

Development and Organizational Goals of the União do Vegetal as a Brazilian and International Religious Group

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The Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal (CEBUDV) is a Christian-based religion with over twelve thousand registered members and one hundred and forty officially recognized administrative units in Brazil, the USA, Spain, Portugal, the UK and Switzerland. Since its creation by José Gabriel da Costa (Mestre Gabriel) on July 22nd, 1961, the UDV has had the principle of working toward the evolution of humanity in the sense of its spiritual, moral and intellectual development. This spiritual guideline includes the belief in its contribution towards global pacification.

José Gabriel da Costa was born on February 10, 1922, in a small municipality called Coração de Maria (Mary's Heart), in the state of Bahia, Brazil. As a young man he migrated to the state of Rondonia, in the Amazon, to work as a rubber tapper in the "rubber army," a term used by the federal government, which recruited workers for the rubber economy. It was in the Amazon that Mestre Gabriel came into contact with the tea Hoasca and began to hold sessions in his home, first in the forest and later in the town of Porto Velho. He worked as a rubber tapper, a mason, a truck driver, and a nurse's assistant, always struggling to provide for his family with the help of his wife, Pequenina.

Mestre Gabriel taught that the tea Hoasca should be used as a vehicle for mental concentration, by people who drink it on their own free will. The rituals he began performing, initially with family members and a few disciples, encourage the participation of the disciples, asking questions to the Mestre, who directs the session. The teachings of the UDV are transmitted orally, "from mouth to ear," in the sessions of "escala," which happen every first and second Saturday of a month. The UDV doctrine includes the belief in reincarnation and spiritual evolution, with reverence to the teachings of Jesus Christ, whom Mestre Gabriel called the "Divine Master."

Disciples should work towards their spiritual evolution through moral improvement, having the Christian value of love towards other human beings as the main goal. The UDV has as its symbol of peace and human fraternity the triad "Light, Peace and Love," and encourages its disciples to work towards a healthy equilibrium in different dimensions of their lives, including professional, family, and religious aspects. There are three classes of members in the UDV: Mestres, Counselors, and Disciples, a hierarchical organization which involves different degrees of commitment regarding the UDV and also regarding personal work towards spiritual evolution.

The UDV began with a small group in Porto Velho, capital of the state of Rondônia, in the north of Brazil. Actions which have shaped the organization's growth and institutional establishment have repeatedly been in the direction of acquiring public recognition through the proper legal channels, in Brazil and wherever necessary.

Even though discretion is also a UDV principle, its members have in several occasions initiated legal actions to ensure the right to partake in their main sacrament, centered on the communion of the tea Hoasca (or Vegetal, both names are used for ayahuasca within the UDV). This article discusses the main steps taken by the UDV toward formal organization and legal recognition, especially in Brazil. These actions have helped achieve the title of *Utilidade Pública Federal* (Federal Public Utility Entity), legal standing as an official religion and the right to use Hoasca in religious ceremonies. The present paper broaches the issue of legalization and institutionalization of the UDV in order to inform public discourse about the general goals and strategies of the União do Vegetal as it is seeking the right to practice its religion in other countries outside Brazil.

Beginnings of the UDV and First Steps Towards Legalization

The first name of the UDV, when its first Internal Rules were written, was simply “União do Vegetal,” having later been formally registered as Associação Beneficente União do Vegetal, and in 1971 it became Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal. The fact that the organization was first registered as an Association, and later as a Spiritual Center is related, among other things, to the continuous pursuit of the best possible institutional standing in different political contexts.

The UDV has always promoted initiatives so as to demonstrate to those that are not yet familiar with its practices that the Vegetal (Hoasca) is “proven to be harmless to one’s health.”¹ These words by Mestre Gabriel have been present since the first statute, which was officially registered in a registry’s office (*cartório*) in March of 1968. Equally important is the doctrine taught in the UDV’s sessions, with precepts which are in agreement with moral and ethical values shared by the most respected segments of society at large. As a religious institution, it seeks the physical, mental and spiritual equilibrium of its members as individuals and in their interpersonal relationships.

The first contacts of the UDV with formal institutions pertaining to Brazilian national society were in Porto Velho in the late 1960s. It is important to note that Brazil’s government at the time was a military dictatorship and there were several restrictions concerning rights of assemblage and the formation of associations. It is also interesting to remember that throughout Brazilian history there had been several instances when religious groups were violently repressed with formal justifications which mixed political, economic, and religious claims. Rondônia in the 1960s was a territory under direct supervision of the federal government, but most of its land was covered with dense rainforest where the modes of livelihood included various indigenous populations and also migrants from several regions of Brazil working as rubber-tappers in semi-servile work relations with powerful landowners. Porto Velho served as a center for medical, commercial, and military activity, which was important due to its location in a borderland region.

The use of Hoasca, under names such as *yagé*, *caapi*, *cipó* and others, was common enough in the hinterland, viewed mostly as an indian and *caboclo* practice without much political consequence. However, when the UDV began to establish itself as

an institution with regular meetings in an urban area, it attracted attention from local authorities. The urban-based members of the UDV began to feel the necessity for more formal organization. So the first Internal Rules were drafted and in 1967 the associates of the Associação Beneficente União do Vegetal elected their first board of directors, with a President, Treasurer, Secretary and other members, but the Association was still not officially registered.

First Reactions of Public Authorities to the UDV

The use of Hoasca and the periodical group meetings encountered a number of prejudices and arbitrary actions from resistant authorities, such as a police deputy from Porto Velho who arrested Mestre Gabriel. A description of the episode was published in the newspaper *Alto Madeira* in October, 1967, under the title “*Convicção do Mestre*” (Conviction of the Master)². Mestre Gabriel was detained for questioning but released on the next day, explaining to his disciples the mission of the UDV, and reminding them of the symbol of peace and human fraternity adopted by this religion, which is “Light, Peace and Love.” This event brought about the awareness of the need to formally register the association in a *cartório*, where all official documents must be registered so as to be legally valid in Brazil. Thus, the first Statute of the UDV was registered in 1968. This is an important landmark concerning the official standing of this religious institution.

In 1970, the chief of police of the Territory of Rondônia verbally declared that the União do Vegetal was shut down. Mestre Gabriel did not shut down the UDV but, demonstrating respect toward the established authority, refrained from receiving newcomers (*adventícios*) and continued to have sessions with the associates. Raimundo Monteiro de Souza, or Mestre Monteiro, who was the association’s president at the time, hired a lawyer to defend the UDV’s rights and contacted the Court of Justice for Territories and the Federal District,³ under the jurisdiction of which stood the territory of Rondônia. Following legal council, the UDV’s members began working on a new Statute which explicitly mentioned the use of the Vegetal, and also transformed the name of the religious institution from “Beneficent Association” to “Spiritual Center,” a term which put the UDV among other religious groups and highlighted its spiritual (as in not political) objectives.

In June 1971, the UDV was registered as the *Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal*, with documents that specifically stated the use of the tea Hoasca in its religious practices in the following terms, which persist to this date: “Those affiliated to the Center drink, on their own free will, a tea, Hoasca, made of two plants, *mariri* and *chacrona*, proven to be harmless to one’s health.” (CEBUDV, 1994)

On July 11, 1971, the Bishop of Porto Velho criticized the UDV in a sermon during Sunday Mass. Mestre Gabriel responded through an article published on July 16 in the newspaper *O Guaporé*, titled “*Velado Enquanto Dorme*” (In a Wake while asleep). The article stated that a member of the UDV, within sixty days of regular attendance, would be free of attending places considered to be harmful to one’s moral formation. It also states that the UDV has a purpose of combating the use of narcotic substances, including alcohol.

Since the death of José Gabriel da Costa in September of 1971, those responsible for the UDV have been working towards consolidating the position of legality and respectability for which its founder tirelessly strived. With the expansion of the UDV to all regions of Brazil, as well as the United States, Spain and hopefully other countries in the future, the Center has always provided the constituted authorities with required information and has won the right to its sincere religious practice. The direction of the UDV, along with other religious institutions that use Hoasca as a sacrament, has involved struggles to establish ethical premises and guidelines for the use of the tea. Its position is that the tea should always be used in a responsible manner. The ritual and religious character of communion should be preserved in all occasions in respect to the sacredness of the tea.

During the 1970s and 1980s there were many times when the UDV had to deal with hostile actions from government-linked individuals and institutions. In 1982, the General Headquarters of the UDV (*Sede Geral*) was moved from Porto Velho to Brasília (Distrito Federal, capital of Brazil), where it still stands. By that time, the UDV had already expanded from Porto Velho to Manaus, São Paulo, Brasília, Rio de Janeiro, and the Northeast of Brazil.

The Exclusion of *Banisteriopsis caapi* from the List of Forbidden Substances

Nearly three years after the transfer of the *Sede Geral* to Brasília, the UDV once again had to take legal action to assure its right to religious practice. On June 24, 1985, the Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal, through its legal representative, the attorney Luis Felipe Belmonte dos Santos, presented a request to the *Conselho Federal de Entorpecentes* – CONFEN (Federal Narcotics Council) for the exclusion of *Banisteriopsis caapi* (*mariri*) from the list of forbidden substances of the *Divisão de Medicamentos* (Division of Medications - DIMED) of the Ministry of Health. The DIMED had included the vine in the list of psychotropics of forbidden use in Brazil, in an Order published in March, 1984, because it allegedly contained DMT. This was a mistake because the *mariri* does not contain DMT, although the *chacrona* (*Psychotria viridis*) does. Nonetheless, the UDV followed the orientation of its founder, who always taught his disciples to respect the established laws and authorities, and suspended the use of the Vegetal until the Center was assured that there would not be any kind of persecution of its members. This respectful and friendly demonstration of good will helped the UDV to make a case for the legal use of the Vegetal before the Brazilian government.

The UDV also offered to collaborate with scientific studies regarding the effect of the tea on its members during the rituals. The request sent to CONFEN stated:

The request of revision of the issue, including under aspects of sociological, chemical, pharmacological, cultural, juridical and constitutional order, is linked to the fact that the referred substance is used in the preparation of a tea by a number of religious entities, among which is the Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal, a society of about two thousand associates which is already recognized as having public utility in several places. (CONFEN, 1985a; authors' translation)

This legal action from the UDV resulted in the creation of a study group for the examination of the production and consumption of the substances derived from *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis* in their medical, sociological, anthropological aspects, and of general health. The CEBUDV vastly collaborated with the study group, composed of scientists and representatives of other ayahuasca using religions, providing requested information and opening its rituals to observation.

On February 5, 1986, CONFEN decided to exclude the *Banisteriopsis caapi* from the list of forbidden substances, while maintaining the study group's activities, basing its decision on the constitutional right to free religious practice. While this decision gave the UDV and other groups legal backup to continue performing their rituals, it was only published in August of 1992, including a clause that allowed the reexamination of the matter in case of the appearance of new facts (Silva Sá, 1987, 1992).

In the meantime, the UDV helped elaborate and signed the *Carta de Princípios das Entidades Usuárias da Ayahuasca* (Declaration of Principles of the Religious Groups that consume the Tea Hoasca), together with other religious institutions, which had the responsible use of the tea as its main goal. This was an important action regarding the establishment of partnerships with other groups which have the same commitment towards religious responsibility and spiritual work for the benefit of human spiritual evolution. All seemed at peace, but the issue was not yet settled. Thus, in 1995 the CONFEN published a new deliberation recommending the interdiction of the use of the tea for people under 18 years old, based on a complaint made by the mother of a juvenile who attended a religious group other than the UDV. Consequences of this action were felt in a few states and municipalities where local judges' decisions forbade the use of the Vegetal by children.

In 1996, the UDV once again presented legal action to CONFEN, requesting reexamination of the matter as well as scientific studies with UDV teenagers. In spite of all effort and collaboration from the CEBUDV, the government published an official opinion that recommended that minors under the age of eighteen should not drink the tea, even in the company of their parents or legal guardians. Again, such recommendation was not based on any empirical observation or scientific research and has been successfully challenged by the UDV and other religious entities which use ayahuasca, as can be seen in the next section.

Traditionally, the UDV had permitted the use of Vegetal by children under parental supervision and in smaller doses than adults, with increasing participation as the children grew older. Participation has always been voluntary and the UDV requests parental permission for all participants under eighteen. Presently, children under the age of twelve are allowed to take part in up to five pre-established ceremonies along the year; once a month when they are between twelve and fourteen and twice a month when they are between fourteen and eighteen. At the age of eighteen they may become full members of the UDV if they wish to do so.

Continuation of the Legalization Process in the Context of Institutional Challenges

In 1998, the CONFEN was extinguished and the activities it performed were taken away from the control of the Ministry of Justice. In the same year, the National Anti-Drug Council (CONAD) was created, along with the National Anti-Drug Secretariat (SENAD). Both new organizations were no longer linked to the Ministry of Justice, but to the Cabinet for Institutional Security of the Republic's Presidency. UDV members followed this institutional shift closely, continuing to insist on their right to freely exercise their religion and providing the new organization with all the necessary information to show that the tea is harmless to people's health.

Meanwhile, in 1999 the UDV received a request from the University of California, Irvine, along with other universities, to initiate a joint research project about teenagers who drink Hoasca in the UDV (see da Silveira et al., 2005; Dobkin de Rios et al., 2005; Doering-Silveira et al., 2005a, 2005b). During the research activities and until its conclusion, the UDV kept both CONAD and the Federal Public Ministry informed about its actions and results. Finally, on August 17, 2004, CONAD's Board approved the indication of the Technical-Scientific Chamber guaranteeing the right of minors to take part in religious rituals which include the communion of the tea. This document, published on November 10 of 2004, declares that "the participation in the religious use of ayahuasca (...) shall remain as an object of parental recommendation, in the adequate use of familiar power" (authors' translation).

Another provision of Resolution 5/2004 was to instate the Multidisciplinary Work Group (GMT), once it recognized that "the administrative and social control of the religious use of ayahuasca can only be adequately structured with the joint knowledge held by its user groups." The GMT met several times from 2004 to 2006 and had representatives from the scientific community and several user groups. The participants of the group elected as its president Dr. Dartiu Silveira, a scientist, and as its vice-president Edson Lodi Campos Soares, the coordinator of institutional relations of the UDV. The final document of the GMT (CONAD, 2006) reflects many principles which have been adopted by the UDV since its creation by José Gabriel da Costa. What follows is a description of UDV practices in relation to the principles approved by the GMT and published in its final report. It is important to note that the GMT document uses the term ayahuasca to refer to the tea which the UDV calls Hoasca or Vegetal.

The Formal Definition of Internal Rules in the UDV Considering the Use of the Vegetal in 2006

1. THE USE OF AYAHUASCA IS RESTRICTED TO RELIGIOUS RITUALS

- UDV practice: The Vegetal is the sacrament of the UDV sessions
- Principle adopted by the GMT:
 - The tea ayahuasca is restricted to religious rituals, in authorized places, by the respective leading people of the entity.

- It is recommended that the groups that religiously use ayahuasca constitute themselves as juridical organizations, led by responsible people with experience in the recognition and cultivation of the sacred plant species, in the preparation and use of ayahuasca and in the conduction of the ritual.
- It is recommendable also to maintain a file with the participant's data and inform him about the ritual, time, norms, including the necessity to stay at the place until the end of the ritual and the effects of the ayahuasca.
- Acknowledging the deontological⁴ principles defined, it is up to each entity and its members, in the institutional, religious or social relationship with each other, at all times to cherish ethics and mutual respect.

2. AYAHUASCA SHOULD NOT BE ASSOCIATED WITH ANY DRUG.

- UDV practice: The UDV does not use any drug in its ritual
- Principle adopted by the GMT:
 - It is prohibited to use ayahuasca with illicit psychoactive substances.

3. AYAHUASCA SHOULD NOT BE COMMERCIALIZED

- UDV practice: The UDV produces Vegetal in the exact quantity of its necessity. There is no excess for sale.
- Principle adopted by the GMT:
 - The whole process of production, storage, distribution and use of the ayahuasca integrates the religious use of the tea, being prohibited the commercialization or the gain of any advantage, in money, for the payment of the production and use, safeguarding the contributions destined to maintain the regular functioning of each entity, in accordance with its traditions or statutory dispositions.
 - The responsible use of the ayahuasca implies that the extraction of the sacred plant species integrates the religious ritual. Each entity constituted must seek self-sustainability in a reasonable time, developing its own cultivation, capable of fulfilling its own needs and avoid degradation of the native forest species. The extraction of the plant species of the native forest must comply with environmental laws.

4. THERE SHOULD BE NO RECREATIONAL USE OF THE AYAHUASCA.

- UDV practice: The UDV uses the Vegetal exclusively in sessions with the administration of its spiritual doctrine. The Quadro de Mestres controls the use of the tea in each administrative unit.
- Principle adopted by the GMT:

- The entities should avoid offering package tours associated to propaganda of the effects of ayahuasca, safeguarding the legitimate members' intercommunion among religious entities.

5. THERE SHOULD BE NO PROPAGANDA FOR THE USE OF THE TEA

- UDV practice: The UDV is not secret, but discrete.
- Principle adopted by the GMT:
 - Safeguarding the constitutional right to information, we recommend that the entities avoid making propaganda of the ayahuasca and that its public manifestations always be oriented to act in discretion and moderation of the use of Hoasca and the diffusion of its properties.

6. AYAHUASCA SHOULD NOT BE USED TO PRACTICE PSYCHOLOGY OR THERAPY

- UDV practice: The UDV believes the Vegetal has therapeutic properties, but does not believe in isolated therapeutic use, outside a religious context
- Principle adopted by the GMT:
 - The curative and medical properties of ayahuasca – that the entities acknowledge and attest – require a responsible use and should be understood from the spiritual point of view, avoiding all and any propaganda that can wrongly induce public opinion and authorities.

The GMT report is considered an important achievement which confirms the UDV's tireless commitment to guarantee its sacramental rights and to confirm the words of its founder, that the "Vegetal is harmless to one's health." Along the years, UDV members have sought to gain official recognition not only with regard to the right to drink the tea Hoasca (Vegetal), but also to establish itself as an institution with respectable social standing in all places where it exists. In this regard, the institution has not only grown numerically and geographically along the years, but also developed a number of departments which organize and promote its members' volunteer activities. The UDV's departments and commissions are: *Departamento Médico Científico* (DEMEC – To relate with medical areas, cf. Lima & Tófoli in this volume); *Departamento Jurídico* (DJ – to deal with judicial issues); *Comissão de Relações Institucionais* (CRI – to relate with institutions pertaining to the legislative and executive power, as well as other governmental and academic institutions); *Comissão Científica* (CC – Scientific Commission), *Comissão de Comunicação* (Communication – press), *Plantio* (Planting Department); *Beneficência* (Social Welfare – collective volunteers and social action); *Departamento de Memória e Documentação* (DMD – Historical Documentation). There are also two voluntary associations related to the UDV: The *Casa da União*, a philanthropic association, and the

New Enchantment Association for Ecological Development (www.novoencanto.org.br), an environmental NGO with chapters across Brazil.

Most recently, the UDV and its related associations have organized several projects so as to help promote social and environmental improvement for individuals, local populations, natural resources and society at large. Because of its actions, the institution gained the title of *Instituição de Utilidade Pública Federal*, which it has managed to keep since 1999. This is an important recognition given by the Brazilian federal government which must be confirmed every year through the careful examination of annual reports. The *Luz das Letras* (Light of Letters) is an adult literacy project, which started in 2002 in the state of Mato Grosso and has already taught reading and writing skills to over 2000 people in its 27 laboratories in different parts of Brazil. The *Festival Água no Terceiro Milênio* (Water in the Third Millennium Festival) has been organized in different Brazilian cities, such as Brasília, Pocinhos do Rio Verde (Caldas, Minas Gerais), Caxambu and Campo Grande, as well as in Spain, with the intent of educating local populations as to the preservation of valuable water resources.

The UDV has also organized local, national and international meetings to promote the sharing of information regarding the knowledge produced within its sphere of action, of which the most notable were the *I Congresso*, in Rio de Janeiro, and most recently, the *IV Congresso da União do Vegetal e II Congresso Internacional da Hoasca* (Fourth Congress of the União do Vegetal and Second International Congress of Hoasca), which took place in Brasília from May 9 to 11, 2008, and had the attendance of 1,200 registered participants. It was also freely broadcast live on the internet.

In retrospect, it is noteworthy that the União do Vegetal has come a long way from the small group in the rubber tapping colony and later in Porto Velho, led by the migrant from Bahia who worked as a rubber tapper, nursing assistant, and truck driver, always taking care of his family while voluntarily working for the spiritual well-being of his disciples. José Gabriel da Costa never made any money from the religious institution he created and always stated that his work was for the benefit of humanity.

UDV members have maintained the example of Mestre Gabriel as a guideline to be followed in all occasions. The *Centro Espírita União do Vegetal* currently has over twelve thousand members mostly in Brazil but also in Spain and the United States of America, having achieved legal recognition in all three of these countries through processes which are narrated in other chapters of this volume (cf. Bronfman and Prades). The global spread of the use of Hoasca, through the UDV, is also a form of bringing Brazilian language and culture into contact with other peoples of the world. In Brazil, the UDV now has the goal of working towards the recognition of the ritual use of Hoasca as a National Heritage Cultural Patrimony, a title which will put Hoasca-related religious phenomena in their due place, as cultural manifestations, born from the peoples of the rainforest and ritually performed throughout Brazil. Such objectives will bring a clear contribution to the spiritual, physical, and mental well-being of mankind.

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- 1 About this topic, check also the article by Bouso et al. and that by Lima & Tófoli in this volume
 - 2 The term conviction here is not used in the sense of being convicted of a crime, but in the sense of being convinced, having a firm belief.
 - 3 In Brazil, there are Federal Courts (Tribunal Federal) and State Courts. Rondonia, in the 1960s and 1970s, was not considered a State, but a Federal Territory, along with Acre, Roraima, and Amapá. Along with the Federal District (Brasília – the nation’s capital), they fell under the jurisdiction of Federal Courts.
 - 4 Deontology is an approach to ethics that debates the rightness or wrongness of intentions or motives behind action of people such as orientation towards rights, duties, or principles. It is opposed to an approach which focuses on the rightness or wrongness of the consequences of actions.