

Santo Daime Community's Healing System— An Alternative Medicine

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I recently completed a thesis for a Masters in Psychology at Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center in San Francisco, CA that focused on the system of healing used in the Amazonian village Céu do Mapiá. Located in the southwest portion of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, Mapiá is the central community of the Santo Daime religion, one of three Brazilian religions centered on the use of ayahuasca. This thesis provides a description of a healing system that incorporates several spiritual traditions with the wisdom of the ancient Amazonian shamans. The study also indicates that it is possible to have a valid system of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) centered on the use of an entheogen.

Methodology

Under the direction of Stanley Krippner, Ph.D., Jeanne Achterberg, Ph.D., and Jodi Lang, Ph.D., I formulated a study with the goal of providing a comprehensive description of Céu do Mapiá's system of healing from the perspective of its practitioners, and placing it in the larger context of alternative medicine. This goal was accomplished by applying the body of historical data, along with this author's firsthand experience during eight visits to Céu do Mapiá, to specific parameters for describing systems of CAM.

A task force created by the U.S. NIH Office of Alternative Medicine (later renamed NIH National Center for CAM), and published by O'Connor et al. (1997) provided the parameters utilized in this study. These parameters consist of 40 questions grouped into 13 categories: lexicon, taxonomy, specific material medica, etc. If a system of healing is able to provide comprehensive answers to these questions, it verifies that the system qualifies as CAM. The answers to these parameters also provide a description of the healing system, which is useful in formulating more detailed studies of the system.

The results of this study showed that, according to the NIH, the system of healing in Céu do Mapiá does qualify as a system of CAM.

The System of Healing in Céu do Mapiá

The system of healing in Céu do Mapiá is centered on the traditions of the Santo Daime religion, and more specifically the sacramental use of ayahuasca, known in this tradition as *Santo Daime*, which means "Holy Give me." Santo Daime has visionary and purgative effects, both believed to be curative. It is also seen as a teacher that shows practitioners how to live healthier and more harmonious lives. This healing system also utilizes and incorporates aspects from several spiritual and therapeutic traditions including, Umbanda Spiritism, floral therapy, homeopathy, bioenergetics, and allopathic medicine. These practices are enhanced by utilizing the wealth of biological resources available in the Amazon rainforest.

Several of the healers in Mapiá have an extensive knowledge of the many powerful plant and animal remedies of the local forest. In 1997, after years of working in this area, these healers created a non-profit, non-governmental organization called the Forest Medicine Center with the purpose of preserving the knowledge of the forest people and the ancient pajés, or indigenous Amazonian shamans. The Forest Medicine Center provides nat-

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ural medicinal products to the local community free of charge, and provides educational services to the locals and visitors of the community.

Over the last several years, the leaders of the Mapiá community have been developing new communities in other areas of the Amazon forest. This expansion has allowed the leaders of Mapiá's healing system to form unions with other indigenous healers of the region. These unions have enhanced Mapiá's system of healing, and they have helped the Forest Medicine Center to achieve their goal of preserving the knowledge of the Amazonian healers.

Implications

On a general level, this study illuminates that it is possible to have a legitimate system of Complimentary and Alternative Medicine centered on the use of an entheogen such as ayahuasca. On a more specific level, the description of this system of healing indicates that further research on the therapeutic practices of the Santo Daime would be valuable to determine the mechanisms of action and the efficacy of these practices in the treatment of a variety of psychological and physical ailments. The various medicines utilized in the Forest Medicine Center could also be further evaluated to identify possible remedies for common ailments, and to provide further evidence of the value and importance of the rainforest. It is essential, however, that this research be done in a way that respects the rights and the ethics of the people to whom these medicines and technologies belong. As the forest healers are the teachers of this ancient tradition, they are also the most proficient researchers. Future studies, therefore, should be carried out in partnership with these healers, by bringing them the scientific and monetary resources needed for them to present these medicines to the world themselves, if they so choose.

Current Projects / Proposal

While continuing my work towards a Ph.D. at Saybrook Graduate School, I am in the process of formulating a proposal for further research on the system of healing in Céu do Mapiá. In the mean time, I am working with the leaders of the Mapiá community to organize ecological/spiritual, Amazonian adventure tours in their many deep forest communities. For further information I can be contacted by email at the address listed above.

I am now also seeking donations for the continuing projects of the Forest Medicine Center. The donations will be utilized to build a new infrastructure and provide needed resources for the Forest Medicine Center to better study, process, store, and administer their medicines. The expanded infrastructure will also be used as a classroom/laboratory to educate the local people about the forest medicines.

Those interested in making a contribution may do so by donating restricted funds to MAPS (specify for this project). One hundred percent of the tax deductible donation will be forwarded to this project.

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