

**R**ecently, a little-known South American spiritual group called the Santo Daime Church has begun making a name for itself in other parts of the world — due in large part to the church's ritual use of a potent vision inducing tea called *ayahuasca*. The spread of Santo Daime is an intriguing modern phenomenon — one that mirrors the revival of the Native American Church and the Peyote Way Church of God. Santo Daime is fully recognized by the Brazilian government, and is gaining recognition in the United States and around the globe. This surge of interest in Santo Daime seems to reflect a general movement in our world towards unconventional spiritual paths.

The Santo Daime church was founded in 1930 by a rubber-tapper in the Amazon rainforest named Raimundo Irineu, who while working in the forests came in close contact with the local indigenous population. After participating in a traditional *ayahuasca* ceremony, Irineu devoted himself to learning more about the magical drink, also known as *yagé*. He learned how to properly prepare the tea as well as how to prepare himself for the experiences that follow.

In an *ayahuasca* vision, Irineu claims he was visited by a woman whom he called both 'Our Lady of Conception' and the 'Forest Queen.' She told him to found a spiritual doctrine in which the drinking of *ayahuasca* would be central to the

ritualistic worship. The Forest Queen also gave the drink a new name, 'Daime.' The name in Portuguese means "give me," which has been interpreted to mean both a gift and a prayer to "give me love, give me light, and give me strength."

Along with the ritual use of *ayahuasca*, the doctrine of the Santo Daime includes worship of nature, Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary and other icons of the Christian faith. This combination of Christianity and Nature Religions is common in South America, and creates a unifying belief system where all can find comfort and healing.

One of the original goals of the members of Santo Daime was to create sustainable communities in rural areas. Their aim was to take people out of the poisonous cities and into the rainforest where children could lead healthy lives. Both the drink *ayahuasca* and the original visions for the Church emerged out of the rain-forests, and the people felt called to return to their place of origin. This created a strong sense of community and history among the worshippers. In fact, the power of the *ayahuasca* experience for Santo Daime members stems in part from this collective experience.

In Brazil the *ayahuasca* ritual is a community affair where everyone knows each other, and all are familiar with the procedure and the songs. Children were present at the ritual that I attended which lasted from early afternoon into the evening. In contrast, I also attended a ritual in California with a

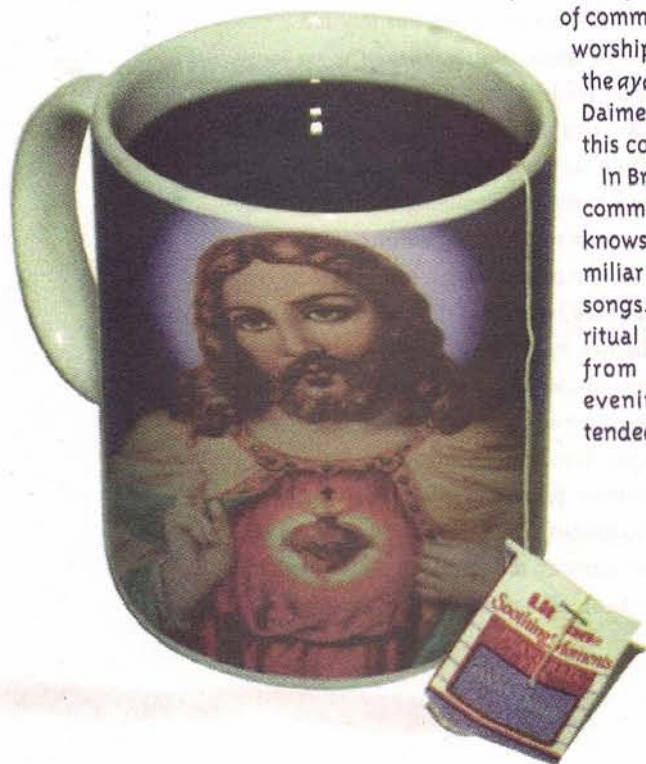
group of unaffiliated persons gathered together for one evening only. Few had prior experience with Santo Daime, and even less knew the songs. The participants seemed more concerned with their own process and less interested in the collective wisdom of the ages contained within the ritual. The participants at this session did not have the rich cultural history of working with *ayahuasca*. In fact for many it was their first introduction. In this situation, it was more difficult to achieve the unity that is often sought. Still, for those present, after several hours of dancing and singing there was a shift of consciousness. We were no longer diverse urban dwellers, but a community of worshippers.

This illustrates the vital role that music and dancing play in the Santo Daime rituals. There are hundreds of hymns in the Church, most written by Irineu, his successor Mato, and later Mato's son Gregorio — all of whom said they channeled the songs from the astral plane. These hymns were designed to invoke specific states of consciousness during the ritual work. Though the Daime is a powerful visionary substance, there is a need to focus the visions on positive and helpful energies. It has been said that without the music, one sees only snakes, which implies a dark, terrifying experience.

# SANTO

by Charles Winstead & Susan Miller

Psychedelic Catholicism





# DAIME

illustrations by a. c. chapman

I felt this amazing calm. I felt empty in a peaceful and powerful way. The darkness had passed and I was free.

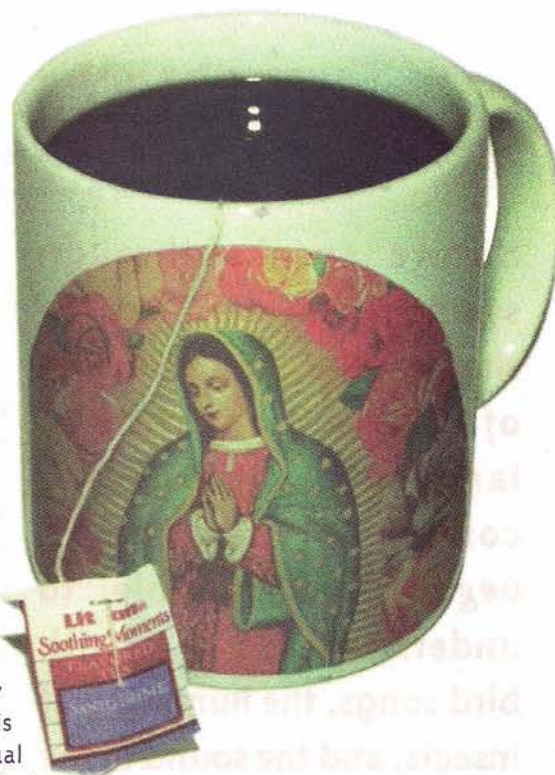
Because of the intensity of the work that occurs in the Santo Daime ritual, there are prescribed preparations and warnings for the use of the *yagé*. Three days of preparation are recommended. No meat or dairy products should be eaten during this time, nor should one engage in sexual activity. It is recommended that you fast for at least three to six hours immediately prior to the work. This regimen should be continued for an additional three days following the work. Those people taking prescribed antidepressants such as Prozac are not allowed to take the Daime, as the MAO-inhibitors in the tea can be lethal when mixed with drugs containing serotonin inhibitors.

The sacrament of the Daime is what sets the Santo Daime Church apart from more traditional religions, and provides a profound experience for many who use it. However, as with the use of any mind-altering substances, the Daime should be approached with respect. Many believe that the key to the mystical experience is not contained solely in the specific chemical compounds of the Daime, but also exists in the community of those involved in the ritual. The sacrament is believed to align the body, soul, and mind to a higher universal good, bringing healing to all who are ready to accept it.

Sometimes during very intense sessions, a participant may be granted an *icaro*, or sacred song. Being granted a song is a very significant experience, and the leaders of the church usually cannot take a position of responsibility until they have received their own personal songs from the visions. Music also helps in the translation and recall of visions that occur, providing an important function in the integration of the mystical experience.

But even with the support of music, there are still times when the visions can become dark. One of the properties of *yagé* is a purgative effect which can be very uncomfortable and unpleasant — yet this is also seen as an important time in the work. The name given these dark experiences is *passagen* or 'passages,' referring to a difficult stretch on a path. As one of the worshippers at the California session reported:

The pain was overwhelming and I had the urge to throw myself over the balcony to get rid of this dark energy that was possessing me. I held my ground though and allowed the experience to follow its own course. Finally, after feeling that my whole body was breaking apart, I had a huge spasm and vomited violently. Then the spasms stopped and



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## REFERENCES

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All quotes are from interviews conducted in 1996.