

## Jurema Ritual in Northern Brazil

Yatra-W.M. da **Silveira Barbosa**

Jurema, or  
vinho da jurema,  
is an  
inebriating drink  
made alternately  
from the  
root bark of  
*Mimosa hostilis*,  
*M. nigra* or  
*M. verrucosa*.  
(Ott, 1996).

WORK WITH “FRIENDS OF THE FOREST,” a non-profit foundation engaged in the research of psychoactive plants and rituals and the investigation of addiction treatment and other therapeutic applications. After researching *Mimosa hostilis* and *Peganum harmala* in Europe, I travelled to northeastern Brazil in January 1997 to undertake field research with the tribes who use Jurema (*Mimosa hostilis*) in a ritualistic way. I planned to learn about their rituals and preparation.

The use of Jurema in rituals is said to be extinct (Schultes & Hofmann, 1980) but continues underground. The children of those tribes who originally used it, a mixture between whites and Negroes, slowly lost their right to the indigenous land as they were no longer recognized as Indians (also called *caboclos*). A war started for land in that area (interior of Bahia, Pernambuco and Paraíba, the so-called Sertó) which has been going on now for about 80 years. The white people took the Indians away from their land, burning their houses, leaving thousands of them homeless.

In order to be recognized as Indians, re-establish their identity and reclaim the right to their land, they had to show a tradition. So, the Jurema Cult (*O Culto da Jurema*) was brought back among the Indian tribes to re-establish their indigenous identity. With the gap in time, much knowledge was lost, as this tradition had never been documented. All the knowledge was passed on from father to son, and the Indians were always very secretive about the ritualistic use of their psychoactive brew, because of the tremendous persecution from the white people.

I met two Brazilian anthropologists who had worked with these tribes and we travelled together. One of them is the director of the non-governmental foundation which takes care of the indigenous affairs in the area—ANAI (*Associação Nacional de Ação Indigenista*). We arrived in Sertão, a place where nothing grows but Jurema Branca (*Mimosa verrucosa*), Jurema

Negra (*Mimosa hostilis*) and cannabis, a true “Garden of the Gods.” I realized after a healing ritual (*cura*) with the Truká tribe, that the brew that they were drinking did not have psychoactive properties. With the gap in time, the tribespeople had lost the knowledge of the  $\beta$ -carboline-containing plant used to activate the effect of the DMT-containing Jurema. Their ceremonies did include trance possession rituals, where they drank the Jurema alone. These rituals are part of several syncretic religions with a heavy African influence.

I had *Peganum harmala* seeds with me, and I proposed that we do a ritual with a combination of Jurema and *P. harmala*. We demonstrated how to prepare them together, and in the evening we held the ritual with only Mestre Antonio (the spiritual leader of the tribe), Joaquim (the *Juremeiro*—the man who prepares and serves the Jurema during the rituals) and their four



best mediums (who incorporate the spirits during trance possession). It was incredible, the *Juremeiro* who normally never took part in the trance possession, but just dealt with the Jurema in their rituals, was possessed almost during the entire time. Sometimes, some panic would emerge, and we all kept singing until it passed away. The master had to lay down most of the time and reported having an amazing journey.

I left the next day to visit the Atikum tribe on the mountain of Umã, leaving some *P. harmala* seeds for the Trukás to plant, and some already extracted for them to drink and do their rituals with.

As we entered deeper into the Sertão, we were confronted with another war, the war on drugs. The biggest cannabis plantation in South America lies in this area. Because of lack of financial resources, Indians and local white folks deal cannabis for their survival, as there is no other economy available to them, and their land is extremely poor.

We had to arrive in the area by daylight, in order not to be taken as drug dealers. There was a lot of turbulence in that area, with gun shots and violence; a cold drug war was going on right there.

One Indian from the Atikum tribe, who lived with the Trukás, agreed to travel with us and to take us to his tribe, as it was extremely dangerous to go up into the mountain unless you were brought by a tribe member. At the end of the afternoon, we arrived at the Atikum village at the top of a mountain. What a beautiful place. Mirana, an English friend who was traveling with us, was the second *gringo* ever to come up there, and they appreciated his courage.

We were received by the *cacique* of the tribe, Ana Olinda da Conceição, who took us to her house, where we set our hammocks and stayed for a few days.

The next day, she organized a ritual for us. They have a few different settings for rituals, and she prepared what she calls "*Trabalho da Jurema*" (Jurema's work). We were taken for a long walk leading us to an immense rock with a cave. Inside this cave was an altar, the place where the ritual was held.

As the ritual began, they started to sing, and a little later, the Jurema brew was served. Ana started to sing, and the trance possession started. She incorporated the spirit of the *Caboclo* called Jurema, the Indian entity from the forest, who stayed throughout the ritual, singing many songs, praying and talking to the people as if to give advice. The brew was imbibed a few times more until the bottle was empty.

There are some very interesting similarities between Jurema rituals and the ayahuasca rituals from the Amazon Forest. Jurema rituals have characteristics of a ritual work done under a psychoactive influence. However, the Indians here also drink alcohol, as

alcohol is the only thing available to them to alter their state of consciousness and to highlight their rituals so as to serve the spirits manifested. Many bottles of *cachaça* (*aquardente* from sugar cane, the strongest alcohol one can drink in Brazil) lay around the altar, empty. Yet, it seems that by the end of the ritual, when the spirits who have drunk through the bodies of the medium participants leave, the participants are sober. This phenomena has been observed in Umbanda, Cadomblé and other African traditions that are part of the Brazilian syncretic religions. The next evening we held another type of Jurema ritual called the *Torè*. Participants go into trance possession during this ritual as well.

The day before we left, I asked permission to introduce a plant from another Kingdom to be drunk with the Jurema. They asked me, "What is the *toante* (the music) of this plant?" I sang for them a song that I channelled when I had the first *P. harmala* ritual with the Trukás just a few days before.

D. Ana and I cooked the brews together.

This was new for her, as typically the Atikum use cold extraction for their Jurema preparation, not boiling or cooking. The ritual was held in D. Ana's house, and surprisingly, though only a few people were invited, by the time of the ritual an enormous number of Indians had gathered in and around the house, and about ten of them drank the brew. One of the people who was drinking was one of the oldest women in the tribe, D. Cotinha, around 80 years old.

The ritual started. I served both brews together in small amounts with the intention of giving a second and maybe a third dose. We all started to sing their songs and my songs. D. Ana went into a trance possession, and meanwhile, D. Cotinha fell flat on the floor, losing consciousness for awhile. When this happened, the Indians panicked, but D. Ana gave me credit and told the others that I knew what I was doing and that they had to trust their Jurema. Her trust brought back order, and I started to sing for this old

lady who was lying unconscious on the ground just next to me. Some minutes later, she regained consciousness, stood up and started to dance the *Torè*, which she hadn't done for many years because of her old age. Suddenly she sat back down on the floor (we were all sitting on the floor), looked at the others and asked, "Have I been home?" D. Ana, the *cacique*, was the next one to fall unconscious, and I told her to just let it go and explore what was happening in the land of the enchanted people, as they call the spirits (*encantandos*). After a while she came to and started to dance and sing again. Only a few of them drank a second dose. The ritual was finished after four hours, and we all sat outside to contemplate the stars. They said, "We finally found the roots of our tradition."

My travelling companions and I left some *P. harmala* ready to

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drink and lots of seeds to be planted. By the time we were ready to leave, many of the Atikum gathered again to say good-bye, and D. Cotinha, while giving me some bananas for our journey and a big hug, thanked me for bringing my knowledge of *P. harmala*. We repeated the same experience with the Funios and Caimbè, leaving *P. harmala* seeds with them to plant.

After interviewing many people, and participating in different Jurema rituals with the Indians, I also realized that the Jurema they drink in their brew is not *Mimosa hostilis*, but the root bark from *Mimosa verucosa*. Different tribes will call *M. hostilis*, the Jurema Negra and *M. verucosa*, the Jurema Branca, as well as other tribes call *M. verucosa*, the Jurema Negra. That means that when they say that they drink Jurema Negra, it does not necessarily mean they are drinking *M. hostilis*, but *M. verucosa* which is called both: Jurema Branca and Jurema Negra. •

Yatra is director of Friends of the Forest (FOF), a non-profit foundation engaged in the research of psychoactive plants & rituals and the investigation of addiction treatment and other therapeutic applications.

Friends of the Forest  
Prinseneiland 97  
1013 LN Amsterdam—Netherlands  
Tel:31(0)20- 6905394  
FAX 31(0)20-6830129  
E-mail: yatra@friends-of-the-forest.nl  
Website: www.friends-of-the-forest.nl

## The Hoasca Project in the scientific literature

IN 1993, a biomedical investigation of long-term drinkers of hoasca (the Portuguese transliteration of ayahuasca) was undertaken, by invitation of the Medical Studies section of the União do Vegetal (*Centro de Estudos Medicos*). This study, which was conducted by an international consortium of scientists from Brazil, the United States, and Finland, was financed through private donations to various non-profit sponsoring groups, notably Botanical Dimensions, which provided major funding, the Heffter Research Institute, and MAPS.

Thus, the focus for the scientific study and understanding of ayahuasca has shifted from the ethnographer's field notes and the ethnobotanist's herbarium specimens, to the neurophysiologist's laboratory and the psychiatrist's examining room.

With the completion of the first detailed biomedical investigation of ayahuasca, science now has the basic corpus of data needed to ask further questions regarding the pharmacological actions, the toxicities and possible dangers, and the considerable potential ayahuasca has to heal the human mind, body and spirit. (excerpted from McKenna et al., 1998)

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