

LOOKING IN: MATTHEW MEYER AND BEATRIZ CAIUBY LABATE

# Rhetoric against use of hoasca not justified

Readers may recall the legal saga of the União do Vegetal, which began in 1999 and resulted, in 2006, in a unanimous Supreme Court decision for the UDV. The cornerstone of the government's failed argument in that case was precisely the contention of the Arroyo Hondo temple critics: hoasca contains dimethyltryptamine, or DMT; DMT is classified as dangerous; therefore, UDV use of hoasca must not be permitted. But scientific studies, decades of real-world experience in Brazil and 19 years of UDV practice in the Santa Fe area confirm that the fears conjured by panicked rhetoric are not justified by reality.

Biomedical research, including a UCLA study, has not demonstrated any harm resulting from UDV hoasca use; in fact, research to date suggests that hoasca may have antidepressant effects. DMT, furthermore, is naturally produced by the human body and by many plants, such as reed canary grass. It breaks down quickly upon exposure to air and light, so risks of groundwater contamination from DMT are nil. Moreover, because the UDV views hoasca as sacred, great care is taken in securing it from improper use. In its years of practice, there has been no evidence of diversion of hoasca in Brazil or in the USA.

The UDV congregation in Santa Fe is part of an international organization based in Brazil founded by an Amazonian rubber tapper in 1961. Today, there are about 14,000 UDV members in Brazil, North America and Europe. As with the proposed Arroyo Hondo facility, UDV temples are often in rural areas or on the outskirts of town, partly because of the value UDV cosmology affords to silent contemplation in nature.

In our fieldwork, we have witnessed firsthand the care with which the UDV approaches hoasca drinking. A period of socialization at the end of ceremonies allows more time for the effects of the hoasca to attenuate, and it also gives the

leadership a chance to evaluate the state of individuals and ascertain that they can drive home safely. Given that thousands of people on three continents drink hoasca in the UDV an average of two times per month, we consider it significant that we have no knowledge of problems related to the operation of motor vehicles following ceremonies.

In Brazil, religious use of hoasca has been the subject of years of study by government commissions, beginning in the early 1980s. In a 1986 report, the judge appointed to oversee investigation into the hoasca religions wrote that "The moral and ethical standards of behavior observed in the various groups are in every respect similar to those found, and recommended, in our society, and are sometimes even quite rigid." In recognition of its charitable service work, the UDV has been designated as an organization of "public utility" in Brazil since 1999, and, in 2010, the Brazilian government announced the definitive legality of ritual hoasca use.

Moreover, these practices have been officially declared cultural heritage of the Amazonian state of Acre, and are under consideration by Brazil's Culture Ministry for inclusion in the national registry as well, along with samba music and the Círio de Nazaré, a popular Catholic procession.

The UDV fought for a decade to win the right to practice freely; now it seeks a permanent place for its ceremonies. We urge the county commissioners to consider the request based on a clear-eyed analysis of the proposed project's impacts.

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