SOUL QUEST CHURCH OF MOTHER EARTH: AYAHUASCA DECRIMINALIZATION AND THE STRUGGLE OF AN INSTITUTION TO BECOME A CHURCH

by

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the process by which Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth Inc., an ayahuasca church, in Orlando, Florida, seeks to become a legal church in order to be exempted from the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 which classifies DMT, the psychedelic by-product of the boiled ayahuasca vine and chacruna leaf, as an illicit substance. The three-year study charts the process by which Soul Quest undertakes to demonstrate their practice and belief in terms that will conform to the State's idea of what "church-ness" looks like and how sincere belief should be demonstrated in terms the law will find legible. In the process, Soul Quest is compelled to make a series of situational adjustments to their practices and front-facing self-presentation in order to perform "church-ness," which the DEA ultimately reads as insincere and uses as the grounds for denying exemption. Soul Quest then sues the DEA for being insincere in their own arbitrary process for denying Soul Quest exemption, arguing that the DEA does not have the right in any kind of statute or law to decide what sincerity is or what a religion is. In the case of Soul Quest v. the DEA we see that the lines between the secular and religious are increasingly blurred and entangled and are not mutually exclusive. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at Soul Quest where ayahuasca ceremonies take place, online, where Zoom

integration sessions are held, through court documents drawn from the court case and through an account of the broader cultural context of the psychedelic decriminalization movement in the United States, I show how the social meaning and identity of ayahuasca is entangled and contested on multiple registers. I show how the State tacitly regards rights to exemptions to use entheogens according to an exceptionalism based on racial ideas and on the exceptionalism extended to combat vet's experiences as hallowed testimony in the face of high suicide rates and intractable PTSD. I argue that at the heart of these various contests and meanings is the question over how altered states of consciousness are to be reckoned with as a social fact.

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For my father and Terry Grazer.

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Entering the Field: A Prologue to the Research, Methods and Ethics

On a Wednesday morning I sat down in front of my laptop and logged into Zoom. It was early spring 2020 and Covid-19 lockdown was in full effect world-wide. The death toll was growing, and as yet no vaccine. I had not left my house in weeks. Zoom had become an important way for many people to communicate with the outside world and would become a central approach to how I undertook ethnographic fieldwork. It was not just that I changed my primary field method from face-to-face participant observation to online participation. Rather, the entire field of interaction I was setting out to study had moved online.

As I joined the private Zoom, sitting across from me was Dorian Yates, six-time bodybuilding champion. I had reached out to Dorian after seeing his documentary, Dorian Yates: The Original Mass Monster. In the film he chronicles his new life post bodybuilding wherein after dealing with depression and mental health collapse, he went to Soltara (an ayahuasca retreat center) in Costa Rica on a "spiritual journey to explore the nature of his consciousness." Shortly after contacting him, Dorian responded and agreed to talk to me on Zoom about his ayahuasca experience. Dorian was on a similar state-ordered lockdown in Spain as I was in Wisconsin.

Former Mr. Olympia, a large muscular man with tattoos, related how he first heard of ayahuasca, how it had changed his worldview and how the large lion tattoo on his back reflected his ayahuasca experience. He said, "I'm a fucking lion in the gym training," (a claim which he is well-known for in the body building community) and "while on ayahuasca I felt like I was transforming into a lion." He went on to say that "I was in lion mode…The facilitator came into my space, and I

wanted to kill him." Dorian continued to talk about the connection between his killer training mentality in the gym and his ayahuasca experience. He "warned Soltara that his lion persona might get loud…I was growling on all fours…The Columbian shaman who was facilitating the Soltara ayahuasca retreat came up to me and said, 'I saw you, you changed into a lion.'" Dorian replied to him by asking, "You know what it is? You going to tell me?" The shaman replied by saying, "No, a lion can call when it's injured, but if you want to know ask Mother Aya." And so, Dorian did. While under the effects of ayahuasca Dorian asked Mother Ayahuasca about being a lion. She told him, "A lion is the head of the family, the protector, when you're calling, you're calling your spirit family…calling people to ayahuasca, calling them together." This is what his full back tattoo signifies. He finished by saying, "This is now how I live my life, spreading the message of Mother Ayahuasca." Who is Mother Ayahuasca? And what was I to make of this experiential account?

My interest in ayahuasca was intersecting with a number of personal and biographical accidents but my interpretive background situating ayahuasca in a scholarly setting came from my earlier work. In 2018, I finished a ten-year follow-up study on *kanaima* assault sorcery (theorized as dark shamanism in the anthropological literature) in Paramakatoi, Guyana South America (See Janik 2018; Whitaker Lewy & Janik 2024; and Whitehead 2002) near the borders of Brazil and Venezuela and which culminated in my Master's degree. It was now time to think about what I should undertake next for my PhD. After a long in-depth discussion with my advisor, Dr. Ingrid Jordt, we agreed that my position in Paramakatoi had become compromised after it had become evident that I had gotten caught in the crossfire between opposing parties in the internal politics of Paramakatoi, and in which

my outsider status made me a ready object of unfavorable attention. When *kanaima* threats were directed at me, it seemed a good time to redirect my research interests in shamanism, healing, and sorcery to another field location.

One day, shortly after my discussion with Dr. Jordt, in a coincidence of timing that sometimes determines unexpected shifts in life directions, my close friend from high school Tom (name changed), a recently retired U.S. Navy Electronic Technician (2nd class) with a disability, related to me that some of his colleagues from the military were going to ayahuasca retreats to address treatment resistant post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He noted that he was interested in trying ayahuasca himself and, knowing my interest in shamanism, he recommended I look into it. He observed that these retreats were run by shamans, which immediately piqued my curiosity. I asked if he knew of any of these retreats in the U.S. and he told me about a place called Soul Quest in Orlando Florida. I would later discover that word of mouth introductions like this were a common place between vets.

My interest in veterans was personally meaningful because my late father, Tarryl Janik Sr. was a United States Army veteran who had served during Vietnam. My uncle also served in Vietnam, so I grew up around veterans. Many of my friends are veterans.

The synchronicity of these interests and events helped me become aware of how these intersections formed part of a still broader social phenomenon that cross-cut place, time, and social relations. Psychedelic/shamanic practices of Amazonia have been taking root in earnest in America at least since the 1960s with many disparate groups of people (vets, celebrities, musicians, and professional athletes) intersecting and giving new color to its understanding and engagement. My

expectations of "traditional," socially embedded practices, of the sort I had researched in Paramakatoi were destabilized.

I became attentive to how ayahuasca was being discussed all over social media, in the news, lauded by celebrities like Megan Fox, Will Smith, Aaron Rodgers, and Machine Gun Kelly, who posted on Instagram their recent ventures to remote places like Peru and Ecuador to use ayahuasca under the guidance of shamans.

As I dug deeper, I learned that ayahuasca is considered "great medicine" within the Amazon, used by many Indigenous communities in Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Brazil. These Indigenous communities use ayahuasca for obtaining knowledge of many realms of being that they believe extend beyond the physical and to engage with Mother Ayahuasca, a divine spirit-being who they believe has the power to both help guide and heal human beings. (Harner 1973; Pinchbeck 2019; Lamb 1971; Dobkin de Rios; 1972; Eduardo Luna and Amaringo 1991; Labate & Cavnar 2014) In the Amazon, ayahuasca may also be used for sorcery, and this aspect, I came to find out, is often neglected in its popular representations outside of Amazonia (Beyer 2009; Labate & Cavnar 2014; Whitaker Lewy & Janik 2024). Ayahuasca is a Quechua word meaning "vine of the soul" or "rope of the dead," and is often made by cooking together the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine with the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* or *chacruna* shrubbery plant.

The potent dark brown sludgy mixture that remains after boiling the vine and leaves contains N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) and the psychoactivity of ayahuasca kicks in within thirty to forty-five minutes after ingestion and lasts for hours. Ayahuasca causes nausea and temporal shifts in spatial and

sensory perception. The brew triggers shivering, sweating, vomiting, and diarrhea. This purging of the body is seen as both the metaphysical and physical expulsion of emotional baggage and purging is conceptualized as part and parcel to the healing process in the broader psychedelic milieu.

Ayahuasca remains an illicit drug in many countries. It is DMT that is illegal, and the plant is not consistently regulated. DMT was classified under Schedule 1 in the 1971 United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances and the 1970 Controlled Substances Act in the US. In the US, hallucinogenic substances (entheogens) like LSD and DMT are in Schedule 1 because they are believed to have no medical use value and have a high potential for abuse. This means that ayahuasca users are at high risk for arrest, search, and seizure by the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) if one were to be caught using or selling these psychedelic substances.

Ayahuasca itself is an entangled object (See Labate and Cavnar 2014). DMT is illegal but the plant is not regulated under the 1971 Psychotropic Convention. The vine nor the leaf apart from each other are illegal, it is only after both are boiled down into ayahuasca that it becomes illegal in the US. At the international and national level regulation of ayahuasca varies, it is both seen as a plant and a drug. This has led to the movement in the US and globally to decriminalize the plant.

Soul Quest is a perfect location and case study from which to explore the much broader movement in the United States (and globally) to decriminalize ayahuasca and in the process to assign a new social identity to it. That work is being accomplished on many registers: university research, pharmaceutical industry research, veterans' advocacy groups, freedom of religion activists, drug decriminalization efforts, psychotherapy and psychogenic therapy advocates, spiritual and religious

movements, celebrity endorsement and enthusiasm, as well as many other locations and actors in society that have taken up the cause of redefining ayahuasca as a healing agent, a spiritual enhancement, even a planetary transformation.

Method & Ethics:

In Spring of 2020 I contacted Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth and sent a formal letter of consent to conduct ethnographic research. In it I detailed my Institutional Review Board permissions regarding place-based ethnography. Since Soul Quest already utilized Zoom for ayahuasca integration, and because these Zoom sessions were open to the public, live streamed on Facebook, and advertised to the broader psychedelic community online, Zoom became my primary mode of data collection.

As an open social platform, I did have initial ethical concerns about gaining informed consent for observing Zoom sessions and from Zoom participants. I knew that gaining informed consent from every Zoom participant would be extremely difficult because members come and go quickly and frequently, use avatars and pseudonyms to identify themselves at times, and some calls could have over one hundred participants. I also knew that by trying to contact each Zoom participant in private chat would not work in practice. Many do not even use the chat function on Zoom and also in doing so I would have changed the shape of the Zoom session itself, making it all about my research and not about member integration.

Instead, I decided to gain informed consent from the Zoom leader after I presented my role and purpose. The leader would then let everyone know that I was there and tell the group about my

research. Participants were not concerned about anonymity, because therapy is a testimonial to the efficacy of ayahuasca and contributes to the shared effort of trying to make ayahuasca a more culturally accepted social fact, which is important to church members. Even so, to protect the participants of this study I have changed the names of all of the participants within this dissertation outside of church leaders, who it would be impossible to conceal their identity due to their status within the church and psychedelic community. My decision about anonymity of key players/leaders is a moot point because anyone who goes online can discern who the leaders are and the veterans are publicly identified on Soul Quest's website, in Zoom, in integration, and in films co-produced by the Church, such as the Netflix docuseries, "Unwell," and the film "From Shock to Awe."

The ethnographic data for this dissertation was collected in three locations over the span of three years; on the ground at Soul Quest, IRL (In Real Life), through Zoom calls, Facebook and Instagram (URL, online), and in the court of law, by way of court documents acquired through online archival research via PACER (Public Access to Court Electronic Records). These locations afforded me the opportunity to observe ayahuasca ceremonies first-hand, permitted me to participate in technologically mediated integration sessions which was considered the gold-standard of practice in the Soul Quest community even before the pandemic had begun, and allowed me, through PACER, access to the full electronic documents of the court case between Soul Quest and the DEA. I also conducted interviews with members of Soul Quest by phone, email and Zoom.

Each location was central to data collection and triangulation. My primary modes of research were both digital and place-based ethnography. Participant observation (both at Soul Quest and on

Zoom calls), informal and formal interviewing (in person and through phone and email with interlocutors), and archival research on the government PACER website were my primary modes of data collection. I used the method of triangulation to make inferences in the field, where I juxtaposed and confirmed my observations, the accounts of participants and the electronic documents in order to check interpretations, validity, and provide rich analysis.

Digital ethnography at Soul Quest via Zoom calls was vital to collecting not only candid accounts of ayahuasca experiences but allowed me to engage with more interlocutors than I would have been able to if I had only performed place-based ethnography. As Howlett (2021) has observed, not only has our qualitative fieldwork methods been altered during the pandemic, so too have our informants' activities transformed our approaches as they themselves move from the physical realm into a digital reality. My access to and conceptualization of "the field" was in practice expanded by the move to digital spaces. I could observe that Zoom had already been employed by Soul Quest as the primary space for post-ceremony integration sessions. This allowed Soul Quest's membership to draw beyond the local brick and board limits of the church to include global participation. People come from all over the world to Soul Quest. There are over eighteen thousand members globally with hundreds located in Florida. Most members are not tied to the physical church, but online and on Zoom.

Each Zoom call had anywhere between twenty to one hundred participants, with Sunday Church Service Zoom calls usually being the most heavily attended by church members. The virtual space of Zoom for Soul Quest members is a place of shared community, interaction, sociality, and

identity. As Chris Young the Founder of Soul Quest, related in the Soul Quest community chat, "Everyone is welcome." To be part of the Soul Quest community one does not have to be a church member but interested in ayahuasca from wherever they have encountered it. It is the plant that unifies the community, not the spatial location of the church. In April 2023, I was invited into a Facebook chat group by Chris Young and since accepting the request my phone has been sending me non-stop notifications. Community members post on a wide range of topics day and night—from how to prepare for taking ayahuasca to questions about the state of the Soul Quest court case with the government. In the ongoing chat, members also take unofficial polls of each one of their thoughts and practices. One member, who I will call Jane, for instance, asked the chat group, "Which substance would you say is the most spiritual amongst the ones listed?" Options were DMT/ayahuasca, psilocybin, and LSD. The majority of church members voted for ayahuasca. The purpose of the chat, Chris Young said, was to "...send out newsletters and to keep everybody up-to-date with the federal case that we have with the DEA in the federal justice department."

Examining online court documents through PACER was my primary mode of studying *Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth, INC., and Christopher Young vs. Merrick B. Garland, Attorney General of the United States of America, and Anne Milgram, Administrator of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration*. The electronic documents allowed review of the full transcripts, which I could download for a small fee. Using the PACER site was relatively easy once I first created a login and learned how to search for cases through the correct court system (each federal or state system has its own database within PACER).

In this thesis I place a special emphasis on the accounts of military veterans who use ayahuasca at Soul Quest. Their use of ayahuasca is central to the debate over decriminalization. Veterans are seeking ayahuasca to heal treatment resistant PTSD because other drug related therapies and psychotherapies do not work (Kime 2020). Veteran suicide rates are 1.5 times higher than in the general population. The Office of Suicide Prevention at the United States Department of Veterans Affairs wrote in a 2016 report that "when compared to their non-veteran peers, most veterans are at an increased risk for suicide" (USDVA 2016). Veterans have established their own standards of care in therapies outside those offered by the Veterans' Affairs, i.e., psychiatric treatments. Instead, veterans seek out shamans and ayahuasca. As a group, vets are significant to the entire psychedelic movement because they are in a position to legitimize the use of ayahuasca practices in ways that other practitioners do not. Their purpose is to heal moral wounds (Purcel et. al 2018) suffered during the course of their service and which other therapies have failed to cure. And from the perspective of the US Government and its agencies, prosecuting veterans for ayahuasca use would be tantamount to prosecuting them for their service.

Veterans' engagement with ayahuasca entangles our understanding of the entheogenic experience as an experience of moral, psychological, and spiritual healing. How vets experience ayahuasca is therefore a particularly valuable location from which to examine how healing is perceived to take place through use of the plant. It also shows us how soteriological and transcendental realms beyond healing the mind body of the individual are seen to be connected to the experience. It is here that we see how ayahuasca practice and religious belief become richly overlapped and entangled from

any number of intersections in the personal life of the individual. Belief ultimately is guided by the individual and not the Soul Quest Church. The work of interpretation and integration is the work of personal synthesis and not the collective construction of belief.

Soul Quest's goals are not just to gain religious exemption to use ayahuasca in a religious context, but also to study the effects of ayahuasca use from a secular scientific perspective–to conduct medical studies in the Soul Quest Natural Healing Center, their for-profit organization. This division between the religious use of ayahuasca at Soul Quest and the expressed desire to participate in scientific research on the benefits of the plant is reflected institutionally in the division between the two arms of the organization: the Church and the Healing Center. For the DEA, this apparent blurring of sacred and profane intentions and practices signaled insincerity on the part of Soul Quest, and became the grounds for denying the religious exemption, as we shall see in the court case. There are many locations from which I come to see the ways that entheogens have come to be culturally interpreted in new ways than during the heyday of their first culturally expressive debut on the American landscape of the 1960s psychedelic era. It is this context that sets the scene for this case study.

Introduction

In the *Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James takes a functionalist approach to the study of altered states of consciousness (or mystical states) to argue that the "will to believe without evidence" which is at the heart of faith-based belief, can be beneficial. Minus the behaviorist and functionalist implications of James' insight, it shines a certain clarity on the question at the heart of this dissertation namely, what is sincere belief and how might it be observed in behavior. Also, if we take James' idea as a philosophical starting point to consider his proposition that the flow of consciousness is a unique personal experience that differs from individual to individual, how might that expressive diversity of experience be institutionally formalized (in Max Weber's sense of institutions being the formalization of ideas)? These fundamental, and ultimately unanswerable questions, lay at the heart of concerns I take up in this ethnography of the process by which Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth Inc., an ayahuasca church, seeks to become a legal church in the United States of America. The question of *sincere belief* lies at the center of many of the questions this ethnography encounters. It lies at the expressive heart of the confrontation between the church and the law as we observe in the court case between Soul Quest and the United States Government, DEA. And, it is troubled in Soul Quest's own efforts to articulate and make visible for a legal institution, how the experiences of ayahuasca, which vary from person to person, can be said to collectively reflect a set of shared beliefs—the received idea of what might constitute a church as collective and shared participation in an understanding of the meaning of non-ordinary states of consciousness as these relate to ordinary states.

Sincere belief for Soul Quest is intertwined in the subjective experience of the plant. Their claim to the right to use ayahuasca is asserted as a universal human rights claim which is articulated as the extension of Indigenous rights and responsibilities towards Mother Earth whose emissary is the spirit being, Mother Ayahuasca.

Soul Quest seeks to institutionally formalize their beliefs by gaining religious exemption, but at the center of this struggle is the State's own perception as to what sincerely held religious belief looks like, which is based in the notion of the Church (See Sullivan 2020). For Soul Quest, the difficulty in demonstrating church-ness to the State is because the plant is the church[1] and so we see two very different worldviews collide, each of which is trying to define what religion is in law—one centered upon the "Church in law" and another around the phenomenology and ontology of a plant. What we see is a number of ways that Soul Quest situationally adjusts themselves to the DEA to perform "church-ness" in law to convince the state that it is religious. This makes visible the ways religious freedom is framed with respect to how entheogenic substances are guaranteed by the First Amendment of the Constitution. In the case of Soul Quest v. the DEA we also see that the lines between the secular and religious are increasingly blurred and entangled and are not mutually exclusive. Soul Quest's efforts to create an exemption to secular laws can only be attained by defining its exemption in religious

[1] I argue that ayahuasca, the plant is the church at Soul Quest. This is not argued by Soul Quest and here I take an interpretive approach that does not come out of the interviews of the participants at Soul Quest (who are concerned with performing church-ness). We do see it in statements like this from Chris Young, the founder, who says, "It is all about coming to the medicine." The unspecified "it" and "all" are instructive in their vagueness. At the end of the day, it is about the plant.

terms. How Soul Quest goes about instrumentally achieving that goal is the subject of this ethnography.

In the case of Soul Quest, we also see how the law impacts religion and how religion impacts the law, but this encounter is also about how secular dispositions and beliefs enable and constrain the religious and how the religious also constrains and enables space within the secular domain. (See McCrary 2022; Dew 2019; and Bivins in Dubler and Weiner 2019) I argue that it is not the content of Soul Quest's beliefs or practices that defines a new syncretic religion but rather, it is the sincerity of individual beliefs (however divergent *within* the Soul Quest church) that constitutes sincere religious practice. Similarly, this mirrors how the law has also addressed sincerity of belief. The law establishes that it cannot identify the truth of the contents of belief to determine whether it qualifies as a religion. While courts cannot determine whether a religion is true, they can only determine what a religion or sect says it believes. The question for the law (in this ethnography, the DEA and the courts) is to determine whether a religion and its practitioners demonstrate *sincere* belief which is part of a broader historical problem of ascertaining sincerity since the "sincerity test" in Ballard (1944)[2] which has become the cornerstone of understanding sincerity in American jurisprudence and statutory laws.

What distinguishes how the law has put the sincerity test into practice is the identification of consistent and aligned practices and assertions of value and belief by a community of religious

[2] *United States v. Ballard*, 322 U.S. 78

practitioners and is seen in the consistency of the practice of its religious leaders and the reliance on a dogma and (usually) written doctrine.[3]

How do courts understand sincerity if a religion is indifferent to dogma, shares no common book of doctrine (or only provisionally does), is anti-authoritarian and emphasizes mostly leaderless, or non-hierarchical institutional arrangements? Soul Quest does not hold common values or common beliefs but is in fact anti-valuative in tone and insistent that what binds the community has nothing to do with common values or beliefs, but is instead only ayahuasca. It is the use of ayahuasca as an entheogenic substance capable of inducing altered states of consciousness that each individual at Soul Quest then divines for themselves the significance of. It is not a tradition that is held together by doctrines and dogma or charismatic authority figures or rituals, it is only ayahuasca that makes the community and holds it together. Soul Quest cannot, in a word, demonstrate or perform to the standards of the "sincerity test" because the test is not designed to measure the sincerity of plant use, where the transformation is within, because the plant is the church. As I found when I observed an ayahuasca ceremony at Soul Quest, this is not something that is observable from the outside because it

[3] (Max Weber theorized these underlying features distinguishing the secular from the religious in terms of a church, a sect and a cult.) When juxtaposing Soul Quest with Weber it begs the question if Soul Quest is a church, a sect, or a cult? Reading through Weber we see the theme of secularization and individualism which bring up questions over whether Soul Quest is acting like a Christian sect or a cult focused around an authoritative figure, but neither are the case. Unlike "cult" in the sense that Stanley Tambiah used it for amulets, where charisma is objectified and transmitted through ayahuasca the plant, here, the plant is not sedimented with meaning about virtuosi or the Buddha (for example) as a signifier and sedimentation of sacred power and meaning. Rather ayahuasca is the producer of meaning. The plant has autonomy and is not circulated as an objectified presence of charisma of individual virtuosi or the Buddha. Rather, it activates the experience of personal revelation through an altered state of consciousness that is linked to everyday consciousness. In this sense, it may be on a continuum with practices of meditation and ascetic disciplines as a means to achieve an altered state of consciousness, but it has important features which distinguish it from a cult (a pejorative term that has been replaced with New Religious Movements or NRMs in the study of religion).

is so internalized and subjective. Ayahuasca experience cannot be measured from the outside with any sort of accuracy. So, does this mean that Soul Quest is not a religion? Or would it mean that the legal term of "religion" and the notions about "religious sincerity" do not fit Soul Quest?

I do not intend to adjudicate upon the question of whether Soul Quest is, or is not, a religion that should be granted the protections of the state to practice the use of entheogens for other-worldly or this-worldly ends. That question is entirely immaterial to the purposes of this ethnography. What I *am* concerned with is the process of how the effort to become a church, focused solely on the use of a plant –ayahuasca– for achieving altered states of consciousness unfolds as a series of instrumental and tactical moves and countermoves directed at securing a legal space for any person to gain access to the psychogenic experiences of the plant. I show how this process broadens ideas about who belongs to the church, and what a church is since membership is loose and not dependent upon any particular belief or practice. It is all about "coming to the medicine" as Chris Young, the founder of Soul Quest says.

At Soul Quest, ideas of personal well-being include the whole of the physical person and not only the spiritual person who might be concerned with salvation or other-worldly directed efforts and goals. In this way, we see how the person is not a dividuated self whose spiritual well-being and worldly physical wellbeing may become opposed. Instead, the person at Soul Quest is intimately part of a pluriverse where not only ordinary states of consciousness and altered states of consciousness combine and synthesize as part of a larger whole of experience, but that the non-human and human and the physical and the spiritual are all integral parts of a new ontology and cosmology centered around ayahuasca.

The effects of ayahuasca take place within and are directed at the whole person and the whole of the life world which is why Soul Quest does not set out to separate itself from the secular sphere nor from the other-worldly sphere, nor the scientific sphere, nor the mental or physical therapeutic sphere. This blurring of the secular with the religious is not an aberration, but a standout feature of Soul Quest. How the institution has attempted to stretch the descriptive boundaries of religion as the law defines it to its own shape is still unnatural–a deformed and deforming fit. Nevertheless, the process helps us to see how American ideas of religion and secularism have become blurred, overlapping and entangled. We see that sacred/profane and nature/culture distinctions do not function as natural and resonate categories (as McNally (2022) also observes in Native North American religious traditions). I argue that the Soul Quest case is but one location from which to observe a broader process transforming the American political landscape and which has developed vis a vis secular and religious freedoms and the role of the State to determine what a religion is. Moreover, these concerns are embedded within culture war dialectics as McCrary and Dew have argued (McCrary 2022; Dew 2019). A long history of political efforts aimed at affirming a balance in the rights between Church and State and the religious and secular has culminated in contemporary law applying specific legal tests determining how religious freedoms conflict with other more generally held freedoms. "Sincere belief" is used as the primary legal test for deciding the grounds for First Amendment claims that would exempt religious practitioners from observing laws of the land perceived to conflict with the rights of conscience. Entheogenic church cases in particular, have had the 'sincere belief test' used as the primary legal instrument curtailing expansion of religious freedoms in the name of protecting the public.

Charles McCrary (2022) looks closely at how sincerely held religious belief became the primary legal standard for what is considered legitimate religion in the United States. McCrary traces a genealogy of secularism as a project of governance through law and argues that "in order to be proved a legitimate claimant, one must demonstrate the sincerity of one's religious belief–and do so not only in public, but to public, state institutions...Sincerity is therefore about recognition: state agents more readily recognize people who look, act and talk like them, who speak the language and metalanguage of sincere belief."[4] Sullivan (2015, 2020) argues that law cannot think outside of the church, and in this dissertation, through the case of Soul Quest, I argue that an alternative encounter may just be emerging, an alternative "church-in-law" in which the state and religion can come together in a secular venue to discuss the meaning of religion in law.

This ethnography is a case study of how Soul Quest, self-described as a neo shamanic, Christian syncretic church seeks to become a legal church and how "sincerity" is implemented as the primary legal standard for determining their legal religious legitimacy. In this ethnography, I trace Soul Quest's efforts to pass the "sincerity test" applied by the DEA to which they declined Soul Quest's application to be exempted from the Controlled Substances Act of 1970. For their part, the DEA claimed also to be sincere in its own practices determining whether to grant exemption. Their own claim of acting sincerely itself becomes challenged by Soul Quest over the course of the protracted (and still unconcluded) legal battle.

[4] McCrary, 13.

We observe how Soul Quest has had to perform church-ness to the DEA and the State's ideas about what a religion looks like. In the process they introduced new features into their practices while adjusting previous features to become more "church conforming" (as conceived by the DEA and courts.) The court case between Soul Quest and the DEA makes legible the lack of fit between these two institutions' ideas of what a religion is. I seek to illuminate the variety of ways that each of these institutions adjust tactically and strategically to achieve instrumental ends and, in the process, transform elements of their own institutional practices.

More broadly, I argue that the Soul Quest case allows us to undertake a micro-analysis of some of the ways that religious or spiritual practices reconfigure the secular landscape providing new affordances and limits. Simultaneously, I observe how secularism also reconfigures the religious landscape, obscuring the lines with the secular and redefining what is contained by the religious, sacred or ritual.

The chapters are organized around elements of Soul Quest's practices and world view and culminates in an account of *Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth, INC., and Christopher Young v. Merrick B. Garland, Attorney General of the United States of America and Ann Milgram, Administrator of the United States Drug Enforcement Administration* (2022) being heard in the Eleventh Circuit United States Court of Appeals followed by a concluding chapter.

In Chapter One, I describe Soul Quest's origins, founding, and the space of the church in Orlando, Florida. I underline the significance of the founder's determination to make ayahuasca available to any and all practitioners irrespective of their background or religious belief. The secular

roots of the institution are arguably present. No specific revelation is received by an anointed individual who serves as divine interpreter of a wisdom beyond. We see that at the very outset of Soul Quest's founding there was no emphasis on hierarchy, authority, or dogma. Instead, we see that Soul Quest is anti-authority, anti-hierarchy and anti-dogma, emphasizing experience over tradition.

Nor does Chris or Verena Young look to assert a sectarian identity as a revelation of Christianity through the founder (for example, calling for the return to a purer version of Christianity.) Ernst Troeltsch's description of a "cult" has some overlapping elements of Soul Quest's founder's vision, in as much as it emphasized an instrumental means of pursuing inner experiences solely for their effects, mystical or otherwise. However, the necessity for belief in a divine element contained within the individual is not necessary or essential to the Soul Quest vision. Rather, the meaning of ayahuasca is left to the relationship between the individual and the psychogenic effects of the plant. Throughout this chapter I start to build toward the court case by detailing my observations at Soul Quest during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. I observe how Soul Quest employs spatial and ritual elements drawn from South American shamanic traditions. And I discuss the phenomenology of the ayahuasca ceremony as observed from outside the experience, reflecting on the inaccessibility of internal states in order to focus on the features of the ritual in the administration of the medicine by church volunteers and facilitators.

Chapter Two is an account of observing an ayahuasca ceremony. I explore how set and setting is becoming standardized in the psychedelic movement and how at Soul Quest it helps to prepare the individual for receiving ayahuasca. A description of the psychedelic plant as an intimate psychosomatic

encounter involving different ways of knowing and experiencing reality ensues. The psychedelic experience contrasts with understandings of the sacred in Christianity, which are the DEA's framework for understanding religion (a further amplification of the contrast with DEA classifications of ayahuasca as a dangerous drug substance that should be kept out of the public sphere.) I look at Soul Quest's worldview from the viewpoint of their website ayahuascachurches.org and how Soul Quest's claim to rights is tied to universal rights, Indigenous rights, and the rights to ayahuasca. Through their worldview we see that the website is a treatise on the plant as a church and the right to access the plant because they believe it is a universal human right connected to Mother Earth.

In Chapter Three, the social life of a psychogenic plant, I deconstruct how the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* which Soul Quest claims as their "central sacred text," emerges as a core concern in the court case. The written document's place in Soul Quest practices is ambiguous for a number of reasons. For one, shamanic traditions are oral traditions that traditionally do not codify beliefs, moral admonishments, or veneration of a deity in written documents. The DEA's determination that Soul Quest is insincere on the question of belief is made in large measure on the basis of a claim that the *Manifesto* is used faithlessly by Soul Quest and is therefore a demonstration of their insincerity and a ground for denying their status as a church and exemption from Schedule 1 restrictions. Soul Quest's claim that the *Manifesto* was the church's "sacred text" was itself an ambiguous performance of translation to conform to definitions of "church-ness" held by the DEA and the courts, where the framing of what a religion is, what a church is, and what constitutes belief are prefigured by Western and Christian ideas of church and religious belief. I also take a look at how ayahuasca is treated by

pharmaceutical companies, non-governmental organizations and other institutions studying the effects of psychedelics in a variety of therapeutic and non-therapeutic settings, to treat myriad disorders, disease and illness such as drug and alcohol addiction, cancer and treatment resistant PTSD. In this, we see how all of these different secular entities are trying to make ayahuasca a social fact in many different registers that I argue enable a new secular venue for discourse between the Church and State in law.

In Chapter Four I observe how veterans are singled out by Soul Quest as model examples demonstrating the profound healing imparted by ayahuasca on intractable PTSD and depression experienced as a consequence of war. These veterans demonstrate how efficacy and sincerity get linked in an unequivocal way, often bridging the secular and the religious. I look at how testimonials of model veterans do the work of outreach to other vets, how integration is a form of fellowship and a consensus producing setting for the experience of healing moral wounds. In Soul Quest's integration sessions, facilitators do not seek to define moral proscriptions or dispositions. Personal moral orientations are the purview of the individual with respect to their own values and understandings. Rather, ayahuasca ceremonies and integration sessions are used by vets to help integrate the experiences of horror, moral wounding, self-hatred, addiction, and violence that continue in their everyday life long after they have left the combat field. Vets describe the process as making the person whole where they had been fragmented. I focus on the vets as a key diagnostic location in the study because Soul Quest's efforts to become a church need to be understood in the broader context of the entheogenic decriminalization and psychedelic justice movement in the United States. Vets have been instrumental

in helping to change State laws regarding the uses of entheogenic substances such as marijuana and psilocybin mushrooms. I also discuss how Jungian psychotherapy and transpersonal psychiatry are being used syncretically by Soul Quest to help members interpret their ayahuasca experience during integration.

Zoom integration meetings provide an opportunity to examine Soul Quest's approach to integration which is facilitated by a third-party organization called *Being True to You,* a secular coaching business. Soul Quest's use of a coaching business to do the work of interpreting the church's ayahuasca ceremonies underlines the significance of secular interpretive approaches drawn mainly from transpersonal psychology and which emphasize personal growth and transformation. Soul Quest's Natural Healing Center is described in order to point out the ways that commercial interests and practices exist on site and as an e-business. How Soul Quest views the important role of scientific research at the center as a way of validating its practices and universalizing its claims to truth is also addressed. The fact that the religious is blurred with worldly well-being is a feature of Soul Quest's "health and wellbeing" arm of its institution and has complicated Soul Quest's front-facing efforts to perform "church-ness" to the DEA (a point that is remarked upon in the court case).

Chapter Five tracks the court case between Soul Quest and the DEA from its inception in 2016 when Soul Quest was first told to apply for exemption by the DEA, to when Soul Quest files suit in the Florida Middle District Court, to the final determination letter of denial by the DEA and then into the appeal by Soul Quest in the 11th District Court. I examine how the DEA defines a church and their criteria for evaluating Soul Quest according to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993

and the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, as well as the major points of conflict that Soul Quest discusses after the appeal in Zoom with church members such as; religious sincerity, their business model, their non-profit status, and the idea that they were working with the DEA to create a "gold standard model" for psychedelic churches to follow on the path to religious exemption in the United States. It is in this fraught legal exchange between the DEA and Soul Quest that we see how Soul Quest struggles to define itself, to become a church, and to make ayahuasca a social fact that is decriminalized and recognized as an agent of personal and spiritual transformation.

In the Concluding Chapter I review the ways that Soul Quest and the DEA framed their court cases as a sincerity issue. I explore what the implications for secularism and religion are in the contemporary American landscape. I consider how ideas about what does or does not receive protections from the State are tied to ideas about race and ethnicity and indigeneity, but more importantly to ideas of how Christianity has shaped the religious landscape as the hegemonic "church" form. I also underline the significance of sincerity used as a measure to determine the standards for authentic religion (and here I elaborate upon McCrary's and Dew's theories and historical works). One might stop just short of arguing that the Soul Quest vision provides us with a study of the secularization of the religious sphere and represents a particularly American version of the technologies of secular governance that afford the expansion of personal freedoms through the "religious sphere." I argue that what had in an earlier time been seen as a strong division between Church and State, and religion and the secular has increasingly eroded as new experiences of personhood, cosmopolitan communities, and ideas about the limits of the lifeworld have emerged as a new Mother Earth as Gaia

ontology. By focusing on the processual way that Soul Quest attempts to pass the DEA's sincerity test we see how new religious forms and expressions are created by the demands of American law. At the same time, the law (and by extension its acting agencies, e.g., the DEA) are also challenged and changed with respect to defining what counts as legitimate grounds for First Amendment claims, and which arm of the law can confer or reject claims to the legitimacy of becoming a legal church.

As the State becomes involved in determining what is a church (a determination that it has been loath to become enmeshed in as a secular power) we see how questions over religion become entwined in the State's own powers. This entanglement of the State to determine the nature of religious belief puts it dangerously on the edge of acting like a religious authority. This is precisely what Soul Quest seeks to exploit as a demonstration of the lack of sincerity of the DEA and as an inappropriate possession of government agencies to determine who believes sincerely. Or even, what is a church.

Chapter One: Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth: Founding, Set and Setting

Soul Quest: Origins

In a 2018 interview with *Inspirey,* (an online magazine that interviews entrepreneurs and executives who "follow their dreams…[to] build businesses from scratch") Chris Young explained why he and his (then wife), Verena Young, decided to establish Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth. "I was inspired by my own personal experience with this medicine in the mountains of Spain and the amazing healing potential I personally witnessed in the ones partaking in the Ayahuasca Ceremony. The transformational work took place on all levels of being – from physical pain relief to breakthroughs with psychological traumas or depression. It was like 10 to 15 years of psychotherapy in one retreat…I personally found relief from a decade long intense pain in my sciatic nerve…It was just gone."[5]

After returning home to Germany, he says he continued to have visions of ayahuasca, the healing power of the medicine, and said he felt called to bring this revelation to others. Chris and Verena relocated to the United States with the purpose of starting a church and began attending ayahuasca ceremonies. Chris relates that he "started a formal apprenticeship under the guidance of a traditional Brazilian Medicine Woman where he learned to perform sacred ceremonies in the Amazonian tradition." And, despite the fact that ayahuasca falls under the Schedule 1 Drug Act as an illicit substance in the United States, he said that there was no doubt in his mind that he would be opening the "Soul Quest Ayahuasca Retreat Center."[6]

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[5] https://inspirery.com/soul-quest-ayahuasca/ Accessed by author, 2020.
[6] Ibid.

Chris Young learned that the only way they could bring an ayahuasca retreat center to the United States *legally* was to create a church. He says their first attempt at establishing a legal church was to investigate whether they could affiliate with a legal church that already had religious-exemption status. With that purpose in mind, Chris met with the leaders of the Oklevueha Native American Church (ONAC) and was told that if he became a member and *purchased* an independent branch of their church, that he would be protected under their legal organizational umbrella and the RFRA Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993. However, Chris soon discovered that the ONAC could not provide that umbrella of legal protection that he sought, as required by law, so he distanced himself from the ONAC. In 2015, Soul Quest incorporated as a Florida domestic nonprofit corporation and held their first retreat. Soul Quest was now one of the many underground psychedelic churches to have popped up across America in response to the rising demand for ayahuasca that has sparked the pro-psychedelics movement globally.

Soul Quest directly established a website and an online presence on FaceBook, advertising their retreats. Soon after they caught the attention of the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), who directed them to apply for religious exemption under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 (CSA 1970). Soul Quest complied. For three years they waited for a response and received no reply. Fearing the DEA was insincere in directing them to apply for exemption and that they might be criminally charged, they filed a pre-emptive suit against the DEA in the Middle District Court of Florida to initiate a DEA response to their exemption application. Covid-19 had just begun in earnest and DEA agents found themselves short-handed. They asked Soul Quest for a "stay of proceedings," so that Soul

Quest might work with the DEA to determine the proper protocols for legally importing, storing, and handling ayahuasca according to the CSA 1970. However, during the stay of proceedings, the DEA investigated Soul Quest, finally sending a letter of determination denying Soul Quest religious exemption. Soul Quest believed this was part of a long-term strategy by the DEA, a concerted effort to shut them down.[7]

Sometime around 2018, Soul Quest started the Soul Quest Natural Healing Center or SQNHC, a for-profit arm that was separate but still connected to the non-profit entity. The healing center offers subsidized post-ayahuasca ceremony coaching, and a *dieta* or diet preparation guide for members to utilize prior to ayahuasca ceremony. The *dieta,* they claim, not only helps one prepare their mind and body for ayahuasca, but also has ordinary everyday health benefits: "cleanse[s] your entire digestive system, and you may even notice an improvement in gas, bloating, and any digestive discomfort."[8]

The Healing Center offers *hapé*, breathwork and chocolate retreats. *Kambo*, a poison drawn from an Amazonian tree frog and used as a traditional cleansing and purging ritual, is no longer offered following the accidental death of one of their members from fatal water intoxication.

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[7] In 2018 a member died during an ayahuasca ceremony. The parents of the deceased then filed a wrongful death suit in Orange County Florida against Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth INC, Chris Young, Verena Young, Dr. Scott Irwin, and the property address on Lone Palm Road in Orlando Florida. (See *John Paul Begley v. Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth* (2020)) Although this case is cited in the final determination letter from the DEA to Soul Quest, this wrongful death civil suit has not significantly affected the case with the DEA because it does not concern religious exemption. Even so, in a *CourtHouse News* article (April 22, 2023), Kayla Goggin emphasized that the Begley case, in addition to another civil case brought against Soul Quest (*Kevin Rupchand v. Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth, INC)* was *determinant* in the DEA's final denial of religious exemption. This was not, in fact, emphasized in the final determination letter in 2021.

[8] sqnhc.com, Accessed by author, 2023.

Soul Quest has rebranded itself a number of times over the years since it first opened. When they first sought affiliation with the ONAC, they referred to themselves as a "Native American Church." They subsequently adjusted their institutional church designation to inflect their identity as a "neo-shamanic and Christian syncretic church," an "Ayahuasca Retreat Center" and most recently, "Ayahuasca Church of Mother Earth." All of these adjustments represent tactical maneuvers in the effort to situate the church within the legal landscape in which they seek to become a legalized church.

Spencer Dew (2019) discusses this phenomenon within the context of Aliite sovereignty to argue that we are looking at examples of how new forms of religion are emerging in order to conform to American law. Religious freedom is not a description by itself, a straightforward guarantee of First Amendment Rights. Rather, it is a description that depends upon many factors. Sullivan (2015, 2020), Dew (2019), and McCrary (2022) have shown that religious freedom is an entangled concept that intersects with issues of race, class, and power in the United States. The work of Sullivan, Dew and McCrary direct our attention to new ways for thinking outside the frame of "church in law," one that makes room for alternative "other-wise" religion. (See Sullivan 2020)

At Soul Quest's website (ayahuascachurches.org), one learns that Soul Quest was founded by Chris and Verena Young in 2013 but formally established in 2015. Soul Quest self identifies as a neo-shamanic church and a Christian syncretic religion offering weekend spiritual healing retreats for individuals seeking physical and mental health benefits, healing, and personal growth through the use of ayahuasca. Ayahuasca is offered to paying members (described as "donations") as a means of healing a variety of psychosomatic conditions and illnesses.

What most intrigued me at the outset was Soul Quest's claim of being a "neo-shamanic church," with connections to shamans in Amazonia. These shamans were periodically invited to Florida to guide ayahuasca ceremonies, but they were by no means critical to the ministrations of the church.

Verena Young granted me permission to undertake a study of Soul Quest suggesting I participate as a volunteer. Volunteers help out with the ceremony by assisting members undergoing the psychedelic effects of ayahuasca. This was in keeping with the idea that everyone at a ceremony should be a participant and not a voyeur. My entry into the field was postponed by four months waiting for Florida to lift its Covid protocols. Eventually around August 2020, Soul Quest was given the green light to re-open, and I planned my first visit.

As I waited for the boarding call at General Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee, I observed that everyone (including myself) was wearing a mask except the man sitting in front of me coughing. Masks were mandatory on airplanes, and I was honestly terrified. All I knew at that point about Covid 19 was that it was an airborne illness and that it was killing people all over the world. The death toll was immense, the tension was high, and people were fighting over the efficacy of wearing masks. The political landscape was divisive and hospitals in Wisconsin were filled with Covid patients, many of whom were dying.

Even amidst my fear of getting Covid-19, I still felt it was necessary to fly to Orlando to make a preliminary visit to Soul Quest to build rapport now that things were opening up. Soul Quest had

recently reopened after government ordered lockdown and were now administering Covid-19 rapid tests on site before allowing members entry.

I pulled into the driveway at Soul Quest around 11:50 a.m. There were two people waiting in Covid-19 N95 protective face masks near the front entrance, they were chatting about how Aya (ayahuasca or Mother Ayahuasca) guided them and that they have not had any alcohol cravings since their first ceremony. I spoke to them briefly then walked past them behind the house to the far back of the property along a gravel driveway to a small white tent where church members underwent a rapid Covid-19 test before being allowed on the church grounds. I sat down in a chair at a small table in front of a man I will call Kurt, the medic on site, who then poked my finger to draw blood for the Covid-19 test. As I sat there both awaiting and fearing my results, he told me how ayahuasca is a "profound experience." Kurt is an ex-firefighter and military veteran. He told me he suffered from PTSD. He also told me that Warrior Quest held retreats on Wednesday evenings (which is a veteran only ceremony) and that the participants usually stay on through the weekend ceremonies to both imbibe ayahuasca and volunteer. It was Friday and there was an ayahuasca ceremony later that evening.

After testing negative for Covid-19, I was allowed into Soul Quest and went directly to the house where I met co-founder Verena Young in her office. Verena greeted me and proceeded to give me the grand tour. We talked for about an hour about my research and the schedule of activities for the weekend. We walked over to the desk in the front office, where she had a name badge waiting for me next to all of the other volunteer's name badges.

1. Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth INC. Photo taken by author, 2020.

Discussion of Soul Quest's impending lawsuit almost immediately came up in our conversation. Verena offered that the DEA had wanted to settle the lawsuit and not go to court and that they had requested more time from the court to further investigate and cooperate with Soul Quest to find some kind of mutually beneficial resolution for complying with the Controlled Substances Act of 1970. She explained that the DEA had complained about not having enough agents during the pandemic and that they were backlogged, which is why they needed more time to investigate Soul Quest. Right from the beginning I could see that the ongoing religious exemption lawsuit with the DEA was a central preoccupation for church leaders.

The Space of Soul Quest

Soul Quest is located on a 4.5-acre parcel of property with a small pond on the outskirts of Orlando, Florida. The house is a six-bedroom, four-bathroom single family ranch style home and it is enclosed with a large white privacy fence. Church administration and members alike park in the front yard on the grass. The house is used primarily for administration, volunteers/facilitators can stay in bunks in the bedrooms, but church members[9] typically only stay for retreats. Members who stay for a retreat can use bathrooms and hang out in the foyer, but everywhere else is off limits to everyone but volunteers, facilitators and administration. The foyer connects directly to the kitchen and back door, which is used by members as they enter the church. The building is not the sacred space, it is an administrative center, welcome center, and place for a few rooms with bunks that hold volunteers, facilitators, and administrators. The sacred space of the church is described by "the maloca."

When you come out of the house there is a fireplace on the right which is one of the extended spaces of the sacred space that members interact with during the ceremony. On the left is an addition to the house which has meeting rooms and sleeping areas for retreat participants. There is also a kitchen where members cook food and spend time conversing amongst themselves before and after ayahuasca ceremony. On the right just past the outdoor fire pit there are two large patios for members to stay in and use while on ayahuasca (they call these the Lotus and Dragonfly patios see figure 5). In

[9] "Members" are what participants of ayahuasca retreats are called.

the very back of the property, near where I had my Covid-19 test, are small private cabins and bathrooms for members to stay in and use which are situated around the maloca, the main ritual space.

2. The Maloca at Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth INC. Photo taken by author, 2020.

Soul Quest recreates the sacred space in which ayahuasca ceremonies take place in South America by building a maloca, a round house modeled on Indigenous Amazonian round houses made from jungle materials. The maloca at Soul Quest has the traditional shape of Indigenous buildings but is made of different prefabricated materials like canvas and a lattice of flexible wood. Soul Quest's maloca is a prefab yurt that is self-assembled. It is in the maloca that the ayahuasca ceremony takes place in addition to *hape*', breathwork, and shadow work retreats.

It is also used for post ceremony integration. The small pond behind the maloca members used for viewing but were not allowed to go near during the ayahuasca ceremony for safety reasons.

3. Inside the maloca at Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth INC. Photo taken by author, 2020.

4. Inside the maloca at Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth INC. Photo taken by author, 2020.

While the church is situated in a peri-urban setting overlooking a pond, the maloca is the sacred space at the church. Inside it centers around a small table with candles on it where ayahuasca is served. Each mat is white and clean and faces a plethora of tapestries with bright colors and spirit beings, trees, and even an American flag (See figures 3 and 4). In the pinnacle of the ceiling is a sun light and a hanging ceiling fan to help keep members cool during hot Orlando summers. The tapestries invoke a sense of an Indigenous practice that is coming from a forest. The murals painted on the wall of the house leading the maloca is particularly representative of this (See figure 6). Forests in South America are the location that you find ayahuasca in Indigenous populations. Indigenous populations are seen as being the protectors of these last raw wild spaces. And so, we see on the property at Soul Quest an invocation, a kind of echo, of this wild jungle being the location for the church and this sacred activity for experiencing ayahuasca.

5. Lotus and Dragonfly patios and the fire pit at Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth INC. Photo taken by author, 2020.

6. The wall on the back of the house leading to the maloca at Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth INC. Photo taken by author, 2020.

Administering Ayahuasca: Volunteers, Administrators and Institutions

There are over eighty people who show up for the ayahuasca ceremony every weekend at Soul Quest, many of whom end up becoming volunteers. Volunteers are the heart and soul of Soul Quest. Not just anyone can volunteer at the church. It is a vetted process. Church members interested in volunteering must first fill out an application on their website, then be interviewed, and follow a strict code of conduct while at the church. Full weekend volunteers are expected to arrive on Friday in the early afternoon and adhere to a dress code. They are to dress in clean plain white garments that are "not provocative." The color white they state, "is so you are easily identifiable at night," and "pants,

shirts, shorts, skirts, and dresses should be respectful to the sacred nature of our community."[10] White also symbolizes purity and purification, a "Light Worker" ready to do the work of Mother Ayahuasca.

Volunteers have to follow the rules of the church space as well. They are not allowed to touch drums, flutes, stringed instruments, singing bowls, feather smudgers, or other ritual and ceremonial tools without permission from their owners. Only the community rattles and shakers can be used by everyone during the ceremony. The altar must be kept organized and clean, and everything must be put back in order after use, especially the *hape*', *tepis*, and *kuripes*. (*Tepis* and *kuripes* are small wooden tubes used to blow *hape'* tobacco snuff powder into the nose).

On the evening after the first ceremony on Friday nights volunteers must also check in with facilitators before going to bed. They must discuss daytime rest periods and develop a schedule to help with this. If there are issues with a member at night, volunteers must wake the on-call facilitator first, who will assess the situation and address it. It is also important that volunteers know where sheets, pillowcases, blankets, ceremony mats, carpets, yoga mats, paper towels, toilet paper, first aid kits and ice packs are located among other important objects and tools. Volunteers are also expected to keep the kitchen clean, the dishes washed, prepare food, and empty trash and recycle bins. The volunteer information sheet that each volunteer must know prior to arriving, has an extensive list of chores that must be done over the course of every ceremony weekend. Not only do the volunteers run and maintain the space of the ceremony, but they must also keep the dorm areas clean and organized as well. In the main house there is a dorm area for volunteers to stay. These are bunk beds where

[10] Ayahuasca Churches, 2022.

volunteers stay over the course of their time at Soul Quest, which can range from one weekend to months at a time.

Volunteers are rewarded with free ceremony time, but many of them will donate that time to other church members in need, especially to veterans. I observed this on more than one occasion. In the online volunteer application Soul Quest asks potential volunteers very specific questions relating to their intentions and abilities (See Appendix A). Candidates must then submit both a picture of themselves and a picture of their driver's license for a background check. Once approved, candidates can begin volunteering and building up their vouchers towards free ayahuasca ceremonies.

There is no specific length of commitment from volunteers, and it does not seem that they have to have extensive knowledge of the church, its beliefs, nor knowledge of the *Ayahuasca Manifesto*. Although, it is encouraged. What Soul Quest is really emphasizing is a core group of practitioners who (in exchange for participation in the ceremony itself) perform the functions of helping others experience the ceremony. They are not hiring outside of the church, and they are not creating a church in the sense of developing an ecclesiastical structure although there is an upper echelon within the institution that includes Chris and Verena Young and, until he left Soul Quest, Dr. Scott Irwin.

There are three types of volunteers at Soul Quest: the upper echelon, facilitators, and volunteers. The volunteers are the lowest level and do most of the cleanup work including washing out the vomit buckets, watching over church members during the ceremony and escorting them around the property and to the bathroom. They also do laundry and prepare food. The middle tier, what we

might call, "virtuosi volunteers" are facilitators who only oversee ceremonies and help with integration. The upper echelon oversees the entire institution including its administrative functions.

Ceremonies are a mix of people including all three types of volunteers. And all these different types of people are channeled into different types of Zoom integration based upon their life histories, interests, and needs. While there are a variety of Zoom integration groups available, one section is strictly for veterans, called Badges and Breakthroughs. I will be focusing on this sub-grouping within the integration groups setting later in the dissertation.

The Phenomenology of Ayahuasca

My approach to the phenomenology of ayahuasca draws on literature with deep roots in anthropology and sociology beginning with William James descriptions of the varieties of religious experience. Non-ordinary states of consciousness and religious experience are vast (Huxley 1954; Castaneda 1968; Kilham 2014; Leary 1968; Devereux 1997; Barnard 2022). My focus will be on the non-ordinary states of consciousness of Western practitioners of ayahuasca. (For an account of Indigenous narratives see for example, Eduardo Luna and Amaringo 1991; Bear 2000; Dobkin de Rios 1972; Lamb 1971; Harner 1973). Culture, psychology, belief, and experience all impact the ways a person experiences ayahuasca, and this is why I will focus on Western interpretations of ayahuasca, because Soul Quest is a particularly Western institution without strong lineage connections to shamans or traditions in the Amazon.

Shanon (2002) offers one of the most comprehensive studies typologizing non-ordinary states of consciousness to date. He describes his study as an account of the "uncharted natural cognitive domain" and bases his work on more than a hundred thirty ayahuasca sessions.[11]

Shanon (2002) describes ayahuasca experience as "disassociation of the self and the mental material one experiences" and "experientially, the feeling is that one is no longer in full control of the thoughts one entertains...one feels that other people or agents are controlling one's thoughts."[12] Barnard (2022) who undertook a participant approach to the ayahuasca experience said he felt a "tinge of anxiety," that the ayahuasca tasted "extremely unusual" and that "for a while, nothing major seemed to be happening."[13] But then, with eyes closed he "began to see a series of brilliant jewel-like colored points of light flickering in a variety of dancing patterns—lights that, more and more, began to feel like flickering windows into a shimmering divine world of colors; colors that seemed to...be more intrinsically pure than color we normally see in different objects in the physical world, perhaps better described as 'upgrades' of color."[14]

Alamia et al (2020) found that DMT "revealed a spatio-temporal pattern of cortical activation (i.e. traveling waves) similar to that elicited by visual stimulation,"[15] and Michael et al (2021) found that "invariably, profound and highly intense experiences occurred," such as dynamic encounters with

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[11] Shanon, "Altered States and the Study of Consciousness," 34.
[12] Ibid, 133.
[13] Barnard, *Liquid Light*, 20-22.
[14] Ibid, 23.
[15] Andrea Alamia, Christopher Timmermann, David J Nutt, Rufin VanRullen,Robin L Carhart-Harris (2020) "DMT alters cortical travelling waves" *eLife* 9:e59784.

"other beings" and "entities" in "other worlds."[16] These kinds of experiences with intense visual stimulation, geometric patterns, fractals, and the engagement with non-human beings is part and parcel to how westerners describe their ayahuasca experiences. It is notable that neurobiological approaches to studying ayahuasca–concerned with biochemistry, neuropharmacology, physiology, and brain imaging as a biomedical approach to studying ayahuasca experience–do not usually overlap with the psychosocial and spiritual dimensions of healing. (A notable exception is Frecska et al (2016))

The interpretation of the ayahuasca experience is culturally inflected. In the Western context for ayahuasca use practitioners tend to use more conceptual and psychological language—"the ego," psychotherapeutic framings, "the unconscious," "personal growth" rather than for example—wherein Iquitos Peru shamans interpret their visions of people and animals, as reflections of their environments and interactions with spirits which are seen as the given foundations of their life world.

The Role of Shamans at Soul Quest and Beyond

The shamanic literature is vast but can be broken into a few broad categories. The first category is based upon Eliade's (1951) generalizing approach. Eliade (1951) argued that shamanism equates to "techniques of ecstasy" or a form of trance where in the soul leaves the body and moves in-between other planes of existence (upper and lower worlds).[17] Early Anthropologists wrote in detail about shamans in places as far away from one another as the United States, Australia, the Arctic, and Amazonia but generalized their findings according to Eliade's broad cross cultural interpretation

[16] *Front. Psychol.*, 16 December 2021, Sec. *Consciousness Research*, Volume 12 – 2021 https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.720717
[17] Eliade, *Shamanism*, 4-5.

(George Devereux 1956; Ronald Rose 1957; Lorna Marshall 1962; Vilmos Dioszegi 1958). Eliade compared techniques of ecstasy that he saw in different ritual contexts across the globe and categorized them all under the umbrella of the shaman, which includes witch doctors, and sorcerers. Eliade's Shamanism would inspire the New Age Movement,[18] making the shaman an attractive figure (in particular for healing techniques) in the second half of the 20th century (and in particular the 1960s) when people became more and more dissatisfied with traditional religion/Christianity and syncretized their religious practices with varying aspects of Western Esotericism, Hinduism, Spiritualism, Buddhism, and Gnosticism. Today, scholars' debate both Eliade's generalizing approach to the study of shamanism and the use value of the word 'shamanism' (See Francfort, Hamayon, and Bahn 2001) adopting instead the arguably more useful shamanism(s) (See Atkinson 1993).

The second category is Neo-shamanism, or new shamanism (also known as urban shamanism), set within the New Age Movement which made its way from Europe to the United States, and was primarily concentrated within the United States, before spreading even more globally. (See Francis Huxley 1956; R. Gordon Wasson 1957; Carlos Castaneda 1968; Barbara Myerhoff 1974; Maria Sabina and Alvaro Estrada 1977; Michael Harner 1980; Holger Kalweit 1987). Neo-shamanism offered a form of spiritual endeavor that aligned its adherents with nature and the primordial Other, in opposition to institutionalized Western religions and Western political and economic orders. It provided in the 1980s and 90s what Buddhism and Hinduism was already offering for many spiritual

[18] A movement defined by scholars that developed in the 1970s where many different forms of religious and spiritual practices are incorporated and unified into one including practices from Western Esotericism, Buddhism, Wicca, Hinduism, and more.

seekers at the beginning of the 20th century, namely, a spiritual alternative for Westerners estranged from major Western religious traditions. Particularly appealing for its democratic qualities that bypass institutionalized religious hierarchies and dogma, the new shamanism is compatible with contemporary emphases on self-help, self-actualization, and rapid results. (Harner 1982 and Houston 1987).

Anthropologists found that neo shamanists share a serious concern about precedent and symbolic content, and some defensiveness about charges of "playing Indian." (Dubin 1991 and Harner 1988). Efforts were made to identify as precursors of neo-shamanism in Western history such phenomena as witchcraft, spiritualism, mysticism, and Western Esotericism. Drury (1978) Looks into occult practices in the 19th and early 20th century Western Europe and America to claim an easily accessible shamanic heritage into which Westerners could tap.

Shamanism and the use of entheogens, the third category, consumed for sacred purposes also remains a growing interest among scholars and popular readers (Erowid 2007; Ott 1993; Pinchback 2002; Ratsch 2005; Schultes et al. 2001). Ayahuasca attracted considerable attention as an element of traditional Amazonian shamanisms (Bennett 1992) and as a crossover entheogen for neoshamanic movements (Grob 1999; Luna and White 2000; Metzner 1999; Shanon 2002).

With an acknowledgement of the ambiguity of the shaman, recent studies (Whitehead 2002; Whitehead and Wright 2004; Whitaker 2017; Riboli and Torri 2013) take into consideration both the healing and harm that shamans do in varying contexts and furthers the literature on how shamanisms are not a global unified phenomenon but are instead myriad individual movements and community

practices emergent in the context of globalization, capitalism, and climate change. This fourth category, where the shaman is an ambiguous figure with the knowledge of both healing and killing, has become an important symbol of indigeneity in the modern world, not just through interactions between industry and local communities, but also in relation to the state, regional, and local governments where the shaman becomes a mediator of not only the divine, but of Indigenous notions of tradition in the face of modernity (Whitehead 2002; Whitaker 2017).

Finally, Shamanism has also become a capitalist enterprise. In this fifth category, Shamans are sought after not only to teach people how to engage with the non-human spirit realm or how to ingest psychedelic plants in the right "set and setting," but also for their ability to help people think deeply about humanity's engagement with the natural world in the context of climate change (See Shepard 2017). Ayahuasqueros are highly sought after in Peru and Brazil for psychedelic guidance. Shamans are a prominent archetype within the New Age community, and a symbol of power from which to draw from to balance asymmetrical power relationships (See Janik 2018). Neo Shamanism continues to evolve as a New Religious Movement, one that is syncretized globally in a variety of contexts, political, ecological, and economic, where even shamanic snuffs (like *hape*') have a vivid presence in the global market. Contemporary anthropologists theorize the shaman more complexly as a figure with the power to both heal or destroy. (See Kraft et al 2015; Alberts 2015; Farrer 2016; Fonneland 2017; Bolling Lowrey 2020; Beyer 2009; Harner 2013; Janik 2018; Vivieros de Castro 2015; Kohn 2013; Javier Rivera Andia 2019; Wallis 2003; Znamenski 2007; Bacigalupo 2007; Keeney and Keeney 2013)

At Soul Quest the role of shamans is less important, Soul Quest does not connect themselves to any specific sect or leader or lineage from Amazonia, even though they sometimes invite shamans to facilitate ceremonies. Shamans are viewed as facilitators of the prophecy of Mother Ayahuasca in the *Ayahuasca Manifesto,* which Soul Quest identifies as their "sacred text" on their website, and from which they read during ayahuasca ceremonies. In the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* we see New Age conceptions of a planetary transformation. The shaman is part of this tradition, the shaman's role is coming out of the forest of South America to spread the message of Mother Ayahuasca, "I am the spirit of Ayahuasca…For the first time, I reveal myself through the 'Word' to make an emergency call to all the Human Beings on the Planet, especially to the Light Seekers, as I must expand beyond the Amazon River Basin…with my physical expansion, I intend to facilitate the spiritual transformation currently stirring the human species."[19] Here we see how the teachings are seen to be moving to the West, colonizing the West, not the West colonizing Amazonia. Coming out of Amazonia to missionize to Westerners is where we observe the transformation of New Age consciousness, through the non-human agent of Mother Aya.

Shamans at Soul Quest are called facilitators. And unlike in the traditional Indigenous usage of the term, one does not have to be called by the spirits or overcome a great sickness to become the "wounded healer," instead, within neo-shamanic contexts, everyone has the innate ability to become a shaman, or in the case of Soul Quest, a facilitator. Many of the facilitators I met were member-participants in the medicine before becoming facilitators with the only qualification for becoming a

[19] ayahuasca churches.org, 2023

facilitator the requirement to successfully pass the *Being True to You* program offered by an outside coaching business training transpersonal therapeutic integration techniques.

Soul Quest's founder, Chris Young, has claimed to have been trained by a "traditional Brazilian medicine woman" and his description of Soul Quest as a neo-shamanic church represents a claim of legitimacy and authenticity. When Chris Young says he was trained by a "traditional Brazilian medicine woman," he is also seemingly attempting to procure some measure of legitimacy by identifying the lineage of his knowledge and authority within the shamanic tradition. This confers legitimacy to his ritual practices from church members, though significantly, it does not make him a prophet of the religion, nor is he interested in becoming one. Soul Quest and its members place no emphasis on charismatic leadership. All emotional affect or faith directed belief is directed to the plant alone. In one of the Zoom meetings, Chris reiterated his knowledge and intimacy with practices and practitioners from the Indigenous communities and of how he was helping these communities in Amazonia. Conducting his Soul Quest Zoom call from the side of his enormous outdoor pool, he related how he helps many families get ayahuasca from Ecuador and announced that Soul Quest was going to make a very generous donation to the Kuntanawa tribe, a tribe they were intending to partner with.

The Kuntanawa are located in the state of Acre Brazil and are one of the Indigenous peoples that Soul Quest works with and has a direct connection to. The Kuntanawa, with a population somewhere around four hundred, offer ten-day jungle retreats, including culture, music, food, medicinal plants, ayahuasca ceremonies and an in-depth *hape'* & *sananga* (eye drops derived from

Amazonian plants that are believed to purify and improve vision) as well as a facilitator training immersion experience. Verena Young, in this same Zoom call, reiterated Chris' assertion of how ayahuasca has an important impact on society, to "bring healing into this world" and she encouraged church members to support struggling tribes like the Kuntanawa, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dr. Scott Irwin PhD was the Senior Minister, Staff Psychologist, and Ayahuasca Facilitator at Soul Quest from around 2018 to 2021. He developed the pre and post ceremony programs which at their height featured over twenty-six weekly integration Zoom groups. These Zoom groups included such diverse groups as; psycho-spiritual integration, Zen Buddhist Meditation, Psychedelics in Recovery, A Course in Miracles study group, a Bhagavad Gita integration group, a Jungian Insights and Shadow work group, a transformational breathwork group, a creative writing circle, a mother's support group, a women's only group, a veteran's only group, and more. In 2021 Dr. Scott left Soul Quest under peril of legal vulnerability following the DEA's final determination letter to refuse Soul Quest's application for church status. Currently he works and advocates on behalf of a Kichwa community called Sacha Wasi located in Amazonia between two rivers approximately thirty minutes from Puyo Ecuador.

At Soul Quest the shaman has shifted into a role that one could describe as the psychotherapist. Expertise is evaluated by one's competency in leading a transpersonal therapy session and gaining competency in that skill is acquired through *Being True to You*, a secular online institution that focuses on psychedelic coaching and integration. This represents a marked move away from

traditional South American ideas of the shaman to a western view of the psychotherapist doing the work of revealing the unconscious in order to integrate the person to their hidden "shadow selves."

On occasion, shamans come to facilitate ceremonies, but they are not considered lineage heads to which the tradition traces its authenticity. Neither is Soul Quest a sect in the way that Santo Daime or União do Vegetal are. There are virtuosi (experienced) individuals who have traveled to Amazonia to experience ayahuasca in Indigenous contexts. One such man, I will call Rick, led the ayahuasca Christian fellowship at Soul Quest. During a Zoom session he described in detail his month-long *dieta* experience in Guatemala:

> It was intense, it was the toughest thing I've ever done. A shaman named Guillermo, who has spent over nine years in the Amazon working with the plants guided me during the dieta. It began with a mapacho purge. Tobacco is a master teacher, and I drank a tea of tobacco and then four liters of water before purging. This lasted thirty to forty minutes. I was in isolation for sixteen days. I was alone, in a tent, and had no contact with anyone except the shaman or workers who would bring me food twice a day. The food was usually steamed vegetables. It was very bland and had no seasoning. No cellphones or electricity were allowed either. All I did was drink tobacco juice, ayahuasca, and consume very strong garlic. Tobacco is for protection. It connects the heart to the throat chakra and cleanses the system. I got many rashes where the toxins in my body came out. I also got nausea and sickness, and cramps. All of this made it difficult to drink anything. I had an amazing experience, it was beautiful, and a clean diet is very important. I lost about fifteen pounds. I feel lighter in my spirit.

Not everyone at Soul Quest is expected to undertake ascetic practices of this sort. Ordinary psychonauts (individuals seeking to experience altered states of consciousness through entheogens) are not being instructed to travel to Peru or Guatemala to undertake month-long *dietas*. However, virtuosi practitioners who are connected to Soul Quest do emerge periodically from the community becoming role models within the church. The community's egalitarian orientation is observable in the

organically sub-organized Zoom calls which grow up around virtuosi with distinct monadic sub communities.

This kind of venture, to experience Indigenous ayahuasca experiences is part of international shamanic tourism (See Labate and Cavnar 2014). For people looking to experience ayahuasca, Soul Quest is identifying itself as one location where people can experience and take ayahuasca. It is part of a larger tourist industry and might be seen as fulfilling a demand in the tourist industry as it offers the services as retreats. Soul Quest membership is a fluid fellowship of people moving among any number of different centers in different countries and taking retreats in diverse places globally. This troubles the idea that a church and its branches or sects are place-based locations for a community in situ. Instead, we see that membership is open to whoever wants to walk in the door and participate.

Chapter Two: Observing an Ayahuasca Ceremony

Set and Setting: Preparing the Mind and Body for Ayahuasca

At Soul Quest the importance of proper "set and setting" is emphasized to church members on their website on Zoom. Set and setting includes having comfortable mats, calming music, a safe place with volunteers that oversee members while under the effects of ayahuasca and a *dieta*. A *dieta* is a special dietary or behavioral restriction usually performed during a period of isolation (See Labate and Cavnar 2014; Beyer 2009) which includes the purification of the body to prepare it to encounter ayahuasca with the clearest intention. *Dietas* in Amazonia include ascetic practices, purification practices, and building resilience and tolerance to be able to prepare one's mind and body so that ayahuasca can do its work inside the individual. These purification efforts and forms of psychosomatic restraint are done in an effort to prepare the mind for transcendence and an exploration into the deeper self.

There are three places where my analysis of the Soul Quest *dieta* comes from: their website, the *Ayahuasca Manifesto*, and Zoom integration calls. Soul Quest claims their *dieta* comes from the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* and a "Peruvian tradition," which they do not name specifically on their website. Why is there so much vagueness? Claiming an ambiguous Peruvian tradition both validates knowledge and authority and is effective because they are not tying their *dieta* to any single tradition. Vagueness is important, it does not allow for any single attachment to individuals or traditions which gives them freedom of creativity and open-endedness in their practices.

Ayahuasca itself does the work inside the individual, so the location of transcendence is within. Ayahuasca is the teacher. Knowledge comes through the substance itself, not through an intermediary in the form of a teacher or prophet, that is, not through individual human personhood. There is a concerted effort not to attach to a brick and board church and dogmatic practice. This perspective is shared by the broader psychedelic community in an effort to create a cosmopolitan ecology of tolerance for all beliefs.

Chapter twelve of the *Ayahuasca Manifesto,* "preparations, precautions and diets" outlines recommendations to prepare for taking ayahuasca. The anonymous author of the 2011 sacred text which is affirmed to be the channeled words of Mother Aya herself states that:

> The Facilitator should investigate with each participant if he/she is qualified or able to receive me. Medical patients under counter indicated medications or psychiatric patients with a history of mental instability, should not receive me to prevent serious health conditions. Alcoholic beverages should be avoided for several days before and several days after receiving me…The traditional teaching of sexual abstinence as part of the post-session diet is not a folk myth of the Amazon traditions…it is only the animal sexual fury and orgasmic energy which must be temporarily controlled to allow the subtle processes of healing.[20]

On the Soul Quest website the *dieta* is much more elaborate than it is in the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* which only discusses sexual abstinence and alcohol. Additionally, the two sources are not consistent with each other beyond this point of congruence. The ordinary psychonaut at Soul Quest is

[20] *Ayahuasca Manifesto*, 35-36

encouraged to start *dieta* seven days prior to ceremony which includes sexual abstinence and the restriction of foods:

> For the week before the ceremony, you should also refrain from sexual activity. Each of us has a reservoir of energy within ourselves, and it is this energy that protects, nurtures, and guides the plant medicines as they work. Sex, including the exchange of bodily fluids, is a powerful exchange that can deplete your reservoir of energy and thereby inhibit the effectiveness of the plant medicines in teaching you.
>
> No red or heavy meats (pork, beef, sheep, tuna, eel), one week before and after the ceremony.
>
> No strong alcohol, beer, wine, one week before and after.
>
> No hot food such as chilies or red pepper, two days before.
>
> No fermented food (pickles, herring, anchovies, old cheese) one day before and after.
>
> Moderate consumption of salt, sugar and honey, three days before and after.[21]

Soul Quest also recommends certain foods that should be eaten prior to ceremony, such as "fresh or cooked vegetables, beans, peas, fresh fruits and juices, olive oil, fresh organic eggs, and or eat a light vegetarian diet for three days prior to ayahuasca ceremony." They highly recommend eating "only raw food on the day of ceremony." On the day of ceremony, the best *dieta* they state, "is a vegetarian breakfast, a light vegetarian lunch and even some fasting." They also recommend drinking water and herbal tea. Some fruits are considered alright if the individual is not nauseous or dizzy.

Soul Quest states that, "an ayahuasca ceremony is most beneficial when approached with a humble heart, clear intentions, and an open mind…having clear intention for experiencing ayahuasca is

[21] ayahuascachurches.org, 2022.

important if you wish to gain the depth and transformational power it can have…prior to ceremony, it is helpful to consider your intentions closely."[22] They recommend that everyone, prior to ceremony, take some time to sit quietly and ask themselves these questions:

> What would you like to change in your life? Are there things burdening your mind or spirit that you would like to resolve? And what do you want to clarify about yourself, your relationships, or your life's path? What is really behind the changes you want to see?[23]

Soul Quest believes that with a clear intention and the proper diet one will be open and psychosomatically prepared to drink ayahuasca. While ordinary psychonauts participate in this seven-day *dieta*, it is not a requirement for ceremony participation.

The Ayahuasca Ceremony

When I entered the main courtyard at Soul Quest, in the back of the house (See figure 5, Chapter 1), I immediately got the sense that Soul Quest was channeling traditional elements of Amazonian shamanic ritual spaces (See Dobkin de Rios 1972; Bear 2000; Eduardo Luna and Amaringo 1991; Beyer 2009; Whitehead and Wright 2004; and Kopenawa and Albert 2013) , but that these elements were not a careful reproduction of Amazonian material culture and iconography, but rather, an eclectic assemblage in which various religious and spiritual traditions—Animist, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian, and paraphernalia (crystals, bells, incense, and Amazonian iconography) are found together (See figure 7).

[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.

7. Table with ritual paraphernalia on it at Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth INC. Photo taken by author, 2020.

As I walked the space, I saw it was lined with small white mats and white buckets where members lie down and experience ayahuasca (See figures 5-6). On the side of the house was painted murals of jaguars and trees and inside the outdoor patios and the maloca were ornate tapestries with animals, various Amazonian and Gaia spirit beings, statues of the Buddha, trees, jungle flowers, intricate colorful geometric designs and more (See figures 2-5). In the center of the courtyard there was a small fire pit surrounded by comfy outdoor wicker chairs with cushions on them. The courtyard was enclosed by a six-foot wooden fence which offered privacy and a sense of security from the outside world. It also kept members from wandering into the oak grove on the neighbor's property while under the effects of ayahuasca. Against the wall of the house in the backyard was a table (See figure 7), not explicitly an altar, but possibly used as such, this is where the ritual paraphernalia was stored and displayed (incense, feathers, and "Florida cleansing water" which is used for spiritual and bodily

cleansing, the mid ceremony gong was used for signaling it was time for taking more ayahuasca if members wanted more) and more religious iconography/Buddha images and Shiva statues, crystals of various colors, intricately decorated bird feathers with gemstones and leather bindings, and incense holders. I noted that there was no Christian iconography on the table.

Later that afternoon, I returned to Soul Quest and the first ayahuasca ceremony began. Around eighty people arrived, waiting, chatting in the main courtyard. Some members excitedly related how fantastic their previous ayahuasca experiences had been, how much they healed or learned from them and how they hoped tonight would be the same or better. Other members complained about not having anything happen during ceremony. One member explained how he had been given more ayahuasca than is usually administered because the previous time he experienced nothing. Yet, even after additional doses of the potent drink, he had still felt no effects. It was evident that ayahuasca was not a medicine that could be dosed and relied upon for a single predictable drug profile outcome. While ayahuasca is called a "medicine," unlike our Western ideas about medicine producing (mostly) predictable effects, ayahuasca had no consistent effect. It could be experienced positively, negatively, or simply, not at all. It is precisely this quality of the plant, that its effect depends upon the individual, the setting and the chemical, that ayahuasca and Soul Quest become such an interesting location for exploring the socio-cultural, biological and personal entanglements that produce the plant's efficacy, identity and meaning.

Experiences were varied. And it appeared that most of the work of interpretation and healing was done after the fact in the integration sessions that undertook to make sense of the varied

experiences by ayahuasca psychonauts. How did ayahuasca do its work? And just as importantly, how was the interpretation of the experience being framed by Soul Quest?

Those in attendance waited quietly, doing mental preparation prior to the ceremony. Facilitators were inside the house talking with volunteers and also preparing for the ritual to begin. There were four facilitators and over twenty volunteers. Facilitators run the ceremony and volunteers facilitate the mechanics of the set and setting of the event. Both the facilitators and volunteers were dressed in white. Some of the facilitators wore Amazonian beaded necklaces and headbands, which I also noticed some of the members who were waiting in the courtyard were wearing. There did not seem to be a stratification of power or knowledge based on roles or dress within the church, and it was not explicitly demonstrated or performed. Facilitators I met started as church members and became facilitators because they felt "called to." When I walked into the courtyard, I noticed that members wore different colored bands on their arms. Green bands were marked as ok to drink ayahuasca, while those wearing orange bands around their wrists were marked for various health issues. This was so that staff could monitor them closely during the ceremony. Members with a red wristband, I later found out, were not allowed to drink ayahuasca, but they could chaperone those who were allowed to take ayahuasca. I was also told by Kurt that by Saturday night many people do not want to drink ayahuasca again because it can be an intense experience and so they will opt out with the red bands. Prior to ceremony I attended the volunteer's meeting inside the house, where we were instructed about what to do with the white vomit buckets, how to help members to the restrooms, how the ceremony would

unfold, and the volunteer coordinator (who I will call Mara) instructed us on how to maneuver the grounds during ceremony.

There were twenty volunteers present at the meeting. Mara told everyone that there is a zero-tolerance policy for fraternization between members and staff to protect against sexual misconduct. This, as well as other rules, were parsed out to the volunteers at the meeting in advance of the ceremony. The consequence for breaking any of these rules, it was reiterated, would be expulsion from the church. Verena Young also emphasized that how staff conduct themselves is extremely important due to the possibility of DEA "infiltration" on account of the ongoing religious exemption court case. As one volunteer explained to me, discussion of drugs and other psychedelic substances was not allowed on site for this very reason. Cell phones also were forbidden in the ceremony space, to prevent recording or documenting events, lest evidence be leveraged against Soul Quest in the court case.

Other volunteer duties included lighting candles, burning sage, offering Florida water, doing laundry, emptying buckets, taking out the trash, washing clothes and cooking food. Emptying vomit buckets was seemingly a rite of passage for new volunteers, that many volunteers openly joked about. I was grateful to be exempted from this duty in my role as ethnographer.

Mara emphasized creating the right "set and setting" for members while they drank ayahuasca. This included keeping candles lit, attending to the fire, walking slowly through the ritual space, not hovering over members while they are experiencing ayahuasca, but instead sitting quietly on the periphery, and only interacting with church members if they asked for help. Mara said that it is also important that if a member asks volunteers about what their ayahuasca experience might mean, that

they do not offer any kind of interpretation but instead allow them to "work on themselves." The reason for a volunteer meeting before every ayahuasca ceremony is because there are always new members who are becoming volunteers. This role is something anyone in the church is welcome to take part in, and even encouraged to do so, so there are new volunteers at every ceremony.

Set and setting was first developed by Timothy Leary, Alfred Hubbard, and others in the 1960s and is important because it helps psychonauts focus their intentions on the plant prior to ingesting it. It is a cultural practice tied to this lineage within the psychedelic milieu. Winkelman (2007) details the significance of set and setting in his analysis of shamanic guidelines for psychedelic use. His analysis is not directed at any specific Indigenous community, but instead a broad generalization (in the Eliade sense) based on the comparative work of Metzner (1998) for what takes place in what Winkelman argues all shamanic psychedelic practices, and what he calls a "shamanic paradigm."[24] All of these ideas and admonishments over how to run an ayahuasca ceremony are found in detail in the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* and amounts to the main use of the text at Soul Quest. That is, as a practical primer on how to prepare for the ayahuasca experience.

Many online resources are available for psychedelic communities to draw upon to structure their volunteer and facilitator practices. Websites like Chacruna.net are used by the psychedelic community to benchmark these practices to each other. Having a safe environment with calming music and volunteers to watch over participants during ceremony has become a standard-bearing technique (These techniques and roles are even being adopted by the state in the formal institution of

[24] Winkelman, *Psychedelic Medicine: New Evidence for Hallucinogenic Substances as Ttreatments*, 145

psychedelics. Oregon is in the process of licensing facilitators to monitor the use of psilocybin mushrooms).

As the ritual process of the ceremony began the members were told to "get into their mat space" and "wait quietly for the ceremony to begin." An ayahuasca song on acoustic guitar then played in the background over the loudspeaker entitled "Holy Mother" by Misk'I Takiy, a musician who lives at " La casa de mis abuelos," the home and ayahuasca healing center of Alonso del Rio in Peru. Dr. Scott Irwin, the Senior Minister preceding over the ceremony then read from the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* (Soul Quest's sacred text) on a loudspeaker from the maloca. He read from chapter six:

> The time has come to clearly expose and declare the benefits and value of my healing properties...the benefits are obvious and evident for those that open themselves to receive and enjoy them...However, third party observers are limited to only seeing the effects of those who live the experience...without the benefit of their own experience, they invariably put limits on the limitless...the scientific community is always curious, willing, and available to design empirical models for my validation.[25]

It was clear from context that Dr. Scott was welcoming me and validating my presence, but he was also forewarning me that in my effort to observe I would not see the lived experience. This underscores an important idea of the healing self that is not present in the scientific view of the body as a physical materiality to be acted upon. Observations of the ritual as ritual are limited because the real content of the church is not available to any outside viewer, nor even to the church.

[25] *Ayahuasca Manifesto*, 10.

While Dr. Scott read from the *Manifesto*, facilitators, and volunteers (including myself) awaited our cue (Indigenous drums on the loudspeakers) to enter the courtyard and circle it clockwise "like a snake" as Mara had instructed us. Narby (1998) discusses the pervasive symbol of the snake in psychedelic communities, what he calls "the cosmic serpent." The snake is a prevalent symbol that many individuals and artists have drawn from and painted when expressing their ayahuasca experiences creatively (See Eduardo Luna and Amaringo (1991)) When the drums started, we began to walk slowly, single file out the door of the house and into the courtyard. There were even rattles in conjunction with the drums, which augmented the snake-like motif. As we walked, we weaved through the courtyard in front of the church members who were all standing by their mats. As with all the facilitators and volunteers, I wore all white, as Verena had instructed me to in preparation prior to my arrival.

We entered the maloca where Dr. Scott and other church members were located, circled it, and exited back to the fire pit in the main courtyard. Soul Quest members then clipped their name tags from their shirts onto their mats, something akin to seating charts. Members who stayed in the maloca at Soul Quest were required to stay in the maloca during the ceremony unless they requested to go out to the firepit. The members in the Lotus and Dragonfly outdoor patios also had to stay in their spaces unless they needed to use the bathroom or wanted to sit by the fire. Those who chose to sit outside near the fire were offered blankets and pillows for comfort.

As the ayahuasca ceremony continued members were instructed to line up in the courtyard to get ayahuasca from a facilitator I will call Hector. Hector then came out of the house with the

ayahuasca on a tray and handed it out in small white cups to members who waited patiently in line in front of him in the maloca. He performed a ritual blowing with his breath over the ayahuasca and whistled before handing it to each member (these are common practices in Indigenous ayahuasca contexts in Amazonia, see Beyer 2009; Lamb 1971; and Bear 2000). Hector is an Army veteran whose experience with other psychedelic substances led him to ayahuasca. Soul Quest identifies Hector as a facilitator, addiction recovery and psychospiritual integration coach (certified by *Being True to You*) and a *kambo*[26] and *hape'* practitioner. *Hape*' (also spelled *rape*') is used by facilitators to get members to purge if they deem it necessary. *Hape*' is used and made by Indigenous Amazonian communities and sold online to support many of these communities financially. Like ayahuasca, there is a whole global industry and market around *hape*' use. Whistling incantations are important to the ritual. Dobkin de Rios and Katz (1975) observe that, "whistling incantations during the period of drug intoxication-served as a vital link in bridging separate realities induced by the ingestion of a plant hallucinogen" and argued that music should be attended to as an important element of the hallucinogenic experience and not just extra effects that were meaningless.[27] Music, like *icaros*, magic song, (See Beyer 2009) creates the bridge between realities.

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[26] *Kambo* is a poisonous wax secreted by an Amazonian tree frog that Soul Quest states, "is referred to as Phyllomedusa bicolor poison. Before focusing too much on the "poison" aspect of that, let's break it down. Phyllomedusa bicolor poison is actually comprised of peptide chains — these peptides are critical for the human body, as they can bypass the blood-brain barrier and actually affect change in the brain. *Kambo*, therefore, is known to stimulate the body's hormone system (endocrine system), eliminate harmful pathogens, and to act as an anti-inflammatory." (Ayahuasca Churches 2019) But, since the unfortunate death that took place at Soul Quest of a member who died after partaking in a *kambo* ceremony it seems like the church has gotten away from administering *kambo* as a ceremony add-on.

[27] Dobkin de Rios and Katz, "Some Relationships between Music and Hallucinogenic Ritual," 64-76.

After members received the ayahuasca they were directed to return to their mats and await Dr. Scott's further instruction. Then, once everyone had been served, on the loudspeaker Dr. Scott talked about healing the collective human soul. He called ayahuasca a divine spirit, "an open channel of infinite love, light, and wisdom," to achieve what he calls "Christ Consciousness." When Dr. Scott said "Christ Consciousness" I became attentive to the phrase because up until this moment I had not had the sense of how Christianity fit into the ideas in the church since it did not seem to be given any special authority or priority. It was one of the only times I heard Christianity referenced.

After this Dr. Scott instructed everyone to hold their cup to their hearts, to inhale, to focus on their intention for being there, and what they hope to achieve by taking ayahuasca, and then with a loud "A'ho," to consume it. A'ho is a Native American word that means "thank you," but has been broadly used in Native American communities in religious contexts and is akin to saying "Amen" and or "I agree." It has been adopted by the New Age Movement in various ritual contexts and used by Soul Quest both in ceremony and on Zoom frequently. A'ho replaces Amen and is another signifier of how a word drawn from the Native American tradition that has a peyote tradition within the Native American Church is used here as a general term of gratitude and acknowledgment. One, it might be noticed, is not inflected with Christian consciousness as it were, since it is not gratitude directed to God in particular but a gratitude directed in general, or to the plant, or to the universe. It is open-ended.

After Dr. Scott instructed members to consume the ayahuasca, the music began. An eclectic Spotify playlist was broadcast over the loudspeaker. Ceremony playlists are emailed to members every

week in the group newsletter. Many members told me that they love to listen to the music again following the ceremony because it takes them back to being in ceremony. Loud Hindi flows peacefully over the speakers in low tones and deep decibels. Volunteers wait outside the Lotus and Dragonfly patios and the maloca to assist members to the bathrooms. A piano sets the tempo. Some members sit cross-legged in a yoga lotus position at the edge of their mats, eyes shut.

As soon as the ayahuasca is imbibed Dr. Scott leaves the ceremony. As the ayahuasca begins to take effect the ceremony takes on a different rhythm, less formal, focused on the music. The volunteers and facilitators undertake their work of observing and safeguarding the members from wandering off or harming themselves inadvertently. One example was a man who kept rolling on the ground too close to the fire and another was a member who was getting too close to the fire while crying. Two facilitators (Hector and another I will call Sara) remain to oversee the ayahuasca practitioners in a ceremony that will go until dawn. They also imbibe the ayahuasca. As the shamans in this ceremony, they help navigate the members to the other reality world by directing the practitioner through their own series of pathways provoked by the music, their intentions set before the event and through attending to the members by administering *hapé* to invoke purging, a purifying effort that is seen to bring healing. While shaman do not have shared access to the private experiences of the members, they serve as grounding agents sensing the needs of practitioners through administering *hapé*, directly interacting with members, discussing their ayahuasca experiences during integration, and giving them water or fruit. For example: The shaman creates and protects the sacred space by creating a bridge from the consciousness of the waking world to the altered states of consciousness produced by

ayahuasca, the medicine inside. The shaman channels the spirit realm by leading the ceremonial consumption of ayahuasca which they themselves imbibe.

Forty-five minutes after taking the ayahuasca, the members begin to fall into a trance. A diverse assortment of songs from a variety of traditions plays over the speakers. Members move more slowly. Some participants were sitting or lying down, while others waved their arms gracefully to the music. By eight p.m., some members were beginning to vomit into the small white buckets. Hector coughed from snorting *hape'*. Sara vomited into a bucket next to Hector. Facilitators also imbibed the ayahuasca and did not function as sober guides to the experience. Spanish guitar music played; the song's lyrics crooned something about "remembering to love."

Hector continued to use *hape.' Hape'* is described as a "psychotropic shamanic snuff" made from tobacco and other herbs and are used as a purgative in the ceremony which is said to ground and heal the self. It depends on setting your intentions before the ceremony and the ingestion of it as well as the ayahuasca. Taking *hape'* is itself used sacramentally with clear intention of mind. Moreover, formulas vary from shaman to shaman and tradition to tradition. Here at Soul Quest, *hape'* is sold online and is not illegal in the US. Facilitators use it to focus their intentions and observational abilities in psychedelic settings. Members also use *hape*' without ayahuasca when they return home for its grounding effect and Soul Quest has had *hape*' specific ceremonies. Soul Quest also has a *hape*'

workshop on Zoom where members can learn how to do it, where to buy it, and when to do it during their day-to-day lives. This Zoom session is facilitated by Hector.[28]

As the night wore on, members began to get more agitated, some frantic and completely unsettled, while others seemed quite happy. I observed a wide range of emotions as well as responses by the two facilitators who were present. Some were swaying to the music, others looked like they were meditating and or praying. A couple sat quietly on the patio, waved in unison, and held hands to the rhythm of the music. A man wearing pajamas sat on the edge of the patio with his bucket in his lap. Another man came out from the patio by Hector with his bucket and sat down next to him. Another young man kneeled by the fire with his bucket. I looked back over at Hector, and he was spitting into his bucket. I could see that by taking ayahuasca and *hape'* with members, facilitators provide comfort to members in the sense of sharing in the altered state with them as a witness.

Volunteers kept the candles lit and the fire going all night. One volunteer who I will call Mark, also a military veteran, told me he wanted to start an ayahuasca church in Georgia, "somewhere out in the woods." Many volunteers seemed interested in either starting or becoming part of other ayahuasca churches, even proselytizing, not just being members at Soul Quest; this diversity and curiosity seemed to mirror what I observed online in psychedelic chat groups, websites, and Zoom groups. Members

[28] I have used *hape'* before and it can make your sinus burn or tingle depending on the mixture of tobacco snuff and other plants in it, which is sometimes mint. Each kind of *hape'* has a different flavor and affect. It is common for most members to have a plethora of *hape*' to choose from as well as their own *kuripes* (small tube for blowing the *hape'* powder into one's nose) to self-administer it. *Hape'* can also facilitate vomiting without psychedelics due to its intense overwhelming effect on the sinuses and throat.

share, create, and discuss all things psychedelic, not just ayahuasca. And, because so many of the members of Soul Quest church live all over the world, the online community and exchange of ideas is part and parcel to how inclusive the community is (further connected through integration sessions). In short, members do not have to be at Soul Quest to partake in the community.

Zoom integration is one of the main ways that members stay in touch, interact, and engage in the community. It is in integration where the work of understanding the ayahuasca ceremony takes place with the guidance of integration coaches, who are also ceremony facilitators. Facebook and social media too are equally important for group *communitas* and social solidarity. There is a private Soul Quest group on Facebook where members give testimony to ayahuasca, ask questions, and talk about church business. There is also a group called "ayahuasca" on Facebook where people (including Soul Quest church members) from all over the world meet to discuss everything ayahuasca (where retreats are, what places are safe, what shamans are legitimate, where they can buy ayahuasca, share their personal experiences, and offer guidance to those looking to try ayahuasca).

More members began to bring their buckets out to the fire and sit down on blankets. Successive rounds of vomiting commence. An elderly gentleman approaches Hector and asks him for *hape*', they hug for a minute. Then Hector helped him sit by the fire and sat back down himself. Hector got up and helped another member, meanwhile the elderly gentleman got back up and sat in Hector's seat, which was seemingly reserved only for facilitators. An unspoken assumption suggested that volunteers dare not sit in facilitator chairs. Sara immediately got up and led the man out of Hector's chair and back to the fire.

The sound of "Om Nama Shiva," a Shaivite chant performed to music, plays in the background. Some members wore crucifixes on their necks, others told me they were Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, "into tantra," and another claimed to be a Satanist. Soul Quest members did not seem to adhere to any single idea about religion or God or Creator, the afterlife, the divine, or cosmology. Everyone had different backgrounds and yet everyone was welcome.[29]

A volunteer directed another man out to the fire with his bucket, a pillow, and blanket. As soon as he sat down, he put his head in his pillow and cried—loud wailing cries. A woman was writhing, then dancing, as the music continued to drive the ceremony, and presumably also, direct the various pathways of the psychonauts on their individual journeys. Lots of members were just sitting and staring into space, at the sky, or at the fire. Others could not coordinate their limbs but were stumbling and talking to themselves. One member fell to the ground barrel-rolling towards the fire before he was stopped by a volunteer. A man screamed and pounded the ground with his hands. More members were now crying, a cacophony of tears and cries to the music. The crying was infectious.

After two hours, a volunteer rang the mid ceremony gong and members were offered a "booster" of ayahuasca, if they so wished. How much ayahuasca got poured into the cup was up to the facilitators and subjectively gauged based on what they estimated each individual needed. Volunteers

[29] In an interview with a local news agency Chris Young was asked "What would you say to those people that say that you're hiding behind religion to partake in ayahuasca?" Chris replied by saying, "I would love for them to come and take the medicine, and they'll see if we're hiding behind religion, they will see that, they will find their religion." (News 6; 2017)

were attending to the man who was pounding and making noise, trying to soothe him down. A volunteer, (I will call Nick) leaned over and whispered to me, "I'm an old fart and it changed my life." We both laughed. Ayahuasca, he meant. He told me he drank ayahuasca six times. Meanwhile, Hector was walking around blowing tobacco smoke on the members, cleansing and healing them with a smoke bath. This practice is done in many Indigenous Amazonian contexts by shamans, healers, and sorcerers to both heal and harm (Whitehead & Wright 2004; Whitehead 2002). One member shouted, "Oh Jesus I'm dying! The desire…the motherfucking–Jesus Christ! Get out!" Some members were howling like dogs. I understood what Dorian Yates meant when he said he had "become a lion on the mat."

A facilitator I will call Paul and Sara were now handing out ayahuasca. Paul had been in the house for most of the ceremony but was now taking a more active role. Paul, like Hector, ritually blew over the ayahuasca with his breath before serving it. Now tribal music played over the loudspeakers with heart-beating drums raising the pulse and energies of the group. Members in line seemed eager to get their next cup of ayahuasca. They happily awaited more ayahuasca while in line, large smiles on their faces and most with looks of joy or contentment. Only one or two people in line seemed to be indifferent. The unfortunate man who had informed me earlier that his previous ayahuasca experiences had been devoid of any effects, seemed destined for the same fate this time.

While Hector never told me why he blew on the ayahuasca, Paul related to me that he imbues the ayahuasca with his love when he blows on it for members, he thanks the leaf and the vine, and each blessing is individualized to the person he is serving. "This is a little rowdy for a Friday night," he told me. He explained that he enjoys it when the laughter is contagious, rather than the crying. He said

that there used to be an ice cream truck that would pass by during the daytime ayahuasca ceremony, and it would make everyone laugh hysterically.[30]

The second cup of ayahuasca is followed by another wave of collective vomiting. Verena Young appeared from the house and walked directly into the courtyard to attend to a disabled woman. Suddenly, a commotion of some kind ensued, a woman yelled, and a swarm of volunteer activity suddenly converged upon a woman who was on her knees and continuing to yell. I watched as the volunteers led her away from the ceremony grounds. Mark, the veteran I had befriended earlier, explained that this was not a typical night where everyone was quiet, and the atmosphere was mellow. He attributed nights like this as a consequence of the ayahuasca being made really strong, "sometimes the energy can be really contagious."

I hear a didgeridoo, some drums, and a flute. "I'm so happy," interjects a man by the fire, before bursting out crying. Then just as suddenly as he had begun sobbing, he went silent and sat bolt upright. He nodded his head up and down to the music, then commenced to weeping again. Other members laughed at him as if he was doing something comical, laughter then broke out everywhere.

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[30] My first encounter with ritual blowing like this was in Guyana and it was called *taleng* in Patamona while doing fieldwork in the village of Paramakatoi. *Taleng* is the practice of imbuing substances with good or bad intention by blowing over them and saying secret words and *taleng* can be used to heal or to harm. I witnessed a *Piya* shaman use *taleng* during a hiari poisoning at the Siparuni River in 2017. The *Piya* blew over the hiari roots to imbue them with good luck prior to using them for fishing. Audrey Butt Colson (1956) and Whitehead (2002, 2004) also discuss *taleng/tareng* ritual blowing in detail in the Patamona and Akawaio context. Ritual blowing tobacco or one's breath is a common practice within Indigenous contexts in Amazonia.

Medical personnel wearing red crosses on their white tee shirts, walked around and monitored the members during the ceremony. One of the medical personnel explained to me that members are not allowed by the pond behind the maloca for safety reasons. Otherwise, the members can meander all around the courtyard as they deem necessary by request. (Many of the volunteers sleep in dorms or bunk beds in the house, which brings the community closer together.) One woman who lived there on a semi-permanent basis with her husband and daughter told me that ayahuasca healed her thyroid issues and that staying there at Soul Quest has helped her heal faster than if she had been staying somewhere off site. Some members stay on a permanent basis while others are just there for the weekend retreats. Sara blew *hape*' into a member's nose through a long wood *kuripe* tube. The member immediately started to vomit— She then blew the *hape*' again. They were both kneeling, facing each other, as she administered the second *hape*'. Hector also offered a member *hape'* and he too immediately started to purge. Members needed buckets changed non-stop all night. They used paper towels to wipe the vomit from their mouths and *hape'* from their noses. A volunteer asked if I wanted sage smoke blown on me for cleansing purposes. I allowed it.

It was eight hours since the ceremony started, and things began to calm down. Some members seemed to be quite cognizant again, or at least appeared to no longer feel the effects of ayahuasca and were holding quiet conversations amongst themselves. Some were talking about how wonderful and empowering their experience was, some were completely quiet, seemingly lost in thought. Our unfortunate would-be ayahuasca psychonaut was again complaining about not having experienced any effect at all.

The volunteers moved about cleaning up the ritual space while others went inside the house to prepare food for the members in the kitchen (mainly cutting up fruits and vegetables). This kind of communal activity at Soul Quest–cooking, cleaning, emptying vomit buckets, and other shared volunteering and facilitating duties–usually included lots of discussion about ayahuasca, member experiences, volunteer experiences. Perez (2016) calls this kind of ongoing discourse between church members "religion in the kitchen," or the way that "discursive acts get under the skin of practitioners, equipping them with the repertoire of skills, dispositions, and habits necessary for religious norms to be internalized, then reproduced."[31] Perez was particularly interested in how micro practices such as preparing food, "accumulate and leave residues of experience in the larger processes fundamental to the preservation of social institutions."[32]

Soul Quest Worldview and ayahuascachurches.org

The website is the front-facing presentation of Soul Quest: it is framed as a proclamation of rights and a treatise on the plant as a church. It appears to be describing its beliefs in terms of three framings: Legal legibility, Indigenous extensions of planetary belonging and rights and responsibilities to nature, and the missionary purpose of Mother Ayahuasca.

The claim of rights to Mother Ayahuasca is a claim made on several fronts; one claim is about the supreme freedom to believe, and the rights of human beings encoded in the UN laws, and which are used as a framework for claiming a higher authority above the US government and its claims about

[31] Perez, *Religion in the Kitchen*, 9.
[32] Ibid.

what a legal religion is. The Indigenous extension of planetary belonging and responsibilities which is an Indigenous argument about indigeneity is here conceptually extended to include all human beings on the planet and asserts a moral and political obligation to be responsible to the planet (to questions of destruction of the planet, climate change, species loss, and rights to nature.) In other words, they claim that no government has the right to regulate a plant, which is a natural thing. When Soul Quest says that they use ayahuasca the plant, and that they, the government, regulate DMT, but that the plant is legal, they are arguing on behalf of their beliefs and belief in a form of natural rights, as rights in nature. The whole *Statement of Beliefs* section is framed as a defensive claim over their right to believe and claim themselves to be a religion by their own self-ascription. They also argue with respect to belief, that the IRS cannot declare them as a religion, only they themselves can declare themselves a religion. The subtext of this discussion of belief is sincerity, though they do not use the word. They are arguing that belief *is* sincere belief—that their claims to belief make it sincere. They believe that no governmental agency or office should be able to intervene on that determination.

Soul Quest's activities are located both in Orlando and online and both sites are significant to understanding Soul Quest's worldview and belief system. Perusing their website begins on their home page, which has a large advertisement for the Netflix documentary, "Unwell," which features Soul Quest in one of the episodes and focuses in particular on veteran narratives. Veterans are central to psychedelic decriminalization efforts in the US, and we see this emphasized online and in integration. If you scroll down the home page, you see a statement from Soul Quest about themselves under a html box that reads "Experience the Healing Power of Nature." The statement reads:

> Soul Quest Ayahuasca Church of Mother Earth is a spiritual learning and healing center focused on providing the community with service, education, spiritual fellowship, healing practices, guidance, and ayahuasca ceremonies. We believe in the rights of Mother Earth, and in protecting the practice of Mother Earth-based South Native American spiritual traditions, ceremonies, and sacred indigenous natural medicines such as ayahuasca. What is of the Earth is our holy sacrament, and we retain the rights as citizens of this nation to use plant medicines as tools for the benefit of our physical health, spiritual growth, and personal evolution.[33]

Here we see how Soul Quest's claim to rights is an extension of Native American rights, and how this extension of rights of all human beings to Mother Earth is central to their belief in the right to use the plant. Soul Quest's beliefs are centered around the idea of the right to use ayahuasca, I argue, because they see the plant as the church. Although, they are not explicitly stated in that way. In their section on statement of beliefs, Soul Quest continue to connect themselves with Native American traditions and spirituality:

> We believe in the Creator (Great Spirit) and that the Creator made all men and women who have lived, and do now live and who will yet live, as free and equal beings. We recognize the inherent, ancestral, sovereign rights granted to all people by the Creator, human conscience, international law and legal constructs of reciprocity, mutuality, and comity, which cannot be dismissed or extinguished. We believe that we derive from and that we may become like the Native and Traditional Indigenous people who lived in this land anciently. That through their literal descendants, we claim the right to form an Indigenous Traditional Organization based upon their teachings and wisdom which have been passed down to us through the traditions, customs, ceremonies, records that have been guarded through the ages by their descendants. We acknowledge the sacred texts of all traditional religions and religious traditions regarding the principles of sacred expression and natural medicine. We affirm and support traditional Christian and Indigenous principles for spiritually based health care.[34]

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[33] ayahuascachurches.org, 2022.
[34] Ibid.

In discussing their beliefs, even though Soul Quest claims to be a Christian syncretic church they only use the term once, when they state, "We affirm and support traditional Christian and Indigenous principles for spiritually based health care." Although they make the claim of Christianity, it is not elaborated on their website. The right to self-determination for Soul Quest is directly connected to the rights of Mother Earth. This continues to be emphasized in their *Statement of Beliefs*:

> Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth (SQCME) is an Inter-Discipline Convocation of Medicine Men and Medicine Women of the Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth Retreat and Wellness Center (SQACME); an independent branch of Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth (SQCME).
>
> We are a restoration of the ancient, sacred teachings, writings and ways of the pre-colonial and pre-conquest ancient nomadic indigenous peoples which historically inhabited parts of Central, North and South America, the Pacific Islands, Japan, Korea, China, Philippines, Thailand, Burma, India and Tibet., all of whom left evidence of periodic territorial occupation, writings and records. These peoples religiously guarded their sacred ways of native, natural and traditional healing practices in order that it be restored and brought into the light in a day of futurity. We honor these ancient sacred healing traditions, beginning here in this state of Florida, in the United States of America and spreading out as far as the wind may carry the message, for as long as the trees grow and the rivers flow.[35]

Soul Quest uses the terms "medicine men and women" they discuss Indigenous peoples and "sacred ways of native, natural and traditional healing," and they use "Great Spirit" frequently. They continue to entangle themselves in Native American religious language and symbology to accentuate an "earth based" spirituality in its own rights and which they perceive as an extension of rights along the same lines as Native American spiritual rights and autonomy:

[35] Ibid.

> Starting in our town in Florida, USA and extending to various locations in the world where the Great Spirit shall see fit to guide us, we will educate others and welcome disciples of all people, from all nations. We run a healing ministry, counseling and natural medicine school that equips our members to integrate our ministry into their lives as the Lord/Great Spirit directs them. We hold spiritual classes and services (Native American style per seasons and guidance from Great Spirit), worship in music and song, share personal professions of faith in action, enact plays, provide street ministry, spiritual materials and provide education on Indigenous Native American Religion and Earth Based Spiritual faith.[36]

Soul Quest believes that "the plant life products of Mother Earth are of the highest value" and "are to be used as natural healing treatments and therefore we proclaim them to be sacred plants and materials to be treated with dignity, protected from threat or violation and defended as a holy sacrament." These inherent rights of Native peoples that they use to justify their own rights are all about using the plant freely and legally. Their engagement of universal human rights surrounding Mother Earth are a core belief in the church that they understand as part of the broader psychedelic justice movement:

> We proclaim this Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, and call on the General Assembly of the United Nation to adopt it, as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations of the world; and, to the end that every individual and institution takes responsibility for promoting through teaching, education, and consciousness raising, respect for the rights recognized in this Declaration and ensure through prompt and progressive measures and mechanisms, national and international, their universal and effective recognition and observance among all peoples and States in the world.[37]

They believe that Mother Earth and all beings have the right to life, to exist, to be respected, to have clean water, air and bodily health. They argue that these rights are a "restoration for violation of

[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

the rights recognized not only in their declaration for rights" but should be recognized as universal human rights that are directly connected to the origin of the "teacher profit," ayahuasca:

> Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth (SQCME) and Soul Quest Ayahuasca Church of Mother Earth Retreat and Wellness Center's (SQACME) origin, teacher and prophet is the Spirit of Ayahuasca made of the two sacred plants "Banisteriopsis Caapi" and "Psychotria Viridis". Our beliefs, purposes, and guidelines are given to us through channeled material documented in the sacred writings known as the Ayahuasca Manifesto.
>
> I am the spirit of Ayahuasca. For the first time, I reveal myself through the "Word" to make an emergency call to all the Human Beings on the Planet, especially to the Light Seekers, as I must expand beyond the Amazon River Basin. With my physical expansion, I intend to facilitate the spiritual transformation currently stirring the human species...[38]

The prophet is the plant, and they believe that the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* is a channeled document by an unknown individual who, through ayahuasca ceremony, was contacted by the plant and used as an emissary of Mother Earth to spread the divine message. In this we see how their statement of beliefs on the website is a treatise on the context of the plant and a justification for why the plant should be given access freely. In their *Code of Ethics*, Soul Quest discusses the spiritual leaders:

> The names for Spiritual Leaders (Pastor, Clergy, Medicine Man/Woman) of Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth are known by a variety of sacred callings: Minister, Curandero, Curandera, Elder, Mara'akame, Roadman, Sacred Prayer Pipe Carrier, Water Pourer, those who are experienced in some Native American spiritual practices and who act to facilitate the spiritual practices of others. A Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth Medicine Person need not claim exclusive or definitive knowledge of his or her practice.[39]

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid.

These terms for spiritual leaders I never heard used in situ. At Soul Quest they are called "facilitators." Under the heading, "Responsibilities and Understandings in the Retreat Center" they claim to host a variety of Indigenous religious practices: Ayahuasca Ceremony, Birth, Breath, Holy Anointing, Marriage, Passing Over, Prayer Pipe, Sacrament, Spirit Dance, Sundance, Sweat Lodge, and Vision Quest. The only ones that I witnessed were the ayahuasca ceremony and breathwork, the others listed on their website I did not see take place (nor did I hear about other's experiences of these in member testimonials).

Under church doctrine one can download or listen to the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* in multiple languages: English, Spanish, Russian, Portuguese, French, Greek and more. In their foundation declaration they use the term Mother Earth repeatedly, never once use Mother Aya or Mother Ayahuasca. This is again because they are claiming that their right to use the plant is intimately connected to the rights of Mother Earth, who has domain over the plant and humans. Mother Aya is an inherent human right.

When discussing what to expect when coming to ayahuasca, Soul Quest distinguishes between spiritual and bodily health. They differentiate between the physical material world and the metaphysical world wherein both are healed and have the right to be healed:

> Working with Sacred Plant Medicine helps us become aware of our own indwelling sacred nature. The Sacred Teacher Plants become our lifelong companions and help us heal our lives. They remind us ultimately that we are in service to the sacredness of life and Pachamama. Working with Sacred Plant Medicine helps us to release negative, fear-filled patterns that have built up over many years through a process of witnessing, integrating and releasing emotional

> traumas. This facilitates new spiritual perspectives in our lives which is the key to discovering an overall greater sense of purpose, presence and peace in your life.[40]

They talk about purification and cleansing the body and how the work of doing ayahuasca is centered upon this in order to prepare oneself for "the next stages of your spiritual healing journey." They talk about having reasonable expectations when drinking ayahuasca, how one may "may go through a strong physical and emotional purge with vomiting and/or possibly diarrhea," and how "some people have unrealistically high expectations of their first ceremonies." Soul Quest tells members what else to expect and that this is not a high, but healing:

> They expect to see breathtaking visions, which at this early stage is rare. It is important to understand that an Aya ceremony at Soul Quest Church of the Mother Earth is focused on deep healing and not 'tripping'. Not having visions in your first ceremonies is very common, however, persistence, patience and determination will often lead to the more visionary states.[41]

These "visionary states" are for Soul Quest part of the bodily purification process, not always part of the spiritual work.

> The sacred plant medicine ceremonies involve deep spiritual work, so it is natural to have some trepidation and anxiety, however, the professionally trained team at Soul Quest will be with you every step of the way to help make you as comfortable as possible during this process. The most important thing to remember is that you are partaking of an extremely powerful and intelligent medicine that is working with you on very deep psychological and physical levels. Mother Aya is a powerful master teacher that works to align your emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual bodies. It also has the power to open your mind to new ideas, clarify questions or

[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

> internal struggles you may have, and heal your body and psyche. The medicine responds to gratitude and is enhanced by greater focus, concentration, and intention.[42]

Not only is one guided and made comfortable in the ritual process, but the "medicine" is deeply internalized and does its work within. Here we see Mother Aya is the "powerful master teacher" who does the work with you, but one has to set a proper intention before coming to seek insight and personal transformation from the plant.

> Knowing what personal matters in your life you want to address, and being able to state this intention clearly in your heart and mind, is a key step to getting the full benefit from the medicine. Within the first few days, you can expect the Ayahuasca medicine to work on cleansing any blockages that may inhibit you in reaching your personal and spiritual potential. This detoxification process cleans not just your physical body, but also your karmic debt and other heavier energies weighing you down.
>
> These sacred plant medicine ceremonies are deep spiritual work, so it is natural to have some trepidation and anxiety. However, the team at Soul Quest will be with you every step of the way to make you as comfortable as possible during the Ceremony.[43]

While the journey with the plant can be terrifying at times, Soul Quest reassures their members that this is work being done by knowledgeable guides and that the fear is a normal part of the process. For those who are still hesitant about their ayahuasca retreat, Soul Quest offers testimonials from members on their videos tab to help demonstrate the efficacy of ayahuasca.

On the website Soul Quest offer a variety of services and information for church members; a calendar of upcoming ayahuasca retreats, a spiritual healing guide with all the services (ayahuasca

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[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.

retreats and information about ayahuasca, intensive integration circle, breathwork, spiritual growth using *hape*', and coaching), help and guides, reviews, an about us page, but the website is not just informational it is a treatise on the rights to use the plant which is an extension of the rights of Native Americans and Mother Earth because we see how they self-identify and connect themselves with Indigenous Native American spirituality and beliefs. This is significant because claiming Indigeneity is not only about religious rights in the US. To claim to be Native American in the United States is to also claim a special legal status (See McNally 2020), one that is connected to and cannot be so easily separated from treaty and land rights. To claim indigeneity connects to their reach toward the United Nations Indigenous rights declaration, which McNally (2020) sees as more of a guide to law than law itself. McNally situates his analysis in the context of Native American religious freedom.

Soul Quest does acknowledge that they may or may not have members who are Indigenous, and they discuss the origin of ayahuasca from the *Ayahuasca Manifesto,* which they believe is a channeled document:

> I am a spirit of spirits. I operate from a vibration superior to the spirits who compose me. I am of a hierarchy superior to that of the spirit of Ayahuasca and of Chacruna. I am the medicine resulting from the mixture of Ayahuasca and Chacruna. Although they give me the name of one of them, my sacred magic does not come from either one of them. My magic resides in the synergy created by the sacred mixture.[44]

[44] Ibid.

The *Ayahuasca Manifesto* became central to the court case with the DEA. And I will look more closely at the *Manifesto* in Chapter three.

In their section on church governance and bureaucracy, membership is briefly discussed. Here we see that to be a member you only need to request membership and that this can take place on your first day. Soul Quest states that members must believe in their foundational principles, but the 'requirement to believe' is not defined, nor does belief constitute a condition for the community, since belief can be found in the process of experiencing ayahuasca. Partaking of ayahuasca becomes the primary condition for belonging. As Chris Young said in a Facebook thread, "Medicine is about community." And because belief is not conditional but processual to belonging and membership in a church, the DEA struggles to recognize sincerity in this form. The DEA sees community as a fixed, long-term engagement, (much like how the IRS sees a "church" as a "congregation") while Soul Quest sees community as constantly emerging. Soul Quest is trying to establish belief as organic diversity within a community of knowers.

Jordt (2006) examined how knowledge is differentially embodied by individuals within Burma's lay meditation movement and how these bodies of knowledge are produced and sustained over time. What Jordt found was that membership was based upon individual subjective meditation experiences and does not conform to prior social and religious categories. Similarly, the DEA struggles to understand Soul Quest, using prior institutional categories which, as with the case of Burmese Buddhists, does not conform to the ways people who acquire altered states of consciousness-derived knowledge comprise a "community of knowers." Like Burmese Buddhists, Soul Quest is a case that

"provides an example of how knowledge is constituted, justified, and shared, within an emergent community."[45] The DEA is using belief as a canonical set of principles informed by parallels with Christianity and could not recognize belief in practice, as they expressed in their final determination letter, as we will see in chapter five.

The Soul Quest website details who the officers of the church are, as well as the details of governance, their holidays, diets, fasting, appearance, propagation, provisions, and powers. Institutions are repositories for legitimate religion in the US. In the Amazon, one doesn't (necessarily) point to the brick and board church of ayahuasca as the legitimate institutional instantiation of belief. Conforming to the idea of a church when the church is something that is important in the US, but not in Amazonia, is what makes for such a convoluted identity quest for Soul Quest who are trying to establish a place for itself in the social landscape of urban America. How does an altered-states-of-consciousness institution establish itself in the non-altered state of the world? Soul Quest's efforts are to demonstrate a sincere identity based on the relationship to a plant and to transform the criminal identity of ayahuasca for all. There is an essential difference in epistemic understanding between the DEA and Soul Quest over metaphysical reality—the nature of the mind, the nature of the world, institutions, and communities. This is the process Soul Quest is working out and the DEA criticizes, but it is a process taking place in many other locations across the world with respect to entheogens and altered states of knowing and transformation.

[45] Jordt, *Burma's Mass Meditation Movement*, 1.

As we saw from the website, Soul Quest claims to host a variety of North and South American Indigenous ceremonies on their website. Claiming to offer Native American ceremonies like the Sundance and sweat lodge under the direction of non-Native individuals is extremely problematic as McNally (2020) argues it adds to the suffering of Native American communities who continually have to fight for treaty rights, religious rights, and land and water rights. The effort of non-Natives seeking a reverse assimilation to Native American ways of life and understanding has been ongoing since the 60s and this has been one of the initial ways of trying to establish the legitimacy of the neo-shamanic movement and of all the plant-based entheogenic traditions and uses in the US. This is problematic particularly because of its neocolonialist underpinnings, which affirm what the DEA sees from this perspective: holistic ethno-cultures with their job being to discern "authenticity" and to identify charlatans, in an effort to enforce drug regulation. A kind of perfect storm of talking past epistemological stances.

Religious sincerity and belief are addressed by both sides but in a way that forms a kind of willful misunderstanding in the way that they talk past each other on a number of points of contention (religious sincerity, handling ayahuasca, storing it, etc.) in order to win the court case. In the most fundamental registers of this dispute these larger debates and ideas come to be entangled in this otherwise straightforward dispute over the right to Church status. What is a church? What is a community? What is the nature of consciousness and the transcendental realm? What is the right to spirituality and belief? The DEA seems to think that if it can show that there is no belief demonstrated then there is no right to protection of a non-existent collective belief.

Soul Quest counter argues that all belief is justified belief and that community is found through the experience of the plant. The issue here is not religious transcendental Truth (Law cannot decide truth claims on that level). However, the DEA has tried to argue that they can determine sincerity of religious belief itself. In their role of enforcing Schedule 1 drug law, the DEA must discern between religious and recreational use in order to "protect the public from harm" while respecting religious practice as a constitutionally provided freedom.

The California Institute of Integral Studies has tried to solidify and solve the belief question by creating an "integral" justification for "sacred wisdom traditions." The syncretic approach to traditions based on altered states of consciousness attempts to establish legitimacy for practices using entheogens by placing them on a continuum with religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, where meditation may be the basis for altered states of consciousness and transformation. At Soul Quest all the Great Traditions lead to Mother Ayahuasca. Members are encouraged to read and study *A Course in Miracles*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Man's Search for Meaning*, to practice Yoga, breathwork by Stanislav Grof, and Zen Buddhist meditation. The integration of sacred wisdom was here seen as a cosmopolitan space of religious tolerance and not a dogmatic practice of received belief.

Chapter Three: The Social Life of a Psychogenic Plant: Mother Aya as the Prophet of Gaia, Mother Earth

This chapter is concerned with how a number of approaches to ayahuasca begin to converge and share the same terms of its effects. We find here one stream that is concerned with a New Age movement institutionalizing its spiritualism, its esoteric practices, and beliefs in the institutional form of a church. Another stream has to do with the decriminalization movement, the psychedelic justice movement that is seeking to make all entheogens legal (to include marijuana, psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, and ayahuasca) each entheogen having its own social life and history. Another stream concerns the wave of global interest in research on these drugs for their beneficial pharmacological effects (PTSD, depression, addiction, eating disorders, cancer, etc.) Yet another stream is concerned with the psychotherapeutic value in the therapy setting (to include microdosing, and psychedelic therapies that have sparked the growth of a new field in psychotherapeutic practice, "psychedelic therapy").

Ayahuasca Manifesto: The Spirit of Ayahuasca and its Planetary Mission

The Ayahuasca Manifesto: The Spirit of Ayahuasca and its Planetary Mission was first published online in 2011 by an anonymous author. The author states that, "this belongs to the public domain and can therefore be unconditionally copied, reproduced and/or distributed partially or totally provided it is made electronically and never in printed form."[46] Soul Quest refers to the document in

[46] Ayahuasca Manifesto, ii.

church services and integration, they read from it during the ayahuasca ceremony and draw from it as a claim to their rights to use ayahuasca.

The *Manifesto* has seventeen chapters written in the first person:

> I am the spirit of Ayahuasca. For the first time I reveal myself through the 'Word' to make an emergency call to all the Human Beings of the planet, especially to the Light seekers, as I must expand beyond the Amazon River basin.[47]

Soul Quest claims the *Manifesto* as their "central sacred text" though one wonders how to evaluate this statement or the claim. Is this another tactic (sincere) in the effort to perform church-ness to the State? Or is it a codification of principles and an evocation of futurity for the plant, for Mother Aya? At times Soul Quest calls themselves a neo-shamanic church and a Christian syncretic religion, but at the same time they may call themselves Buddhists, study the *Bhagavad Gita*, and practice Zen meditation. Soul Quest incorporates any number of religious traditions into their program even though they describe themselves as a Christian syncretic religion. This cognitive dissociation is infused in the dialogue with the DEA, confounding mutual understanding.

There are no practices being organized around the *Manifesto*, central religious tenets are not there, and it does not instruct on how to live a moral life. The idea of the *Manifesto* having a central place in the church emerged in the court case thereby putting intense significance on the document to do the work of demonstrating proof of practice and belief. I did not hear the *Manifesto* discussed

[47] Ayahuascachurches.org, 2022.

much beyond the *dieta*. Readings from the *Manifesto* during Sunday church services only started in earnest following the DEA's final determination letter denying them religious exemption.

In practice, there is no central sacred text in shamanic traditions. More ironic still, given that text-based transmission is not the way that shamanic traditions as oral traditions are transmitted, is that the *Manifesto* was itself only written in 2011. It draws our attention to the ways that time itself has legitimizing properties as Hobsbawm (1983) has shown.

The ambiguity surrounding the *Manifesto's* provenance sets the stage for Mother Aya's own autopoiesis. No author claims the words as their own. It is Mother Aya herself who proclaims, "This is my planetary mission. To become one powerful tool, in service to all Humanity to reach its divine destiny."[48] The *Manifesto's* appearance on the internet is "channeled," Chris Young explains. Viewed as sacred text, it is the ambiguity of its genesis that sustains its charismatic appeal as doing the work of Mother Aya, the deity and prophet, and by evoking in its autopoiesis on the internet a sense of miraculous emanation. The internet becomes an imminent zone where Mother Ayahuasca is born into the digital realm and the world of ordinary consciousness. In this way Mother Aya seeks to instantiate herself in the ordinary world while serving as a bridge to other transcendental worlds. The *Manifesto* is the missionary story of Mother Ayahuasca. First Mother Ayahuasca is born on the internet, then she comes to the West to spread her message about her role in the expansion of the human consciousness, to inculcate how nature is sacred, to create awareness and urgency of ayahuasca preservation projects, and to talk about how her criminalization is blocking her from reaching people.

[48] Ayahuasca Manifesto, ii.

Mother Ayahuasca as Gaia is not just a quest for individual self-transformation, but transformation of the planet—Mother Aya as Gaia emerging from the Amazon Basin to save the planet. Other accretions layer this mission with meaning including an implicit emphasis on decolonization of Indigenous lands and worldviews. Vivieros de Castro (2015) explores how Indigenous perspectivist ontologies have become part of broader ideas about ecological protection. It may be useful to consider whether we are looking at a reverse missionizing effort aimed at Western epistemes. Soul Quest sees Mother Ayahuasca's work accomplished at the location of the individual and their own personal growth and spiritual transformation. Her larger missionizing efforts are part of Soul Quest's own mission in so far as they seek to legalize their status as a church in order to contribute to the broader psychedelic decriminalization movement and to afford scientific researchers an opportunity to study the effects of ayahuasca so that her identity might come to be viewed more broadly as contributive to positive health, mental wellness in addition to having planetary benefits.

The *Manifesto* is not a mission statement for how to come to the world and does not require prior belief for church members. In the text, Mother Ayahuasca also identifies the problem of her own criminalization. Mother Aya speaks for herself as a criminal needing to be exonerated:

> The criminalization of my medicine is a direct attack on the spirituality of Human Beings. The absolute prohibition and the severity of the punishment only demonstrates the authorities intent to limit, hinder, and totally eradicate a natural gateway to the improvement of individuals, society and the Human race. The inalienable right to pursuit of spirituality, the religious expression inherent in Human Beings and physical and emotional health, should never be suppressed by the false sense of duty to protect the population from drug abuse of dangerous substances...My warriors of Light in the urban world should have the same basic

objective: to achieve my official acceptance as medicine. This involves the creation of a formal protocol for my use.[49]

In the *Manifesto* Mother Ayahuasca presents a battle between good (Light Workers) and evil (governments) for humanity to reach divine destiny. "I send this correspondence at this historical moment to contribute to the expansion of the Human consciousness in a definitive and significant way, honoring the universal Light that guides my Being…my shaman emissaries…I am a spirit of spirits…I operate from a vibration superior to the spirits who compose me."[50] She continues by saying, "This is my time to embrace the planet…it is my duty…my mission…what I was created for. I now become a protagonist after remaining in the shadows for thousands of years guarded by my indigenous protectors…they now travel around the world raising awareness about my benefits."[51] This battle is one that Mother Aya proselytizes toward global transformation, which Soul Quest members are not required to adopt in belief or practice.

Making Sincere Belief Legally Legible: The Santo Daime and União do Vegetal Cases

In this section I want to provide context for what an entheogenic church looks like from a legal perspective and how Soul Quest is different from ayahuasca churches that previously have been granted religious exemption in the US. Only two entheogenic churches have been granted religious exemption to use ayahuasca. These are the Santo Daime and União do Vegetal. I argue that there are

[49] Ibid, 42.
[50] Ibid, 1-46.
[51] Ibid.

three reasons accounting for why these churches were successful in being granted their legal status as a church with legal exemptions to use ayahuasca: (1) They are both syncretic Christian churches (2) they both have associations with Indigenous peoples (3) both churches were founded outside the United States long enough ago to confer the legitimacy of being "traditional" to them.

I emphasize the way that these examples better fit ideas of what a psychedelic church is in the United States, specifically who legitimately can use ayahuasca in their ceremonies and practice this religion based on the state's recognition of an implicit connection between ethnicity/race and belief in Amazonia. This Amazonian lineage, which itself partakes of implicit notions that for a church to be legitimate it has to be capable of identifying some primordial connection to past practices can best be seen in the Santo Daime and União do Vegetal religions. The aspect of history making is part and parcel of the requirement to justify True church identity. It troubles the idea that the plant alone does the work of religion. That is, there is an implicit disclaimer that an altered state of consciousness is the grounds for religion and belief, although the opposite may be true—where a religious adherent may have access to an altered state of consciousness through other means of trance than those induced by a psychotropic substance by virtue of religious belief (for example e.g., speaking in tongues).

Santo Daime began in the 1930s in the rubber camps of Brazil. Founded by Raimundo Irineu Serra (Mestre Inrineu), Santo Daime is a fusion of folk religious and spiritual influences centered on the consumption of ayahuasca or *daime*. Santo Daime remained small and relatively unknown until the 70s when it began to spread internationally beyond Brazil. Today, it has become a contemporary transnational phenomenon with churches also located in the United States, the UK, and Canada.

Santo Daime ritual focuses on the performance of hymns (divine messages from the spiritual plane) and the church became formally institutionalized in 1963 with the creation of the Centro de Iluminacao Crista Luz Universal. By the end of the century Santo Daime had spread to urban centers across Brazil and other South American countries, Europe, and North America. (Cemin et al 2010; Labate and MacRae 2010; Labate and Jungaberle 2011; Barnard 2022)

Santo Daime expanded in the early 80s on the fumes of the counterculture movement and the heyday of the psychedelic era that reached its height in the 1960s when Timothy Leary was encouraging people to "Turn on, tune in and drop out." American hippies set out on psychedelic journeys to Amazonia to drink ayahuasca and to open "the doors of perception" and explore unmapped areas of human consciousness. The exotic mystery and difficulty in attaining ayahuasca fueled shamanic tourism and the search for altered states of consciousness and alternative therapies with voyages into nature. Santo Daime gained significant membership due to this and the New Age Movement which followed and incorporated shamanic techniques and psychedelics into syncretic New Age practices. (See Wallis 2003) Santo Daime represents itself as a "religion of the forest." Their indigeneity and connection to shamanic tradition in Brazil has traction in the court of law and gives Santo Daime churches social and legal legitimacy and authenticity in Brazil where it is valued as a shamanic religion. In Santo Daime ayahuasca is reinterpreted as a sacrament analogous to the Christian eucharist (See Barnard 2022).

Not all Santo Daime churches in the United States have religious exemption. There was a decision in September 2008 where three Oregon Santo Daime churches filed suit in federal court to

gain legal status because they did not have religious exemption. Their trial ended January 23, 2009. The case, *Church of the Holy Light of the Queen v. Mukasey*, (which is also cited in the Soul Quest case) ruled in favor of the Santo Daime church and made it so the Federal Government could not prosecute members of the three churches for their "ritual use" of ayahuasca. That decision only applies to those three churches, it is not applicable to other ayahuasca churches or Santo Daime sects in the US. In 2014 a Santo Daime group in Southern California called the Flower of the Divine Mother applied directly to the DEA for accommodation to operate and was approved as well. Another church that has gained religious exemption to use ayahuasca is União do Vegetal (UDV).

The UDV underwent a similar global dispersal and expansion as Santo Daime (Labate and MacRae 2010; Labate and Jungaberle 2011) The UDV was officially founded in 1961 in the Sunta rubber camp on the Bolivian border in the state of Rondonia in northern Brazil by José Gabriel da Costa, known as Mestre Gabriel. The translation of União do Vegetal is "Union of the Plants" referring to the sacrament of the UDV, *hoasca* tea, also known as ayahuasca. In its religious practice, UDV members drink *hoasca* tea for the effect of mental concentration, and to achieve altered states of consciousness to commune with the divine.

In Brazil, the use of *hoasca* in religious rituals was regulated by the Brazilian Federal Government's National Drug Policy Council on January 25th, 2010. The policy established legal norms for the religious institutions that responsibly use this tea in Brazil. The Supreme Court of the United States affirmed the UDV's right to use *hoasca* tea in its religious practice in the United States, in a decision published on February 21st, 2006. *Gonzales v. O Centro Espírita Beneficente União do*

Vegetal (2006) is cited and referenced often by both the DEA and Soul Quest in the court case, especially regarding Soul Quest's lack of "religious sincerity."

Gonzales v. O Centro Espírita Beneficente União do Vegetal (2006) was a United States Supreme Court case in which it was decided that, under the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the government had failed to show a compelling interest in prosecuting religious adherents for drinking ayahuasca. This is significant because under the RFRA 1993 the government must demonstrate compelling interest to substantially burden religious practice whereas in the case of Soul Quest the DEA did not even evaluate compelling interest or substantial burden because they found their religious belief to be insincere and because Soul Quest applied for exemption under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, where religious freedom is not protected by the RFRA 1993.

After the federal government seized the churches' ayahuasca, the New Mexican branch of a Brazilian church sued, claiming the seizure was illegal, and sought to ensure future importation of the tea for religious use. The church won a preliminary injunction from the United States District Court for the District of New Mexico, which was affirmed on appeal. The Supreme Court also disagreed with the government's central argument that the uniform application of the Controlled Substances Act (CSA) 1970 does not allow for exceptions for the substance in this case, just as Native Americans who are members of federally recognized tribes are given exceptions to use peyote, another Schedule I psychedelic. The difference between the UDV and the Soul Quest case is that the UDV filed for exemption under the RFRA 1993 and Soul Quest under the CSA 1970. This becomes an important factor in the appeal when both Soul Quest and the State argue over whether or not the RFRA as a

"super statute" oversees the CSA 1970. If the court finds that the CSA 1970 does fall under the RFRA then the Soul Quest case would be remanded back to the Florida district court and the DEA would have to justify compelling interest to substantially burden Soul Quest's use of ayahuasca for religious purposes.

As the DEA continued to build their case against Soul Quest, they juxtaposed their experience investigating the UDV with that of Soul Quest. They said "UDV members constantly mention their sacred texts when discussing *hoasca* (ayahuasca)...Soul Quest members on the other hand routinely described their use of ayahuasca in terms of its psychological and/or medical benefits rather than its spiritual/religious aspects." (Moreno testimony)

In citing the UDV case in their counterargument, Soul Quest also juxtaposed their current situation with that of the UDV church in the court record. They argued that they are both small denominational churches and that they both filed suit in local U.S. District Court seeking a preliminary injunction and complaint for permanent injunctive relief, and both allege that the DEA interfered with the church's ability to fulfill its religious obligations and ayahuasca practice by least restrictive means. However, Soul Quest claims that it did not compare their specific religious practices, origination, or rituals, nor claim a specific link to Amazonian ayahuasca lineage in the way the UDV church had. This is a key departure in how the DEA and Soul Quest are talking past each other.

Soul Quest's own lawyer pressured them into presenting their case in a way that would be most beneficial to precedence by steering them away from any practices that might make them look like "environmental activists" and which might make them conform to what a church looks like according

to the criteria familiar to the DEA and the Courts. This set the whole trial in a kind of motion in which situational adjustments by Soul Quest led to their distorting and changing of their own mission while the DEA, Soul Quest argues, may have overstepped their legal purview by making a claim concerning "belief," which in the RFRA 1993 and guidance provided by the memorandum of the Attorney General explicitly states they are incapable of evaluating. The DEA cannot evaluate religious belief. It can oversee Schedule 1 substances that fall under the CSA 1970 and institutions that petition for exemption from it.

The DEA refers to these two cases in their complaint and denial of religious exemption on religious basis because they see Soul Quest as not conforming to these legitimate ayahuasca churches. This will be discussed more in depth in chapter five.

Soul Quest's Association with the Oklevueha Native American Church

In an article in September 2018 in *Indian Country Today*, Ruth Hopkins drew attention to the Oklevueha Native American Church or ONAC and called founder James Warren 'Flaming Eagle' Mooney a "Pretendian" or an individual who goes at great lengths to claim Native heritage and lineage but is just pretending to be Native American. For as Hopkins states, "If you research Mr. Mooney online, you'll uncover a veritable maze of a pretendian who is desperately trying to prove he's Native. He claims to be a direct descendant of Osceola, but data on his family tree is sketchy…So is his basic assertion of Native lineage…He's not enrolled in a state or federally recognized Tribe." Ruth goes on to say that "Be suspicious of anyone who is a self-proclaimed medicine man or 'shaman.' Yet 'Flaming

Eagle' would have us believe he was commanded by a Lakota to 'take this medicine to the Whiteman.'"[52]

The controversial ONAC is not run by or part of a federally recognized tribe, even though making explicit claims of being Native American. And in the United States, in order to use a psychedelic like peyote, as the NAC or Native American Church does for religious purposes one must be Native American and part of a federally recognized tribe.

Chris Young's claims of having been trained by a traditional Brazilian medicine woman and his description of Soul Quest as a neo-shamanic church represents a claim of legitimacy and authenticity. However, it falls short as a claim of being a denomination of a Brazilian church.

Ayahuasca in Multiple Social Contexts in America

At Soul Quest we see the process of standardizing and synthesizing a singular meaning of ayahuasca taking place. They are processes that exist simultaneously with processes of differentiation, and these manifest in integration, in community discourse, in ritual, in online communities and Zoom and are emphasized at different times by the same and different people in a variety of ways.

What we see at Soul Quest is how ayahuasca is a perceptual experience (I will examine integration in chapter four) that is in the process of becoming interpreted as a new kind of social fact. It is a sensorial and spiritual experience in search of a religious description. In this sense, it is much more like Buddhism which sees itself as a philosophy in search for Truth and enlightenment through

[52] Hopkins, 2018.

means of embodied practices. In the 1960s Americans also combined Buddhist meditation with psychedelics to achieve direct experience through altered states of consciousness, now known as psychedelic Buddhism (See Osto 2016). This underground practice evolved into a form of religiosity that Douglas Osto observes as "eclectic and challenging as the era that created it."[53]

Ayahuasca's identity in the US and global contexts is in the process of being made: is it a recreational drug? (illegal) Is it a medical drug? (restricted) Is it a spiritual technology? (semi-legal as determined by the State) Is it an "ancient wisdom" long used by shamans that is only now being seen for what it is by the West? This is a historical process unfolding that necessarily contains within it contradictory understandings and ways of thinking about ayahuasca as a social fact. It is being made into a social fact and for that to happen it requires consensus. A consensus of ayahuasca integration not only in terms of individual experiences, but integration of ayahuasca itself as a material substance into the cultural, social, economic, and legal landscape.

Studies of ayahuasca use, tourism and shamanism have been growing within the anthropological literature since the 1990s (Winkelman 2005; Davidov 2010; Fotiou 2010; and Labate and Cavnar 2014) when the demand for ayahuasca turned into a multi-million-dollar industry of global ayahuasca tourism. Today ayahuasca is a prosperous tourist business that consists of transnational networks of shamans and retreats, with people all over the world traveling to seek ayahuasca in various parts of the world, including Orlando Florida. There are also a growing number of state protections to use psychedelics in the US such as in Oregon with Ballot Measure 109 which

[53] Osto, *Altered States*, 1.

directs the Oregon Health Authority to license and regulate the manufacturing, transportation, delivery, sale, and purchase of psilocybin and Proposition 122 which legalized some psychedelics in Colorado. These complex networks and interests in psychedelics include and intersect at Soul Quest.

Labate and Cavnar (2014) specifically focused on how ayahuasca shamanisms provide an exceptional platform for discourse on the complexity of interrelations between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people, neo-shamans and traditional shamans, local people and outsiders, as well as relations among Indigenous Amazonians. They argue that ayahuasca is not just a cultural medium of exchange, but a "portal of power for tapping into deeper sources of indigeneity," used to support reinvented traditions, emergent social identities, and promote new ethnic and political alliances.[54] Shamanism and the use of psychedelics consumed for sacred purposes also remains an ongoing interest among scholars and popular readers (Erowid 2007; Ott 1993; Pinchback 2002; Ratsch 2005; Schultes et al. 2001) Ayahuasca has also attracted much attention as an element of traditional Amazonian shamanisms (Bennett 1992) and as a cross over psychedelic substance for neo shamanic movements (Grob 1999; Luna and White 2000; Metzner 1999; Shanon 2002) The study of psychedelics links shamanic traditions closely to wider discourse about community state relations, access to psychedelics, psychedelic decriminalization efforts and religiosity, globalization, and transnational economic networks.

Soul Quest is one location from which we see this ongoing and fraught social transformation. It is also happening at academic and research institutions (that get permission to study it from the

[54] Labate and Cavnar 2014, 14.

government because it is a Schedule 1 drug). Ayahuasca has been studied for the treatment of eating disorders (Renelli et. al 2020), psychotherapy, depression, anxiety (Giovannetti et al 2019; Neilson and Megler 2013) cancer treatment (Schenberg 2013) and post-traumatic stress disorder (Hooyer Applbaum, & Kasza 2020; Campbell M. S. et al 2016; Huston V. 2016). Scientists and academics too are paying attention to how DMT works in the brain See Fontanilla et al 2009). The botany and pharmacology of ayahuasca is an ongoing study of ethnobotanists (Callaway et al 1999; Ott 1993; Schultes 1982; Schultes and Winkelman 1996; and Spinella 2001).

Garcia et al (2020) showed that ayahuasca promotes neurogenesis in mice, specifically the birth of new brain cells in the hippocampus, the region of the brain responsible for memory and learning. This study also indicated that DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine), when combined with MAOIs (Monoamine oxidase inhibitors), foments an anti-amnesic effect. This seems to explain how ayahuasca assists with PTSD, which is many times associated with memory repression. Psychedelics are increasingly studied from a variety of perspectives, institutions, and organizations.

The Johns Hopkins Center for Psychedelic and Consciousness Research is leading the way in exploring innovative treatments using psilocybin mushrooms. They received a four-million-dollar federal grant in 2021 from the National Institutes of Health to explore the potential impacts of psilocybin on tobacco addiction. This is remarkable because it is the first NIH grant awarded in over fifty years to directly investigate the therapeutic effects of a psychedelic.

Harvard and the California Institute of Integral Studies are also studying psychedelics. In the United States, states too are addressing the psychedelic legalization and decriminalization movement

and offering psychedelic therapies outside of the healthcare system, for example in Oregon and Colorado. There are also a number of states that are enacting reform efforts to legalize and decriminalize psychedelics (Minnesota, Illinois, California and Arizona). This is not just a federal or state level issue, it is also happening on the city level. U.S. cities are actively seeking psychedelic reform in such places as Seattle, Washington and Ann Arbor, and by-passing local ordinances for example in Rock County Wisconsin where the Rock County Board passed an ordinance change to set the penalty for possessing 28 grams or less of cannabis to no more than a $1 fine.

Pharmaceutical companies like Atai Life Sciences, Compass Pathways, and GH Research, as well as centers for psychedelic healing like the California Center for Psychedelic Therapy, and non-profits like Alexander Shulgin Research Institute, The Chacruna Institute, Decriminalize Nature DC, Global Ayahuasca Project and Erie Vision are studying, advocating for, promoting global awareness of, educating about, and campaigning for psychedelics and the efficacy of psychedelic therapies.

These kinds of studies on psychedelics and ayahuasca are particularly impactful because they represent efforts to overcome the first obstacle to entheogenic identities as a criminalized substance. Criminalization of entheogens goes back to the 1960s counterculture led by psychedelic "psychonaut" icons like William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Timothy Leary, and Ram Dass. There is so much renewed interest in studying ayahuasca because there has simultaneously been a grassroots bottom up movement to experience ayahuasca in the popular culture with professional athletes like Dorian Yates and Aaron Rodgers and celebrities like Will Smith and Megan Fox who have spoken candidly and publicly about their ayahuasca experiences and openly proselytize for its therapeutic value. But these

accounts are not the same as those of the 60s exactly. It is not Timothy Leary's "tune in and drop out," "peace and world unity" version of psychedelia that impels this movement forward. Although 60's narratives remain in the background, this is a different cultural moment.

Today, it is the substance as medical therapy, healing and spiritual enhancement that we see accentuated. While the culture wars grew out of the prior 60s counterculture rejection is surely an important influence, it is the real wars that took place, now and then, (the Vietnam war and the Gulf and Middle Eastern wars) that have focused concern and collective empathy over the issue of veteran healing and trauma that has significantly reshaped ayahuasca's efficacy and its' evolution to a new kind of social fact. Unlike LSD or mushrooms or marijuana, ayahuasca brought with it from its Amazonian shamanic traditions the shaman guide. In the West this has become the doctor, the therapist, and the commercial psychological knowledge "light worker." Psychedelic therapists have professionalized a burgeoning field within psychology and psychotherapy more generally.

What is key here is that ayahuasca is in the process of becoming a social fact in which the dimensions of its identity are being increasingly discerned and shared, and the dimensions of disagreement share a similar phenomenological foundation in social, economic, legal, and therapeutic settings. Ayahuasca has multiple identities for multiple communities and users and convergence of its meaning is taking place in Orlando, on Zoom, and the religious exemption court case. This context is a moment where one can closely examine ayahuasca from the perspectives of individual users, communities (veterans), interpretive processes, institutionalizing processes and court case disputes. From these locations we can see how the broader process of decriminalization unfolds as one critical

aspect in rehabilitating the identity of ayahuasca in the face of the drug wars and culture wars of the US and globally.

Two seemingly contradictory processes are ongoing. One is the validation of multivalent accounts, and the other is the effort to standardize the experience as a collective social fact. In a sense, this is a phenomenological novelty (new perceptual experiences outside of mundane experience) that are trying to be observed and made sense of and brought into the scientific language and laboratory, pharmaceutical companies, institutions of learning and research. There is an effort to make sense of the way to see the experience. The shaping of epistemic approaches to understanding—ways of understanding ayahuasca and ways of coming to understanding ayahuasca. And there is the production of the conditions of being in the world and in community that are produced through the ayahuasca experience. This is where we see the discourses of global transformation through altered states of consciousness, and collective consciousness as a new spirituality with the potential for the emergence of "global consciousness" (utopias).

And there is the verification of these through establishing the ancient Amazonian credentials of ayahuasca as having been discovered in the "ancient traditions" or "ancient wisdoms" of traditional Indigenous cultures that embraced the alteration of consciousness as a way of coming to understanding. All of the prior "wisdom traditions" of the Great Religions are seen as many roads leading to the great mysteries. And those who are embedded in those traditions are welcome to experience ayahuasca through those lenses (which is even parsed out in the *Ayahuasca Manifesto*). Ayahuasca, the Spirit of Ayahuasca, and Mother Ayahuasca, can hold them all. In this it seems like the

way that the many become the one is a process that asserts that all the other knowledge regimes are true but only partial accounts of truth.

Integration is therefore happening not just on the individual level (inside the head of the individual whose consciousness is being affected) but in the body politic and the global body itself. One could say that we are watching Soul Quest evolve and integrate its contradictions about what ayahuasca is and what kind of institution can hold it and use it. To do that they need to systematize and standardize the experience and they gather their information from a multitude of registers and individuals. And that itself is difficult given its diverse experiential outputs. Since the substance itself cannot be standardized (which is what the pharmaceutical industry has realized and is trying so hard to make sense of) the next best thing is to understand how to standardize the meaning of the object, which is a messy process which is not yet resolved, integrated, nor completed.

Transpersonal Psychotherapy

Although Soul Quest institutionally separated Zoom calls into different categories they were able to talk to everyone all at once through the notion of Carl Jung's "shadow work," which is part and parcel to the Being True to You process of integration. With the wide range of ayahuasca experiences that members have, the shadow becomes a way to talk to everyone in the same moment. One person's narrative becomes a pedagogy for the entire group, because everyone has a dark shadow side.

Shadow work, Being True to You describes as, "the process of bringing the parts of our shadow – of our unconscious – to our awareness so that we can work on them and heal them. Jung talks of how integrating the disowned parts of ourselves can eliminate their sabotaging effects and help us

recover a sense of wholeness. In effect, shadow work brings to light each piece of ourselves we've repressed and kept from acknowledging so that we can process them, accept them and fully integrate them into ourselves."[55] Soul Quest believes shadow work is important because, as they say, "Your shadow creates the momentum behind acts of self-sabotage and unbeknownst to us, the decisions we make about how we lead our lives. If you don't believe you are worthy to fulfill your life goals and lead a life of your dreams, you will only engage in activities that hold you back from the things you really want."[56] Here we begin to see how Carl Jung's goals are being incorporated into the psychedelic milieu and the work of ayahuasca integration.

Soul Quest commodified Jungian analysis in their business model by adopting a transpersonal psychotherapeutic approach to integration which began with Carl Jung and is popular in the broader psychedelic movement. The California Institute of Integration Studies is tremendously entangled in teaching about Jung. Jung is the interpretive key or translation device between Western psychological ideas of the self and healing and Indigenous "wisdom systems" based on altered states of consciousness. In as much as institutions are shaped by knowledge-making and knowledge communities it is good to observe that these knowledge communities are at the forefront of making ayahuasca a decriminalized social fact with an identity tied to healing and individual and spiritual-ecological transformation. If Mother Ayahuasca is in search of an identity that is not criminalized, she has chosen Jung as her emissary to the Moderns. Like all colonized objects of knowledge, Mother Aya must first unburden herself from the colonizer's efforts to forbid her own narrative identity by imposing their own scientific

[55] Being True to You, 2022.
[56] Ibid.

and legal institutional identities upon her. They do this as a way of subordinating her and criminalizing individuals who would ingest her and thereby challenge the account of the colonizer's world. It is interesting that Carl Jung has become the bridge that supports Mother Aya's crossing from Amazonia into the Western world.

The shadow is one of Carl Jung's archetypes. As Jung observes, the shadow "is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort…to become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real."[57] Jung argues that knowing one's shadow is essential for self-knowledge and thus doing so meets considerable resistance. The shadow for Jung involves dark characteristics, personal inferiorities, and repressed tendencies, which is relatable to everyone and why it speaks to so many church members on Zoom at once. The realm of the shadow for Jung is the negative side of one's personality and lives in the personal unconscious.[58] So when Dr. Scott talks to one member about their shadow self, he is simultaneously talking to all members, and all members feel as though he is talking directly to them.

Carl Jung also had a deep interest in shamanism. And his therapy has been likened to shamanic transformation of healer and patient (Grim 1984; Groesbeck 1989; Downton 1989; and Senn 1989) Jung's influence is clear in a number of influential general works on shamanism (Larsen 1988 and Halifax 1982) Laderman (1991) has offered an ethnographic consideration of Jungian

[57] Jung 1959, 13-19.
[58] Jung and Storr 1999, 90-93.

thought in her juxtaposition of a Malaysian theory of temperament and Jung's notion of archetypes. Central to Malay shamanism, Laderman argues, is a non-projective system of psychotherapy, which calls upon patients to address the internal sources of their own problems. Jung's fascination with shamanism and focus on internal transformation is part of this broader movement to define ayahuasca as a social fact, to connect the individual to the spiritual and which leads to utopia in this life, the new psychedelic enlightenment.

Soul Quest integration coaches typically frame negative ayahuasca experiences described as "horror," "hellish" or "nightmarish" qualities in terms of Jung's notion of the Shadow. Soul Quest has a specific integration group dedicated to shadow work which is facilitated by Steven Twohig Sr. Steven, as the Soul Quest website states, "...is the Online Church Producer and facilitates several online post-ceremony groups including, Your Hero's Journey, Mental Cleanse, and the Shadow I Group. He has supported the Warrior Quest Vet's ceremonies as a volunteer, is a founding member of the Church Council and provides ongoing individual support to our church members."[59] The church council are the founders and leaders at Soul Quest, and they are both board of directors and church leadership.

Steven's main integration approach was that of Jungian psychotherapy and he ran the shadow integration group on Mondays at 6pm., which he also referred to as the "shadow tribe." The notion of a shadow tribe connects to shamanism, community, and Jung. Steven was even featured as the guest

[59]Ayahuascachurches.org, 2022.

speaker of the week during a Sunday Zoom church service to discuss his shadow work. It was there that I learned more about Steven's background and shadow work pedagogy.

Dr. Scott Irwin hosted the Sunday Zoom featurette, and Steven began by talking about his work with his mentor Tony Robbins (motivational speaker, author, and philanthropist) which seemingly lends credence and credibility to his experience and expertise in popular self-help therapies, which builds up his power and influence with church membership and his multirelational modalities which includes Carl Jung, Stanislav Grof breathwork, journaling, and other transpersonal methodologies for integration. Steven claimed to have worked under Tony for at least a decade in order to master Tony's concepts.

Steven said that during his first three ayahuasca ceremonies his negative shadow energy was primarily projected. While he spoke, he also mentioned Carl Jung's notion of the collective unconscious and that the key to integration is "digging into the psyche to hunt for your shadow." Steven went on to say that "shadow desires fight for distinction," that "Light and dark mixes together once mastered," like "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde or the Incredible Hulk." These popular culture references are a kind of speech act that prioritizes the everyday and not the transcendent or spiritual. Transcendence and transformation are happening in the mind-body and in the pragmatic everyday world.

Jungian therapy at Soul Quest is about shadow work and which in general is about bringing union between conscious and unconscious parts of the mind. Transpersonal therapy takes a holistic (social, emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual) approach to the person with an emphasis on

spirituality. It is the emphasis on integrating the transcendent into aspects of the human experience and to experience that transcendent realm through altered states of consciousness induced through ayahuasca that is at the heart of the sacramental practice of Soul Quest. Transpersonal therapy takes the spiritual and transcendent as part of its domain, of its knowledge, which is a blurring of the secular and religious distinction. (Sullivan (2020) discusses and imagines a different kind of coming together between the state and religion, an alternative venue where both can sit down at a table as equals in fellowship) In the case of Soul Quest we see the concerns of the secular being drawn into the religious scope of concerns through an institution, which could be exactly the kind of venue that Sullivan conceptualizes.

The language of transpersonal psychology has come to shape the decriminalization movement more broadly because of its secular claims of healing the individual from trauma, addiction, PTSD, depression, eating disorders and other psycho-social-bio illnesses. This biopsychosocial model of wellness and healing is central to Soul Quest practices and is accessed through altered states of consciousness through ayahuasca. Healing is a process that is viewed as not simply accomplished on the physical body and person (described in Western biomedical traditions) but is a practice of healing for the whole person and which makes the person whole. This is accomplished through ayahuasca because the experience elevates repressed memories and emotions to conscious awareness where they can be integrated into physical healing, emotional healing, and spiritual healing.

The Jungian notion of the "shadow" here plays a central role in the facilitator's guidance during integration following the ayahuasca experience. The practitioner is directed to explore the

places where their subconscious hides or places in the shadows where awareness and understanding of the causes of suffering and unwellness dwell.

To emphasize how the overlapping of terminology that gets shared in different silos, and where knowledge production is taking place, in this chapter we see the ways in which the plants' identity is becoming decontextualized from its specific locations (the law, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, therapy offices, shaman retreats, etc.) and we find that its identity as a social fact increasingly becomes capable of moving across different domains without changing the way it gets talked about.

In Salem Oregon voters approved the regulated use of psilocybin in 2020 ballot measures. In April of 2023 around one hundred people completed a six-month course at a retreat near Portland to learn how to become facilitators and earn a certificate that would enable them to take a test administered by the health authority to receive facilitator licenses. Here we see that the language of the psychedelic movement, specifically the term "facilitator" is being used by the state to define the legal category of the entheogenic specialist.

Chapter Four: Interpreting Ayahuasca Experiences, Soul Quest Integration and Zoom

In this section I focus on the interpretation of the ayahuasca experience at Soul Quest. I look at how Soul Quest employs a syncretic approach to ayahuasca ceremony integration which is informed by Being True to You, a secular psychedelic integration training program which utilizes a transpersonal psychotherapeutic approach to health and healing. I show that veterans are exemplars who demonstrate the efficacy of ayahuasca experience and how their involvement in the church is entangled in the context of the psychedelic decriminalization movement. Veterans become central to the discourse about the freedom to use entheogenic substances in the United States.

I look at how veteran ayahuasca experiences are central to Soul Quest's demonstrations of the efficacy of ayahuasca for healing a wide range of psychosomatic illness and disease. The veterans are singled out by Soul Quest as an exemplary model showing the success of ayahuasca. Veteran's experiences link the church's institutional efficacy and sincerity in an unequivocal way, a link that also links the secular to the religious. Veterans are in a multi-indexical category of exceptionalism, and this is why they are prioritized at Soul Quest as testimonies to the power and healing of ayahuasca, they validate the plant's beneficent effects.

Testimonials of model veterans do the work of outreach to other vets. Integration is a form of fellowship and a consensus producing setting for the experience of healing moral wounds. It is not defining moral conditions and dispositions—those are already taken for granted by the individual with respect to their own individual values and understandings—rather, it is integrating the experiences of

horror, moral wounding, self-hatred, addiction, and violence. It is making the person whole where they have been fragmented.

Western biomedicine relies heavily on treatment protocols and licensed pharmaceuticals to treat illness and disease. Ayahuasca requires social integration through interpretive and communal agreements about what health and illness means. If ayahuasca is taken by twelve different people, they will take away twelve different experiences, that is why integration is undertaken from a syncretic approach, outsourced to Being True to You.

Being True to You states that they are a "coaching company that provides coaching services for addiction recovery and psychedelic preparation and integration, as well as an in-depth Coach Training Program, group coaching, family recovery programs, and other related services."[60] At Soul Quest it is required that anyone who wants to be a psychedelic facilitator and integration coach on Zoom or at the church in Florida has to successfully complete the Being True to You program.

Soul Quest also draws on the expertise of individual therapists hired to work at their Natural Healing Center, like Eric Milbrandt MD who specializes in psychedelic-assisted therapies at his infusion clinic in Ocala, FL. Dr. Milbrandt had been hired as the Soul Quest Medical Director in 2021 prior to the DEA's final determination letter and not only worked with Soul Quest members on site in Orlando, but also worked with them on Zoom. Dr. Milbrandt used to be a critical care medical specialist and he self-identified as a certified trauma professional, also certified to treat anxiety, and used

[60] Beingtruetoyou.com, 2023.

ketamine infusion therapies to treat addiction and mood disorders. Michael Pollan's book *How to Change your Mind* is what he said got him into psychedelics. He also said that his clients had to do clinical trials to use psychedelics due to it being illegal, but that when he found Soul Quest, that changed everything because he was now able to offer ayahuasca to his clients when he was not able to do so before.

Soul Quest outsources integration because ayahuasca's interpretive framework is not universalizing in the sense of representing a singular view of truth from which to interpret ayahuasca experiences. It is not an objectified spiritual truth regime, rather it is a shift in perception ("the doors of perception" as Huxley called it) that generates a new interpretive account of experience, self, community, and world that is open-ended, an endless flux of possible futures. This has led to two distinct tendencies; 1) Multivalent accounts of Truth that are experienced by and within individual bodies/minds and 2) An integrated account of Truth as one universe and one consciousness and one spirituality (presumably the kind of unity that is found in diversity)—cosmopolitanism as tolerance of difference converging in one place.

In other words, the work of ayahuasca as a substance of meaning is happening (1) at the levels of self and defining what a self is in the first place, (2) on the levels of community and tolerance and incorporation and (3) on the level of society and global/planetary consciousness more generally still. This is the register on which we may speak of the integration of all traditions and religions as a unity of difference under the banner of the ayahuasca experience. At Soul Quest this coalescence of traditions is talked about under the single idea of "wisdom traditions." It is something about the reality beyond the

mundane that is being grasped at and which is integrating internal contradictions—of war, of trauma, and of hurt. What we see are many different people from different dispositions coming together at Soul Quest to be healed through a shared experience of the plant. Healing then becomes the resolution of contradictions of difference. This "healing" is happening on multiple registers and in the process changes the individual, the community, and the planet. Jordt (2007) demonstrated how epistemic shifts in techniques of viewing the self in Buddhist meditation produce ontological conditions that change the individual and shape the body politic itself. This process that Jordt noticed with Buddhists in Burma seems to be similar to what is taking place at Soul Quest.

Some of the ways ayahuasca is made a new kind of social fact whose meaning may be collectively shared is through standardizing the ways it is talked about. That is, its semiotic importance as a system of value. In the effort to overcome the primary obstacle of transforming its meaning from a Schedule 1 recreational drug that is illegal to a panacea of human psychic trauma and communal and global healing, certain discourses can be observed as doing the work of transforming ayahuasca's identity and one of those key locations where this takes place are with veterans.

The history of ayahuasca for veterans represents a political counter-cultural strand dating back to the Vietnam war when soldiers were getting high on the ultimate counterculture drugs of the time, LSD and marijuana. It began in contemporary times not as a protest to the subjecting of consciousness to killing and the fear of being killed, but to the failure of contemporary PTSD medicines to have any effect—all the trauma counseling and SSRIs have been a patent failure for

veterans and evidence shows it. Veterans do not need scientific evidence; they need results, and they are the ones turning to psychedelic therapies and ayahuasca. That is the high empirical standard.

The veterans have a ready-made community that solidifies the meanings of the plant in a particular way that entangles the veterans' war experiences with the drug along a single consistent narrative. Other people who are not combat soldiers are separated; including anthropologists (I was not allowed to join the veteran Zoom integration sessions). Anyone who has not experienced war and existential threat of that sort is not a member of the club. They have a ready-made community of people they trust who have gone through it and shared the same experiences of trauma and moral injury. This is why they create separate groups for veteran ayahuasca ceremony and integration.

It may be an unconscious recognition but eventually a recognition, that like in any socialization process, you have to learn how to experience ayahuasca. Ayahuasca does not do the interpretive work for you. Recognition of those things excited people like William James and Aldous Huxley. It was not just cosmic dust that Leary was after, there was something philosophically at stake when your understanding of the world is something that is worked out through the "doors of perception." The doors of perception become the things that you think with. If we take away conventional reality of how we perceive things, the psychedelics simulate the removal of conventional reality. And if you systematize that experience then you can change how people are.

It became evident to me that the journey the veterans at Soul Quest were undertaking to heal their traumatic wounds was not a casual undertaking and it was not for the faint of heart. For many

vets it represented a last-ditch effort at the end of a long series of failed efforts to recover from the moral wounds of combat. Many vets described it as the last stop before suicide.

The vets I spoke with evidenced enormous courage to try literally anything that might heal them when pharmaceuticals and other therapies had so completely failed them. Their testimony was compelling and inspiring. Veterans are not just a core group of ayahuasca users and advocates, they are the core reason why ayahuasca is in a semi-legal state in different parts of the US. Veterans give ayahuasca legitimacy because the war wounded remain in a state of exceptionalism. Their claims that ayahuasca heals them when other forms of healing and therapy just do not work give pause to US government agencies' enforcement of Schedule 1 arrests. The US government and veterans are concerned about the high veteran suicide rates in the US and so when veterans say that ayahuasca works, that it heals, that it is more effective than pharmaceuticals and other therapies, and that it is much more than a criminal substance as the DEA labels it, the federal government is caught in a moral dilemma regarding the status of the substance. It is this incertitude that troubles the legal landscape around ayahuasca and that I examine in this dissertation by tracing the still on-going process by which Soul Quest has sought to become an entheogenic church with federal government Schedule 1 exemption status (drugs with no accepted medical use).

While talking to Verena Young early on in my research I showed interest in the veteran's group and Verena told me on the phone about how ayahuasca is healing people from all walks of life, how important it is that more research is done on ayahuasca to show its efficacy, and how veterans are one of the main groups that come to Soul Quest to be healed. She said they had a non-profit organization

called Warrior Quest that they worked with, run by Lance Supernaw and Daniel Murray (both veterans) that not only paid for veterans in need to come to ayahuasca ceremonies, but also provided post ceremony integration in person and on Zoom so that veterans could form a tight knit community and discuss what they experienced in ceremony. This community building through ayahuasca ceremony and integration for veterans is what Hooyer et al (2020) argued is a direct reflection of how veterans build communities in the military which leads to the effectiveness of psychedelics use and collective healing.

Healing Altered States of Combat: Veteran Integration at Soul Quest

Veteran ayahuasca integration at Soul Quest is set apart from other integration groups, both at the church in Florida and on Zoom. If you are not a veteran, you cannot take part in the veteran only integration. The leaders of the veteran integration groups can only talk about it if they themselves have experienced it. The veteran integration discourse is about trauma work and as a community their main work is around trauma which is different from other Zoom integration groups where trauma is discussed, but it is more framed around doing "shadow work," which may or may not have to do with trauma.

Model veterans are seen by church members as experts due to their specialized knowledge, both of war trauma and of ayahuasca. This is a different kind of lineage of wisdom than the sort of self-help gurus also seen as role models, for example, like Tony Robbins who Steven Twohig, an integration leader at Soul Quest claimed to have trained with or 60's psychonauts like Timothy Leary who are regarded saint-like within the church. The charisma of the veteran leaders is tied to their experience

both with war trauma and ayahuasca, a specialized knowledge that other integration leaders at the church do not possess.

One of the veteran leaders at Soul Quest that I became closest to over the course of my fieldwork was retired Staff Sergeant Shilo Harris. He was also one of the model veterans at Soul Quest who gave many talks about his ayahuasca experiences during integration both at the church and on Zoom. Shilo also wrote a book entitled *Steel Will: My Journey through Hell to Become the Man I was Meant to Be* and leads a public life as a motivational speaker. The first day I met Shilo, he talked extensively about his own war trauma:

> On February 19th, 2007, I was on patrol on an infamous southern Iraqi roadway when my Humvee was blown up by an IED (improvised explosive device). The driver and I were the only survivors. I'm blessed to be here…to honor those who served in the military. I joined the military after the 9/11 terror attacks in New York City. I come from a family of veterans, and I wanted to serve my country, and to seek justice for 9/11 on behalf of the American people. After the Humvee explosion I was put into a drug induced coma for forty-eight days. It was the darkest hopeless feeling in my life. I felt trapped in my own personal hell.

His coma experience and how he describes it is one ontological reality that is critical for understanding his way of being in the world, a framework indifferent to psychotherapy and medications which he told me did not work for him. His was a transformation of being in the world that only other veterans can fully understand:

> I traversed the timeline of my life and was left for dead at the end of it. I wouldn't wish my coma on my worst enemy. It was as close to hell as I ever care to be. I didn't go to heaven for ninety minutes. I didn't travel 'toward the light.' I didn't have any conversations with God. I was in a dark place. I was in an abyss. I wasn't asleep. In my coma, I died over and over again. I lived in an alternate reality. Every image was dark and distorted. It was if I had taken up residence in the worst nightmare or horror film you could imagine. I had no impression that I

> was dreaming. It was as real to me as the paper in front of me is now. It was full of pain and torment. At times I saw myself from outside my body, while at other times I was experiencing hell firsthand.
>
> It wasn't hot, as you might expect when you read a description of hell. Everything hurt, and I had a feeling of utter helplessness. I started in a vast valley or canyon that was not of this world. Everything around me was crumbling. As I traveled through the darkness, the shadowy landscape would change from rural to urban. If I was in the wilderness, rocks were crashing and crumbling around me. If I was in the city, buildings were melting and crumbling next to me, covering me with debris. As I ran past these crumbling walls and buildings, I could feel sand and dirt on my skin, gravel and grit in my teeth. The landscape was full of scary figures, silhouettes with red eyes that glinted in the dark. I remember having the conscious thought, This has got to be hell. What did I do to get here?
>
> I had a level of consciousness that surprises me to this day. I was not alone. Other people were with me. I remember a woman with a large Afro running next to me, and another dark man wearing a gas mask. They were pulling me along as we ran together through a house of fiberglass. The fiberglass looked like long shards of crystal and pierced me through like a thousand swords. I had terrible headaches, and because I felt the rocks in my mouth, I couldn't bite or clear my mouth to scream. I tried to cry out but could make no sound. I wanted the pain to end but it would not.[61]

When I asked Shilo if he would recommend ayahuasca to other veterans he said enthusiastically, "Absolutely. Only if they plan to do the actual work to get the most relief from the experience." Part of what initially drew me to talk to Shilo above other veterans at Soul Quest, had to do with my own childhood trauma. My father, Lieutenant Tarryl L. Janik Sr., who was drafted and served in the Army and National Guard during Vietnam was also blown up in an explosion later in life while at work when I was a young boy. My Dad, like Shilo, had to endure the hell of the burn unit; skin grafts, surgeries, and being disfigured due to extensive burns. Now looking back at the day I first

[61] Harris, 188-120.

met Shilo, I realize that he reminded me of my father, and I felt more drawn to talk to him because of this. I think that he too felt more comfortable talking to me because of this shared trauma.

Trauma is how veterans talk about their ayahuasca integration and trauma has been broadly studied by anthropologists much in the way that Eliade (1951) studied shamanism–from a generalized approach (Crapanzano 1985; Levi-Strauss 1963; Obeyesekere 1984; Rosaldo 1989; Spiro 1987; Turner 1967) but the contemporary study of trauma has focused more on specific cultural contexts (Casper and Wertheimer 2016; Luckhurst 2008; Bond and Craps 2020; Buelens, Durrant, and Eaglestone 2014; and Whitehead 2004) and veteran trauma and psychedelics is a new burgeoning subfield (Hooyer et al 2020). Scarry (1987) links traumatic experiences to the "making and unmaking of worlds," wherein "pushed to the very precipice of physical and/or psychological annihilation, the bonds that tether a person to the everyday world become stretched, distorted, and even torn; sometimes irreparably so…such a state of ontological alienation is profoundly distressing."[62] Veterans are an important group for understanding how ayahuasca does its work upon trauma and how trauma can unmake and remake veterans' ontological worlds.

Shilo called his ayahuasca experience at Soul Quest "wonderful," and he encouraged others to take part in "the medicine." When I asked Shilo if ayahuasca helped with his coma memories he related to me:

> I think ayahuasca brought a great deal of peace into my life by giving me a different perspective of those memories. I did not work on the coma related trauma specifically because I had bigger issues to address. The overall peace I got overshadows the memories I have from that dark

[62] Scarry, *The Body in Pain, 37.*

> place. I've come to believe that I needed to see what 'Hell' potentially looked like to appreciate the life I live now and to work harder for the peaceful afterlife we all hope to experience once we leave here.

Another model veteran who was asked to speak during an integration on Zoom was a man I will call Kent. Kent, like Shilo, began by talking about his experience as a veteran and then went into how ayahuasca helped shift his way of thinking and being in the world:

> I went to Soul Quest a couple months ago with the Warrior Quest veteran group. Prior to going to Soul Quest I wanted to commit suicide, because the darkness comes in every other day. It has haunted me every day since 1970. It comes and goes, and I keep reliving it. During my ayahuasca trip I relived it all, everything that I had done in the Vietnam war. I was forced to do things that weren't right, and it got to the point where all I see is the women and kids I killed…they haunt me. Since Vietnam I'm an alcoholic. When I did ayahuasca I was killed two or three times, but started to like it. I'm different now, I don't have the same temper I used to, I used to be coldhearted. I would not sleep or eat, but now I get five to six hours of sleep a night…that ayahuasca helped one hundred percent. My advice to anybody, is to do it. But especially veterans, they need to do it.

Kent's narrative, like Shilo's, demonstrates the ongoing prolonged trauma that veterans suffer after returning home from doing war work or what Hooyer et al (2020) calls "altered states of combat" or (ASCombat). "Altered states of combat" is the specific mindset that soldiers experience in combat and is a useful theoretical framework for understanding veteran subjectivities, the effectiveness of psychedelics like ayahuasca, and collective healing in veteran communities as seen in the veteran testimonies I collected at Soul Quest.

Hooyer et al (2020) states that altered states of combat is also an alternative world of consciousness, like altered states of consciousness, one wherein "prolonged adaptation to life in the

battlefield is collective, meaningful, embodied, and co-constitutive of the experience," and "reacclimating to life at home after prolonged deployment in this alternative world is precisely what many veterans have difficulty accomplishing, with often tragic consequences for themselves and their loved ones."[63] In their study of ASCombat, the veteran author they call "DK" took part in a Soul Quest ayahuasca retreat and shared his ceremony experience:

> My shadow-self had served its purpose and I had to watch myself die. Over and over again I watched the last moments of my life and I observed myself placing a poncho over my body. This dark loop was on a constant repeat until I was comfortable with it. Not until I accepted this did I progress past the death. Crows pecked at my corpse as I waited for a medevac in this ayahuasca-induced world. Letting go and accepting outcomes I could not control was the lesson the medicine was showing me.[64]

In DK's narrative we see how the Jungian notion of the shadow self emerges in his reflection and integration of his Soul Quest ayahuasca experience. The significance of this connects to how Soul Quest integration coaches utilize Carl Jung's notion of the shadow self during integration to speak to everyone at once.

Lance Supernaw, the founder of Warrior Quest, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping veterans experience ayahuasca, is another model veteran who shared his experience with ayahuasca and the trauma he dealt with after returning home from the military. Lance served in the United States Air Force, as part of a pararescue unit for six years. After returning home from being deployed in a combat

[63] Hooyer et al 2020, 4.
[64] Ibid, 12.

zone, specifically Kuwait, Pakistan, and Iraq, he said that his wife begged him to get help. He said he had become addicted to Xanax, Ambien, and other pharmaceutical drugs:

> I was slipping into daily depression, battled anxiety, was stressed out, and it caused marital problems. I got divorced and started using alcohol and cocaine. I went to the VA (Veterans Affairs), but they sent me away because I was abusing drugs and alcohol. In 2018 I went to the Center for Veterans Studies for two weeks, came home, and found my car repossessed. I literally fell into a hole. I heard about ayahuasca from other veteran friends, who recommended Soul Quest. The day before I was scheduled to partake in my first ayahuasca retreat I didn't want to do it, I was angry with the world. But I still went through with it. During my first ceremony I cried for five hours straight, it felt good to cry, and when the medicine wore off it felt like I shed one hundred pounds. I saw myself, I was hovering over my own casket watching my kids cry at my funeral. So I did more ayahuasca retreats at Soul Quest. I found what I needed was love, that the grey world I was living in now had color, and that I was baptized and I found God. This is when I decided to found Warrior Quest. My kids now see the difference. They love that I no longer drink. In order to find the love I was yearning for, I realized that, I had to love myself first. Before ayahuasca I thought about suicide daily, how I could do it, I even carried a Glock 9mm pistol in my car, and the one time I really came close to doing it, my phone rang, so I stopped.

Model veterans also took part in documentaries for television that were being filmed at Soul Quest before and during my research. They focused on the efficacy of ayahuasca for veterans. Two of these documentaries are called *Unwell* and *From Shock to Awe*. One model vet that took part in *Unwell* I will call Angie. Angie, like Lance, came to Soul Quest as part of Warrior Quest. Angie was asked to be a guest speaker on Zoom and started by saying that she met her husband while she was in the United States Army, that she had a government job, just bought a house, and was living the dream. Then, she noticed her husband seemed stressed. Not long after he went to a psychiatrist who prescribed him Paxil, a nurse doubled his dosage. This, she blamed for the tragedy that would occur next:

> He came home one day with a loaded shotgun and shot our fourteen-year-old daughter through a door, then killed himself. I was mad at God, for what he did. I wanted to die after finding them dead. Standing there surrounded by all this gore, I decided to do this (keep living) for my son (who was nine years old at the time) for ten years. But when he was eighteen, I would kill myself. I could break down, cry, pass out, I only made it nine months in that house, using Valium and alcohol every night. Day after day I was resenting every breath I took. Then I was in a bad car accident and had traumatic brain injury and suffered broken bones. I recovered but was working for the government and was forced to retire. I signed over custody of my son at this point because, I was going to kill myself. I dropped him off and went on a farewell tour. I finally made it past the ten-year anniversary of my husband and daughters' deaths, but I was back to putting my gun in my mouth for comfort. Then in 2019 I stumbled onto Warrior Quest. In my first ceremony I went into it with the intention of seeking permission to kill myself. I could not bear the weight of my own life anymore, I was just so angry. I wanted to fight God.
>
> During ayahuasca ceremony, I heard God speak to me. God said, 'I'm so sorry, what you went through wasn't right…but you have to stop.' God told me that he needed me to walk this new path, that he needed me to see that the whole universe is connected. I have not had a single suicidal ideation since…I'm still ready to go, but I can see myself more clearly. The medicine helps me, and it will keep healing, so there is hope.

Dr. Scott who was facilitating the Zoom integration responded to Angie by saying, "This is why we're here, to witness your healing. We've had about two thousand eight hundred vets come through Soul Quest." Listing the amount of veterans emphasizes the importance of veterans at Soul Quest as part of the church community.

A woman I will call Suzanne, another model veteran, had a very different ayahuasca experience from Shilo, Lance, Kent, and Angie's. Suzanne came to integration first before going to Soul Quest. She said she came due to alcohol, that the whole purpose was to get sober:

> After experiencing ayahuasca I probably will not do it again because it was not easy at all. I broke every rule prior to coming to Soul Quest. Drinking is what I did every night until I blacked out. Every day from 4:45am to 9pm I would drink alcohol. My life was a downward

> spiral. Dr. Scott recommended that I be there for the Netflix documentary that was being filmed.
>
> During ayahuasca ceremony I immediately felt a flush of heat. Everything went blue then an echo started, I started seeing fractals and closed my eyes. As soon as I did I was stuck in a loop of scenarios. I tried everything to get out of this hell and it was my hell, and it just lasted all night long. Even with my eyes open, I saw all kinds of scary stuff. I just froze, caught in this forever loop. Then I seized up and the medical team had to get involved. My jaw locked shut and my body completely froze. The last thing I remembered was thinking this is so strong, this is wrong, I can't do this. Then I woke up in the hospital.
>
> I was taken to the emergency room and woke up periodically in urgent care. I was belligerent, but conscious enough to be pissed about not having insurance. I had no idea what happened while under the effects of ayahuasca, but that they did an MRI, even though I wanted to leave. I caused this, no doubt. But I checked out of the hospital and returned to Soul Quest the following day and spoke with the Netflix film crew about what had transpired. My ayahuasca experience caused trauma in my life and I'm afraid to take ayahuasca again. I've been having anxiety and panic attacks. Anytime I think about my ceremony for sixty seconds, heat, blue lights, oh hell no…it's absolutely terrifying.

Even though Suzanne had a traumatic experience, she still spoke with the documentary filmmakers about ayahuasca because she believes she "caused this" to happen, demonstrating the ways that members internalize their negative experiences to show others that even when ayahuasca does not do the work they expect or want, it still changes you.

Daniel Murray, a model veteran and affiliate of Warrior Quest discussed what brought him to ayahuasca during Zoom integration and how it has affected his worldview since. Daniel was in the Air Force for twenty-one years, like Lance, with a pararescue unit. He completed ten deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan, Kuwait, and Africa:

> It's hard to come back to a normal life. I knew about PTSD, but I did not think that I had it. Over time though I noticed that I became more and more aggressive and that I felt like I was

> emotionless. My PTSD manifested later into depression and aggressive anxiety, to the point where I started to abuse drugs.
>
> I used spice or synthetic marijuana that was undetectable in the Air Force as well as cocaine, opiates, Xanax, Ambien, and alcohol. This changed my personality. Eight months prior to retirement from the military I was in a car accident, I did jail time, and was lucky enough to stay prosecution until retirement. I ended up in a drug rehabilitation facility for six weeks. I did it to save my marriage. To get my kids back in my life. But, I went back to using again shortly after rehab and it spiraled out of control. I began to cut myself off from the world, to lose weight, and do more rehab and more jail time. I thought I deserved this. It was hard to know I failed. I tried to work with narcotics anonymous, but it just was not working.
>
> Then, I became involved with Warrior Quest and it completely changed my life. My first few ayahuasca ceremonies were very hard, I could feel a lot of dark emotions coming out of my body. This opened me up to my own emotions, and, it's amazing to feel again. I began volunteering at Soul Quest, to continue to build up Warrior Quest for people like me who could not afford to come to the medicine. These are the things we do so that others may live. I lost a sense of my identity, and I am very proud to be a part of other's healing. Ayahuasca helped me quit using drugs and nicotine. I don't desire it anymore. Every ayahuasca retreat for me peels back more layers of myself, like peeling away the layers of an onion, but layers of trauma. I'm a better man, father, and human being since ayahuasca, I'm a constant work in progress. People think that taking ayahuasca will just make it happen, but it takes time, dedication, and proper integration.

Then Daniel went into more detail about his war work, his ASCombat. He said, "It was a struggle to come home after deployment. If you get hurt, someone has to take your spot, and there is guilt in that. It is a high tempo, non-stop, job…People get shot, blown up, and trying to get sleep after is ridiculous…unless you do drugs he says."

A final model veteran I will call Derrick, began by telling everyone during Zoom integration that he came to Soul Quest a few weeks ago through Warrior Quest. While he was preparing to come to Soul Quest, he said he secretly changed his plans:

Instead of going directly to Soul Quest, I booked a room at a hotel, and got an Uber to buy a gun so I could finally kill myself. I came from a military family, my grandfather was a marine in Vietnam, and lost his leg. My mother was raped by a guy at her church at fifteen years old, and that was how I was conceived. I was molested and beaten growing up, so I wanted to do the safest job possible, which to me was the military. I was running away from my life and wanted to be a better man. Then, while on duty, I was blown up in an explosion, had twenty-nine surgeries to remove the shrapnel from my body, which led to being in a wheelchair for three and a half years. The doctors said I would never walk or stand up again, so I struggled to get back to health. I was put on lots of pain medication, I had insulin issues and started using cannabis for pain. I harbor regret for being a jerk to people and for using pills. I was granted one hundred percent disability from the military and went on to have a great career in business. In 2014 I worked three hundred and fifty-seven days that year and was in a wheelchair the year before. I moved to Colorado and volunteered in the cannabis industry. Then, my PTSD started to get really bad. Two months ago I was dead set on killing myself, but fate intervened.

I dreamt about suicide and the thought of dying would bring me peace. My wife set up my Soul Quest ceremony, but I thought it would be a good excuse to finally kill myself. I put no effort into preparing for ceremony, doing the dieta, or doing any of the right stuff. Then, while I was waiting for an Uber to pick me up from the airport in Orlando a guy came over and sat next to me on a bench. The guy turned to me and asked, 'Are you here for Warrior Quest?' I laughed. What are the chances right. I told the guy I was there for Warrior Quest and the guy responded by telling me that our ride would be there soon. A little while later a white car pulled up and Tom, a volunteer for Soul Quest, got out to pick us up. I did not believe in God but started to have faith.

At Soul Quest, I was not convinced, I was not buying what they were selling, so I tried to get kicked out. Lance and Daniel, convinced me to go inside and I told them I'd rather kill people than look at them right now. I listened to them, and my first ceremony was real light. I tried to give in, so I did the ayahuasca booster too, then just really sat in my own space, in my own head. I had a new peace that I had never felt before while in ceremony, so I decided to stay the whole weekend. I drank ayahuasca four times, and I went through hell. I saw everything that I had put on myself…the rage came back about having no warm shower, no shuttle to get a taxi, got to the flight home and it was cancelled. Mother Aya was calling me back to Soul Quest, and when I came back Lance gave me the money to do ceremony.

I got back, and everything was easy, nothing was forced, but I hadn't forgotten my Mom. She was the reason for my anger and hate. I realized that I really need to love myself, that I see the potential now. I drank ayahuasca again to work on myself. Since then, I'm doing counseling and getting help through the VA. I don't think about suicide…I don't want to be dead.

These veteran narratives demonstrate how altered states of combat affect both veteran subjectivities and their ayahuasca experiences and how model veterans discourse around altered states of combat serves as a model for and call to other veterans at Soul Quest. Veterans seeking psychedelic therapies instead of pharmaceuticals is the new standard. The high veteran suicide rates in the US are indicative of this. Psychedelic therapies and ayahuasca retreats are frequently reported and advertised in veteran news sources like *Military Times*, *Task and Purpose*, and the *Veteran* (Huston 2016; Simkins 2018; Linehan 2017) and talked about regularly in veteran communities, which are closed tight knit communities.

A Transpersonal Approach to Integration: "Being True to You"

In other integration groups at Soul Quest, I noticed a consistency in framing integration that begins with the Being True to You program. Unlike with the veteran groups, there were no model individuals aside from the facilitators themselves. In order to be an integration coach/facilitator at Soul Quest it is required that one has to complete the Being True to You program. I sat in on many of the Zoom integration groups offered at Soul Quest but chose to primarily sit in on Dr. Scott's Wednesday integration, and the Sunday Church service. Dr. Scott's integration sessions were the most popular. He was a charismatic individual that shaped and unified the other Zoom sessions.

Two well-known and high-ranking members of Soul Quest were partnered as coaches for Being True to You on the Being True to You website—Carlos Guzman and Penny Kring. The Being True to You program includes forty-eight one-on-one coaching sessions, multiple weekly group coaching classes, and "support for emotional healing, character building, goal setting, and personal

empowerment and 100+ hours of instruction and 800+ pages of workbooks."[65] Once a member completes the Being True to You program then they are allowed to begin hosting and holding space for integration with the permission of the church.

Being True to You transitioned their business model from coaching people with addiction issues (in the footsteps of AA) to transpersonal or psychospiritual coaching. How has this idea of outsourcing to anonymous experts in the "coaching industry" come to claim so much authority in the area of consciousness transformation and the psychedelics field—after all, traditionally the domain of shamans? This is practical worldly inspiration coaching—life coaching. How did that happen so seamlessly and without any kind of cognitive disruption?

Transpersonal psychology, which began with Carl Jung and later developed by Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof is based on the idea that humans are more than just their mind and body, but are also composed of intangible, or transcendent, factors. The fact that Being True to You emphasizes a social construction of the self as self-made and an autonomous individual whose integration of life is never happening solely at the level of society but at the level of the individual inside of their particular psycho-cognitive embodiment is a very Modernist construction of subjectivity. It is a very Cartesian view of the self as separate from nature—the externalities of the World. The idea that placing the transcendent experience activated by the entheogen solely inside the individual mind-body

[65] Beingtruetoyou.com, 2022.

interpretive machine is something also inculcated in transpersonal psychotherapy. This model is Soul Quest's multi-relational model for post ayahuasca integration.

Soul Quest has created what they call an "intensive integration circle" wherein individuals can book integration sessions online with coaches. This is similar to the Being True to You program. Coaches work with consciousness where healing, identity, and personal transformation is intimately connected to the community. Integration at Soul Quest may include:

> ...a brief meditation, mantra, poetry, Buddhist spiritual philosophy, and psychoanalytic or Jungian interpretations of your transpersonal journey. A guided exploration led by a trained psychologist and trauma professional is the best way to begin untangling the emotional knots from previous trauma or abuse and unresolved memories or grief from early life experiences.
>
> When we sit down to share our stories in the spirit of openness and compassion, we stitch ourselves together in an intimate circle...forming a new supportive community, where we each become sacred mirrors for each other.[66]

When you click to book a session online you are directed to a web page much like the Being True to You program where you can choose from a list of integration coaches. The similarity in websites is a direct reflection of Soul Quest transitioning from outsourcing therapy to creating their own program. They also did this with the veteran group, which started with outsourcing to Warrior Quest, but is now done in-house with Badges and Breakthroughs. At Soul Quest, one can choose between Verena Young (co-founder of Soul Quest) and Dr. Tiffany Riley, who, on the website is listed as "a licensed paramedic, licensed massage therapist, board-certified doctorate of pastoral medical

[66] Ayahuascachurches.org, 2022.

sciences, pastoral medical association, and doctoral degree in oriental medicine. Tiffany is a certified Integration coach from the Being True to You integration coaching platform."[67] The listing of professional degrees and micro credentials constitutes a form of legitimation of knowledge, much like Steven Twohig who discussed training under Tony Robbins. The knowledge emphasis is a skillset on holistic healing, which fits within the broader framework of transpersonal therapy. The third integration coach to choose from is Brandon Pickard, who is a "lead facilitator…Hapé practitioner, psycho/spiritual, addiction recovery, and entheogen integration coach (certified through Being True to You) veteran of the United States Air Force with a year spent in Iraq."[68] Chris Young is not listed as an integration coach but is listed as a facilitator at the ayahuasca retreats. The Soul Quest Natural Healing Center, which is a different corporate entity than Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth Inc. (the healing center is for profit and the church is nonprofit), has many more integration specialists to choose from on their website, all of which are trained in Being True to You.

Soul Quest's approach to post ayahuasca ceremony integration, specifically how Soul Quest leaders use many forms of psychoanalysis in the Zoom calls is multifaceted and multi-relational, which is part and parcel to transpersonal psychotherapy. They employ an eclectic approach based on Jung where many healing methods are useful (meditation, journaling, shadow work, reading *Course in Miracles* and the *Bhagavad Gita*) and the implication is that ayahuasca experiences represent one reality that is accessed through multiple points of view (i.e., of the practitioners). Soul Quest's approach to therapy and healing emphasizes a multi-theory and worldview methodology or what

[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

Mitchell (1988) calls a "multifaceted relational matrix" which "takes into account self-organization, attachments to others ('objects'), interpersonal transactions, and the active role of the analysand in the continual re-creation of his subjective world."[69] This holistic approach to health and healing can be seen in Soul Quest's Zoom integration, one on one coaching sessions, Sunday Church Service, and member narratives.

Changes in Zoom Integration

There are many post-ayahuasca ceremony integration groups at Soul Quest, which are now listed as part of the Soul Quest Natural Healing Center. Every week church members receive an email newsletter containing the list of current group integration groups as well as private ones. The range and types of integration groups has changed over the course of my research and continues to change. Primarily, the integration groups have changed on account of Dr. Scott leaving the church and the DEA's criticism of lack of religious sincerity.[70]

Prior to these groups, and more specifically prior to the departure of Dr. Scott Irwin shortly after the DEA final determination letter, there were more religious/spirituality focused groups. This is partly because Dr. Scott left the church (he organized these groups) and also because Soul Quest

[69] Mitchell 1988, 8.

[70] The current 2023 groups are; Post ceremony integration with Ken Stanley (Ken took over Dr. Scott's Wednesday integration group), Wednesday After Hours Integration with Brandon Pickard, West Coast Integration with Tom and Jamie PK, Shadow Integration with Steven Twohig Sr, Psychosynthesis Integration with Melissa M, Veteran only and First Responder "Badges and Breakthroughs" Integration with Andres Martinez and Dr. Tiffany Riley, Ayahuasca in Recovery (AIR) with Steven Twohig and Michael Malloy, Union of Brotherhood Men's Integration with Christopher Cobb, Woman Integration Circle with Penny Kring and Lori Drell, Deeper Meanings of the Ayahuasca Manifesto with Jason Bruzik, Mental Cleanse with Steven Twohig Sr., and a Hape Workshop with Shiri Takacs.

shifted their focus from broad spirituality (reflecting transpersonal psychotherapy) to the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* due to the DEA's criticism. Some of these earlier spirituality focused groups were Zen Buddhist Meditation with Dr. Gene Healy, A Christian Ayahuasca Fellowship with Jerry Daly, A Course in Miracles Study Group with Jan-Marie and David Etzel, Jungian Insights into Psychedelic Experience with Dr Laurie Maddox, Qigong Healing Exercises Group with Jasmine Win, a *Hape'* Workshop with Carlos Guzman, Integration with Dr. Scott, Bhavagad Gita Study Series with Rachel Jamison, Chakra Meditation with Melissa Ruy, Transformational Breathwork with Alva Marie Ways, and Warrior Quest USA Veteran Only Integration with Andreas.

This shift in integration groups tracks the ongoing engagement with the State, reflecting what Sally Falk Moore (1978) calls "situational adjustment." For Moore, situational adjustment is the way that people "arrange their immediate situations (and/or express their feelings and conceptions) by exploiting the indeterminacies in the situation, or by generating such indeterminacies, or by reinterpreting or redefining the rules or relationships…they use whatever areas there are of inconsistency, contradiction, conflict, ambiguity, or open areas that are normatively indeterminate to achieve immediate situational ends."[71] Situational adjustment emerges at Soul Quest in moments like this where Soul Quest readjust themselves; their beliefs, practice, and ideas in response to the criticism of the DEA, specifically their lack of religious sincerity, lack of emphasis on the *Ayahuasca Manifesto*, and failure to adhere to government protocols of ayahuasca use, maintenance, distribution, and storage. The DEA also situationally adjusts themselves to Soul Quest, which Soul Quest argues ends

[71] Moore 1978, 50.

up with them overstepping their constitutional authority in their final determination letter. The subject of Soul Quest's countersuit following the determination letter and the events leading to legal determination over the proper jurisdiction of the court case itself are examined in chapter five.

While the variety of groups has changed and continues to change, one of the mainstay groups over the last three years that was not affected by the DEA final determination letter was the military veteran integration Zoom group. This is because veterans are the core group of ayahuasca users who are most active (even if de facto) in defining ayahuasca as a social fact in the US.

Chapter Five: The Struggle for Religious Exemption, Soul Quest vs. The DEA

This chapter focuses on how the DEA is trying to enforce the importation, handling, and distribution of ayahuasca according to the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 while trying to avoid evaluating Soul Quest as a church according to the Religion Freedom Restoration Act of 1993. The DEA is trying to avoid this because it is difficult for them and the Courts to determine what religion is in law given that religion in law is so deeply entangled in the idea of the Church (See Sullivan 2020).

Prior to 2016 Soul Quest made ayahuasca available to thousands of church members in Orlando Florida without approved federal exemption of Schedule 1 prohibitions. Florida is one of the few states that has a state version of the Federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) of 1993. The Florida RFRA, much like other state RFRAs was created in response to the struggle in the 1990s between the US Congress and Supreme Court in regard to interpreting the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the US Constitution. (See Sullivan 2005, 24) Florida is one of many states that are creating new precedence for the religious use of psychedelics.[72] Florida's RFRA has drawn a number of underground churches (like CAYA Sanctuary who is also located in Orlando) to Florida as prosecution of the religious use of psychedelics remains a low priority for the DEA in Florida. The agency finds itself in a fraught legal landscape and on one of the frontlines of a brewing showdown between

[72] Colorado and Oregon have both legalized and decriminalized psilocybin and are regulating psilocybin services. There are growing statewide reform efforts in states such as Illinois, California, Arizona, and Utah. There are 22 states in the United States that have "mini RFRAs" (see Chacruna.net) and are known collectively as RFRA states. As Chacruna.net observes, "Ultimately plant medicine churches and their members may have more legal clarity regarding their rights and protection for their religious exercise in RFRA states or in those states that have adopted RFRA analysis." (Chacruna.net, accessed, April 2023) Even though Florida has a mini RFRA, it does not circumvent Florida's drug laws (see Statute 761.05 (4) on Applicability; construction)

government and psychedelic churches over how to interpret the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment. Soul Quest's efforts to procure an exemption for ayahuasca use for its community on the grounds of exercising a First Amendment guarantee in the United States Constitution, as well as in Florida's own State Constitution, would establish legal precedence for other underground churches in their efforts to legalize under State and Federal statutes. Soul Quest's effort to become a legal church was often contextualized by founders and leaders as an effort that aimed beyond their own church's immediate aspirations to practice ayahuasca ceremony without government interference. Soul Quest claims that their efforts should also be read as a strategy aimed at transforming the entire legal landscape on behalf of the decriminalization movement. The claim bolsters the moral and political strength of their claim as a question of religious freedom by putting the wind of support of a broad movement with diverse positions favorably at their back so that the profile of the case has become of interest to various actors which has in turn amplified pressure and public opinion on the government.

In August of 2016 the DEA contacted Soul Quest and directed them to apply for religious exemption under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970. If Soul Quest were to be approved, they would be allowed to legally offer and use ayahuasca at their center making them the first non-Indigenous psychedelic church in the United States with religious exemption. To date, three Indigenous churches have been granted religious exemption in the United States: The Native American Church (NAC), and some Santo Daime and União do Vegetal (UDV) churches. While the NAC uses peyote for religious purposes, Santo Daime and the UDV use ayahuasca. Both Santo Daime

and the UDV's judicial histories with the DEA directly affect the Soul Quest case because they are cited as precedent and were used in the court case by the DEA to justify their denial of religious exemption.

Responding to the Silence of the DEA: Soul Quest Files Suit

On August 21, 2017, Soul Quest sent their exemption application "out of fear of enforcement action" to the DEA through legal counsel. The DEA did not acknowledge receipt of the exemption application directly to Soul Quest, leaving them to wonder if they had even received the application. A year later, it was "independently confirmed" in October of 2018 that the DEA had received the exemption application. Soul Quest's legal counsel then continued to try and contact the DEA through telephone and voicemail to receive updates about the state of the exemption application to no avail until May of 2019 when they decided to file an official complaint in opposition to the DEA's lack of response in the Florida Middle District Court. In the January 2023 oral arguments between Soul Quest and the State, Soul Quest's attorney Derek Brett discusses this fact:

> There was no waiver...Not withstanding, three and a half years after we, after Soul Quest submitted to a non-process, and put in, there was no response from the DEA. There was no inquiry by the DEA. The calls into the DEA to find out the status of this supposed religious exemption process fell on deaf ears. And only then did Soul Quest file its suit in the district court.

The lack of response by the DEA to Soul Quest is what Litman (2023) points out as part of the strategy used by the DEA to avoid the pitfalls of declaring what a church is (religious belief cannot be defined by the State) while still fulfilling their mission as agents of drug enforcement law. The consequences for the DEA avoiding action in cases where legal precedent on the religious question

with respect to psychedelic churches remains unsettled is that it "leave[s] most religious practitioners without a clear path forward to legal protection."[73]

In the absence of a response, Soul Quest filed their first complaint in April of 2020 enumerating four specific counts against the DEA: 1) the violation of Soul Quest's First Amendment rights to freedom of religion, 2) the violation of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act 1993 (RFRA), 3) the violation of Soul Quest's right to substantive due process, and 4) the violation of Soul Quest's right to freedom of speech. The Florida Middle District Court would eventually rule in favor of the DEA, dismissing the case on two grounds. First, due to Soul Quest's lack of religious sincerity and second, the case being heard in the wrong court. The Florida Middle District Court does not handle exemption cases that fall under the CSA 1970, it only oversees cases under the RFRA 1993. CSA 1970 cases are channeled to the 11th District Court of Appeals where Florida federal cases are heard. Due to Soul Quest's application for exemption under the CSA 1970 and not the RFRA 1993 Soul Quest was forced to turn to the appeals court for further litigation. This is because their case was federal, not state jurisdiction.

Soul Quest is not the only underground psychedelic church that is seeking religious exemption with the DEA. The Iowaska Church of Healing, like Soul Quest and the Arizona Yage Assembly, has applied for tax-exempt status under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) Code, and claims to be working with the U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, as well as state authorities to ensure compliance with all laws affecting sacramental use of ayahuasca.

[73] Litman 2023, 1.

(iowaskachurchofhealing.com accessed March 2023) The effort to become a legal church by applying to the IRS is another tactic undertaken by underground psychedelic churches. The internet is a valuable resource for how to bring a legal case against the DEA with many websites like chacruna.net dedicated to it. Psychedelic Justice has allowed for the confluence of joint arrangements and knowledge sharing across digital platforms. The Drug Policy Alliance is one group that urges people to take action and engage the conversation about how psychedelics are perceived and managed. They even offer resources for academics (media training, how to visualize and present data) and host conferences across the US to educate and highlight current drug use trends. Their slogan is "The war on drugs is a war on people."[74]

Religious Sincerity and the Denial of Church Status by the DEA

The final determination letter of denial for religious exemption from the DEA was sent to Soul Quest on May 11th, 2021. In response, Soul Quest filed a second amended complaint. In the second amended complaint Soul Quest directly addressed Chris Youngs' first affidavit wherein the DEA failed to conduct any reasonable investigation into the sincerity of Soul Quest's use of ayahuasca. In June of 2021 the DEA would file a motion to dismiss the second amended complaint and, in the process, Soul Quest filed a third amended complaint which would be dismissed on March 4th, 2022. On April 4th, 2022, the court received a notice of appeal by Soul Quest and in the appeal, Soul Quest argued that "the Appellees' unwritten and ad hoc process for 'investigation' was defective in practice," and that "the actions of the Appellees fall prey to their severe constitutional and statutory defects." Soul Quest

[74] Drugpolicyalliance.com, 2023.

is arguing that the DEA has no official process for religious exemption and that they have no authority to enforce or oversee religious exemption because nowhere in any statutes are they designated with the ability or power to do so. (Appeal 2022)

The Soul Quest case is an inflection point in an ongoing story about religious freedom and religious sincerity in America which traces its history to the 1940s when courts were expanding the concept of religious freedom, and when sincere belief became the standard for delineating between religious and not religious. This, McCrary (2022) observes, led to a model of Protestantism in law (what Winnifred Fallers Sullivan calls the "church in law" (2020)) that many judges depend on to determine religious sincerity.[75]

Spencer Dew's 2019 study of Noble Drew Ali and the Aliites makes visible the ways in which a "religious actor" situationally adjusts to law in pursuit of religious freedom, which simultaneously has made room for new forms of religious practice. And the courts also are transformed in the process. Charles McCrary's quote is instructive here. He writes, "While secularism restricts the scope of religious ambition…it also contributes to the creation of new forms of religion, suited to, and making sense out of, assigning significance to, such secular conditions."[76] McCrary reveals how sincerity and sincerely held religious belief developed as technologies of secular governance, determining what does and does not entitle a person to receive protections from the state.

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[75] McCrary also rightly points out that this model does not work for minorities and Native Americans because their cultural and political practices and knowledge do not translate easily in this Protestant-centric system. (McCrary 2022, 24)

[76] McCrary *Sincerely Held*, 41.

This criticism of the DEA extends beyond the scope of just the Soul Quest case, Litman (2023) argues that the DEA exemption process is "constitutionally suspect" (or what Dr. Scott Irwin referred to in a Zoom integration session as "shenanigans"). Litman stated that "Petitioners are asked to disclose all their (illegal) activity with no guarantee or protection from criminal charges, and they are told they must cease following the practices while waiting for a response," and that the DEA has never voluntarily granted an exemption for a religious community, that the two churches (Santo Daime and the UDV who were granted exemption in 2006 and 2008) were only granted exemption by court order. The claim here is that the DEA is not really the one who grants religious exemptions (it is the courts), nor are they invested in the process, instead they are more concerned about how Schedule 1 substances are handled and the legality of the protocols surrounding Schedule 1 substances.

The DEA claims that it has its own guidance under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970 which grants them constitutional authority to make decisions about religious exemption to use Schedule 1 substances. They also claim the Office of the Attorney General permits it to receive petitions for religious exemption which reference the RFRA 1993 and UDV case. They also claim that the CSA 1970 grants them authority to enforce as well, yet as Soul Quest points out, there is no word "religion" anywhere in it, only exemption applications for medical, scientific, or industrial purposes are addressed. This inconsistency between the two statutes and the authority of the DEA is called into question by Soul Quest, because the language of the law does not seem to support the DEA's claims. If the DEA's method of religious exemption is constitutionally suspect as Soul Quest argues, and the

Supreme Court is the only arm of the government who has granted psychedelic churches exemption in the US then how does the IRS and the Attorney General figure into the religious exemption equation?

What is a Church?: Framing Church Identity through the Court Case

The only institution that is able to declare the religious status of an institution is at present the IRS. The IRS defines exemption requirements, filing requirements, special rules, and the federal tax rules that apply to group rulings of exemption under Internal Revenue Code section 501. The IRS even has a webinar survey of tax-exempt status meant for churches and religious organizations who are seeking religious exemption that is available on their website.

In October 2017 the Attorney General of the United States, Jeff Sessions, sent a memorandum to all executive departments and agencies on "Federal Law Protections for Religious Liberty." The purpose of the memorandum was "The President has instructed me to issue guidance interpreting religious liberty protections in federal law, as appropriate. Exec. Order No. 13798 § 4, 82 Fed. Reg. 21675 (May 4, 2017). Consistent with that instruction, I am issuing this memorandum and appendix to guide all administrative agencies and executive departments in the execution of federal law."[77]

As the memorandum states, "the freedom of religion is a fundamental right of paramount importance, expressly protected by federal law."[78] Jeff Sessions notes that religious liberty is enshrined in the Constitution and federal statutes. In addressing the Free Exercise Clause, Sessions states that,

[77] Memorandum 2017, 1.
[78] Ibid.

"the Free Exercise Clause protects not just the right to believe or the right to worship; it protects the right to perform or abstain from performing certain physical acts in accordance with one's beliefs."[79]

In the memorandum, Sessions goes on to say that "Government may not officially favor or disfavor particular religious groups," meaning that both the Free Exercise and Establishment Clause protect individuals and groups from government religious preference and institutes government denominational neutrality in law. The Attorney General continues by addressing the Religious Freedom Reformation Act of 1993, in which it "prohibits the federal government from substantially burdening any aspect of religious observance or practice, unless imposition of that burden on a particular religious adherent satisfies strict scrutiny."[80] Here we see that free exercise and substantial burden become central to religious liberty for Sessions. Here he is establishing new precedent and shaping the law around the RFRA 1993, not just enforcing already established law.

He goes on to say that "the RFRA does not permit the federal government to second guess the reasonableness of a religious belief."[81] Sessions even goes as far as to say that the federal government is not "competent" to assess the reasonableness of religious belief. And, in terms of least restrictive means and compelling government interest, Sessions states that, "only those interests of the highest order can outweigh legitimate claims to the free exercise of religion," and that "even if the federal government can show the necessary interest, it would also have to show that its chosen restriction on free exercise is the

[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Memorandum 2017, 1.

least restrictive means of achieving that interest."[82] What does Jeff Sessions mean by "least restrictive means" and "compelling governmental interest?" The answer is part of a broader question relating to the Free Exercise Clause and the compelling interest test of *Sherbert v. Verner* and *Wisconsin v. Yoder*. These two court cases are examples of religious sincerity and practice that were being substantially burdened by the government with no compelling interest.

In *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972) members of the Old Order Amish religion and the Conservative Amish Mennonite Church, were convicted of violating Wisconsin's compulsory school attendance law. The Amish argued that they provide continuing informal vocational education to their children designed to prepare them for life in the rural Amish community. They also argued that they sincerely believed that high school attendance was contrary to their religion and way of life, and that their salvation was at risk by complying with the law. In response the State Supreme Court upheld their claim that application of the compulsory school attendance law violated their rights under the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment.

In *Sherbert v. Verner* (1963) a member of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, was fired from her job after she refused to work on Saturday, which was the Sabbath. The Employment Security Commission then decided that she was not eligible to receive unemployment benefits because of her refusal to work. Under South Carolina law, employers were not allowed to require employees to work on Sunday which led the court to find that the Free Exercise Clause prohibits the government from setting unemployment benefits eligibility requirements that people cannot properly observe due to

[82] Ibid.

religious practices like observing the Sabbath. The court found that the state's eligibility restrictions for unemployment compensation imposed a significant burden on *Sherbert's* ability to freely exercise her faith. The *Sherbert* test states that the government can only substantially burden a person's free exercise of religion if it can demonstrate a compelling interest for doing so by least restrictive means. The DEA considered, but did not fully examine Soul Quest under these conditions that are upheld in the RFRA 1993 because there is nothing about "religion" in the Controlled Substances Act:

> DEA finds that Soul Quest has not demonstrated the existence of a sincere religious exercise; it has therefore necessarily also failed to show that application of the CSA to its use of ayahuasca would substantially burden a sincere religious exercise. Accordingly, DEA need not, under RFRA, consider whether application of the CSA's prohibitions with respect to ayahuasca would impose on Soul Quest a substantial burden under RFRA, and DEA need not demonstrate that the CSA's prohibitions with respect to Soul Quest's proposed use of ayahuasca further a compelling governmental interest by the least restrictive means. However, even if Soul Quest had established all three elements for establishing a prima facie case under RFRA, DEA finds the CSA's prohibitions on Soul Quest's importation of plants containing the Schedule I controlled substance DMT, use of those plants to manufacture an herbal tea containing DMT, and distribution of that tea are the least restrictive means of furthering two compelling governmental interests: the need to protect public health and safety from potentially dangerous substances, and the need to prevent diversion of controlled substances into the illicit market. (Final Determination Letter 2021)

According to the DEA Soul Quest not only failed to demonstrate sincerity in religious belief, but because of this they refused to even consider whether their actions imposed a substantial burden under the RFRA 1993 by least restrictive means. How then does the DEA understand religious sincerity?

While the First Amendment states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," American law historically has shaped the discussion of what it means to be a Church through the language, doctrine, and practice of Christianity or what Winnifred Fallers Sullivan (2020) calls a Church State Corporation. Sullivan identifies the "church-in-law" or a "church-state mimesis" taking place in religious exemption law. Sullivan goes on to say that, "American law has shown that it cannot think religion without the church—that space for religion in US law is a church-shaped space…but that does not mean that the church is simply the template for what counts as religion in law; the church itself lives on in American law in a new and very particular way…the church has a logic--a law—of its own…a church-stateness."[83] This broader ongoing historical problem of the church in law is entangled in the 1993 RFRA, a U.S. Federal law that "ensures that interests in religious freedom are protected."[84]

In 1993 new Senate legislation led to the enactment of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), in response to *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990). *Employment Division v. Smith* (1990) was an unemployment compensation case where two Oregon substance abuse counselors were fired because they were members of the Native American Church and used peyote at ceremonies as part of their religious practice. In the case the State found that it was within its rights to substantially burden their free exercise of religion because its right to enforce controlled substance laws outweighed that of

[83] Sullivan 2020, 10.
[84] RFRA 1993.

the free exercise of the peyotists. This conflicted with Native American religious practices, so Congress responded with RFRA as a solution to this.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 is a statutory restoration of pre-*Smith* religious freedom. It specifically restored the compelling interest and least restrictive means aspects of the *Sherbert* test. The Act – "Prohibits any agency, department, or official of the United States or any State (the government) from substantially burdening a person's exercise of religion even if the burden results from a rule of general applicability, except that the government may burden a person's exercise of religion only if it demonstrates that application of the burden to the person: (1) furthers a compelling governmental interest; and (2) is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest ." (H.R.1308 — 103rd Congress (1993-1994))

In the case of Soul Quest, the DEA argued that it was necessary to burden their free exercise of ayahuasca use because they believe Soul Quest does not have sincere religious belief. The DEA also claimed Soul Quest was putting people outside of the church at risk for harm or abuse and or allowing for uncontrolled ayahuasca use outside of the church according to CSA 1970 regulations. This makes visible the DEA's main concern, the risk of diversion of Schedule 1 substances in the US, which is greater than their concern for Soul Quest's free exercise of religion. Because the DEA is more interested with how Soul Quest is using a Schedule 1 substance and less interested in their use of ayahuasca, they did not even evaluate it according to the RFRA 1993 guidelines.

In response, Soul Quest argued that the DEA did this because of their misconceived power given to them under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, one that Soul Quest believed they

misinterpreted. In the 2022 appeal Soul Quest stated that, "This case touches on a grave, serious matter concerning the religious freedom rights of a small church, which Appellees have obliterated by interfering with and denying Appellants' religious exercise with ayahuasca, a brew made from the Banisteriopsis caapi vine and the Psychotria viridis shrub, and widely used in ceremonial settings during religious exercises both domestically and abroad."[85] Soul Quest went on to say that "the sincerity of religious exercise with ayahuasca has been uniformly upheld by the courts," citing *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita Beneficente União do Vegetal* and *Church of the Holy Light of the Queen v. Mukasey*. Soul Quest also believed that "the DEA has consistently viewed religious exercise with ayahuasca as a low law enforcement priority and one devoid of issues related to diversion, or health and safety to religious adherents or members of the general public."[86] The legal argument of the appeal, while too long to quote in its entirety, has four main points:

> The DEA has no authority whatsoever to rule upon petitions for religious exemption. The District Court erred in failing to recognize the Appellee's abrogation of APA requirements. The District Court erred in failing to recognize Congress' clear assignment of jurisdiction to the courts under RFRA, and the Major Rules Doctrine Acts as any further bar upon the Appellee's Assertion of Authority. (Appeal 2022)

In their legal argument, Soul Quest is saying that the DEA's "framework" for evaluating religious exemption in their denial letter does not exist. They also state that the DEA, as part of the Executive branch of government, are bound by the statutes of the Administrative Procedure Act which

[85] Appeal 2022, 7.
[86] Ibid, 8.

demand that federal executive agencies like the DEA adhere to particular judicial procedural requirements, a democratic process that Soul Quest maintains the DEA undermined. Furthermore, Soul Quest asserts that the DEA "claimed…for the first time that the District Court had been stripped of its jurisdiction" pursuant to federal statutes having to do with jurisdiction under the Controlled Substances Act of 1970. Because Soul Quest applied for exemption under the CSA 1970 the DEA argues that the Florida Middle District Court is the wrong venue to hear the case because all exemptions under the CSA 1970 must be channeled to the court of appeals. Finally, Soul Quest claims that the DEA is in violation of the Major Rules Doctrine "which is based in the Constitution's non-delegation clause and restricts diffusion of legislative power away from Congress."[87] Here Soul Quest argues that the DEA has "both usurped Congress' authority, as well as the power specifically delegated to the Judiciary."[88]

Soul Quest also criticized the DEA agents who they worked with by saying, "the DEA was represented by and through two DEA agents lacking any ability to assess and understand religious practices. These agents focused their inquiries with Soul Quest Church and one of its lawyers on 'control-diversion' aspects, which are purportedly designed to limit the prospect of ayahuasca being readily accessed by persons not immediately engaged in the use for religious sacramental purposes."[89] Rather than try to evaluate religious belief (which is how the case started with the DEA inviting them to petition for religious exemption), the agents focused on the protocols that Soul Quest was in

[87]Appeal 2022, 26.
[88] Ibid, 27.
[89] Ibid, 10.

violation of with regards to the CSA 1970. This turn of events followed the trajectory of the court case as it progressed in the Florida Middle District Court.

Following the DEA's order that Soul Quest apply for exemption status from the DEA, Soul Quest felt compelled to perform church-ness to the DEA to demonstrate sincerity in the received historical (hegemonic) terms they were located in and needed to adjust to. However, following DEA denial on the grounds that they did not have religious sincerity, Soul Quest counterclaims that the DEA were themselves being insincere in their investigation by tricking them that there was a protected process in order to later criminalize them. The DEAs prompt demanding application for exemption solidly placed the case at the outset in the legal channel wherein the Courts could only address Soul Quest's legality on the basis of the Controlled Substances Act. This tactic allowed the DEA to sidestep RFRA entirely in making their determination *even* as they used the language of RFRA by appealing to the religious sincerity test to deny approval. By countering with this argument, Soul Quest is asserting that the DEA has employed this tactic strategically as a broader procedural process for denying all psychedelic churches. Elevating the case to one of broader constitutional concerns over the ways that the DEA has taken power for itself to determine what stands for sincerity, what is a church and what is religious belief according to their own standards shifts the legal ground of the case. Soul Quest argues the DEA has seized "powers to act under the RFRA, despite no congressional grant of authority."[90]

The guidance for investigating, evaluating, and denying Soul Quest religious exemption that the DEA cited specifically is the Attorney General's Memorandum and *Gonzales v. O Centro Espirita*

[90] Ibid, 10.

Beneficente União do Vegetal. Both of which Soul Quest claims give the DEA zero authority to "accept, review, or make any decision whatsoever upon any petition for religious exemption," and that their process to evaluate religious sincerity was unconstitutional.[91] The goal of Soul Quest to argue this, as their legal counsel state in their January 25th, 2023, oral arguments, "is to get the case back into the district court because this is a RFRA issue not a CSA 1970 issue." If Soul Quest can get their case sent back to the district court, they can restart their exemption case with a new complaint and the DEA would be required to assess their religious exemption based upon the RFRA 1993, not the Controlled Substances Act. Lowell V. Sturgill, Jr. from the Department of Justice, representing the government, responded to this by arguing that the DEA does have power to enforce under the CSA 1970 because "the Attorney General has given the authority to the DEA to regulate, and Soul Quest chose to apply for an exception to the CSA 1970."

Sturgill Jr. observed that, "They (Soul Quest) think RFRA gives them the opportunity to just sidestep this kind of channeling statute and it doesn't…first of all, RFRA only creates a cause of action, every court that has addressed this question has held that…RFRA creates cause of action, it doesn't create jurisdiction. It doesn't tell you which court they can go to, it just says you have a cause of action…again they can't go to HHS or department of labor for an exception to the CSA 1970, that they can only do that with the DEA." The "cause of action" here created by the RFRA is to evaluate the state's compelling interest to substantially burden free exercise of religion.

[91] Ibid, 13.

He further argued that "if the agency (DEA) actually doesn't do a good job of investigating something, then the remedy under these channeling statutes is a remand to the agency…then say do it right, you did it wrong, do it right…as opposed to letting the Plaintiffs completely start over in district court, which again, is completely duplicative." One of the judges at the hearing then asked Sturgill Jr., "So it is your opinion that the petitioner could have chosen to go directly into court but because it chose to avail itself of the DEA process then it's stuck with that as far as appeal?" He replied, "Exactly." One final question, "What was the provision that you said authorizes the DEA to grant exceptions?" Sturgill Jr. responded by saying:

> So, there are two, sort of one. Um, (he laughs) just to be precise…section 822d expressly allows for exceptions to the CSA 1970, but the second part of that is that, I believe it's section 823, whichever section authorizes DEA to register importers to import and use controlled substances, that also provides authority for the DEA to allow for religious uses of drugs and that Church of the Holy Light and that's how they got theirs. Church of the Holy Light and the Daime church. So, there are really two, I think it's two…and I think in addition, just to wrap up, in addition to all of that, the entire CSA has numerous provisions that make it clear that it's the DEA that has authority to regulate controlled substances. Plaintiffs are seeking an exemption from that and that's really what makes this arise under the CSA. Especially if you look at the text, as we talked about, the key term is 'under' this subchapter and not just under reviewed just by itself.

Derek B. Brett, Soul Quest's legal counsel responded by first saying:

> So even if there was this notion of waiving your RFRA rights, which I don't believe even exists, at that point Soul Quest and Mr. Young availed themselves specifically of their rights under RFRA and continued that process…they are referring to it as an investigation. The district court's case was stayed without a responsive pleading under the agreement, which was quoted in Appellant's materials, an agreement to negotiate for the settlement. That's what happened.

Brett then went on to narrate the story of Soul Quest's interaction with the DEA before arguing that there is no exemption process and thereby the DEA has no authority to enforce. Brett also pointed out that Soul Quest did not choose to submit their exemption under the CSA 1970, but that it was demanded by the DEA:

> And then, without providing any notice to Appellant, the Appellees continued to do their own quote on quote investigation and that ultimately culminated in this April's 16 2021 final ruling. The final ruling though, requires actual process, actual regulations. Here, there's nothing except a non-binding interim guidance that's been in effect for 16 plus years...RFRA is a super statue that suppresses any other statute that might come into conflict with it...Soul Quest submitted the exemption application...due to the August 2021 letter, where DEA commanded it to do so. That was the only basis by which they actually went through with that. Now, again there was no process in place. If they are basing their invocation of power under RFRA of power under the CSA based upon a page and a half guidance that they even say is 'nonbinding'...according to the case law Congress has to grant the DEA specific authority under RFRA and has not done so...it cannot grant authority under the CSA where there has been an invocation of religious authority to its rights...Simply, the Appellees don't have any authority under the CSA when it collides with RFRA.

Brett's argument is that once the RFRA comes into contact with any other statutory authority, even the CSA 1970, it supersedes it because it is a super statute and therefore the final determination of denial for exemption by the DEA based on Soul Quest's lack of religious sincerity, is unconstitutional. Of all the reasons for refusal by the DEA, religious sincerity was the most discussed by the leaders of Soul Quest on Zoom. The leaders took their umbrage to the community directly. In the next section I will be discussing the aftermath of the denial letter and how it was received, specifically in points of conflict where the DEA and Soul Quest continue to situationally adjust themselves to one another prior to and after filing the appeal. The first major point of contention was religious sincerity.

Claims and Counterclaims: Situational Adjustments in the Process of Defining a Church and a Plant

Dr. Scott[92], Senior Minister at Soul Quest, opened the Zoom call and when he got on camera, he looked upset. Usually, he was smiling and greeting members, but something was different this Wednesday afternoon. Then he said in an irritated tone of voice "The DEA says none of you have any religious intention, their aim is to make criminal examples of us." Now sounding more annoyed, he told everyone, "We went through investigations, never once did they ask about our religious beliefs or sincerity and yet they send us a final determination letter not granting religious exemption because they say we lack religious sincerity." Dr. Scott then implored everyone, "I want you to say A'ho if you have experienced religious sincerity at Soul Quest." He was now irate and said, "It seems like the DEA is up to some tricks, so we're back in the courts again." He continued, "We sent hundreds of pages and still they say we have no religious sincerity."

One of the core arguments used by DEA to demonstrate Soul Quest's lack of religious sincerity centered on the status of the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* to church members. The DEA observed, "When both Verena Young and Dr. Scott Irwin were asked by GS Graumlich to speak about how they arrived at Soul Quest and to discuss their introduction to ayahuasca, neither of them made any reference to the Ayahuasca Manifesto, a document which the group identifies at its sacred text. In fact, in all of the background provided by all of the group members interviewed over the course of six months, the

[92] Dr. Scott has since moved to Sachi Wasi Cultural Retreat Center in Ecuador within a small Kichwa indigenous community about thirty minutes' drive from Puyo. Dr. Scott moved there in conjunction with the DEA's final determination letter in fear of prosecution by the DEA. In Ecuador Dr. Scott holds one on one ayahuasca/integration sessions with both him and a local Sachi Wasa shaman and a Zoom integration session every Wednesday at 2pm.

Ayahuasca Manifesto has only been referenced once verbally in passing." (Moreno testimony) Here we see that one major issue the DEA had was the lack of engagement with the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* by church members, this is something that Soul Quest also counter argued. The issue of the sacred book is in many ways a distraction to the question of religious sincerity. Shamanic practice does not require that a book outline moral character, nor does it inspire a closer relationship to Mother Aya, and it does not even help them to learn more about their "faith." Shamanic traditions are oral traditions. The *Manifesto* is not intended to provide the adherent with a uniquely emotional and spiritually fulfilling experience. The book is intended to be a primer on how to use ayahuasca, a pharmacological manual for proper use of ayahuasca. Where it discusses Mother Aya it intends to proselytize her coming out of Amazonia to save the world through plant consciousness.

Dr. Scott, in a Facebook Live from Sachi Wasi in September of 2022 said that:

> The DEA rejected our application and stated it was based on our lack of religious sincerity. They had produced a court document posted online that they had actually admitted that although we had this discussion that took place about an agreement about self-incrimination, nothing was formalized on paper. We had no special agreement. The rejection, the final determination letter came to us and stated we were denied based on a lack of religious sincerity. I said what are you talking about? Have you never been to one of our church services in the maloca? Or have you never been online to any of our Soul Quest Sunday services? We are deeply embedded in the sincerity and spirituality, what this does for our spirituality and our religious sincerity. There was a lot of identifying this idea that we referred to the medicine as the medicine...Im here in the Amazon with Yachuk, that's kichiwa for medicine man, for a shaman, and they call it medicina, the medicine, it's the medicine. Historically, it's been called the medicine. So we refer to it as the medicine, and to them we are all about ayahuasca as a medicine as a treatment, not a sacrament, that we were not at all grounded in the Ayahuasca Manifesto that we based our church doctrine on. Every time I got up in public I would quote it. This was the core of our church, and they are saying after months and months of interviewing our senior leadership and staff that only one person made mention of the Ayahuasca Manifesto.

Soul Quest felt compelled to show they had a sacred text to the DEA to conform to the notion of a church. They also had to emphasize things that were not central to shamanic practices and to meet the expectations and standards of the law to what constitutes a religion in the US. Soul Quest fell into the trap of having to describe themselves in ways that were performing for the outside and not the inside. At the same time, the DEA was also having to situationally adjust their approaches to the case when they tried to run Soul Quest down their channels of performing like a church and showing in court that they never mentioned the *Ayahuasca Manifesto*. The DEA were themselves having to situationally adjust their own practices and assertions in such a way that they got forced in to having to demonstrate that because Soul Quest did not use a sacred text, for example, they had established a criteria for church-ness that Soul Quest had not met the test of.

That, Soul Quest argues was their overstep and it is coming back to haunt them in a countersuit. Soul Quest were blindsided by this and their exemption was directed by the DEA (including the paperwork they were told to make that might have made them disqualified, according to DEA, for the RFRA) and the trap they initially fell into was in partially accepting that they had to look like a church and that they were therefore performing those aspects which looked most like what the courts would want to see. This was because of the way they were forced to answer questions and to be defined in terms of things they were not rather than as things they were. They did not get to define what their practice was. They only got to demonstrate whether their religious practices conformed to prior ideas of religion as defined by the courts.

The DEA's "sincerity proof" was also premised on demonstrating Soul Quest's efforts to attain religious protection without having to apply for exemption from the DEA by associating itself with the Oklevueha Native American Church (ONAC). This again shows the way that practices are used as measures reflecting internal states of belief whereas, from Soul Quest's perspective they were merely trying to conform to the legal landscape as given. The grounds for proving sincerity in their own right were not afforded to them in the context of the court case. Moreover, it would require of them to address the messy fact that the unreachable mental states of their own congregants were also ambivalent and beyond reach of their own determination over what constituted belief. This is because many use ayahuasca for personal healing, therapy, physical therapy, self-knowledge, spiritual development and even recreation. Since ayahuasca has so many identities Soul Quest also cannot determine the conditions under which members of their community come to partake of the ceremony. The question is whether it disqualifies ayahuasca as a sacred ceremonial plant foundational to a community's practices that might be called "religious." The DEA discussed Soul Quest's ONAC association:

> Soul Quest's historical associations also call into question its sincerity claims. When DEA first contacted Soul Quest on or about August 2, 2016, about its lack of authorization to obtain, handle, or distribute controlled substances under the CSA, the organization operated under the name "Oklevueha Native American Church Somaveda of Soul Quest, Inc." The Oklevueha Native American Church (ONAC) does not consider the Ayahuasca Manifesto to be its foundational text, but offers a Code of Ethics. It provides support and legal defense of the ceremonial use of various natural plant medicines by its member churches, ranging from peyote, ayahuasca, San Pedro, and psilocybin to cannabis. (Final Determination Letter 2021)

This is used by the DEA to demonstrate that there is not a single religion in ayahuasca churches. And also, that the absence of a Code of Ethics is seen to also be a mark against Soul Quest's religious sincerity. The very idea of what a religion is, is itself changing to include an idea of spirituality that is imminent in this world. Talking with plants and animals and spirits in this world, as compared to a salvational practice of redemption in the afterlife, is not a necessary part of the context for ayahuasca use. In as much as it is a salvation religion it is directed at salvation of the person in this world, and it is directed at salvation of the planet in its unity with the spirits of animals, plants and beings of this world. There are no souls to save except in as much as persons with beliefs in religions like Christianity, Islam etc. are concerned with salvation as part of their personal faith and as embedded within ayahuasca community practices. In some ways Soul Quest is a church within a church. Prior to the DEA first contacting them, Soul Quest disassociated themselves with the ONAC, but on Soul Quest's official website ayahuascachurches.org they dedicated an entire page to the "Legality of Our Practice," wherein they discuss their current connection to Native American beliefs:

> At the Soul Quest Ayahuasca Church of Mother Earth, we believe that its members possess a constitutional right, guaranteed by the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to use the sacred sacraments of Ayahuasca, The sacred sacraments are core to our religious practices; any effort by the Government to abridge the religious use of such sacred Earth bounty would substantially inhibit and unduly burden the ability of our members to peacefully practice their religious faith.
>
> Also, we believe, and will forcefully advocate for, the continued right to use these plant medicine teachers according to natural law, a philosophy denoting that certain rights or values are inherent by virtue of human nature, and universally cognizable through human reason. Natural law has been historically used to refer to the use of reason to analyze social and personal behaviors to deduce binding rules of morality based on the law of nature, which are determined by nature and the elements of the natural world itself and are therefore universal and without question. The fact is, these plants grow from the Earth. According to Indigenous

> Native American beliefs, "anything that grows from the Earth is sacred, and here for our learning and use. As an Ayahuasca Church, Soul Quest and its members believe in, and advocated for, the specific, legal right to experience sacred plant medicines based on a federal bill passed by U.S. Congress to protect the Religious Freedom. (Ayahuasca Churches 2023)

What we see in the text here is that Soul Quest not only directly engages the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to use ayahuasca but, they frame it on their website within the scope of Native American rights and beliefs, which McNally (2020) argues are not so easily separated from treaty and land rights. This may be another reason why the DEA finds Soul Quest's claim to Native American traditions problematic.

The DEA also had a problem with how church leaders like Dr. Scott Irwin described ayahuasca use as therapy and not sacrament. Dr. Scott related to them, "Ayahuasca is 5, 15, or 20 years of psychotherapy in a weekend," and the DEA found this ongoing emphasis on psychotherapy at Soul Quest insincere. The DEA base their notion of a church on a model that Winnifred Fallers Sullivan argues is "largely, although not exclusively, indebted, theologically and phenomenologically, to protestant reflection and culture."[93] The DEA also argued "Soul Quest's website and public advertisements also do not support the claim that Soul Quest offers ayahuasca solely for religious purposes and only to members who are exercising religion pursuant to a sincerely held religious belief." (Final Determination Letter) Here the DEA are claiming that what Soul Quest says and does are two

[93] Sullivan 2005, 7.

different things. They claim to be a non-profit church but are advertising for profit services through their healing center online, which to them seems insincere.

The key word here is "solely," specifically how a multi-use plant must be used solely for one purpose in order to be a religion. This disqualification may be the only real claim that undermines Soul Quest. Intention for spirituality being sincerity for religious status. Intention for recreation and or healing does not a religion make, at least according to the DEA and law. Unless one change's the idea of what a religion is. The definition of religion is still debated by scholars of religious studies and anthropology. The more narrowly one defines religion, as in the belief in a God or the supernatural, the less that can be seen as religious. The broader one defines religion, the more that can be considered religion. (See Chidester 2005) The question of religion is itself the problem. The freedom to exercise religion freely is culturally constrained by historical Christianity and the Great Religions' tradition. Shamanic practices, ancient as they are, and based on oral transmission and healing (and dark sorcery) –that is, they are based on meanings that are indeterminate. That is too much for the law as it now narrowly defines "religion." Rather than asserting a different version of religion, Soul Quest felt constrained to assert a version that conformed. Even their lawyers forced them in this direction. The point of contention about sincerity in the use or neglect of the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* and calling ayahuasca medicine or sacrament Dr. Scott said had to do more with how they were advised by their lawyers to speak to the DEA as much as the DEA's strategic and unconstitutional line of questioning:

> No religious sincerity and our exemption was denied. Our church attorneys, six-hundred-dollar attorneys, really skilled professionals, they understand the constitution, they understand religious freedom law, they understand this process. The attorneys advised us to only answer

> the questions that the DEA asks. Don't go off into some tree hugging stories of other stuff. Stay focused on answering specifically what they ask you. Their line of questioning was exclusively directed towards the Soul Quest Natural Healing Center, which was a completely separate entity that provided outsourced services for Soul Quest. This exclusive line of questioning…these services…questions about specifics…all that. It was amazing that in their rejection letter that they said we had no religious sincerity. Not once did they ever ask us about our beliefs, our religion, our manifesto. Zero…not even one question about our spiritual belief. Nothing remotely close.
>
> This to me was just bunk, just incredible to make these kinds of claims. So, when your attorneys say only answer the questions that the government asks you, you're inclined to not go off topic. I feel like in the end what the DEA did was trick us. They selected very limited types of questions that lead to an extremely distorted picture of what we as a church were all about. My attorneys informed me that after that determination letter came, it basically rendered in my attorneys' opinion that the operation at Soul Quest had to stop, that it would be considered no longer under protection of this process of exemption. We could stay open during the process. The original cease and desist order still stand.

Since the denial letter from the DEA Soul Quest has made subtle shifts in both their face to face and digital formats via Zoom. There has been a larger emphasis on the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* in Zoom meetings, including a new Wednesday Zoom group called Ayahuasca Manifesto which meets at 4pm EST and is hosted by Colleen Mix. The Sunday church service on Zoom has been put on hiatus, Soul Quest said that this is due to the Church reconfiguring a new experience wherein they plan to broadcast actual Sunday services in the near future as opposed to the previous format and focus on weekly presentations/hosts and holding space for ayahuasca integration/narratives. With each subsequent State engagement, Soul Quest's outward facing description and mission has been affected to include personnel and program changes.

Sacred and Profane Elements of Practice and Identity: Soul Quest's Business Model

The DEA also took issue with Soul Quest's business model which revolves around church members attending ayahuasca retreats. This was another significant point of contention between them, particularly the idea that "there does not appear to be any required involvement or investment for members before or after the retreat experience." (DEA testimony 2022)

The retreat experience is difficult to comprehend for the DEA. Retreat experiences like this are not uncommon in modern religious practices in Buddhism. Buddhism is a philosophy not just a religion and in modern meditation movements, Buddhists attend retreats all over the world to practice meditation where practitioners can come from anywhere, much like in the case of Soul Quest. Buddhists who go to these meditation retreats can even call themselves Buddhists, but they are not required to be members of a "church," monastery or temple. Practice is not defined by the community in situ—the brick and board church. Western Buddhists for example, attend various meditation retreats without having to proclaim membership to a single institution or center. Attendance is open-ended. Soul Quest is not faith-based but does have a pluralist ideology (See Masuzawa 2005) that participates in the logic of "world religions" even while it is not in the tradition of the World's Great Religions (Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism) as these were formulated in Modern European thought.

Dr. Scott, in his Facebook Live from Sachi Wasi, told everyone that "this was really for us about collaborating with the United States government to develop this gold standard model" and "we had

this first-class medical team at Soul Quest…we had an experienced medical staff with licensed paramedics, just real professional." He discussed this golden model in more detail:

> Intake process, we had screening process, we had protocols in place for what to do medically in any situation, then we had over fifty integration specialists who were professionally trained and certified by the Being True to You organization. The Being True to You org is the gold standard in psychedelic integration. Our people were extremely deep in resources for post ceremony support…we are talking about if 20,000 people who came through our organization and most of those people were first time ayahuasca drinkers. We had a lot of experience, we know what works and doesn't work, and that was part of what we were bringing to the table. We were earnestly providing everything we could to the DEA so that we could create this gold model…this template for any new ayahuasca church.

While the gold standard, Dr. Scott argues is Being True to You, Soul Quest's non-profit status also became an issue for the DEA even though Soul Quest was under the assumption that they were working with the DEA to create this new gold standard for psychedelic therapy in the US. The fact that Soul Quest claimed to be non-profit, but also had a for-profit healing center made the DEA question their religious sincerity. Soul Quest also was under the impression that the DEA was interested in working with them to create an ayahuasca church model that could be used by other institutions who wanted to gain religious exemption, but they would soon learn that this was not the case. The DEA was not interested in working with them, they just told Soul Quest this in order to stay proceedings so that they would not get the case dismissed. The DEA on many occasions throughout the legal proceedings had to ask the court to grant delays and extra time to finish their investigation and assess Soul Quest's exemption request.

Dr. Scott talked about this exact point of conflict between Soul Quest and the DEA during his Facebook Live. In the 2022 appeal Soul Quest discussed how on June 15th, 2020, the parties (Soul Quest and the DEA) filed a joint motion to stay all proceedings for one hundred and twenty days to "engage in good-faith negotiations" vis a vis the preliminary injunction, petition, and litigation. Soul Quest argued that these good-faith negotiations were a ruse in a well-played manipulative judicial game, that the DEA had no intention of working with Soul Quest towards resolution, but only sought to deny them exemption through skillful means so that they could shut them down:

> Really clearly defining the manufacturing, and the storing, and the dispensing, and the security of the ayahuasca was all about. We were really working together, we believed, to establish professional, best practices. So that this could be universal. We were led to believe that we were in an exemption process for developing this template. We modified some of our procedures...we installed security cameras...we had a special room for the storage of the ayahuasca with double or triple locks. All these controls and every single ounce of the medicine was measured and accounted for, the waste was accounted for, so quite an intense process. It's like a pharmacy, where you have all these rules...that's what the DEA wanted us to do, to develop fail safe rules and procedures so people couldn't come in off the street and steal the ayahuasca and go out and risk harm to the public.

Agent Moreno, one of the DEA investigators, noted that she saw a form that, "summarized intelligence which confirms that illegally imported plant materials containing DMT were repeatedly shipped from the Netherlands to Dr. Scott Irwin's father in Lincoln, Nebraska." Moreno went on to say that "During our investigation Soul Quest leaders repeatedly refused to offer any concrete plans to legally obtain plant materials needed to make ayahuasca tea, either by seeking DEA registration as an importer or by obtaining the plant materials from a registered importer." (Moreno testimony) This significance of this is that the DEA are saying that Soul Quest are not following the guidelines set forth

in Controlled Substances Act of 1970 in regard to the proper import, handling, and storage protocols for a Schedule 1 substance in the US. The guidelines in the CSA 1970 state that in order to use a Schedule 1 substance in the US one has to be a licensed importer, designated by the DEA, and the handling, storage, and distribution of the substance has to be overseen by the DEA, which includes audits by the DEA. The strict oversight of the substance is centered around the issue of what is in the public's best interest, to "minimize the risk of diversion." It did not help that Dr. Scott was purchasing ayahuasca from Waking Herbs in the Netherlands, having it shipped to his father in Nebraska, who then forwarded it to the church in Florida.[94]

This "risk of diversion" and deception through illegal importation rather than a licensed DEA importer became another mark against Soul Quest in the DEA's final determination. The DEA's requirement to enforce drug law as acting on what is best for public interest and moral good is countered by Dr. Scott in a 2022 Zoom meeting where he argues that public safety is made more precarious when ayahuasca churches have to go underground and where a lack of expertise (professionalism) over how to administer and integrate the ayahuasca experience is interfered with. Here Scott's assertion emphasizes the way that the plant must be treated by a number of specialists and not just the "minister" of a church or an individual taking the plant on their own:

[94] The way that Soul Quest stores the bulk plant material at a nearby off-site storage facility (a storage shed) with no security system other than cameras and limited access was also found to be an issue for the DEA. GS Graumlich, the lead agent on the Soul Quest investigation, claimed to inform Chris Young and his attorney that they would need to work this aspect out together. Graumlich went on to say that "The group is currently storing products containing DMT at two different locations, neither of which are authorized to handle controlled substances." (DEA testimony, 2022)

> We considered the ayahuasca as our church sacrament, this was essential to our survival as a church movement, we wanted to cooperate, we fully cooperated. I know that personally I had wanted to help this process of legalization so that medicine communities all over the country could benefit. To do this, this is done underground. I don't believe that doing this underground is safe for the public. So, without legalization, the serious issues that occur, delayed or prolonged extended reactions to the medicine, this can take some skill and professionalism. So, to attract this kind of professionalism, we really needed to have legalization. Also, to conduct medical research. With many universities and centers interested in working with us. But until we're legal we can't do these kinds of studies.
>
> We shared everything with the DEA. 100 percent full sincere cooperation and disclosure right down to the license plates on cars. Cell phone numbers and all that were in there...all the while were being lead to believe that we as individuals in the church were legally protected from self-incrimination. We were told by the church lawyers, that they made a deal with the DEA that set the ground rules for all of us to make honest and full disclosures about administering this medicine. So, it meant that we couldn't be incriminating ourselves in some way. The importation, manufacturing, and dispensing of what they considered a controlled substance.

In this discourse between the DEA and Soul Quest we see the way that strategies of representation arise and co-evolve. This also happens at the level of the courts. The burden of conforming to prior (legal and cultural) ideas of what a church is gets addressed sometimes imperfectly and clumsily by both parties. Since incorporating into a church, Soul Quest has been struggling to make themselves appear more like a church, especially once they filed for religious exemption and the DEA began their investigation. The DEA invited Soul Quest to apply for exemption and told Soul Quest that they were evaluating them as a church when they were really more interested in how Soul Quest was using and distributing ayahuasca as a controlled substance. Because Soul Quest applied for exemption under the Controlled Substances Act and not under the RFRA the DEA used this to their advantage to deny application for exemption.

Conclusion: Theoretical Questions, Puzzles and Problems Emerging from the Study

This ethnography traces the ways that a psychedelic church attempts to become recognized as a legal church under United States law. However, it might be said that this ethnography is also about the ways a plant seeks to decriminalize its identity in order to become a church. In the process of Soul Quest trying to gain religious exemption from the DEA we see how the plant plays a central role in every facet of the conversation. It is the source of contention (the DMT being the controlled substance) and it is where the church is located (within the individual, where the psychedelic experience takes place).

Ayahuasca is a plant with a multi-indexed meaning. Its actions are indeterminate and ambiguous, we do not know what it will do after the individual consumes it. It could give a good experience or a "bad trip" or do nothing at all. The experience is very personal and subjective, and it varies greatly between individuals or between experiences in a single individual. Its legal status also is multiple. When used by Santo Daime or the UDV it is a sacrament. When used for recreation on the open market it is an illicit drug. From the point of view of the individual self it is also ambiguous. Which sub-community is using it and to what end? Vets? Domestically abused? Self-knowledge seekers? Psychonauts? Spiritual seekers? Religious syncretic practitioners (Christian, Hindu, Buddhist). Even at the location of the individual the plant has its varied meanings. At the level of the plant, it is also ambiguous: is it a plant, is it DMT? What is the object being revered? The DMT? Or the plant as ambiguous unity that crosses boundaries of reality consciousness and altered

consciousness, of national boundaries, of criminal boundaries and sacred boundaries. There are so many places where its identity cannot be pinned down.

The legal question is only one location in which the identity of ayahuasca is being puzzled out by its users and those who stand outside the circle of use. For those who do not use it but wish to contain it lest the genie get out of the bottle and wreck new harms on society, ayahuasca is seen as a danger—a danger for addiction and for the unborn children of our future societies. It is a moral threat in that case. Part of the culture wars. It is a disruptor in the sense that it is disrupting ideas about what a person is, what a community is, what a church is, and what the transcendental realm is. It is no wonder that in the *Ayahuasca Manifesto*, in one of its main purposes perhaps, the idea of Mother Aya taking her warriors under wing to undertake a holy crusade for the sake of the planet represents a reverse missionizing effort out of Amazonia and to the West.

The fact that the indigenous question plays so profoundly in this discussion is relevant here. The plant is seen as a natural being and a natural right of the human being to use without interference by government. (A right acknowledged in law which only prosecutes use of DMT and not ayahuasca as a plant.) More importantly, the Indigenous question is tied to cultural-political assumptions over who legitimately may use the plant and also how the wisdom of the plant, as non-human agent and prophet, is indexed to Indigenous knowledge systems on equal footing with colonial knowledge systems.

Ayahuasca is seen as dangerous and in need of control by the DEA, but to Soul Quest it is a panacea, a powerful medicine and sacrament. This ongoing struggle to define what ayahuasca is can be

observed in the ways that the plant traverses disparate contextual spaces and temporal landscapes in legal efforts to decriminalize its identity. Soul Quest grapples with how to define ayahuasca as a social fact that would accord with the law and legal definitions of a church and religion in America as it seeks the imprimatur of the DEA. The DEA, for its part, must appear to be solely performing the role of its office in its purview to enforce controlled substances law and regulations in the United States. By inviting psychedelic churches to apply for exemption from the Controlled Substances Act and evaluating their application within that legal context they prefigure the outcome of the decision as illicit drug use. This is how the DEA won the first round in the court system and got the case dismissed.

Presenting their bureaucratic intentions as an obliging interest to mutually come to agreement over how to safely secure the storage and transportation of an illicit substance, the DEA's own sincerity becomes questioned by Soul Quest (as well as by other underground psychedelic churches and legal observers writing in social media where there is a strong discourse over how to approach these kinds of legal cases). A common theme noted in online decriminalization movement discussions is that the DEA's maneuver is a practiced tactic of DEA procedure (See Chacruna.net).

In as much as the DEA avowed interest in the legal test of "sincerity" to adjudge the religious intent of Soul Quest in its use of an illicit substance for religious practice, Soul Quest argues it overstepped the scope of its legal influence and power. By declaring that the grounds for denial was based on Soul Quest's failure to demonstrate sincerity of religious intent, claiming that Soul Quest used the substance not for religious purposes but for self-help and therapeutic reasons, it created the

opportunity for Soul Quest to file a counter-suit against the DEA arguing that the agency did not have the right to determine what is a church or what defines religious sincerity. It is to be remembered that the DEA's denial was *not* based on a determination that they were using "the least restrictive means of protecting the public health and safety" (for example, by drawing on the wrongful death suit brought against Soul Quest). While "least restrictive means" is one legal test for limiting government's interference in religious activity, it was the "sincerity test" that they employed to argue in court that Soul Quest should be denied exemption. This then led to dismissing the case based on procedure for submitting the suit in the improper legal channel which subsequently sent the case to the 11th district court which resulted in staying the DEA's determination of denial.

Toward an Alternative Church in Law and New Ontology

The plant is the church, but what does that mean? Especially emphasizing the diversity of belief, place setting etc. and how in that sense, it *differs* from Santo Daime and União do Vegetal which incorporate ayahuasca as sacrament within their larger church context and conception. Here, ayahuasca and the person who ingest ayahuasca *are* the church. The sense of sacrament here differs quite significantly from syncretic Christian ideas because the sacrament does not *represent* God, or the ideals of Jesus, or a prophet's teachings. The signifier in the ayahuasca ceremony represents no transcendent thing that is accessed through the sign. It is a null set. Soul Quest's use of the sacramental-as-sign in their ritual, merely locates functionally the literal moment of coming together of the ayahuasca tea in the body of the person. This location–the holism that is the plant as it engages the neurochemical and psychogenic experiences in the individual – is the church.

Intuitively (or as Bourdieu would say, in a "state of learned ignorance") psychonauts perceive their membership to a church as open-ended and non-committal, imposing minimal rights or responsibilities. It is why the church is anti-dogma. It is why they are indifferent to belief in God. It is why Soul Quest does not view *healing* as solely the act of attending to the Cartesian body as having a separate identity from the mind (and which the State codes "secular"). Rather, the person is viewed as an indivisible holism capable of transformation and human and spiritual growth.

Why is the plant the church? Historical (especially Christian in the context of the US) ideas of the church, its walls, its material spatial presence, its dogma, teachers, God-belief or any requisite concept that would define membership in a humanly imagined ecology of the religious that would circumscribe the borders and limits of a given church concept remain imperfect metaphors and descriptions for the ideas of the plant as church.

This makes us consider how we might address non-human social agency, as a question of Mother Aya as colonizer and extends the idea of the way radical otherness operates as non-human social agent with the potential to replace contemporary idealist notions of "church-ness" or "the religious." If we consider from a Weberian sense, how ideas take institutionalized forms and also how the relationship of conduct to those forms are made we must ask more broadly how meaningful aspects of life that have previously been coded as classified in the secular sphere have been drawn in and incorporated into the church idea of psychedelic churches as these have historically evolved within the American legal, racial, psychological, political and ecological landscape. In the Soul Quest/DEA conflict we identify, as Sally Falk Moore would have us notice, the ways that relationships of conduct

toward competing ideas held by disparate institutions participate in a processual mode of situationally adjusted, amplified, or intentionally ignored in the open-ended and contingent way the court case and the dispute play out according to social, cultural, political, religious and other factors coming to bear on the event. An event I treat here as a diagnostic moment for interrogating the ways that church and state and the secular and religious are perpetually transforming social realities embedded in histories of identity and difference. Here we are seeing the ways that ideas about the person, cosmopolitan diversity and tolerance and an emphasis on the pluriversal nature of reality in ordinary and non-ordinary states of consciousness and worlds come to be crafted as new contexts for living and being, representing and defining.

An Alternative "Church in Law"

Sullivan (2020) argues that American law cannot think about religion without the church. She points out how the "church in law," as one corporate body, as "church-state-corporation," endures in the American legal imagination and she pays attention to how this drastically impacts the ruling of courts in the religious exemption process. Sullivan points out that U.S. law about religion has repeatedly acknowledged and privileged the legal personhood of the church over the individual. This is what McNally (2021) argues is explicitly demonstrated in Native American religious freedom jurisprudence.

Michael McNally recognizes how the term religion as a Western category has failed Native Americans through law by not fully interpreting the complexities of Indigenous religions. Nevertheless, he argues that even though religion is a problematic term, it remains useful, especially if

"imagined capaciously as an Indigenous collective right keyed to the collective nation-to-nation relationship that can carry the legal teeth of religious freedom."[95]

What McNally proposes is an integrative approach wherein Native American religious claims connect with elements of federal Indian law, while Indigenous rights operate within international human rights law. He argues that not only does the language of religion still have value for Native American religious claims in law, but that sovereignty, religion, and peoplehood should be seen as collective rights. This inclusion of religion in notions of peoplehood and sovereignty is what he calls "religious sovereignty," or a "special legal status and nation-to-nation relationship between Native nations and the United States and also to the prerogative of Indigenous peoples themselves to determine what matters are sacred to them."[96] In practice McNally argues that "folding claims to what is arguably religious into broader claims of tribal sovereignty under federal Indian law and Indigenous rights under international law is religion as peoplehood"[97]and holds many possibilities.

This same process, the folding of universal rights, Indigenous rights, and the rights of Mother Earth into individual rights is being done by Soul Quest. This is their claim to rights and at the same time the rights of the plant, because, I argue, the plant *is* the church. In the case of Soul Quest, we see McNally's "religion as peoplehood" as an extension of Native rights and part of a new ontology that has emerged in the psychedelic justice movement.

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[95] McNally, *Defend the Sacred*, xv.
[96] Ibid, 21.
[97] Ibid, 31.

Not only is the church present in U.S. law as Sullivan makes clear, but Sullivan makes visible the ways that the church requires protection while the individual does not vis a vis free religious exercise. So how can a plant attain free religious exercise when it is the church, and the transformation takes place in the individual? We see that this is where Sullivan's notion of the "impossibility of religious freedom" plays out most vividly in the case of Soul Quest because the courts cannot think outside of the Church concept, which compels Soul Quest to perform church-ness in order to convince the State that they are deserving of legal recognition as a church. For as Sullivan observes, "shallow and over simplistic readings of ecclesiology and church history by courts further contributes to the impossibility of religious freedom in the U.S." Sullivan drives home this point by stating, "'Religion' is a word used in the First Amendment to the Constitution…'Church' is used elsewhere–in the tax code and in countless other laws recognizing the legal personality of religious societies."[98]

Sullivan recognizes that non-Christian forms of religiosity individually and collectively organize and perform their identity in American law by analogy with the church (such as the Native American Church and Buddhist Churches in America).[99] This is part and parcel to the Church and State dynamic, but here we see some slippage. In the case of Soul Quest, we see that while they organize themselves around being a Church and perform church-ness in a variety of ways, they are perceived by the DEA as a secular institution (insincerely) performing church-ness within the worldview of the law.

[98] Sullivan, 61.
[99] Sullivan, 94.

Robert Cover (1983) sees law as a worldview within itself, a normative world that we inhabit. He argues that, "Once understood in the context of the narratives that give it meaning, law becomes not merely a system of rules to be observed, but a world in which we live."[100] And as Sullivan (2015) observes, "Religious liberty is not a single, stable principle existing outside of history or spatial geographies, but is an inescapably context-bound, polyvalent concept unfolding within divergent histories in differing political orders."[101] Sullivan (2015) situates religious freedom in a genealogy of many histories and phenomenologies of religious freedom in the United States, the same histories and a worldview that Soul Quest is intimately entangled in. Given this, how can Soul Quest navigate this imaginative capture by the State?

In a recent symposium of essays (lloyd 2021) engaging Sullivan (2020) Joshua Mauldin relates that Sullivan rightly points out that "the American religious and legal imaginary the concepts of the church, state, and corporation are interwoven and mutually defining…the law of the corporation comes to define what it means to be the church, while the meaning of church comes to define what it means to be a corporation…meanwhile the state lurks in the background, as the ever-present mirror of both church and corporation."[102] In his essay, Mauldin points out that "courts get involved in religion because religion goes to the courts." Religion goes to the courts because it is through law that social actors utilize and augment their agency when interacting with the State. As Dew (2019) shows, social actors situationally adjust themselves to the state in law and on the streets as a "survival strategy" where

[100] Cover, Robert. M. Nomos and Narrative. *Harvard Law Review*, 1983. 4-5.
[101] Sullivan, Winnifred, Fallers. Ed. *Politics of Religious Freedom*. University of Chicago Press, 2015, 5.
[102] Political Theology 2021.

they "seek protection from the power of the state through appeal to and inclusion with the state."[103] He argues that this is a sovereignty issue, that "sovereignty represents a paradox in American legal and political thought" because social actors, like the Aliites, "exercise sovereignty as a collective while also retaining individual sovereignty as citizens."[104] For the Aliites, this is both an ideal and a reality that is made most visible through encounters with the state through its representatives (police, judges, lawyers, etc.) Just as in the psychedelic justice movement where exemplars and court cases serve as pedagogical examples for future practice, Dew shows how Aliite performances in law and everyday activities, through forms of social media, also become didactic in purpose when engaging the state on religion.

Sullivan's answer to the question of there being an alternative is called by Dew a "revolution through encounter."[105] Sullivan envisions a community outside the political and legal framework of the state, "she imagines opposing parties coming together at a shared table."[106] What would this shared table look like? For Sullivan (2020) it is akin to the famous meeting between the late celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain with Barack Obama.[107] A crowded table, where they share beer and noodles in Hanoi, where "various otherwise-opponents or exemplars of counter-communities gathered together, practicing what she identifies as 'the hospitality and table fellowship that all religions teach' and instantiating what she calls 'messianic time conscious of the end but not collapsing into it, suspended

[103] Dew, *The Aliites*, 11.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Political Theology 2021.
[106] Political Theology 2021.
[107] Sullivan 2020, 176.

in tension, already but not yet."[108] This shared table for Sullivan is about creation and the exchange of ideas and a much-needed change to our legal aesthetics–a "disestablishment." This disestablishment project for Sullivan is what Dew calls a "community beyond the framework of the state, predicated on encounter and exchange and change."[109] This alternative disestablishment model is useful, when incorporating the non-human–the plant, Mother Ayahuasca, for thinking about how the secular is shaping the religious and the religious is shaping the secular in the case of Soul Quest. What we see here is that secularism is the shared table for the state and the plant to have a dynamic encounter to create "other-wise religion."

Mother Aya as Gaia, a New Ontology

What we see in the *Ayahuasca Manifesto* and Soul Quest's ontology is Mother Ayahuasca as Gaia, as colonizer, as radical other, and non-human agent. This is part of a broader pluriverse known as the ontological turn in anthropology. Eduardo Vivieros de Castro (1998) discusses Amerindian perspectivism, a theory of trans personhood, which is multinatural and unicultural, a cosmology within a universe that is peopled by "different types of subjective agencies, human as well as nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is, the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities."[110] He relates that "perspectivism supposes a constant epistemology and variable ontologies, the same representations and other objects, a single meaning and multiple referents."[111] Here the Amerindian conception of the world, one in which Mother Ayahuasca is firmly situated,

[108] Sullivan 2020, 177-9.
[109] Political Theology 2021.
[110] Vivieros De Castro 1998, 58.
[111] Ibid, 59.

seeks spiritual unity with corporeal diversity or one culture with many natures, as opposed to the Western dualism between nature and culture. The prior emphasis on the dichotomy of nature and culture has been critiqued by many scholars, for as Bruno Latour observes, "Western European mononaturalist-multiculturalist ideology is based on a (particular) nature-culture binary."[112] Vivieros De Castro (1998, 2015) and Philip Descola (2006, 2011) have developed anti-dualist approaches that center upon ontological hybridity.

This perspective is applied through Soul Quest's ontology and that of the *Manifesto*. The belief in universal human rights which are intimately connected to the rights of Mother Earth and all of her emissaries, such as Mother Ayahuasca, makes visible the pluriverse in her coming to colonize the Western world. This new ontology, part of the New Age, is where we see the plant is the church. Much like jaguars who see blood as manioc beer and vultures who see maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish (See de Castro 2015, 197) Mother Ayahuasca sees the Western world as not colonizer, but a world in need of colonizing. This epistemic shift in perspective, connected to Indigenous ontodiversity, and cosmopolitics, and cosmology and what Halbmeyer (2010) and Lewy (2018) calls a "multiverse" with many overlapping "timescapes," not just vis a vis sound in shamanic rituals (See Whitaker, Lewy and Janik 2024) and "soundscapes" but in the case of Soul Quest, it is part and parcel to the broader psychedelic justice movement at large. And, this new way of knowing is being increasingly appropriated by the State, as we see in the case of Oregon where facilitators are being licensed guides for psychedelic experiences. Indigenous systems for understanding the world recognize that disorder

[112] Latour 2009, 46.

and change are innate to both human and non-human existence and this is the task of Mother Ayahuasca, to transform Western consciousness, to shift the Western perspective through the plant. This shift is not just spatial, but temporal, ontological, and cosmological, and has its own eschatology entwined in climate change, natural disaster, human pollution, and species loss.

If you think in the Weberian sense that institutions take idealized forms, we see a plant trying to become a church and this idea is trying to institutionalize itself through this ontological shift of agency of Mother Ayahuasca. These include changing ideas about personhood, cosmopolitan diversity and tolerance, the pluriversal reality, non-ordinary and ordinary states of consciousness and the importance of treating non ordinary states of consciousness as being not separate from, but a continuation of ordinary states consciousness. When you take non ordinary states of consciousness seriously you also have to take seriously the pluriversal nature of reality, its notion of multiple identities and multiple ideas about the transcendent that are accessible as Descola and de Castro and others have described as being located in multiple worlds which all come to bear in this interrogation of how a plant seeks to become a church.

What we are seeing in one location, Soul Quest, is an inflection point on this process, a small example where ideas about the radical interdependence of human and non-human beings that is part of this idea in the new age, the dawning of the transformation of the entire planet consciousness which coincides with climate change and a fervent mission to save the planet. And so, it is producing a new world, a new ontology, a new historical and political moment, a new kind of transcendent world that is accessible and feeds back into the real world.

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Appendix: Soul Quest Church of Mother Earth

(Data Derived from Ayahuasca Churches 2022)

Questions for Prospective Volunteers

1. What are your reasons for wanting to volunteer?

2. What makes you a good candidate to volunteer at Soul Quest? Please share a little about yourself and what you hope to receive from this experience.

3. Please share with us your experience with Plant Medicines.

4. Do you speak any languages other than English?

5. Do you have any skills or passions that could be helpful outside of ceremonies? Examples: carpentry/construction, professional medical/psychological training or experience, CPR certified, etc.

6. Do you have any emt, paramedics or nursing experience?

7. If yes above, would you be interested in volunteering for intakes and overnight in a medical assistance capacity?

8. Are you a veteran or first responder?

9. If yes above, would you be interested in volunteering for the veteran and first responder only ceremonies? (occurs on the 3rd Thursday of the month)

10. In what ways do you tend to deal with conflict or uncomfortable situations?

11. What is your travel distance/time to Soul Quest? If you are local, would you be available for weekday volunteer opportunities, last minute weekend needs, or single day weekend fill-ins?

12. Do you agree to the No Fraternization Policy?

13. Do you agree to the No Weapons or Illegal Substances Policy?