of some of the illicit substances in use in Brazil, attracted increasing numbers of drug users to Colonia 5000. Frequently these people experienced difficulty in accepting the rigid moralism and patriarchal authoritarianism of the religious doctrine and involved themselves occasionally in trouble in Rio Branco, where they were, in spite of their rebelliousness with regard to his teachings, still identified with Padrinho Sebastiao. This contributed to an increase in the stigmatisation already suffered by Colonia 5000. This and other problems such as the growth in the numbers of the community members, led Padrinho Sebastiao to go in search of another place to settle, where the land was more abundant and where they could be more isolated so as to live in their own way without outside interference. After some time a very remote and difficult to reach place was found called Rio do Ouro and there began a gradual movement of exodus from Colonia 5000 with many of the characteristics of the Messianic movements which frequently develop among poor Brazilian peasants.

One day while Padrinho Sebastiao was away a young frequenter of his community was arrested in Rio Branco and found to be in possession of a bottle of Daime and an amount of Cannabis. This was used as an excuse for the police to invade Colonia 5000 in large numbers and heavily armed with machine guns, rifles and revolvers, ready to

fire. Obviously they did not find the armed hoodlums they were used to dealing with, but only a very humble and peaceful group of people who looked at them with uncomprehending surprise. Nevertheless they found a well tended Cannabis plantation which was then destroyed before the community dwellers, many of whom were reduced to tears by the brutal sacrilege being committed to their sacred Santa Maria garden. These procedures also had great media coverage and for the first time news the great Brazilian public had news of this entheogen using religion.

Although Padrinho Sebastiao later presented himself to the local police authorities and was able to convince them of his religious integrity in the use of Cannabis and ayahuasca, there was nevertheless a great deal of controversy over the subject. This was still the time of the military regime with its obsessive concern with left wing subversive activities and so it was deemed necessary to look into the activities of what was felt to be a potentially threatening movement of poor peasants allied to drug taking young dropouts. On the other hand there was a realisation that this was an unusual situation since the community was renowned for its hard work and religiosity and had never been involved in any serious trouble before. So a special government commission, made up of police and army authorities as well as a group of scientists, was dispatched to Rio do Ouro in order to carry out investigations into the life of the community. It also had the express recommendation to be careful not to create a situation of needless religious conflict, once Brazilian history is marked by many cases of the government trying to put down messianic movements not unlike this one, leading to fanatical resistance and usually ending in bloody massacres (Ovejero, 1996). Already in this case some of the daimistas were bringing up the story of Canudos, one of the most notorious examples of Brazilian religious intolerance ending in civil war.

Although the commission's report was favourable to the community and recommended that its members be left to continue their life in peace, this was not the end of their troubles. Their relatively unabashed ritual use of Cannabis and the press coverage given to the conversion to this

religion of a few television celebrities were irksome to many. Matters became even worse when new police incidents involving supposed followers of Padrinho Sebastiao with Cannabis use occurred and led to further efforts on the part of certain authorities to ban altogether the ritual use of ayahuasca. As we have already seen, this in fact happened in 1985, when the brew was placed on the list of forbidden substances for six months and was only liberated after a new scientific commission was set up to investigate the matter further and for a period of two years there was uncertainty as to the long term legal status of ayahuasca use in Brazil.

Even though this commission ended by again recommending the liberation of ayahuasca for religious use, the fright increased the prejudices of the other ayahuasca using religions against Padrinho Sebastiao and his followers, once they felt that their own sacramental use of ayahuasca was under permanent threat due to what they considered its misuse by those who insisted in using it with the 'drug' Santa Maria.

Here one sees in almost caricature form the process of religious dogma turning one person's sacrament into another's 'drug'. Although aware of the importance of ayahuasca in the history of the Americas in general and in theirs in particular, they were unable to generalise the notion of the sacredness of entheogens to other substances different from those they used themselves. Here one sees a repetition of the intolerance of medieval Christianity and of the Inquisition, who persecuted many groups similar to present day ayahuasca religions. At the same time there is a forgetting of the botanical eclecticism of the Indian shamans whence originated the use of the brew and whose influence is still very marked in these religions. Above all one detects great ignorance of the long history of the sacred use of Cannabis.

Rather than being the 'devil's weed', Cannabis is in fact one of the oldest plants cultivated by humankind. According to Schultes and Hofmann, historically it has been used for five purposes: as a source of hempen fibres, for its oil, for its seeds consumed for food, for its narcotic properties and therapeutically to treat a wide spectrum of ills.

Because of its various uses, it has been taken to many regions around the world and integrated into a great number of different cultures. It is difficult to say which of the several uses of Cannabis was the earliest but the Vedas, supposed to have been written around 2000 B.C. in India, already sang the praises of Cannabis as one of the divine nectars, able to give man anything from good health and long life to visions of the gods. The Zen Avesta, dating from 600 B.C. Persia and containing the teachings of Zoroaster mentions an intoxicating resin thought to be extracted from hemp and the Assyrians used it as an incense as early as the ninth century BC. The Chinese also seem to have known and probably used its psychoactive properties at very early dates. About 500 B.C. Herodotus described a kind of sauna bath of the Scythians in which hemp seeds were thrown onto hot stones inside a closed tent, leading all those present to delight and shout for joy. Among the ancient Greeks and Romans, Democritus reported that it was occasionally drunk with wine and myrrh to produce visionary states, and Galen, about A.D. 200, wrote that it was sometimes customary to give hemp to guests to promote hilarity and enjoyment.

Its use for spiritual purposes goes far back in Indian history, as can be seen from ancient mythological beliefs. One Cannabis preparation, Bhang, was so sacred that it was thought to deter evil, bring luck and cleanse sin. Those treading upon the leaves of the plant would suffer harm and sacred oaths were sealed over hemp. Indra, god of the firmament had his favourite drink made from Cannabis and hemp was also smoked in rituals to the god Shiva. In Tibet, Cannabis was also used in Tantric Buddhist ritual to facilitate deep meditation and heighten awareness (Schultes and Hofmann, 1987).

Cannabis was introduced to Africa quite early on and transcends Moslem areas, being used both in social and religious contexts. It was used by, among others: the Hottentots, Bushmen, Kaffirs, and the Kasai in the Congo considered it to be a god, a protector against physical and spiritual harm. Treaties are sealed with its smoke and many hemp using cults exist in East Africa, specially near Lake Victoria (Schultes and Hofmann, 1987).

There is an unresolved controversy over whether or not PreColumbian America already knew Cannabis, with suggestive archaeological evidence pointing towards very early use (Bennett et al., 1995). What is certain is that at present Cannabis plays a role in the religious life of several different Indian peoples such as the Cuna in Panama and the Cora in Mexico. The Tepehua, another Mexican Indian group also use it under the name of Santa Rosa in healing ceremonies, considering it to act as an intercessor with the Virgin and the Tepecanos, of northwestern Mexico occasionally use it as a substitute for Peyote in their rituals calling it Rosa Maria (Emboden, 1972).

But apart from being the result of simple historical ignorance, the intolerance of the other ayahuasca religions with regard to Padrinho Sebastiao's followers also reflects the symbolic impact of legislation. After all alcohol and tobacco are also seen as pathogenic, evil and addictive by most members of these religious groups, but their use does not arouse feelings of such strong rejection for its users. Among the Brazilian poor, often living in conditions of total misery, the use of Cannabis frequently serves as a one of the few marks distinguishing the respectable poor from the total outcasts. For this reason it is common to find a much greater emotional investment in the condemnation of its use on the part of the poor, even though it might be part of their traditional cultural heritage, than among the members of the middle class, who do not feel a such need to assert their respectability at all times. This might, then, also serve as a partial explanation for the different reactions of the increasingly middle class followers of Padrinho Sebastiao and the much poorer members of some of the other religions.

This, however, can only be seen as a partial explanation, since one of the ayahuasca using religious groups most critical of Santa Maria, the Uniao do Vegetal is even more middle class than the one that worships Cannabis. In their case one is dealing with a group that has a definite social and even political project aiming at a total institutionalisation of their religion and at its complete social acceptance. They have a rigidly hierarchical organisation, and a pretension to being the

only bearers of the true ayahuasca doctrine. The greater emphasis on the validity of personal revelations, often conceived of by the daimistas as being open to everyone, is an implicit challenge to their hierarchical structure which bases the difference between its members on the degree to which they are cognisant of their doctrinal secrets. They consider Mestre Irineu's followers and other users of ayahuasca as, at best, ignorant 'masters of curiosity' and so any successes they may have question the significance of these exclusive secrets and of the often oppressive hierarchical organisation built around them. Thus the use of Cannabis in conjunction with ayahuasca not only affronts their dogma, but also puts in jeopardy their cherished social pretensions.

But even Padrinho Sebastiao's conviction of the importance of Santa Maria to the ritual life of his flock could not resist the force of legal repression and of the social ostracism implied by its continued use. This became especially true once they ceased to restrict their activities to isolated Amazonian communities and began to spread their doctrine to the large Brazilian cities. As one of the conditions for the liberation of ayahuasca use, his followers had to sign a joint declaration, whose wording clearly shows it to have been drawn up by Uniao do Vegetal members to suit their own interests (it insists, for instance, in calling ayahuasca by the name given to it by that religion and not by the more common 'Daime'). Several items of this joint declaration deny some of the basic tenets of the other religions, like those that ban the use of ayahuasca for healing and, of course, the use of any other psychoactive substance in conjunction with the brew. Even though not all the items of this declaration are closely kept by the different groups, the followers of Padrinho Sebastiao have since felt compelled to avoid their ritual use of Santa Maria, however unwilling they may be to deny its sacred nature, which they continue to consider as elevated as that of Santo Daime itself and as its female counterpart.

This, however has not been easy, since Padrinho Sebastiao's flock bears the mark of his tolerance and even predilection for 'difficult cases'. He taught that nobody should ever be

denied Santo Daime, once he believed that it was only through coming into contact with the 'divine being' of the drink that they might be indoctrinated. Consequently, compared to the members of the other religions who are much more selective of whom they accept into their fold, his followers to this day seem particularly rebellious and unruly. Many of them have a long past history of drug use and only considered joining this religion because of the dignity it accorded certain psychoactive substances. They especially prize its rejection of the more narrow-minded prejudices against marijuana, a plant already used by a great number of them prior to their religious conversion. Thus, moves to cease the ritual use of Santa Maria can only be justified by pragmatic arguments, which are often questioned under the argument that earthly laws cannot go against spiritual truths.

So, although official authorisation is nowadays systematically denied by the leaders of the group for the use of Santa Maria in the Santo Daime ceremonies, it is very difficult for them to impose the total ban on its private, somewhat 'wild' use as suggested by the religious doctrine. So, as they cannot make the ritually correct use of Santa Maria, it is common for the followers of this particular branch of the religion to smoke before and after the ceremonies and sometimes even to sneak out of the rituals to take a few puffs away from the sight of the others. It is even more common for them to show a pattern of relatively frequent use in their daily lives. Even in these cases they tend to preserve the basic simple ritual initially proposed by Padrinho Sebastiao, smoking in an orderly circle, keeping the conversation restricted to elevated topics, avoiding mixing it with the use of alcoholic drinks and avoiding smoking with outsiders to the religion. Often there is the singing of specific hymns which emphasize the differences between the divine Santa Maria and the profane 'maconha' insisting on the respect and discipline needed for its correct use. Nevertheless, certain of the prescriptions applying to its fully ritualised use are not observed, mainly those concerning frequency, physical setting and, above all, manner of acquisition.

The participation in Santo Daime ceremonies and the partaking of its sacramental brew is usually a very moving experience that leads to a questioning of much that usually people take for granted about their lives. This destructuring effect is countered by many cues present in the ritual setting, such as the religious symbols, the chants that accompany the ceremonies, the ‘guardians’ whose presence affords a feeling of security that order will be maintained, and the figure of the leader of the session who is ultimately responsible for the proceedings. On the other hand, the extra-ritual smoking of Santa Maria often provokes a kind of ‘flash-back’ effect that can lead to a reliving of the ayahuasca experience outside the ceremonial setting. This in a few cases can be a painful and unsettling experience mainly for inexperienced users and for those with psychological problems. This haphazard multiplication of the original experience can, in a few cases, generate difficulties in settling back into normal life and a lack of motivation for any but ‘spiritual’ activities, which on occasion lead to dropping out of school or jobs and subsequent situations of maladjustment and disorientation.

But whereas psychological problems only appear in a very few cases, the most serious problem is the breaking of the ritual manner of acquisition of the herb. Instead of the elaborate ritualised tending of ‘Santa Maria Gardens’ where the doctrinal norms are symbolically stressed and reinforced, the users are obliged to resort to illegal dealers, and to face all the dangers inherent in this contact with the underworld and its violent ways, as well as running the risk of being caught by the police and maybe suffering violence, stigmatisation and even long term imprisonment in institutions notorious for being ‘schools of crime’. This in fact has happened to a few of Padrinho Sebastiao’s followers and has been the cause of most of the bad publicity they have suffered in the last few years.

So here we see, in an almost paradigmatical case, the importance of the setting, as argued by Zinberg and Grund, among others. As Zinberg maintained, controlled use is a result of social learning and requires suitable social and cultural conditions to develop fully. Here dealing with

rituals which are not only social but religious as well, we see how they can be quite effective when allowed to develop in a licit manner even in dealing with potent substances like ayahuasca. On the other hand, when their banning makes it difficult for them to become fully institutionalised, as is the case with Santa Maria, their controlling influence is weakened and it is more difficult for them to prevent undesired effects. Further evidence of this is the fact that in contrast to the ‘wild’ use of Santa Maria we find that Santo Daime is never used out of a strictly ritual context except for when it is used in small doses as a remedy.

1. Notes

‘entheogens’ – A word suggested by R. Gordon Wasson and others to name in a non-pejorative manner certain substances whose ingestion provokes altered states of consciousness, leading to states of shamanic ecstasy or possession.

‘Padrinho’, meaning ‘got/father’, is a common expression used in Brazil for leaders of popular spiritual communities. Mestre Irineu was also called ‘Padrinho’ by his closest followers.

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