

Report of research carried out in the Netherlands concerning Santo Daime Churches

Introduction

This report had been prepared by Alberto Groisman, researcher and lecturer at the Anthropology Department, Federal University of Santa Catarina, Brazil, and PhD student at Goldsmiths College, University of London. It is broadly based on long-term research on different subjects concerning Santo Daime religion in Brazil, and particularly on specific fieldwork carried out at Santo Daime churches located in the Netherlands. The data which bases it was collected in the Netherlands and Brazil, in different periods from October 1996 to May 1999, with a focus on the process of transposition of rituals and religious tradition of Santo Daime to the Netherlands.

Report concerning the process of *transposition* of Santo Daime to European Context

Introduction

This report has been written on the request of Adele van der Plas, lawyer and legal counsel of the Santo Daime churches in the Netherlands. Its contents may be used by the Santo Daime churches in their defense for the forthcoming trial at the Court of Amsterdam. The questions put forward to me relate to investigations I made during my study on the ayahuasca using religions. The main question answered in this report is focused on the transposition - or the process of re-location of ritual and doctrine - of the Santo Daime religion from its Brazilian context to a European one.

1. A brief history of Santo Daime religion

Santo Daime is a religion which originated in Brazil and its religious practices are based on the ritual use of a psychoactive substance known as ayahuasca, called daime¹ by Santo Daime adherents.

Santo Daime emerged in Brazil in the 1920s. Its founder was Raimundo Irineu Serra, a Brazilian descendant of African slaves. Serra probably went to the hinterlands of Brazilian Amazonia in 1912, during the period of economic expansion triggered by the boom in latex extraction. There, he became a rubber-tapper, and later worked for a governmental commission responsible for the demarcation of the borderline between Brazil and Bolivia. In the region, having heard about a drink called ayahuasca, which healers -descendants of the Amerindian population- used to provoke visions and healing, Serra participated in sessions and was initiated in its use. In his initiation, Serra had visions in which a woman, who was identified as the Virgin of Conception, appeared and instructed him on how to use ayahuasca 'for the benefit of humanity'. In subsequent experiences, Serra learned or 'received' from the spiritual world - as his followers used to say - sacred songs called hinos (hino-hymn). Towards the end of the 1920s, he started to organise sessions in the periphery of Rio Branco, state of Acre, Brazil. With the increase in the number of followers, Serra founded the first institutionalised centre for the use of ayahuasca in Brazil, which later became known as Alto Santo. The substance was named daime and Serra established a specific ritualised way to use it, central elements of which tradition are still maintained in Santo Daime religious practices: the ritual use of daime, the basic format of the ritual (men and women separated in a concentric format, singing programmed set of hymns); and inspired by a Christian-spiritualist doctrine.

From the end of the 1940s, in different periods, other ayahuasca groups were founded in Brazil, some of them directly derived from Serra's centre. In 1971, Serra died, but his centre remained active. In 1974, Sebastio Mota de Melo, a member of Serra's centre, left Alto Santo and founded another spiritualist

¹ A preparation based on the ritual cooking of two plants growing in Amazonia, Banisteriopsis caapi and Psychotria vind/s, which contain psychoactive alkaloids, harmine and N,N dimethyltryptamine (DMT), respectively, both with psychoactive properties.

organisation called Centro Eclético de Fluente Luz Universal Raimundo Irineu Serra² (CEFLURIS), initiating a new trend in the Santo Daime religion. His centre, located in Rio Branco, state of Acre, Brazil, attracted people from other parts of the country and also foreign followers who went to Aniazonia and joined the group.

2. National and international expansion of Santo Daime religion

At the beginning of the 1980's, under the leadership of Mota de Melo, Santo Daime-CEFLURIS expanded nationally for almost all the states of the Brazilian federation. After the consolidation of its national presence and because of the interest of European adherents, in 1989, Brazilian daimistas were invited to perform rituals in Spain and, in the Holy Week of 1989, Santo Daime-CEFLURIS official rituals were organised for the first time in Europe. Afterwards, groups of Brazilian daimistas (musicians, singers and ritual experts) were invited to come to Europe to perform rituals, to teach the ritual skills (the singing and playing of the hymns) and the Santo Daime doctrine to European members, and other ritual participants. The emergence of Santo Daime churches in the Netherlands began in 1992, when a Dutch citizen looking for alternatives to surgery to treat a brain tumour went to Italy to participate in a Santo Daime CEFLURIS ritual. Impressed with the experience, she subsequently went to the headquarters of CEFLURIS in the state of Amazonas, Brazil, and there started to use Daime as a spiritual treatment for the tumour. The experience was considered a healing process and prompted her to join Santo Daime. At the same period, another Dutch citizen in a process of writing a book in which ayahuasca was discussed a subject discovered the existence of Santo Daime and later went to Amazonia. Both, after obtaining official permission from Santo Daime-CEFLURIS board, started to organise rituals with friends and other interested people, and soon after founded Santo Daime churches in the Netherlands.

3. Rituals in the Netherlands

The Santo Daime rituals in the Netherlands were held regularly, congregating people who might wear ritual uniforms called fardas (for members), or white clothes (for non-members). In the services, participants drank Daime and positioned themselves around a central table, to sing the hymns and to perform a synchronised and repetitive style of dance called bailado. The ritual was supervised by coordinators, normally called commanders, who were also the political leaders of the churches. Ritual participation in the Santo Daime churches in the Netherlands was selective, taking account of a particular view on the benefits of ritual-religious use. In this sense, the Dutch churches developed systems of selection of participants, under the general criteria of admitting to the rituals those people who were considered to be authentically and consciously in search of a spiritual experience.

Daime was used in a ritual setting under the supervision of religious experts, called fiscal, who were responsible for the taking care of ritual participants. The work of these fiscal

² Eclectic Centre of Fluent Universal Light Raimundo Irineu Serra.

was supervised by the board of the churches, and up-dated with counselling and advice from more experienced members of Santo Daime. A sense of sacredness was applied to the use of the beverage daime, and it was also extended to the visionary experience. It was this 'contact' which was considered the moment when healing and self-awareness processes were triggered by the 'energy' from the spiritual plane - as the spiritual effects of daime are referred to by ritual participants, and could be 'absorbed' in a process of healing.

4. Concluding Remarks

Based on the Santo Daime doctrine and ritual format, and also on the personal background of ritual participants and their interpretations, the way Santo Daime churches in the Netherlands have developed their approach to this religion shows that spiritual practices among daimistas are related to features of exploration of the healing and social-associative potentialities of the ritual-religious use of the psychoactive substance. Structured by the religious setting and supported by the Santo Daime indigenous system of teachings to be translated or taken as guidelines, interpretation of visionary experience reverberates in social life, in a continuum, as a form of quest for socialisation, promotion of self-awareness and 'spiritual development'. Religious commitment and practices were predominantly triggered by experiential knowledge, whose plausibility was given both by the doctrinaire principles, and by the solidarity sparked among ritual participants by the social effects of the experience itself, basically in triggering situations of reflection and scrutiny of social interaction.

The use of daime and the religious practices among Santo Daime churches in the Netherlands reflect their connection with Santo Daime-CEFLURIS traditional forms, and it can be included in the contemporary process of spiritual seeking, in which ritual is revitalised, as a space of experience. As performance and transcendence are considered to be related to experience, the collective and individual hermeneutics are considered highly relevant, giving room for the stimulation of individual oriented reflection. In this particular aspect, the process of transposition of Santo Daime to the Netherlands shows that the way Dutch Daimistas chose to re-locate ritual and doctrine was motivated by a wish to reproduce the original Brazilian tradition of Santo Daime, exploring its cosmological, therapeutic and associative potentialities.

Florianopolis, January 3, 2001

Alberto Groisman, PhD
Anthropologist

Florianópolis, 13 de Janeiro de 2001

Dear Hans

After many 'infra-structural' measures, we are finally starting to feel on the ground in Brazil. It is not really easy this transition.

Find enclosed the report I had written. I hope and wish it can help you with the legal process.

I considered your suggestion of an anthropological 'comment' on De Wolff's report but I did not feel I would improve the results of its approach with my comments. Also, I think he is already considering anthropological implications, and further, I think it would be redundant to expand them. On the other hand, this kind of procedure (from my point of view) would sound as (and so, it would suggest that) I was not agreeing with his judgement, what is not the case.

My greetings to all of you

Alberto