

Ayahuasca Cultural Inventory (*)

by Edson Lodi (**)

Translated to English by Celina Bennett

In 2008 I was invited by Congresswoman Perpétua Almeida (PC/Brazil-Acre State) to a meeting at the Legislative Assembly of Rio Branco, Acre, with some of the main Ayahuasca leaders in the state of Acre. In attendance were also the Congresswoman's advisors, Paulo de Tasso, Fátima Nobre, and some members of the União do Vegetal (UDV) in Rio Branco. The meeting was the first important step taken toward the recognition of the ritual use of Ayahuasca as an Intangible Heritage of the Brazilian Culture by the National Institute of Historical and Artistic Heritage – IPHAN.

Later that year, when the Brazilian Minister of Culture, at that time Gilberto Gil, visited Acre, a document was submitted to him requesting that the “Ritual Use of Ayahuasca” be registered as an Intangible Heritage of the Brazilian Culture. This document was signed by the directors of the Acre Cultural Foundations and of the Municipality of Rio Branco, and leaders of Alto Santo, Barquinha and the União do Vegetal. (***)

According to the resolution of the National Council on Drug Policy (CONAD), which was constituted after ample debate among representatives of the religions that use Ayahuasca in urban centers, there are no questions regarding the legitimacy of the use of Ayahuasca tea within a religious context. However, prejudice persists, motivated mostly by a lack of knowledge on this matter. Sociology professor Joaze Bernadino Costa, points to a positive perspective:

These interactions with the public authorities have been unique opportunities for the advancement of this process of institutionalization, even if at first there was a great deal of prejudice, repression and a lack of awareness by the public authorities and the greater society regarding Ayahuasca religions. However, we know that nothing happens by chance, and what appear to be coincidences are, in truth, signs given us on the path. Many times, obstacles on the path become the very stepping stones that lead the way. Therefore, wherever we find a challenge, an imprisonment, a repression, in reality sometimes it is the opening for a future accomplishment. (Alves *apud* Bernardino Costa, 2011, pg.250)

It is an opportune moment to reinitiate the search for new parameters in the dialogue with the Government, ones that demonstrate the cultural contribution of Ayahuasca use to Brazilian society, beyond the judicial and pharmacological aspects (steps which seem to us to have already been resolved). These cultural factors are pointed to in the petition presented to the Federal Council on Narcotics (CONFEN) in 1985 defending the ritual use of Ayahuasca:

The request for the re-examination of this matter, including aspects of sociological, chemical, pharmacological, anthropological, cultural and legal-constitutional order, is based on the fact that this said substance is used by some institutions of religious nature in the preparation of a sacramental tea. Among these institutions is the

Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal, a community with approximately 2,000 members, which has been recognized as an entity of public service in several locations. (CONFEN, 1985)

Until recently our attention has been diligently focused on chemical, pharmacological, and legal issues. We feel the need to bring our attention now to the anthropological and cultural aspects of the ritual use of Ayahuasca. This is a moment to honor the flowing spring of this profound cultural heritage and in its water recover, register, inventory, and safeguard the cultural expressions and immense diversity of the wisdom, rites and celebrations present in the Ayahuasca cosmologies.

The importance and depth of cultural Ayahuasca practices are immense in this country of so much diversity, plasticity and capacity for articulation and syncretic integration in the ethical and aesthetic realms connected to religious practices. Among the indigenous people of the Amazon that were contacted during the colonial period, there are records indicating that the use of Ayahuasca was part of the intensive cultural and material exchanges. The natives of the Amazon will also take part in this Ayahuasca Cultural Inventory, as creating the inventory is the first step toward accomplishing the goal of registering the ritual use of Ayahuasca as an Intangible Heritage of the Brazilian Culture. What is this inventory? We may conceptualize it as the conducting of research that increases our knowledge of the significance of Ayahuasca religious practices as a cultural asset.

Therefore, this request for registering– the first phase of which is to produce a Cultural Inventory- has the objective to preserve assets of historical and cultural value. This inventory will only contain assets of intangible nature, including popular celebrations and rituals, bodies of knowledge, traditions and customs of specific groups, in this case, Ayahuasca communities. Inclusion in this registry is only granted after the asset is characterized as having significant impact on the cultural development of the Brazilian society and is therefore of great value to the Ayahuasca “nation.”

IPHAN/Acre accepted the bid of the firm Marques & Barbosa Ltd., from Rio Branco, to start the preliminary survey of bibliographical and documentary material on the most important cultural assets of Ayahuasca and the communities that utilize it ritually. This endeavor will subsidize the two later phases of the inventory. There can then be an evaluation of the pertinence of registering Ayahuasca as an Intangible Heritage of the Brazilian Culture.

The consultants on the survey team are: Marcélia Marques do Nascimento, Sandra Lúcia Goulart, Wladimir Sena Araújo and Flávia Burlamaqui. Also invited to participate as collaborators: Sérgio Polignano, Edward MacRae, Marcos Vinicius Neves and Edson Lodi.

This team of researchers, responsible for the “Ritual Use of Ayahuasca” inventory, met in Rio Branco from February 15th to 17th, 2012. During this time the team participated in the Training Course, also attended by the chief officer of IPHAN/Acre, and other experts from the institution. Indigenous community representatives were also present: Acre Special Advisory Council for Indigenous People (Assessoria Especial dos Povos Indígenas do Acre); Acre Indigenous Advocacy Commission (Comissão Pró-Índio do Acre – CPI); Acre Federation of the Huni Kuin People (Federação do Povo Huni Kuin do Acre – FEPHAC) and National Indigenous Foundation (Fundação Nacional do Índio – FUNAI).

One of the objectives of the researchers is to maximize the possibilities for communications with the Ayahuasca groups in order to motivate them to participate in this inventory. For this purpose an informational brochure will be created and distributed, with

explanations of what this endeavor means and what it represents. IPHAN will promote a seminar geared towards the indigenous Ayahuasca communities in order to broaden the discussion on this topic. The decision to participate or not will be entirely up to the indigenous leaders.

The goal of this inventory is to gather sufficient elements to justify the registering of Ayahuasca as an Intangible Heritage of the Brazilian Culture. This registration will allow us to receive preservation awards and recognition by the public authorities.

References

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(*) This text is a translation from the original in Portuguese published at: Lodi, Edson (2012). “Inventário cultural da ayahuasca”. *Bialabate.net*. Available here: http://www.bialabate.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/Lodi_Inventário_Cultural_Ayahuasca_2012.pdf

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(***) Institutions that preserve and respect the religious use of Ayahuasca entered into an ethical agreement that included a Letter of Principles on the ritual use of ayahuasca. This letter was signed by these and other groups in Rio Branco, Acre, in 1991. An English translation is available here: http://www.bialabate.net/pdf/laws/carta_prin_eng.pdf