

**AYAHUASCA:
INTERNATIONAL PROSCRIBED DRUG
OR INTANTIBLE HERITAGE?**

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Abstract

Ayahuasca is an Amazon brew prepared in order to induce shamanic experiences. Its use might date back to at least 2000 B.C. Today, it is an important part of indigenous shamanism and neo-shamanism practices. In this text, we explore some possibilities and problems arisen by considering Ayahuasca indigenous uses intangible heritage in Peru and Brazil.

Keywords: shamanism, tourism, drug, sacred, identity.

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1. Introduction

“Ayahuasca” is a term of Quechuan origin that means “wine of the souls”. It refers to the brew made from the decoction of two plants native to the Amazon forest: the *Banisteriopsis caapi* and the leaves of *Psychotria viridis*. This Brew has been used to induce shamanic experiences by indigenous peoples at least from 2000 years B.C. (Fotiou, 2010: 7).

At the beginning of the 20th century in the Brazilian Western Amazon, the formation of a society based on the extraction of rubber established the conditions for the ancient indigenous tradition of Ayahuasca, to be assimilated by Brazilians. In this way, between 1910 and 1945, syncretic Ayahuasca churches were founded by afrobrasilians (i.e. mixing christianism with African and indigenous traditions). In present days, there are three primary Brazilian churches that employ Ayahuasca as a sacrament: the Santo Daime, The Union of Vegetal (UDV) and the Barquinia. (Labate and MacRae, 2010: 1-4).

2. Ayahuasca Intangible Heritage in Brazil and Peru.

In April 2008, a coalition of this Ayahuasca churches submitted a paperwork to the Brazilian National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage (IPHAN). They requested to recognize the use of Ayahuasca in religious ceremonies as an element of Brazilian national cultural heritage. To justify this demand, the Ayahuasca churches quoted the definition of intangible heritage as it was established by the UNESCO 2003 Convention. According with those churches:

“We can affirm that the use of Ayahuasca in religious doctrines fulfills the requirements of characterization as immaterial patrimony, considered as ‘practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and techniques that communities or groups recognize as an integral part of their cultural patrimony’”.²

².Available at www.bialabate.net, translated by Mathew Meyer. Now, three years later, this project has yet not received an answer from IPHAN.

The proposal to declare Ayahuasca brew intangible heritage in Brazil is not an isolated case in South America. In June 2008, Peruvian National Institute of Culture has designated the knowledge and traditional uses of Ayahuasca, as practiced by native Amazon communities, intangible cultural heritage of the Nation. One of the main objectives of this declaration was to preserve the brew from western commoditization. Peru has only recognized traditional uses of the brew as cultural patrimony, to explicitly excluding transnational shamanism tourism. It is important to note that differences between ritual uses of Ayahuasca, in relation with commercial psychedelic substances, are underlined by the Peruvian declaration of Ayahuasca as intangible heritage:

“The effects produced by Ayahuasca, extensively studied because of their complexity, are different from those produced by hallucinogens. A part of this difference consists in the ritual that accompanies its consumption, leading to diverse effects, but always within the

confines of a culturally determined boundary, with religious, therapeutic and culturally affirmative purposes(...)what is sought is the protection of traditional use and sacred character of the Ayahuasca ritual, differentiating it from Western uses out of context, consumerist, and with commercial objectives”.(Fotiou, 2010: 339).³

To declare Ayahuasca national heritage in Peru goes to the divide between indigenous / historical / authentic uses of Ayahuasca, and western / modern / appropriating uses of it. As we see, the Peruvian State also affirmed the sacred character of Ayahuasca brew, when used by communities in religious contexts, a character that does not allow considering the brew just a drug. The debate about Ayahuasca as a drug or a sacrament emerges because this brew contains Dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a psychoactive substance proscribed by United Nations conventions and which is

³.(Underline is ours). As we saw in the Brazilian case, the text quoted here refers to the definition of intangible heritage given in the Article 2 of the 2003 UNESCO Convention.

criminalized in many countries.⁴

The question of considering Ayahuasca a drug has predated the proposal to declare the brew intangible heritage. Today, the Brazilian government does not exactly have a law, but an accumulation of opinions and resolutions recognizing the right to ritual and religious use of Ayahuasca. In 1985, Ayahuasca was placed on the Brazilian list of proscribed substances by the Federal Council of Narcotics. Although, there is also a more recent opinion from 2004, that explicitly affirms the ritual and religious use of Ayahuasca as a right related with religious freedom. Only Ayahuasca outside the ritual context would be punishable (Labate and MacRae, 2010: 198).

Ayahuasca churches are now expanding in Europe and North America. The Santo Daime and Union of Vegetal are presented in Netherlands, Spain and Canada, with juridical recognition

⁴.UN conventions from 1971 and 1988.

(Labate, Goldstein, and Arantes, 2008).⁵

Besides this institutional spreading of Ayahuasca, there are Europeans that offers Ayahuasca within independent ceremonies in the old continent, as well as indigenous and *mestizo* individuals travelling from Amazonian countries to work with the brew in Europe. This expansion of Ayahuasca use also foster the debate about the Ayahuasca status (i.e. sacrament, identity item, healing instrument, drug?). In this globalised context, we can ask several questions about Ayahuasca and the possibilities to consider the brew an item of intangible heritage.

3. *Problematique*

The indigenous origin of Ayahuasca poses the question of the relation between Ayahuasca and ethnical identity. The problem differs from country to country. In Peru we may ask which roles (if any) play indigenous organizations, communities or individuals in the process of declaring Ayahuasca intangible heritage. In Brazil, indigenous

⁵.We know these churches work in a clandestine way in other European countries(France, England, Switzerland).

peoples were absolutely marginalized from the proposal submitted to the National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage. Although, they have recently joined the national debate on the issue.⁶ Who are the representatives of indigenous peoples in Brazil? which are their claims and interests in participating in this debate? In the Colombian case, we have the UMIYAC (Association of Ayahuasca Indigenous Physicists from the Colombian Amazon), directed by shamans from several indigenous peoples, who pretends to have the right of deciding which groups and individuals can be considered as a qualified Ayahuasca practitioners, according to traditional criteria (Weiskopf, 2004: 300-335). In this case, we may analyze the need of identify actors and mechanisms to define a deontology on the practice of Ayahuasca, and, if at least in this country, an indigenous organization is the best institution to fulfill this function.

The spread of Ayahuasca churches and independent practitioners (indigenous,

⁶.Labate, E-mail communication, may 2010.

Latin American *mestizos* and Europeans) in Europe, arises a serial of questions related with processes happening in the Amazonian countries. Outside more or less traditional indigenous context, could be Ayahuasca considered as a candidate for an intangible heritage declaration? Just Ayahuasca practices held by recognized churches (e.g. Santo Daime in Netherlands, UDV in Spain) can be considered in an eventual intangible heritage proposal? (This last problem would be pertinent in the Brazilian case also).

Another question which is necessary to pose for all the European and Amazon areas is the following: which status could be given to independent individuals and groups, who use Ayahuasca outside a cultural framework or religious organization? The problem can be reformulated in order to include identity issues. If Amazonian indigenous uses of Ayahuasca could be considered as intangible heritage: Which legal status should be attributed to indigenous shamans or individuals clamming an ethnical identity and working in Europe with Ayahuasca?

There is maybe another question that could be interesting to answer. If Brazilian State recognize Ayahuasca as intangible heritage, we would have two countries in south America (Brazil and Peru) that give that status to Ayahuasca. With this background, a demand to declare the brew intangible heritage would be accepted by UNESCO?

We have some hypothesis that could guide a future research on this problem. Ayahuasca is not a drug or a sacrament by itself, it depends of the context it is used. Following UNESCO 2003 convention, it is difficult to consider a practice intangible heritage if it is not supported by a community which held that practice as part of its identity. It's why it is important to put Ayahuasca in relation with ethnical identities. In this context, independent Ayahuasca practitioners maybe will find more useful to argue in terms of religious freedom in order to achieve juridical recognition of their work, or even in terms of medical arguments, and not in terms of intangible heritage. In any case, it is essential to affirm the humanist and sacred nature of Ayahuasca

when used in certain context, in contrast with “commercial” drugs (e.g. cocaine or heroine) if Ayahuasca eventually could be recognized an item of intangible heritage.

4. Conclusion

We have articles and notes in books about Ayahuasca as intangible heritage focused on the Brazilian case (Labate, Arantes, Meyer), but we are lacking a comprehensive work in heritage studies that cover both the Peruvian and Brazilian cases and further, that take in account all the complexity and diversity of phenomena related with Ayahuasca in a transnational level. The Heritage studies domain, with its transdisciplinary vocation, is an excellent point of view to approach the Ayahuasca issue. The research hypothesis proposed here would put these Latin-American initiatives in a more global context, which is necessary to eventually design a proposal to make of Ayahuasca intangible heritage of humanity, if it is proved that this declaration could foster an ethic and fruitful practice of this kind of

shamanism and could bring some benefits to the communities holding this knowledge.

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