

Hoasca and the União do Vegetal (UDV): A Comparative Study with Adolescents

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MY

FIRST TRIP TO BRAZIL last October was enchanting. The intent was to attend the International Confer-

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ence of Hoasca Studies in Rio de Janeiro sponsored by the Centro Espirita Beneficente União do Vegetal (The Spiritual Center Beneficent Union of the Plants), commonly referred to as the União do Vegetal (UDV), and learn about the research in which Charles Grob, M.D. had participated in the previous year. Prior to the conference, while in Brasilia, I stayed in a home with young people from the UDV and was moved by their presence and the energy they radiated forth. I met other young people from the UDV and my experience of them was of the same presence and a radiating energy. I have traveled many countries and taught in the public schools of the United States and to date have yet to meet groups of young people like those I met through the UDV. The uniqueness of my experience sparked the question, "How young are the children when they start drinking the tea, Hoasca?" I was told that some have received the tea since they were in utero. My professional background is in education, psychology, and consciousness studies. The majority of my adult life I have taught and worked on behalf of children and their rights. Upon receiving this information about the children of the UDV, whom I refer to as grounded angelic beings, I began thinking about the planetary impact and possibilities this tea could have on consciousness and transformation. A few days later in Rio de Janeiro I spoke with Charles Grob about my idea to study the UDV children and he was full of encouragement. I approached Glacus S. Brito, M.D., Director of the Center for Medical Studies of the UDV about my ideas, and with openness he asked me to put a protocol together. In March of this year I flew to Brazil to discuss my research proposal with Brito and other leaders of the UDV.

THE RESEARCH IS to assess the world view, social behaviors and hierarchy of values for a group of 30 rural and urban adolescent members, 14-18 years of age, within the UDV who have been receiving the sacramental Hoasca since they were in utero and to compare these findings to a control group of 30 of their peers matched by age, socioeconomic status and education who have never received the Hoasca and are not members of the UDV. The specific aim of this study is to compare the two groups by assessing similarities and differences using the parameters of IQ, creativity, social behavior patterns, experience of spirituality and religion, awareness of death and/or experience of someone dying, awareness and experience of nature, and expression of altruism. We all agreed that my proposal has value for the UDV, as they currently investigate the long term effects of the tea relevant to their children. In addition, the findings hold the potential for significant insights into fostering healthy spiritual and psychological development for all adolescents.

Background

The Centro Espirita Beneficiente União do Vegetal, commonly referred to as the União do Vegetal (UDV) is a Brazilian syncretic religious movement founded July 22, 1961 by Jose Gabriel da Costa. In the UDV the plant derivative Hoasca is used sacramentally to foster the spiritual development of the human being. Some children have received Hoasca since they were in utero. The doctrine of this movement echoes Streng's (1976) description of religion as "a means of ultimate transformation" (p. 7) encompassing both "the power of transformation and the cultural forms that express and release this power" (p. 15).

Hoasca is the word used by the UDV to refer to this sacramental tea brewed from the N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT) containing leaf of the *Psychotria viridis* (chacarana plant) and the harmala alkaloids serving as the monoamine oxidase A (MAO-A) inhibitors contained in the *Banisteriopsis caapi* (Amazonian mariri vine) (Callaway, 1994a, p. 385; UDV, 1989/1991, p. 14). Among indigenous tribes in Peru this plant derivative is known as ayahuasca, which is a "Quechua word that is often translated in Spanish as 'vine of the soul,' 'vine of death,' 'vine of enlightenment,' or 'vine of spirit wisdom' and is also known as natem (Shuar), yaje, and caapi" (Perkins, 1994, p. 130). Within the União do Vegetal (UDV) it literally means 'union of the plants'.

In the late twentieth century of Western culture, the ingestion of psychotropic substances

has become illicit and is often considered dangerous. One expression of the official position is that although "the illicit use of hallucinogens has declined somewhat since the heyday of their popularity in the 1960's, these agents continue to be abused by a significant proportion of the population, particularly those between the ages of 18 to 25" (NIDA, 1987). Despite social condemnation of this practice, adolescents continue to experiment with these substances. It is well established that in Western cultures drug use among adolescents is often the norm. The continued abuse of such substances by adolescents has been related to alienation, loss of values, and disintegration of ritual within these societies (Zoja, 1988). In contrast to this official view, it appears upon informed observation that the adolescents within the UDV population employ Hoasca in a way that it is positive and life enhancing.

UDV Experiences

During the ritualistic and religious ceremonies of the UDV in Brazil, adolescents from the age of twelve routinely ingest Hoasca sacramentally. According to parents and other adults within the UDV community, frequent utilization of Hoasca by the adolescents leads to reported blissful, transcendent, and unitary experiences, while shedding light and awareness of shortcomings and the need for further development (G. S. Brito, personal communication, April 6, 1996). School teachers of this religious community have stated that the UDV students within their classrooms express more altruistic and creative behaviors than students who are not members of this community. (J. Mauro, personal communication, March 28, 1996).

In the UDV ethos these ritual encounters with Hoasca are experienced as life enhancing. Of particular interest is the determination by an international team of researchers (Grob et al, 1996; UDV, 1989/1991, p. 14) that the ingestion of Hoasca by adult men has no known negative physiological or psychological effects. Specifically, "psychological evaluations demonstrated the experimental group to be more stable and better adjusted than the control group, with no signs of depression or other adverse reactions" (Callaway, 1994b, p. 297).

REACTION TOWARD the use of psychotropics by adolescents is diametrically polarized between Western cultures and indigenous groups. The difference between ingestion of Hoasca in the UDV context of a supportive community and the random use of psychedelic drugs in Western cultures is that in the UDV the substance is only

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consumed within a ritualized and sacramental setting. However, the behavior, attitudes, and socialization of adolescents within the UDV has yet to be investigated.

Who is involved and how you too can get involved

I have embarked on a study with the guidance of consciousness researcher and East West Psychology Professor, Stanislav Grof, M.D., Ph.D. and Philosophy and Religion Professor, Steven Goodman, Ph.D., through California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco. The UDV has welcomed this research and agreed to assist with the logistics of the project and provide translators for this lengthy investigation. Funding support is greatly needed to move this research forward. The findings hold the potential for significant insights into creating healthy spiritual and psychological development during adolescence. My greatest appreciation is given to Rick Doblin and the MAPS community for acknowledging and honoring the magnitude and importance of this work through providing the round trip air fare to Brazil to conduct this research.

Those interested in making a contribution to this project 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 the project. •

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Recently published paper on the topic of psychedelics:

Halpern, J.H.

The Use of Hallucinogens in the Treatment of Addiction.

Addiction Research 1996, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp 177-189.

Abstract

Research into treating drug dependence with hallucinogens, although promising, ended with questions still unanswered because of varying, in some cases skeptical, methodology and insufficient adherence to a double-blind, placebo-controlled design. Interest is again emerging, especially with the recent patenting in the United States of ibogaine for its apparent anti-craving properties. A review of the literature shows that these properties may be present across the entire family of hallucinogens. Potential efficacy may be tied to their agonism and antagonism at specific serotonin receptor sites. After the administration of a hallucinogen, there is a positive "after-glow" lasting weeks to months which might be extended through repeated dosing. Ibogaine and LSD both have lengthy periods of action, making their application unwieldy. However, tryptamines, such as N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), are so short-acting that they could easily be administered in an office setting. With numerous hallucinogens yet to be tested, a hallucinogen might well be discovered with superior anti-craving properties and a non-deleterious side-effect profile.

KEYWORDS: LSD, Ibogaine, N,N-Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), Therapeutic Use, Drug Dependence, Serotonin •

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