Ayahuasca, Religion and Science: A Multidisciplinary Approach

Beatriz Caiuby Labate (Ed).

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1. Sandra Lucia Goulart – Anthropology Casper Libero /NEIP – “The religious matrices of the União do Vegetal”

This article analyzes the relations between the União do Vegetal (UDV) and other religious traditions. Narratives provided by early members and biographical details of the founder of the UDV since his childhood, reveal the presence of elements within the cosmology and rituals of this religion that are originated in various sources. These span from popular Catholicism, Allan Kardec's spiritism, masonry, Jewish tradition, and Afro-Brazilian religions, to popular Amazonian beliefs. The text shows how the combination of aspects of these different traditions is important in the constitution of the new religious system of the União do Vegetal. The article situates this ayahuasca religion within the field of Brazilian religiosity, indicating, for instance, parallels in its formative process with the history of other religions, such as Umbanda. The article also highlights relationships between elements of the mythology, doctrine and rituals of the União do Vegetal and the Amazonian context linked to the use of ayahuasca.

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47 pages.

2. Denizar Missawa Camurça, Beatriz Caiuby Labate, Sérgio Brissac and Jonathan Ott – Biologist University of Guarulhos/NEIP; Doctoral candidate in Social Anthropology Unicamp/NEIP; Doctoral candidate in Social Anthropology Museu Nacional-UFRJ and Organic Chemist - HydroXochiatl/Mexico –“Hoasqueira Ethnomedicine: The traditional use of the Nove Vegetais in the União do Vegetal”

The article deals with a tradition of the Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal (Beneficent Spirit Plant Union Center, or UDV), which occasionally used in the past what became known as the Nove Vegetais brew (Nine Plants brew), that is, ayahuasca
with the addition of nine species of plants specifically aimed at healing. The use of these plants distinguishes the UDV from the other Brazilian Ayahuasca religions and resembles the traditional practices of Amazonian healers. There is a body of evidence about the properties of these species and of another one that was occasionally used, the João Brandinho. These species are compared with those used by mestizo or indigenous populations described in the specialized literature: among the ten plants adopted by the founder of the UDV, Mestre Gabriel, five are reported to have been used by traditional healers of the Amazon region. The article explains that these plants do, in fact, possess medicinal properties, indicating the need for further research into the therapeutic potential of the Nove Vegetais and of the João Brandinho.


41 pages.

3. Jeffrey Bronfman – UDV Master in the USA – “The extraordinary case of the United States versus the União do Vegetal Church”

An oral presentation made at the “Bioneers Conference” in 2002, revised for publication in English in 2006, and slightly revised again in 2008 for its publication in Portuguese. The Representative Mestre of the União do Vegetal in the United States narrates his experience of the legalization process of the UDV in his country. A history of the legal case is presented and compared to similar cases, such as the use of peyote by the members of the Native American Church. The speaker interweaves historical facts with thoughts on the conflict between “drug” legislation and the right to religious freedom, the problems of cultural relativism, and the political dimensions of the prison industry and “drug” users, among other topics.


21 pages.


Although most studies acknowledge the centrality of music in the Brazilian ayahuasca religions, the music itself has been dealt with generally alongside many other aspects, without giving it a special focus. The role played by music in these religions, as well as in the generation of religious meanings -- in the body and in the practitioners' subjective constructs -- indicate that the musical dimension deserves special attention. The goal of this article is to offer a view of the musical aspects of the Santo Daime (in its Alto Santo and Cefluris branches) and of the União do Vegetal, reflecting on the role of music in these groups' religious experiences. Beginning with description of the musical practices of both religions, we endeavor to establish comparative analysis,
focusing on similarities and differences regarding the musical aspect. The paper aims at understanding how these musical acts – and their contrasts – can reveal more general aspects of these religious movements. The study also concludes with some suggestions concerning more general implications for the study of experiences with consumption of psychoactive substances, especially in regards to the role of music during the ayahuasca experience.

Unpublished article in Portuguese.

62 pages.


The aim of this text is to analyze the “offering of hymns” in two Santo Daime churches located in the city of Rio de Janeiro (RJ), both of which belong to the line of spiritual work founded by Sebastião Mota de Melo. In certain instances, the Santo Daime member can present another member of the religion with mediumistic-inspired songs. By means of these offerings of songs of praise, the worlds of the spirits and humans are bound and a special type of communication between members is forged. Beyond the classic anthropological works on the terrain of the gift-giving, this article draws its theoretical basis from the school of symbolic interactionism, which understands exchanges as a “grammar.”

Unpublished article in Portuguese.

47 pages.


Na geração que corresponde à direção do Padre Sebastião o Santo Daime presenciou transformações substanciais, a se considerar a religião fundada algumas décadas antes pelo Mestre Irineu. Ao se colocar no intenso circuito de trocas simbólicas decorrente de sua expansão, o Cefluris, dentre outras recepções, acolheu a Umbanda – que progressivamente adquiriu centralidade no seu conjunto ritual. Este artigo recupera as ocorrências históricas que prepararam a acolhida da Umbanda, e descreve o processo de criação de diversos novos tipos de trabalhos mediúnicos por esta vertente daimista. Propõe uma interpretação das razões pelas quais a Umbanda fez sentido no universo cosmológico daimista, explorando o modo como passou a satisfazer necessidades latentes. Entre elas estão a possibilidade de dar voz àqueles à margem da estrutura de poder, uma alternativa mais catártica de expressão religiosa com um destaque menos reprimido para o corpo e a possibilidade de contato mais pessoal e direto com os Deuses.

Unpublished article in Portuguese.
In 2001, a group of professionals from the Department of Chemical Dependence of the Brazilian Association of Psychiatry (ABP) and the Brazilian Association for the Study of Alcohol and Drugs (ABEAD) produced a report entitled "Ayahuasca," in which they concluded that there could be no safe use of the substance and that it could cause serious intoxication. In this unpublished article, members of the Medical Scientific Department of the Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal present critiques of the ABP/ABEAD document and detail some of its significant technical shortcomings.

Unpublished article in Portuguese.

55 pages.


The purpose of the study was to evaluate neuropsychologically adolescents who use ayahuasca in a religious context. A battery of neuropsychological tests was administered to adolescents who use ayahuasca. These subjects were compared to a matched control group of adolescents who did not use ayahuasca. The controls were matched with regards to sex, age, and education. The neuropsychological battery included tests of speeded attention, visual search, sequencing, psychomotor speed, verbal and visual abilities, memory, and mental flexibility. The statistical results for subjects from matched controls on neuropsychological measures were computed using independent t-tests. Overall, statistical findings suggested that there was no significant difference between the two groups on neuropsychological measures. Even though, the data overall supports that there was not a difference between ayahuasca users and matched controls on neuropsychological measures, further studies are necessary to support these findings.


15 pages.
Ayahuasca is believed to be harmless for those (including adolescents) drinking it within a religious setting. Nevertheless, controlled studies on the mental/psychiatric status of ritual hallucinogenic ayahuasca concoction consumers are still lacking. In this study, 40 adolescents from a Brazilian ayahuasca sect were compared with 40 controls matched on sex, age, and educational background for psychiatric symptomatology. Screening scales for depression, anxiety, alcohol consumption patterns (abuse), attentional problems, and body dysmorphic disorders were used. It was found that, compared to controls, considerable lower frequencies of positive scoring for anxiety, body dismorphism, and attentional problems were detected among ayahuasca-using adolescents despite overall similar psychopathological profiles displayed by both study groups. Low frequencies of psychiatric symptoms detected among adolescents consuming ayahuasca within a religious context may reflect a protective effect due to their religious affiliation. However, further studies on the possible interference of other variables in the outcome are necessary.


13 pages.

Qualitative research was conducted in Brazil among 28 ayahuasca-consuming adolescents members of the União do Vegetal Church, and 28 adolescents who never used ayahuasca. They were compared on a number of qualitative variables, including vignettes measuring moral and ethical concerns. Psychocultural studies utilizing co-occurrences of variables in the realm of qualitative studies are useful in understanding and complementing quantitative studies also conducted among this population. Qualitative data show that the teens in the União do Vegetal religion appear to be healthy, thoughtful, considerate and bonded to their families and religious peers. This study examines the modern use of a powerful hallucinogenic compound within a legal religious context, and the youth who participated in these ayahuasca religious ceremonies (usually with parents and other family members) appeared not to differ from their nonayahuasca-using peers. This study helps to elucidate the full range of effects of plant hallucinogenic use within a socially-sanctioned, elder-facilitated and structured religious context.


10 pages.
Ritual use of ayahuasca within the context of the Brazilian ayahuasca churches often starts during late childhood or early adolescence. Premature access to psychoactive drugs may represent a risk factor for drug misuse. Conversely, religious affiliation seems to play a protective role in terms of substance abuse. The objective of this study was to describe patterns of drug use in a sample of adolescents using ayahuasca within a religious setting. Forty-one adolescents from a Brazilian ayahuasca sect were compared with 43 adolescents who never drank ayahuasca. No significant differences were identified in terms of lifetime substance consumption. Throughout the previous year period, ayahuasca adolescents used less alcohol (46.3%) than the comparison group (74.4%). Recent use of alcohol was also more frequent among the latter group (65.1%) than among ayahuasca drinkers (32.5%). Although not statistically significant, slight differences in terms of patterns of drug use were definitely observed among groups. Despite their early exposure to a hallucinogenic substance, adolescents using ayahuasca in a controlled setting were mostly comparable to controls except for a considerably smaller proportion of alcohol users. Religious affiliation may have played a central role as a possible protective factor for alcohol use. Thus, ayahuasca seems to be a relatively safe substance as far as drug misuse is concerned.


9 pages.

This text presents reflections on the therapeutic potential of ritual ayahuasca use that is employed in the treatment of psychoactive substance abuse in therapeutic centers that combine elements of medicine and psychology with the use of ayahuasca (in Brazil and Peru), the ayahuasca religions, and neo-ayahuasqueiro groups in Brazil. Perspectives for a future agenda of interdisciplinary scientific research in this area are also discussed, with an emphasis on the possibilities for a dialogue between biomedicine, anthropology and psychology, as well as the ethical and methodological challenges involved in this kind of research.
Unpublished article in Portuguese.

39 pages.

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