

Editors' Introduction

Ayahuasca Use In Cross-Cultural Perspective

Marlene Dobkin de Rios, Ph.D.

Associate Clinical Professor, Department of Psychiatry & Human Behavior, University of California, Irvine

Charles S. Grob, M.D.

Director, Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Harbor/UCLA Medical Center, Torrance, California

A new religious group in Brazil, called União do Vegetal (UDV), was founded there in 1961 and has a current membership of over 9,000 people in more than 100 *nucleos* or communities, both in Brazil and abroad. As a religious sacrament, hoasca (called ayahuasca throughout the rest of Latin America), a combination of two hallucinogenic plants, *Banisteriopsis caapi* (mariri) and *Psychotria viridis*, is ingested at least twice a month in the group's religious rituals. An unusual custom among the UDV is the taking of this sacrament by adolescents. In fact, pregnant women are given a small amount of hoasca with apparently no adverse effects throughout their pregnancy. A multinational research group from the United States and Brazil was formed in 2000 to investigate the psychosocial and neurocognitive effects upon a group of 84 hoasca-ingesting adolescents and a matched control group of nonusers in three Brazilian cities (Sao Paulo, Campinas and Brasilia). Articles based on qualitative, neuropsychological and psychiatric assessments of these adolescents are presented in this issue of the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs*. Additionally, other scholars have participated in adding to current knowledge of the hoasca sacrament as used by the UDV church, and there are cross-cultural contributions on ayahuasca use in South America and the United States and Spain. Also of interest is the chronology of the legal battle in the U.S. undertaken by the UDV Church, as it attempts to obtain the right to use the plant psychedelic as a religious sacrament there.

The anthropological record on the use of ayahuasca is clear. Data shows that when hallucinogen-induced managed altered states of consciousness have been used under optimal conditions, positive and salutary outcomes have resulted (see Dobkin de Rios & Grob 1994; Grob & Dobkin

de Rios 1992). This contrasts historically with Euro-American culture, where altered states of consciousness have been associated with negative and antisocial behaviors. From a sociological perspective, such states have been synonymous with alienation, excessive introspection, rebelliousness as well as illegal behaviors. This has carried over into the general population of Western nations to the point that there is a strong feeling of rejection of any substance or drug that promotes these stages of awareness, as well as fear and distrust of such substances. In the study of UDV adolescent ayahuasca use, scholars examine the incorporation of a powerful hallucinogenic decoction into ritual and ceremonial events of the UDV church. This sacrament attempts to offer spiritual, emotional and ethical support to those who ingest the tea. As individuals drink the tea, they become part of a religious congregation and part of a religious event that has as its major goal the development of spirituality in adherents. Since the late 1980s, the UDV has had permission from the Brazilian government to use hoasca as a sacrament in their religious rituals. People who drink the tea participate as family units and include their adolescent children.

THE HOASCA PROJECT

The first formal psychiatric research investigation of ayahuasca took place in the Brazilian Amazon city of Manaus in 1993. A multinational collaborative study called the Hoasca Project examined biochemical, pharmacological, physiological and psychiatric perspectives to establish a core of qualitative and quantitative data on the psychopharmacology of ayahuasca, which could establish relative

safety profiles for human consumption as well as provide the foundation for future studies. This data is reviewed in articles by Grob (2002) and Grob and colleagues (1996). Psychological profiles of long-term members of the Brazilian ayahuasca church, União do Vegetal, revealed high levels of function compared to normal controls, including healthier personality measures and superior neuropsychological function. For the subjects studied, the syncretic church they belonged to provided a protective and supportive community, as is often the case with all forms of religion (see Schumaker 1995). A key factor when examining the apparent outcome of frequent hallucinogen, or ayahuasca, use is the set and setting, and the role of suggestibility.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON AYAHUASCA

Hoasca is a combination of a woody vine comprising various species of *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*, as well as other DMT-containing plants, which are found in the moist tropics of South America. Archaeological evidence suggests that human beings may have consumed hoasca for two millennia. The plant decoction has been used for its hallucinogenic properties by both Native South American cultures as well as by mestizos (people sharing both European and Native American heritage). Various uses of hoasca by native American cultures include: to obtain divine guidance and to communicate with the spirits that animate the plants; to achieve trance states; to train prospective shamans; to induce dreams so as to divine the future; for prophecy; as a telepathic agent; to cure illness through psychic or physical means; as a preventive agent against the malice of other people; as a diagnostic tool where the visions are used to prescribe remedies for illness; to identify an evil-doer or agent responsible for illness; and to achieve ecstasy in the service of health and political acumen (Siskind 1973). In tropical rain forest environments which have been studied extensively, hoasca is used for magic and religious ceremonies; to receive special protective spirits, to tell whether strangers are coming; to learn the whereabouts of enemies and to discover their plans; to cause illness to another through psychic means in witchcraft, to use as a preventive agent against the malice of others, and for pleasure and social interaction (Dobkin de Rios 1972). During the 400 years of European influence, hoasca has played an important role in mestizo culture in the Amazon, and has been used differently than among Native American tribal peoples. Hoasca use has undergone a major transformation. While in the rain forest, secluded Indian tribes took hoasca in ritual ceremonies or else limited its use to the shamans; today we see many urban men and women using hoasca to diagnose and treat emotional and psychological disorders. Folk healers in cities throughout the Amazon in Ecuador, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil use the plant to determine the magical causes of

illness and to neutralize or deflect the evil that their clients believe is responsible for their sickness (Dobkin de Rios 1972). During the course of the mestizo use of hoasca, many rubber gatherers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had access to this plant and its rituals. One individual, *Mestre* Gabriel (José Gabriel da Costa), the founder of the UDV church, incorporated hoasca use into the church that he founded in 1961 at Porto Velho, Rondonia in Brazil. In the process, the use of hoasca became syncretized with Christian elements, elements of spiritualism that were widespread in Latin America throughout the nineteenth century, and influences from the *Mestre's* experiences with other Afro-Brazilian religions. This is a syncretization or blending of religious elements, which is an integral part of the development of most belief systems throughout the world.

The UDV church is organized into a hierarchic structure comprised of a master board, a council board, an instructive and member board. Followers are arranged according to their level of spiritual development, called degree. Oral transmission of beliefs plays an important role in the church. The ritual experience of ingesting hoasca serves as a teaching vehicle for the adherents. To the early explorers, the use of visionary plants like hoasca was trafficking with the Devil; no published evidence exists in ethnohistorical sources that any European tried hoasca in the early centuries of contact. Missionaries throughout Latin America forcibly repressed traditional religious beliefs and practices in order to save the native peoples by obliging them to abandon their customary practices and embrace the Christian faith. As various Christian denominations spread throughout Latin America, syncretistic movements arose. The term "syncretism" can be defined as the mixing and blending of the sociocultural components of religious systems. Religious scholars look at the way that religious systems change and indigenous beliefs and practices blend with those of dominant cultures, like Christianity, when diverse cultures come into contact through conquest and domination. Christian beliefs around the world, for example, have been assimilated into traditional indigenous cosmologies to become powerful symbolic images and rituals. Roman Catholicism, in particular, has blended with pagan traditions in the Americas. Additionally, slaves imported from Africa to Latin America and the Caribbean brought with them traditional religious ideas and practices that were also absorbed into forms of Catholicism, such as the religious sects of Umbanda, Macumba and Candomble in Brazil. These syncretic traditions, which combine traditional African religions, Kardecism (spiritism) and Catholicism, are evident in many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. Syncretic religions throughout the world run the gamut of both political and spiritual organizations. The UDV, one such syncretic religion, tends to be apolitical in nature and devotes itself to a spiritual role in contemporary Brazilian

society. As a syncretic religion, the UDV has elements of shamanism, Christianity and spiritism. Shamanism values the altered state of consciousness as a means to control and dominate spirit forces in nature. Generally, in shamanic-based societies, numerous individuals have access to such altered states of consciousness and apperception of the spirit world. The hoasca potion enables members of the UDV to achieve an experience akin to this shamanic experience. Curing plays a less prominent part in the ritual activity in the UDV, somewhat differently than the native shamanic tradition.

In addition to the four articles discussing research on adolescent União do Vegetal members' use of ayahuasca, this issue of the *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* is publishing new papers on rates of metabolism and the neuro- and phytochemistry of the plant by J. C. Callaway, as well as preliminary EEG results and subjective reports during ayahuasca experiences by David Stuckey and colleagues. A report on psychedelic sacraments (as distinct from sacramentals) by John Baker links psychoactive sacramental use to other religions throughout history and geographically. Also included is an up-to-date report on the legal status of the UDV in the United States, and the right of that church to ingest ayahuasca within a ritual context, in an interview with Jeffrey Bronfman, chief *mestre* of the União do Vegetal Church in the United States. Barbosa and colleagues examine the short-term psychological after-effects induced by the first-time ritual use of ayahuasca both among UDV adherents and Santo Daime, another hoasca-using religious group in Brazil. Also included in this issue is an interview with an ayahuasca-using Native American shaman of Shipibo ethnic origin, Sr. Guillermo Arrévalo, by the Peruvian journalist, Roger

Rumrill, with his comments on the drug tourism phenomenon—a movement that is gaining ground throughout Latin America, as tourists seek out ayahuasca-using shamans in cities and small towns to incorporate others' spiritual paths into their own (see Dobkin de Rios 1994). Michael Winkelman provides an updated examination of the phenomenon of drug tourism in the Amazon, in contrast with Arrévalo's harsh condemnation of European-American intrusion into mestizo patterns. Riba reports on the psychophysiology of ayahuasca in a laboratory setting in Spain. Dr. David Smith reviews Marlene Dobkin de Rios' book, *LSD, Spirituality and the Creative Process*, which includes information about the historical and ethnological use of ayahuasca in the tropical rain forests of Peru and Brazil. Frenopoulos reviews Labate and Sena Araújo's edited book on hoasca in Brazil, bringing many Portuguese-language chapters to the reader's attention. An article by Dennis McKenna on ayahuasca and human destiny concludes this issue.

The study of ayahuasca represents a challenge to mainstream culture through the phenomenon of new and novel forms of religious practice, exemplified by the ayahuasca churches of Brazil, which have lately spread to North America and Europe. As with the case of other plant hallucinogens employed as religious sacraments, in particular the use of peyote by the Native American Church, vital questions regarding freedom of religious practice will have to be addressed. To accurately determine ayahuasca's potential value as a medicine, it will ultimately be necessary to move beyond the boundaries of conventional treatment models and incorporate the lessons learned by past and distant cultures.

REFERENCES

- Dobkin de Rios, M. 1994. Drug tourism in the Amazon. *Newsletter, Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness* 5 (1): 16-19.
- Dobkin de Rios, M. 1972. *Visionary Vine. Hallucinogenic Healing in the Peruvian Amazon*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.
- Dobkin de Rios, M. & Grob, C.S. 1994. Hallucinogens, suggestibility and adolescence in cross-cultural perspective. *Yearbook for Ethnomedicine and the Study of Consciousness* 3:113-32.
- Grob, C.S. (Ed.) 2002. *Hallucinogens: A Reader*. New York: Jeremy Tarcher Publications (Penguin Publishers).
- Grob, C.S. & Dobkin de Rios, M. 1992. Adolescent drug use in cross-cultural perspective. *Journal of Drug Issues* 22 (1): 128-38.
- Grob, C.S.; McKenna, D.J.; Callaway, J.C.; Brito, G.S.; Neves, E.S.; Oberlander, G.; Saide, O.L.; Labigalini, E.; Tacla, C.; Miranda, C.T.; Strassman, R.J. & Boone, K.B. 1996. Human psychopharmacology of Hoasca, a plant hallucinogen used in ritual context in Brasil. *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 184 (2): 86-94.
- Schumaker, J. 1995. *The Corruption of Reality*. Amhurst, New York: Prometheus Press.
- Siskind, J. 1973. Visions and cures among the Sharanahua. In: M.J. Harner (Ed.) *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*. New York: Oxford University Press.