

# The union of the vegetable: the ritualised use of hoasca tea

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In the Amazon rainforest there grow two plants: the mariri (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and the chacrona (*Psychotria viridis*), which have been used by native Indians for hundreds of years to make an infusion. The infusion, known as 'hoasca tea', is no ordinary herbal brew but one with psychoactive properties. The leaves of these plants contain dimethyl-tryptamine (DMT), which has hallucinogenic effects, and beta-carbolines, which are monoamine oxidase inhibitors that prevent the degradation of DMT in the gastrointestinal tract. The preparation and consumption of these substances are legal in Brazil; although the Federal Council for Narcotics (CONFEN) states that they can only be used during recognised rituals.

There are two main religious organisations, which drink hoasca tea as part of their rituals, the União do Vegetal (UDV) and the Church of Santo Daime (Macrae, 1992). The UDV was founded about 20 years ago by Mestre Gabriel and now has over 5000 members, who are organised into small nuclei based in cities throughout the country. The União is open to anyone and members come from a variety of backgrounds, but are mainly people on low and middle incomes, sometimes with whole families taking part. The religious philosophy is a hybrid of Christianity, candomblé, spiritualism, eastern mysticism and moral values related to the family, peace and love. Members are forbidden to use alcohol and cautioned against committing adultery, but otherwise proscriptions are few. Each nucleus consists of members, more senior counsellors and the 'mestre'; women are admitted to the União but cannot become mestres and children below the age of 12 cannot partake in the ceremonies. The mestre is generally the most senior in terms of age. Members do not consider the tea to be a 'drug', a view reflected in the Federal Council for Narcotics' permissive attitude to its use.



*A scene from the Amazon rainforest. Sue Cunningham Photographs.*

Meetings are usually held every two weeks, last about three hours and are led by the mestre. Each member drinks around 100–150 mls of the hoasca tea and remains seated, while music plays in the background (either regional Brazilian music or 'new age'). Members wear a special tunic during the ceremony, which is green in colour and has a yellow 'UDV' insignia on the left side. Throughout the ritual the mestre walks around the room speaking on a variety of subjects, responding to questions and trying to instil an air of calm and relaxation. He asks each member in turn if they are experiencing 'borracheira' (the word used to describe the effects of the tea). Members describe feelings of well-being, inner peace, intense emotions, illusions and hallucinations, which usually commence 30 minutes or so after ingestion of the tea and are often preceded by an episode of self-limited nausea and retching. The members of the UDV believe that these experiences of altered perceptions are necessary for spiritual growth.

Although the two plants are indigenous to the Amazonian region, they are sometimes sent rooted in soil to individual UDV nuclei where they are planted in the grounds of their buildings. More commonly sacks of leaves are delivered to the groups at regular intervals. Further rituals are involved in the preparation of the tea which occurs over a weekend when up to 200 litres may be made, sufficient for several months. The men are responsible for preparing the leaves and maintaining the fire until the mixture has reached the right point.

It is interesting to compare the ritualised use of these plants with the use of ecstasy (MDMA) by young people at raves and other discos in the UK. Users of ecstasy usually take the drug in the confines of a discotheque, although the frequency of use and the amount taken will vary much depend on individual disposition and availability. Users report similar feelings of emotional warmth and empathy and a heightened appreciation of music and colours. Loud electronic music, known as 'techno', is played, which along with complex light shows form an integral part of the experience. The most obvious differences are that ecstasy is illegal and the user has no control over the quality or even the type of substance purchased. More worryingly, the combination of stimulant drugs, prolonged dancing in locations with no air-conditioning can lead to dehydration and has been linked to sporadic deaths in the UK (Randall, 1992).

In the UDV the tea is produced by the members themselves from plants which they cultivate, it is consumed at set intervals and use outside of meetings is forbidden. During the meetings individuals are closely supervised by mestre and members who have a very bad reaction, in particular persistent psychotic symptoms, are not allowed to drink the tea again.

The incidence of adverse reactions, idiosyncratic reactions and other complications from using the tea are not known. From a research point of view there are many interesting questions one could ask about the ritualised use of hoasca tea. Does the organisation attract individuals with a predisposition to drug use, mental illness or personality disorder and what are the long-term complications of hoasca tea use? Researchers at the Escola Paulista de Medicina in São Paulo are currently investigating some of these questions.

### References

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