

Sign of the Times -- A new policy for ayahuasca in Brazil (*)

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Ever since the traditional ayahuasca communities (Alto Santo, Barquinha and União do Vegetal) submitted in 2008 a petition to Minister of Culture Gilberto Gil for the "Ritual Use of Ayahuasca" to be registered as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Brazil, the discussions and articulations around this subject have been intense. It could hardly have been different, given that the proposal is so new and the enormous degree of complexity around a question for which it is obligatory to consider and involve hundreds of religious and indigenous communities with great differences among themselves.

In accordance with this, the Committee on Intangible Cultural Heritage -- which has the function to elaborate a previous legal opinion before the petition is submitted to the Consulting Council on Cultural Heritage (a branch of the Brazilian National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage [IPHAN] which then deliberates over whether or not these cultural and artistic goods are registered) -- has indicated the need to make an inventory that will make it possible to analyze the outlines, limits and characteristics of possible registration, once the need is satisfied for the bibliographical material submitted with the petition to be systematized.

Currently, the public cultural institutions that are in this process -- the Elias Mansour Foundation (in the state of Acre), the Garibaldi Brazil Foundation in the city of Rio Branco, and IPHAN/AC -- are elaborating a project for gathering of resources and accomplishing the inventory using the methodologies defined by the National Inventory of Cultural References. The guiding principle must be the broad and deep participation of the ayahuasca communities, taking into consideration their extraordinary diversity of roots and cultural manifestations.

Therefore, in recent months there have been intense discussion among the ayahuasca communities that submitted the petition to IPHAN as well as the public institutions of Acre involved in the process, different indigenous representatives and leaders of the eclectic religious centers, in order to form a pact for effective participation of representatives of the three ayahuasca fields (original, traditional and eclectic) in this inventory and consequently for the possible registration of the cultural goods to be defined.

As evident signs of the opportunity and importance of this registry, we must bring up for consideration the many advances that the traditional ayahuasca communities of Acre have gained in recent times. Among these are the design and execution of projects of valuing and preserving the histories of the various different centers; the

realization of a great seminar to debate public policy for the ayahuasca communities ("Seminar of the Traditional Ayahuasca Communities: Building Public Policies for Acre," which took place April 12-14, 2010); the regulation by the state of Acre of extraction and transport of the vine and leaf, developed through three long years of discussion, work, and dialogue with the traditional Acrean communities (Joint Resolution CEMAC/CFE No 004, December 20, 2010).

Furthermore, it is necessary to remember that, already in 2007 the Committee of Ayahuasca Cultures was created within the scope of the Municipal Council on Cultural Policies of the Garibaldi Brasil Foundation of Rio Branco. The members of this Committee not only have participated actively in the fertile process of construction of the Municipal System of Culture of Rio Branco, as have made it one of the most active voices in the council. Through lively monthly meetings, problems and solutions in the areas of culture, health, education and environment are debated with different public organs and social organizations.

At this moment, a meeting is being organized among the indigenous leaders of Acre, although a date has not been set yet, so that they can participate in the construction of the inventory since its inception, if they so decide. It is not forgotten that the question of ayahuasca among the indigenous peoples goes much further -- pan-Amazonian and international -- and is not limited to indigenous groups of the Brazilian Amazon. Thus, the inclusion of the Indians in this inventory process without doubt has greatly increased its complexity, extension and implications.

At the same time, conversations are happening among representatives of eclectic groups to try to sharpen the guiding principles of this work that always was, and continues to be, respect and clear recognition of the differences among those involved, in pursuit of a common objective. And, it must be clarified, this is no small task -- on the contrary, it represents a hard work. But, although a long one, this collective construction has revealed itself an important and enriching process.

However, it is necessary to warn: it would be a mistake to see this as simply dealing with a search for innocuous formal recognition. The final objective of this process, well defined by all the participants, is to make the inventory suggested by IPHAN and, if possible, to define which cultural references constitute the core that is common to the different ayahuasca matrices, to register these cultural goods as Brazilian Intangible Cultural Heritage, and to establish safeguards that serve to reinforce the communities and preserve these cultural manifestations.

Because, in the end, we understand that the ayahuasca practices cannot be considered simply as questions that can be regulated by national anti-drug policies, or defined solely within the parameters of biomedicine, without treating them as a fundamental and inseparable part of many Amazonian cultures and of our national identity. And this mode of understanding can result in a great paradigm shift in our country, in the Amazon, and in the world. It is a sign of new times that are beginning to delineate themselves.

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