Santo Daime in the Diaspora

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Introduction

Although scholarship on Santo Daime as a religion is growing, until recently there has been little academic literature on Santo Daime in the diaspora. This is surprising given its extraordinary complexities: a small but significant number of people outside of Brazil—who are, in the main, not Brazilian (Groisman 2000; Blainey 2013; Dawson 2013; Watt 2013), and who include middle-class professionals and semi-professionals—have chosen to align themselves with a religion whose central sacrament, ayahuasca or Daime, is a psychoactive substance mostly illegal outside of Latin America, and with a group which continues to be portrayed outside of Latin America as a dangerous “cult” (swns Reporter 2010) or (for example) a “drug fuelled religion” (Boggan 2008).

So far, there have been just a handful of published studies. In the late 1990s, the Brazilian scholar Alberto Groisman undertook pioneering field research on Santo Daime churches in the Netherlands which resulted in a groundbreaking thesis (Groisman 2000), and he has developed his analysis further in more recent publications (Groisman 2009, 2013). Meanwhile, Beatriz Caiuby Labate has published prolifically on ayahuasca religions, including Santo Daime in the diaspora. She is especially concerned with the criminalization of ayahuasca and other psychoactive substances in religious and spiritual activity. Her work is an extensive resource for scholars, and much of it is made available on two websites. Her comprehensive co-edited volume The Internationalization of Ayahuasca (Labate and Jungaberle 2011) includes many chapters that address Santo Daime in the diaspora, with a particular focus on the various and continuing legal battles fought by practitioners (‘daimistas’) in Europe and America. Another important work is Andrew Dawson’s analysis of Santo Daime ritual order and hierarchy, which includes a timely profile of ‘late modern’ Santo Daime practitioners both, in Brazil and in the diaspora (Dawson 2013).

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1 See Dawson, “Brazil’s Ayahuasca Religions: Comparisons and Contrasts,” this volume.
2 These are www.bialabate.net and www.neip.info. Both accessed 30/03/2016.
As well as these publications by established scholars, there are many Masters and Doctoral theses on the subject of Santo Daime in the diaspora, many which are available online (www.neip.info). One of the most recent is Marc Blainey’s (2013) PhD thesis on the presence of Santo Daime in Europe.

Overview of the Spread of Santo Daime

The spread of the ritual use of ayahuasca/Daime in Santo Daime congregations outside of the founding Santo Daime community began in the mid 1970s, (Macrae 1992: 58; Groisman 2000: 82, 2009: 190; Dawson 2013), with the increase of ‘spiritual tourism’ to parts of the Amazon by ‘hippies,’ or ‘backpackers,’ who began to travel on generalized spiritual or religious quests typical of the time in the wake of counter-culture of the 1950s and 1960s (see Groisman 2000 and 2009: 190–191 for historical contextualization of this trend). Many of these quests were focused on personal experimentation with the ‘traditional’ use of psychoactive plants and fungi, as well as synthetically produced drugs (such as LSD). This group was attracted to the alternative and unusual experiences that ayahuasca/Daime seemed to promise, and discovered the early Santo Daime groups in Brazil (Groisman 2000, 2009). The first informal Santo Daime ceremonies outside of Latin America are thought to have taken place in Europe as early as 1985 in Spain (López -Pavillard and de las Casas 2011:365) and in 1987 in Boston in the US (Groisman 2000: 15). Increasing visits from Brazilian Santo Daime practitioners led to a more systematic organization of rituals in Europe (Groisman 2009:192), and the first ‘official’ Santo Daime religious ceremony is said to have occurred in 1989 (Groisman 2009; López -Pavillard and de las Casas 2011; Blainey 2013). Each nation has its own history of the introduction of Santo Daime and several of these histories are briefly documented in Labate and Jungaberle (2011).

The use of ayahuasca in Santo Daime makes its spread outside of Brazil problematic in nations where public health concerns mean that particular ‘hallucinogens’ or ‘consciousness-altering’ substances (also described as ‘entheogens’ or ‘power/medicine plants’) are outlawed under international drug treaties and highly controlled. However, Santo Daime nevertheless is a

3 The term ‘entheogen’ (‘becoming divine within’) was introduced by Wasson et al. (1978).
4 The United Nations 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances lists DMT as a Schedule 1 controlled substance. Although the plants that make up ayahuasca are not prohibited, confusion arises from a provision in Article 3 (1) stating that, “a preparation is subject to the same measures of control as the psychotropic substance which it contains.” However, the