

THE USE OF AYAHUASCA IN BRAZIL BY THE SANTO DAIME RELIGION

by Rex Beynon, *Friends of the Amazon*

THIS YEAR has been a historic one for the Santo Daime doctrine. I returned from Brazil in July of 1992 where I attended the Earth Summit conference and in this article I am going to report on some developments that received little attention outside of Brazil. In order to put those developments in context, I will first give some background on the Santo Daime doctrine.

In the earlier part of this century a seven feet tall black man named Raimundo Irineu Sera was working among the Indians in the state of Acre (in Brazil), on the border with Bolivia and Peru. During this time he was introduced to the drink known as Ayahuasca, which is translated as "vine of the soul." This drink is a tea made from the vine *Banisteriopsis Caapi* and, generally, also the leaves of the plant *Psychotria Viridis*. It has been used in religious rituals since ancient times by the native peoples of the region, including the Incas, both as a medicine for healing and as an agent for spiritual enlightenment.

During a retreat in the forest, Master Irineu, as he later came to be called, received visions of the Virgin Mary in the form of the Queen of the Forest, who revealed to him a religious doctrine which he was to bring to the world through the specific rituals that he was shown. Gradually master Irineu gathered a group of people around him and started to receive hymns from the astral plane, which became an integral part of the rituals which they practised.

The word "Daime," which became the name of the doctrine as well as the drink, comes from these hymns in which the words often occur as a prayer - "Dai-me forca, dai-me amor, dai-me luz," - "Give me strength, give me love, give me light." The doctrine which is revealed in them is a Christian doctrine blended with the native religions, with a profound reverence for Mother Nature, especially the forest, personified as the Virgin Mary.

There are several types of ritual. In the "official works," the community will dance for up to 12 hours in a specific formation and rhythm to generate an energy current, with the Daime being drunk several times during the night. In the healing rituals, the participants generally sit around the altar and one or more people are the recipients of the healing. The deeper cause of the illness is often revealed during the work, in a vision which is called a "miracao." The making of the Daime is also done in a ritual called the "feito" in which the vine and the leaf are cooked together into a tea. It is said that the vine gives the "strength" and the leaf gives the "light" or the capacity for visions.

In the past 20 years or so the religion and the use of the tea has spread throughout Brazil, giving rise to churches in many of the major cities. This has occasionally brought persecutions by groups of people who do not understand the practise, trying to confuse the issue by claiming that the tea is simply a drug and should be banned, even though the churches have actually become well known for their work in helping people to effectively overcome alcohol and drug addiction.

FORTUNATELY the CONFEN (the Federal Drug Council) has consistently upheld the right of the Daime Church to practice its religion and healing practices using the Daime tea. A study was made of the Daime by the CONFEN in 1987 which included visits to the various churches and observation of

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*In the
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MAPS
newsletter
Dennis McKenna
proposed a
bio-
chemical
investigation
of ayahuasca.
He has since been
pledged \$50,000
and
is planning
to begin
his study
in early 1993.*

the making of the Daime. It also included study of another group of ayahuasca users, who call the drink Vegetal. The work group which made the study included representatives not only of the CONFEN but also of several other government agencies. The conclusion of the study was that the Daime was a very positive influence in the community, encouraging social harmony and personal integration. It was emphasized that, rather than simply considering the pharmacological analysis of the plants, one must consider the whole context of the use of the tea — religious, social, and cultural.

In June of 1992 a definitive decision was made by the CONFEN, putting the matter to rest once and for all, stating that the use of the Daime is perfectly legal. Domingo Bernardo Da Silva, the president of the CONFEN, had visited the community of Mapia, in the state of Amazonas, and taken part in the rituals as part of his study. During the Earth Summit in Rio in June there was a conference on medicinal plants of Amazonia, in which three of the members of the CONFEN, including Domingo Bernardo, took part in a panel and explained their study of the Daime and their conclusions. They had taken part in the rituals and showed a great deal of respect for religious and cultural tolerance and emphasized that there is no evidence of any harmful effects or potential for abuse of ayahuasca.

THE study was published in a detailed document with many thoughtful insights into the matter. At one point it is stated that "altered states of perception do not necessarily signify a negative or harmful situation" - on the contrary these effects can be channeled for the benefit of society and the individual. As a government document, there are many words of wisdom in this study which deserve serious consideration in this country.

At the same time that this occurred another historic event happened when the Daime church was invited to take part in an inter-religious vigil as part of the program at the Global Forum section of the Earth Summit conference. All of the

major religions of the world were represented. The Santo Daime, now being considered a major religion in Brazil, had its own tent and 600 people took part in an all-night ritual. The Daime was served and the people took part in the sacred dance, in rhythm to the Daime hymns. To me this official recognition was a fitting tribute for the hundredth anniversary of Master Irineu this year. There will be further celebrations of the centenary in December this year when people will gather in Rio Branco, Acre, from all over the world to celebrate the Master's birthday.

The expansion of the Santo Daime doctrine has created a movement also to help the people of Amazonia to protect the rainforest which is the natural habitat of the vine and the leaf used in the Daime. Mapia is, in fact, now the center of a one and a half million acre protected reserve. The ecological work of the people of Mapia is a natural extension of a religion which was born in the rainforest, and is being supported by the United Nations and the non-profit organization Friends of the Amazon Forest in the U.S.

There are also moves towards organizing the healing works of the Daime, creating a center which will include not only the traditional healing rituals of the Daime but also include psychotherapy, a clinic, a hospital and birthing center, along with training programs and workshops. The intention is to create a center for consciousness with a complete healing program. Serious scientific research into the properties of Ayahuasca is also welcomed by the community in Brazil. ■

If you would like more information on how to take part in these programs, including retreats in the rainforest, you may contact: FRIENDS OF THE AMAZON FOREST at P.O. Box 625, CAMBRIDGE, MA 02140.