

## Seeking the Sacred with Psychoactive Substances: Chemical Paths to Spirituality and to God

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Foreword by the Reverend Dr. Alexander Riegel

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### CHAPTER 7

THE UDV RELIGION, SCIENCE, AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH [1](#)

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With the publication of the book *Hoasca, Ciência, Sociedade e Meio Ambiente* [Ayahuasca, Science, Society, and Environment] (Bernardino-Costa, 2011), the Brazilian ayahuasca religion União do Vegetal (UDV) demonstrated vitality and growth, projecting confidence, organizational acumen, and a truthful, confessional character. The book was edited by Joaze Bernardino-Costa, a sociologist at Universidade de Brasília (UNB), who specializes in racial inequality and also holds the rank of *Mestre* (master) of this religious group. Within the world of ayahuasca religions and practices, UDV is known for its strong institutional organization.

According to this volume, UDV has 13,839 members distributed among 104 full-fledged *núcleos* or centers, mostly in Brazil, but including two in the United States and one in Spain; 39 *pre-núcleos* (fledgling centers); and 12 *distribuições autorizadas* (authorized distribution points), of which three are in the United States, one in Lisbon, and one in London (36–41).

Though the religion was only founded in 1961, and represents a relatively small minority within Brazilian's religious expressions, UDV has played an outsized role in shaping the broader legal, social, and scientific trajectory of ayahuasca religiosity in Brazil and throughout the world. Its existence certainly raises important sociological questions. This book represents a watershed in studies of this theme.

The book emerged from the UDV's efforts to publicize the results of its Second International Congress of Hoasca, which took place in Brasilia, Brazil, in 2008. More than a thousand participants took part in the event, which featured presentations by church members and guests of honor,

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including a few scientific researchers. The book includes the contributions of 44 authors, consisting of a foreword, introduction, opening, and 30 chapters divided among three thematic sections: Science, Society, and Environment. Together, the congress and the book should be understood within the UDV's historical trajectory seeking public and legal legitimacy through, diverse publications, scientific collaborations, and internal and public congresses.

The most important prior event was the First International Congress, which took place in Rio de

Janeiro in 1995. The group's first book, published in 1989, was called *União do Vegetal—Hoasca: Fundamentos e Objetivos* (Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal [CEBUDV] 1989). Unlike the book under review, this was a small, homemade volume consisting of an introduction, a collection of internal documents, and a compilation of legal events that had shaped the religious group's history. In this booklet, the UDV identified itself as a religious "sect" (*seita*, a Portuguese term that has perhaps slightly more cultish connotations than in English)—at that time little known to the Brazilian public and stigmatized for its use of "drugs"—that sought to differentiate itself from other urban ayahuasca religions. Both the original 1989 publication and the book under review point out that UDV suspended using ayahuasca in 1985 when Brazilian authorities prohibited the substance, and both reiterate that "[ayahuasca] tea has been proven to be harmless to health."

This short-lived Brazilian prohibition from 1985 to 1986 was in fact a turning point for the UDV toward much greater institutional organization. Yet, the differences between the books also reflect very different historical moments in the growth of the UDV, and highlight the intervening symbolic and practical alliances that were adopted through the process of its legal recognition as a religious group. The Second Congress and this new book reflect a more proactive attitude on behalf of the group as it seeks public visibility and scholarly recognition, unlike the discretion and caution that marked the group's prior involvement with Brazilian society. The book's release in July 2011 coincides with the 50th anniversary of the founding of UDV. For the occasion, the group promoted a number of other events, publications, internal festivities, and public celebrations. Other recent productions have likewise traced the historical trajectory of the group: *Relicário: Imagens do Sertão*, by the journalist Edson Lodi (2010), uses the lyrics and melodies of Brazilian country music (*sertanejo*) to transmit the colors and tones of life in UDV; *Parlamento Reverencia os 50 Anos da União do Vegetal* was compiled and edited by Wolney Queiroz (2011), a federal congressman from Pernambuco who belongs to UDV's counseling body. Queiroz, together with Perpetua Almeida, a congresswoman from the Brazilian Communist Party (PCdoB) in Acre, introduced the motion to hold the 50th anniversary

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honorary ceremony that took place at the House of Representatives in Brasilia on July 11, 2011.

The volume includes the speeches that were made on the occasion as well as articles by various church and government leaders, and a map of 83 different ceremonies held at state and municipal legislative houses. Another important 50th anniversary event was the publication of *Mestre Gabriel, O Mensageiro de Deus*, a biography of the church's founder, Jose Gabriel da Costa, written by Ruy Fabiano (2012), a UDV master and journalist known for his polemical opinions.

Bernardino's book shows many similarities with these other works, but we will focus on certain unique elements found in this volume that reveal important aspects about the current political and historical context of UDV, especially in relation to the group's ongoing dialogue with scientific and scholarly research. Of the five introductory chapters, four are authored by UDV leaders. These chapters present the administrative arm of the church in departments, councils, and divisions that structure power and internal hierarchy; the history of UDV from the "primordial" days through its expansion, travails, and successes; and the moral code of dignity and balance that underlies their concepts and practices related to the Christian virtue of charity. The fifth is written by congresswoman Almeida who, although not a church member, praises and supports the group's petition for recognition of ayahuasca as state and national cultural heritage. This petition represents an important new development: the alliance between three religions—UDV, Alto Santo (Santo Daime), and Barquinha—in requesting that the "sacred right" of ayahuasca be recognized as cultural heritage (56).

Part One, "Hoasca and Science," contains nine chapters subdivided among three main topics. Two chapters describe the mission and function of UDV's medical-scientific department and scientific commission, committees set up within the church to promote internal research and review, and facilitate collaboration with external research projects that plan to study UDV. One chapter is a personal statement by a pharmacologist who participated in the First Hoasca Congress. Six chapters summarize research results of the project "Hoasca in Adolescence" carried out by researchers at University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) and the Federal University of São Paulo, funded mostly by the Heffter Institute, who sought to evaluate the impact of ayahuasca use on young members of UDV.

Of the six, four are Portuguese translations of articles originally published in the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* in 2005 (Da Silveira et al. 2005; Dobkin de Rios et al. 2005; Doering-Silveira et al., 2005a, b). The work emphasizes the young Caianinhos' (little Caianos, a term for UDV disciples) strong adherence to collective values, and highlights the fact that mental health indicators show no significant differences either in neurological or psychiatric

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parameters from the control group. Two additional chapters present previously unpublished results from this study written by Otavio Pereira and Luiza Alonso, respectively. The first of these details the intricate and challenging logistics involved in carrying out the study, and the second presents a methodological discussion on the qualitative aspects of the research.

Part Two, "Hoasca and Society," comprises 12 articles divided among the following topics: UDV in Brazil, UDV abroad, and "historical ayahuasquero [hoasqueira] institutions," a term UDV applies to the other ayahuasca religious groups invited to participate in the Second Congress. In the first subdivision, we learn about the church's institutional objectives, its collaboration with government drug control agencies, charity activities supported by the group, narratives by religious leaders from Alto Santo and Barquinha (smaller, nonexpansionist ayahuasca churches), and legal struggles in the United States and Spain highlighting UDV's landmark victory in the U.S. Supreme Court. This section presents an excellent overview of the UDV's historical trajectory in different countries and makes available, for the first time in Portuguese, translations of two chapters published previously in English in the book *The Internationalization of Ayahuasca* (Labate and Jungaberle 2011).

John Boyd, one of the American lawyers who argued the UDV's case before the U.S. Supreme Court, provides an especially significant and moving behind-the-scenes account of the UDV's historic struggle to obtain legal recognition in the United States. His discussion turns on the idea of religious freedom that is fundamental to modern, democratic life.

The third part, "Hoasca and the Environment," includes nine chapters that present the UDV's research into the ethnobotany and conservation of the mariri vine (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and chacrona shrub (*Psychotria viridis*) that make up the ayahuasca brew. These texts outline the various projects the group has undertaken, for example, studies of the ecology and taxonomy of the species involved, the creation of a seed bank, recovery of degraded areas with agroforestry systems, and sustainable management of the harvested plants. The reader is guided along this fascinating trail of initiatives that combine scientific knowledge with cumulative empirical know-how, leading the UDV to complete self-sufficiency in the harvest and consumption of the plants used in making their sacred beverage.

The chapter by Maria Alice Correa presents, for the first time, the scientific identification of the three species of chacrona used by the group, previously referred to only by their vernacular names: "cabocla" (*Psychotria viridis*), "caianinha" (*Psychotria leiocarpa*), and "caneluda" (*Psychotria carthagensis*). The concluding chapter of the section elaborates on the history and environmental actions of the NGO known as Associação Novo Encanto (New Enchantment Association), the little-known "ecological arm" of UDV

that runs different projects throughout Brazil. In our estimation, this part of the book represents the most significant and innovative contribution of the volume, highlighting a prominent feature that differentiates UDV from most other ayahuasca-drinking groups throughout the world, namely; a huge expansion of ayahuasca usage and harvest accompanied by sustainability, efficiency, and organization.

The resulting book constitutes an important source of information and research that allows for multiple interpretations and appropriations. It will inspire nonspecialists to learn more about the diverse history and evolution of UDV, in particular, and the richness of the ayahuasca religious phenomenon more generally. It will also stimulate interest in the topic for researchers from different disciplines and contribute toward the consolidation of the emergent field of ayahuasca studies. In sum, *Hoasca: Ciência, Sociedade e Meio-Ambiente* will immediately become a central reference for those interested in this field.

The book is authored by social actors situated at the boundaries between “religion and scholarship, religion and the state, religion and national society” (12). Besides seeking to introduce their point of view to society and the governmental powers, the church questions the primacy of academic discourses over what UDV is and claims the right to “our own vision about our selves” (Otávio Velho, on the jacket text). In the foreword, the editor of the volume and the organizer of the Second Congress, Joaze Bernardino-Costa and Jose Roberto Campos de Sousa, specifically reject classifying the book as a “contribution by ‘natives’ to the field of study” (12).

Instead, in this work, the UDV aims to promote a “dialog with the pertinent scholarly and scientific literature” (12), thus presenting itself as a religious form that seeks public expression through scholarly recognition, “installing a more symmetrical dialog with the academy” (19). These objectives are legitimate and in consonance with the spirit of contemporary anthropology. Seeking to take seriously this goal of symmetry and dialogue with the academy, and as co-participants in the construction of the field, we present here a few critical considerations. We do not pretend to exhaust the subject nor underestimate the important contributions in this volume, but rather aim our critical reading at deepening the discussion. As a work that presents a religious institution situated as both subject and object of scientific study, the book acknowledges the religious affiliation of its authors, but it does not submit its discourse to a more reflexive analysis. As Bourdieu points out, such a reflexive process helps minimize the risk of turning a belief system into an analytical model (Bourdieu 1998). In this sense, we ask: Who is this book for? Unlike the authors’ proposition, we view the book as being aimed primarily at its own adepts, serving as a source of data for academic researchers about “native thought.”

Though this book shows much greater sophistication in articulating with scholarly work than the previous one—and in contrast to the various other productions that were released around the same time that didn’t have this pretense—one nonetheless gets the feeling that we are still dealing with an “institutional” tome. To what degree, in fact, does the book engage with the existing scholarly literature on the subject? How rigorous is it in relation to the historical facts that marked the development of ayahuasca religions in Brazil?

In the chapters where we learn about the scientific commission and other institutional relationships, we find some clues toward understanding the theoretical and analytical limits we

mention above. The scientific commission, formed by members situated at the top of the institutional hierarchy, is charged with the “analysis, approval, and supervision” (71) of various academic research projects. The idea of “supervision” is justified in order to “guarantee that scientific production is compatible with the objectives of our Institution” (71).

Although such interest in preserving religious privacy and public representation of the institution are worth considering, this posture appears to bring consequences to the necessary process of separating the religious and scientific spheres of knowledge. These themes were, in fact, discussed in the methodological considerations in some of our own previous works (Labate and Pacheco 2010; Melo 2010). The book contains continuous reiterations of the fact that UDV respects the research process and the autonomy of researchers: “União do Vegetal participated only in the logistics of such research, not interfering in the definition of methods or interpretation of data” (14); “independent researchers” (85); “non-interference” (95); “acceptance of academic science” (197); “in the same manner as in the biological sciences, this dialog with social scientists, especially anthropologists, was always welcome in the institution” (66).

Nevertheless, the book avoids promoting a critical reflection on the relationship between the UDV and the scientific knowledge produced about it, whether by members of the scientific commission or by the academic researchers who are invited to write chapters in the book. An opportunity was lost to deepen the “symmetrical dialog” and at the same time eliminate the dissonance present in the delicate situation that typically marks the relationship between researchers and research subjects. Knowing the field well, we are aware of various tensions that have occurred between UDV and social scientists in the course of their research.

In contrast to the typical academic distance, a “UDV-ist” religious posture is clearly visible throughout the book. Perhaps the best example is the exhaustive repetition of the fact that the hoasca “tea” is “proven to be harmless to the health” and that “scientific studies prove what Master Gabriel

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taught: that hoasca is harmless to health” (43, 48, 69, 153, 155, 161, 241, among others; the books by Queiroz and Fabiano also insist on this point).

The authors who make these affirmations refer especially to the “Human Pharmacology of Ayahuasca” project (Callaway et al. 1994, 1996, 1999; Grob et al. 1996; McKenna, Callaway, and Grob 1998) and the research on adolescent users. As some authors have noted (Labate et al. 2009), “Human Pharmacology” was a pilot project that included only 15 subjects, all males who had a long experience with ayahuasca consumption, imposing an important limitation on the data obtained and the possibilities for extrapolation because people who have experienced adverse effects tend to leave the group rather than remain.

The research project with adolescents corrected some of these problems, increasing the sample size to 40 people and including greater diversity in terms of gender and length of involvement in the group. Yet the sample size is still small, among other methodological limitations. While these two projects are valuable and pioneering studies, considering the broader field of biomedical research, it is not yet possible to make such a generic and strong affirmation that “ayahuasca is harmless to the health.”

Evaluating the effects of a psychoactive substance, especially outside the laboratory settings, is enormously complex and implies both legal and methodological challenges. The field of biomedical studies on the ritual use of ayahuasca is just getting started. More longitudinal studies with follow-up over several years are necessary, as well as prospective studies (pre-use evaluations) or those that take into account retroactive data, using methodologies that allow the determination of causal relations and that document not just behavioral changes but persistence through time (cf. Barbosa et al. 2012). On the other hand, the existing research

cannot be taken as absolute evidence about the “beneficial effects of ayahuasca” because it remains unclear which aspects might result from religious conversion more generally and which can be attributed more specifically to psychoactive use.

Additionally, most laboratorial research involves investigating the effect of ayahuasca only on previously selected healthy volunteers. Finally, one must consider the broader political and contextual limitations involved in this kind of knowledge production, for instance, bias in the recruitment of research subjects and the fact that subjects might be anxious to “score well” on interviews and questionnaires given the stigma around ayahuasca use.

The chapter by Luiza Alonso, for example, approaches somewhat tangentially the classic influence of religious culture on private life, pointing out the resistance of UDV adolescents toward taking individual stances on taboo topics such as religious affiliation, drugs, and sex. The scientific bibliography on hallucinogens in general, and ayahuasca in particular, points out the importance of caution in the consumption of these

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substances in certain contexts, and by certain populations, such as those with mental problems or those using certain psychiatric medicines. In the Labate and Jungaberle (2011) collection, mentioned above, Francisco Assis de Sousa Lima and Luis Fernando Tófoli, both members of the UDV, presented a more balanced view about the possible risks of ayahuasca, reporting a few apparent psychotic episodes within the UDV membership.

This discussion was not included in the congress, and Bernardino’s book neither cites the article nor provides a more nuanced and critical reflection on possible risks associated with ayahuasca use, and does not discuss the implications and limitations of available biomedical research on the subject. However, our observations do not in any way dismiss the genuine interest the UDV has shown for scientific discussion nor dispute the available evidence for potential therapeutic uses of ayahuasca and a reasonable degree of safety when used in certain contexts.

The authors’ overestimation of the biomedical and scientific implications of the two research projects developed under UDV auspices appears related to an overestimation of their legal significance. Historically, regulation of ayahuasca use in Brazil is not related to the research carried out within UDV, as some adepts of the group seem to think and sometimes affirm. In the first place, the Hoasca project was published in the early 1990s, while the plant *Banisteriopsis caapi* was excluded from the old DIMED (Divisão Nacional de Medicamentos, the National Division of Medicines)-controlled substances list in the mid-1980s. In some places, the book appears to suggest implicitly that UDV research on adolescents influenced legal decisions about ayahuasca use among children and youth in Brazil (i.e., 158, 176). Yet the research on adolescents was published in June 2005, while the first reference to permission to consume ayahuasca by pregnant women and children appears in 2004 in the “Evaluation by the Technical-Scientific Advisory Chamber on the Religious Use of Ayahuasca” (Parecer 2004), which is summarized in CONAD Resolution No. 5, also in 2004 (Resolução 2004).

Both these documents, and others that followed, do not cite the UDV research as a source for their decisions but rather emphasize anthropological and cultural questions in the defense of religious freedom. In sum, the regulation of ayahuasca use in Brazil by adults, children, youth, and pregnant women did not occur based on the exclusion of ayahuasca from the category of “drug,” nor because scientific research showed it to be “harmless to the health.”

The tendency to overvalue the role of UDV in regulating ayahuasca use is heightened by the absence of references to the role of another ayahuasca religion commonly known as Santo Daime, formerly specified by the acronym CEFLURIS (Centro Eclético da Fluente

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Luz Universal Raimundo Irineu Serra) and now known as ICEFLU (Igreja do Culto Eclético da Fluente Luz Universal Patrono Sebastião Mota de Melo). This group, together with UDV, played a central role in the expansion of ayahuasca beyond the Amazon and was present side by side with UDV over the past 25 years in debates before government representatives and scientific researchers to regulate these practices.

Nevertheless, the group is cited only once, tangentially, in one of the chapters. No representative of CEFLURIS or ICEFLU was invited to participate in the congress or in the round table event that generated the section of the book called "Historical Ayahuasca [Hoasqueiras] Institutions." Apparently, according to this classification, the selection of what is considered to be "historical" or "traditional" in the field of ayahuasca religions depends on political alliances rather than historical or sociological criteria.

Likewise, the book presents UDV as maintaining a close and tolerant relationship with the other ayahuasca religions, pointing out the "friendly contact and good relations between Master Gabriel and other ayahuasquero leaders" (16). Missing are references to published academic reflections on the historical trajectory of relationships and exchange between the groups, as well as the rivalries currently present in the field of ayahuasca.

Several authors (Labate 2004; Goulart 2004; Patrocínio de Andrade 2004; Melo 2010; Luna 1995; Henman 2009) have presented critical reviews of debates surrounding the "Story of Hoasca" and the "Episode of the Masters of Curiosity" (rival ayahuasca practitioners who supposedly capitulated to Gabriel's superior religious authority), and yet none of these references are mentioned.

Like the Kardecist spiritist religious groups have historically done (Giumbelli 2008), the UDV resorts to certain strategies of self-legitimization, including charity and appeals for recognition as an institution for the public good. In this sense, there are certain striking parallels between the speeches that commemorated the 50th anniversary of UDV in the chambers of the Brazilian Federal Congress and those that celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Assemblies of God evangelical church in the same place a month earlier (June 14, 2011).

Both religions proclaimed forest origins, remembered the early years of stigma and persecution, celebrated expansion, and revealed an interest in public manifestation associated with the sphere of state power. In the case of the UDV, this discourse of self-legitimization is consistent with its principles of "respect for the laws of the country" and "cultivating [cativar] relations with the authorities," founding tenets of the UDV ethos transformed into catch phrases in Queiroz's book (*Journal Alto Falante* [Loudspeaker Journal] 2011).

The image of the UDV promoted by the book is sustained by another set of claims: that the religion has "egalitarian features," "participatory character,"

and is "democratic" in promoting elections for its administrative bodies (27–36). What is omitted is the fact that women are not allowed to reach the maximum spiritual degree of "master;" and hence, though they participate locally in each nucleus, they do not participate in the broader regional and national elections, and in only a few cases do they attain important positions in the administrative leadership. This patriarchal bias has generated internal protests and frictions. Likewise, people who are unemployed, divorced, single, or homosexual encounter significant difficulties in ascending through the hierarchy and do not attain the degree of "master." In all, the notion of "equality" appears to be applied selectively.

By focusing on the values of work and family, the UDV emphasizes its allegiance with Christian moral principles while diminishing its own historical roots in non-Christian traditions (Goulart 2004; Melo 2011). For example, in the section on Ayahuasca and Environment, Maria Alice

Correa mentions 10 “companion plants” found near the natural habitat of chacrona and mariri, indicating the presence of these species. The companion plants, she argues, could contribute to the “biochemical communication” inherent in the composition of ayahuasca, thus describing an intricate system of communication among plants, and between plants and humans.

Of the 10 companion plants mentioned by Correa (286), eight happen to figure, along with chacrona and mariri, among the “Nove Vegetais” (“nine plants”) that are used to make a special brew valued for exceptional medicinal properties, a practice derived from indigenous and mestizo shamanic traditions. The “Nove Vegetais” brew is no longer prepared by UDV for fears of accusations of charlatanism and “false practice of medicine,” according to Brazilian law, because there are no proper scientific studies to back up the therapeutic use of this medicinal mixture, nor of ayahuasca itself (see Labate and Bouso 2011). Correa does not mention the existence of the “Nove Vegetais” brew, even though she does discuss the plants as “companions,” apparently reflecting the same logic of preoccupation over legal and biomedical issues that led to the extinction of this tradition by the group.

Allowing secular debate over the sacrament to move beyond the strictly legal arena is a dilemma for a form of religiosity such as UDV that transits between Christianity and magic. Indeed, the magical elements are much more notable in Fabiano’s biography of Master Gabriel, portrayed as a popular healer and prophet imbued with special powers.

The tension between Kardecist-Christian spiritism on the one hand and Afro-Brazilian spiritism and popular Amazonian shamanism on the other is a fundamental question, not for ecological or pharmacological research, but rather to the domain of the social and cultural. In the original 1989 book, the official meanings of *burracheira*—a word borrowed from the Spanish “drunk, intoxicated,” and used by UDV to refer to the special state of consciousness

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and other effects caused by ayahuasca consumption—are explored through many pages and compared with other traditional altered states of consciousness. The theme of *burracheira* was also present in previous congresses (1991, 1993, 1995), appearing always in a double register that expresses a tension: on one side, it is a product of the magic healing powers of the caboclo; on the other, the “spiritual gifts” received (*merecimento*) depend on following certain moral behavior, which is derived from a Christianized, middle-class perspective.

In the 2008 congress and the 2011 book, there are notably fewer panels and contributions that unite former rubber tappers (the “natives” of UDV) and biomedical professionals: its “doctors.” If we take pains to point out these limitations in the academic approach sustained by the book, it is because this tension and hybridism between science and religion is what makes the UDV such an interesting phenomenon and the book such a valuable contribution. Through its desire to seek public recognition and its openness to research—in sum, its vision of convergence between spiritual knowledge (the “science of Solomon”) and science (academic knowledge)—UDV has creatively and constantly added new elements to its religious and cultural repertoire. In this sense, the ideas expressed in the book tend to become part of the group’s own world view, thus strengthening it.

Finally, if the book’s objective was to elevate UDV to a new level in its public representation and to provoke academics, then it was certainly doubly successful.

#### NOTES

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