

## **Children of a higher God and journalism of a higher standard**

I would like to express here my disappointment with the article “Children of a Higher God” published March 2<sup>nd</sup> on the Willamette Week, found here: [http://www.wweek.com/portland/article-17017-children\\_of\\_a\\_higher\\_god.html](http://www.wweek.com/portland/article-17017-children_of_a_higher_god.html)

It tells the interesting story of a couple who are fighting over the right of their 7-year-old daughter to partake in Santo Daime ceremonies. Unfortunately, it chose to follow the sensationalistic spirit of the tabloids.

I am particularly frustrated because I had given an interview to Nancy Rommelman and sent her a forthcoming article entitled “Consumption of Ayahuasca by Children and Pregnant Women: Medical Controversies and Religious Perspectives,” which will come out in the March edition of the Journal of Psychoactive Drugs, and all this information was ignored in the text. Instead, the author used pictures from my work to illustrate what seemed to be a pre-formatted story, resting on common misperceptions, and not the product of real investigation. It is frustrating to me as an anthropologist and researcher in the field of ayahuasca studies for 15 years, with several serious academic publications about its legal, social and health aspects, to see such a superficial approach dominating the public debate.

First, the article is misleading in its description of Santo Daime as having only a superficial relationship to Christianity, and describes this in a disrespectful and glib way. It follows by mentioning ayahuasca tourism and shamanism in Peru in a mish-mash of references – what does this have to do with the use of ayahuasca by this religious branch? Next, it dismisses the main character of the story – a mother in a custody battle with the father of her daughter – by stereotyped references to her hair, clothing style, and how much she spent on her shoes.

Further, the article quotes a shamanic ceremony as a space of “vomiting, yelling and threats,” with a legend in a photo as “tea party”: in sum, not informing us about what really this ceremony was for. cursory research would have informed the author about the structure and purpose of such ceremonies. Yelling and threats are not typical of any ayahuasca ceremonial tradition.

Finally, there is the implication – based on no real investigation or presentation of facts – that a church leader diverted sacrament for use in a private shamanic ceremony. Even if this is not stated directly, it is irresponsible to imply that ayahuasca is being diverted without proof. Such allegations could ultimately jeopardize the group’s legal status, which was earned partly as a result of trust in the functionaries of the church.

The aforementioned are all concerns regarding the credibility of this article, but what is sincerely shocking is the lack of discussion of the main issue itself. The article does not discuss why the use of ayahuasca was regulated in Brazil and in the US, nor does it

discuss the main arguments in this area. These religions were recognized in Brazil, Holland and in the US as legitimate religious expressions. This happened after 25 years of debate and public scrutiny. These groups were allowed to use this substance because their use was considered safe and in a proper setting. There is no reference in the article to the official government legislation regulating the use of ayahuasca by children and pregnant women, nor to the many public debates on these issues; all were ignored.

These disputes between parents also happen often in Brazil, and are normal; they are part of the development of these recent religions. This is a very fair and pertinent debate, which unfortunately the article does not engage in. It would be fascinating to trace parallels with other religions and similar phenomena regarding the limits of personal freedom, such as polygamy or the right to not use helmets when riding motorcycles, barring religious clothing in public schools, not allowing blood transfusions and so many others. Instead it repeats old clichés on hallucinogens and sects, and reduces this complex and interesting anthropological matter to a sideshow fueled by the accusations of an unhappy father.

The use of ayahuasca by children and pregnant woman is allowed with parental consent in Brazil. This is in accord with the notion, based on the right of religious freedom, that parents are allowed to raise their children in their own traditions. Many things are imposed on infants according to family values, such as circumcision and baptism. Why should it be different with Santo Daime? To prohibit people from following their religious beliefs leads us down the slope to a state of dictatorship. The Santo Daime members should have full autonomy to decide whether their children should join the ceremonies or not. Of course, when the two parents disagree, there should be a consensus, but this is not exceptional and pertains to education, vaccinations, and many other issues regarding the rearing of a child.

There is no evidence of harm in the use of ayahuasca by children and pregnant women; the burden to prove this harm should be on the State, and not the other way around. These groups have a profound accumulation of knowledge on ayahuasca, and treat it very respectfully. If it were not so, they would have hardly won their right to practice in the most vehemently anti-drug empire in the world. Their criteria for administering ayahuasca to people are based on a combination of factors, such as age, size, gender experience, health conditions, state of mind, sensitivity, and others. It is much easier to stigmatize different habits than to try to understand them.

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