

Ayahuasca: a psychedelic murder story

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Did ayahuasca tea — brewed from rainforest plants and revered by many Brazilians as holy — contribute to the brutal death of a celebrated Brazilian artist?



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So this is what the murder scene looks like. There, on the sun-dappled driveway, is where the shots were fired; here, at the top of the hill with its astonishing view of São Paulo, is the mausoleum where the bodies, currently in a public burial ground, will one day be laid; there, just beyond the children playing football on the lawn, is the murdered artist's studio, since closed; and here, at the edge of the property, lies his church, still very much open. Beatriz, his widow, shows me all this when I visit her one day, and as we enter her house she stops by a giant poster hung on the patio wall. Two words are stencilled across it: "*Glauco Vive!*"

[2] Glauco Villas Boas and his son Raoni, a university student, were shot and killed in their house at Osasco, a suburb of São Paulo, on March 12 2010. Glauco, 53, was one of Brazil's best-known cartoonists. Lesser known, at first, was also his iridescent inner life as the leader of the Céu de Maria church, part of the Santo Daimé congregation that treats ayahuasca, a psychedelic Amazonian brew, as a sacrament. Charged with the murder was Carlos Eduardo Sundfeld Nunes, known as Cadu. A troubled young man from an upper-class Brazilian family, Cadu, then 24, had joined the religious rituals directed by Glauco in search of relief and healing from his problems of drug abuse.

[3] The story of Glauco’s murder had anchored itself in my mind when I first stumbled across it, and I had not been able to let it go. In part, my interest stemmed from Glauco’s fame. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil’s then-president, spoke of his great sadness and the “tremendous loss” of this “great chronicler of Brazilian society” when he learnt of Glauco’s death. More than 1,000 people attended the funeral, Beatriz told me.

[4] But in large part my morbid interest in Glauco’s death stemmed from its ambiguous context (why had a friend shot him?), the role of the ayahuasca tea that Glauco administered as part of his faith and, in particular, the tea’s growing popularity outside Brazil. In the US and Europe, interest in ayahuasca has soared of late, creating a subculture of New Age spiritual seekers — and a following among not a few millionaire environmentalists. As a writer for The New York Times style section noted recently, it has become “exceedingly trendy”, a salve for those seeking dream-time in a world increasingly dominated by screen-time.

[5] Among public figures, Isabel Allende, the Chilean novelist, has said ayahuasca helped her conquer writer’s block. Sting, the musician, and Oliver Stone, the film-maker, have made similar claims. Jeffrey Bronfman, a descendent of the family that founded the Seagram brewing empire, leads an ayahuasca church out of Santa Fe, New Mexico. “The tea is really an instrument to help us get in touch with our own spiritual nature,” he told US National Public Radio in 2013. When Kira Salak, a National Geographic reporter, described how an ayahuasca healing session in Peru cured her of a life-long depression, the article became the most read in the magazine’s online history.

[6] There have been many other reports of mental and physical healing following ayahuasca ceremonies, as well as occasional stories of delusion, cultism and worse. Early last year, Henry Miller, a 19-year-old Briton, died after apparently taking part in a shamanic ayahuasca ritual in Colombia — a terrible accident which played in the British press as a cautionary tale of a gap-year adventure that went horribly wrong. And then there is Glauco’s story, largely unreported outside Brazil, although it is one of the most curious cases of them all.



The newspaper that published Glauco’s work, announcing his death; it subsequently left a blank space where its cartoons ran as a mark of respect

[7] When Glauco was shot, the news spread like wildfire across the Brazilian media. Commentators bewailed the death of a man whose bawdy cartoon characters had become embedded in the Brazilian psyche in much the same way that Charles M Schulz’s Peanuts cartoon strip defined the popular culture of a generation in the US.

[8] “His drawings were very simple, almost 2D, like puppet theatre,” said Laerte Coutinho, a celebrated cartoonist and one of Glauco’s longtime collaborators. “They were also unique. Anyone could imitate his simple style but not his ideas. He was inspired.”

[9] Amid the mourning that immediately followed Glauco’s murder — *Folha de São Paulo*, the national newspaper that published his work, left only white space where its cartoons normally appeared — news coverage at first maintained a respectful attitude towards ayahuasca and Glauco’s Santo Daime church. That changed abruptly after the police caught Cadu while he was trying to escape to Paraguay. Glauco’s captured murderer told TV reporters that he had wanted to kidnap the cartoonist to prove to his family that his younger brother was, in fact, Jesus Christ. Worse, Cadu’s father and lawyer both claimed that Cadu, whose mother was schizophrenic, had gone “psycho” after joining Glauco’s rituals.

[10] What had been a national tragedy now turned into a heated debate about ayahuasca or *daime* as it is also known. Although legal in Brazil since 1992, because of its deep roots in indigenous shamanistic practice, ayahuasca is mostly only tolerated in what remains an essentially conservative country. *Época*, a popular glossy magazine, asked on its front cover: “Did daime provoke the crime?” *Veja*, another, splashed: “The psychotic and daime: up to what point should a hallucinogenic drug be used in the rituals of a sect?”



The widow. Beatriz Villas Boas in their home, 2014

[11] Five years later, Glauco’s tragic death can still be seen as just another confirmation of the risks of taking drugs. Yet his murder and its ensnarement with a potent psychedelic is also a story about the perils of first impressions, as became clear when I met Beatriz Villas Boas. She had been reticent to talk to a journalist again after so much heated press coverage, and it had taken me several months of emails before she agreed to see me. But now we were sitting in the tidy living room of the house that she and Glauco had built next to their church almost two decades ago.

[12] “I am not angry with Cadu. How can I be? He was crazy,” Beatriz said, her cheeks flushed with emotion as she described the awful events of that day: how Cadu had burst into her home and pistol-whipped her around the head; how he had screamed that he wanted Glauco to confirm Cadu’s belief that, yes, his fair-haired and blue-eyed younger brother was Jesus, so obviating the need for Cadu to be sent into psychiatric care. Glauco had rushed downstairs when he heard the shouting, had tried to calm Cadu but was then forced to leave after Cadu held a gun to his head. It was the last time Beatriz saw her husband alive.



Beatriz with Glauco

[13] “What makes me angry,” she said, “is how the law, which I respect, ruled that Glauco was complicit in his own death because of the tea.” Beatriz then explained that Cadu’s father had once even thanked her and Glauco for looking after his crazy son. Furthermore, before the murder, Cadu, bar one visit, had not attended an ayahuasca-drinking ritual for two years. “That’s key,” she said.

[14] At this, her eyes glassed-over with tears, and I apologised for bringing up such sad matters from the past. The swiftness of her reply surprised me. “Sad?” Beatriz exclaimed. “No, nothing about Glauco was sad. When I think of him I am only happy.” And she had then smiled a bittersweet smile because somehow, I think, she meant that applied even to Glauco’s death.

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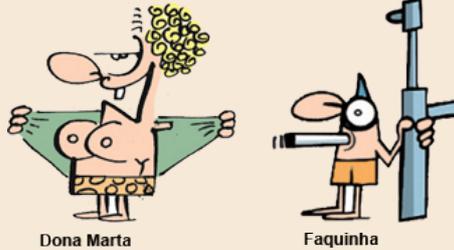
[15] Glauco credited ayahuasca with saving his life — which is ironic given how it was later considered an instrument of his death. The youngest of five brothers, born in 1957 to a middle-class family in Brazil’s southern Paraná state, he was one of a trinity of cartoonists called *Los Tres Amigos* that emerged in the late 1970s, towards the end of Brazil’s military dictatorship, in an explosion of irreverent humour carried on the pages of *Folha de São Paulo*, Brazil’s leading broadsheet. One of the *Tres Amigos*’ abiding characteristics, which can be seen in Glauco’s first cartoon, was to take nothing seriously, especially themselves. Published in 1977, it depicted a stooped and elderly couple wearing the dark glasses of the blind and, underneath, a gleeful comment by the smiling gentleman of his wife: “It was love at first sight.”

The Artist

Full of irreverent humour



Cacique Jaraguá



Dona Marta

Faquinha

Glauco's cartoon strip characters included (from top) the mournful Indian chieftain Cacique Jaraguá, the bored and oversexed civil servant Dona Marta and the child gangster Faquinha

[16] Such sweetness of character seemed to define Glauco, a goofy-looking figure with a hangdog face framed by curly hair and languid eyes. In his early years at *Folha*, Glauco was known for his shyness, quiet brilliance and rapid drawing technique — but also for being *amaluco*, or crazy guy, who often delivered his work late, sometimes not at all, and frequently had to be dragged out of a bar. “We used to get nervous before press deadlines,” Fabio Marra, one of his page editors recalled, tapping a finger on the side of his nose in an allusion to Glauco’s drug habits. “Sometimes he just wasn’t around.”

[17] That erratic behaviour changed dramatically, though, in 1995, when Glauco drank ayahuasca at a Santo Daime ceremony for the first time. Afterwards, he still drew the twice-weekly political op-ed cartoons that poked fun at power (“My role is always to be in opposition,” Glauco once said). There were also his daily cartoon strips, with their bawdy gallery of characters that included the frenetic Geraldão, an urban everyman with multiple compulsions, Dona Marta, a bored and oversexed public sector functionary, and the Cacique Jaraguá, an Indian chieftain who mournfully contemplated São Paulo from a hill above the metropolis. Now, though, the difference was that Glauco had left his booze and cocaine binges behind. “There was one Glauco before ayahuasca and another after, more responsible and focused,” Marra said.



One of Glauco's op-ed cartoons

[18] It was not just the tea, though; Glauco also drank deeply from Santo Daime's doctrinal beliefs. A syncretic spiritual practice, Santo Daime was founded in 1930 in the Amazonian state of Acre by Raimundo Irineu Serra, an illiterate rubber tapper who had a vision of the Virgin Mary after drinking the tea in the rainforest. Mestre Irineu, or Master Irineu, as he is known, built a church based on this revelation that combined indigenous mythologies, Kardecist spiritism and folk Catholicism, all within a recognisably Christian moral code that emphasised humility, purity of heart and fraternity. In the 1980s, the church began to radiate out from the Amazon and into Brazil's cities.

[19] True to these beliefs, Glauco moved to a tough downtown São Paulo neighbourhood, rented a large house, opened a Santo Daime congregation and began ministering to the poor and homeless. He found 12 crack-addicted street kids squatting inside his rented house and convinced two of them to stay; one later became an office boy who took his cartoons to the newspaper. Then he befriended the prostitutes and cross-dressers who patrolled the streets outside. "Before long, they were cleaning his house," Beatriz said. Glauco married Beatriz soon after — both had children from previous partners — and in 1997 they founded the Céu de Maria, literally Heaven of Mary, church on a hilltop at the edge of the city by the Jaraguá State Park. By the time of Glauco's death, it had a congregation of about 500 people, Beatriz told me, making it São Paulo's largest Santo Daime church with Glauco, the irreverent cartoonist, as its unusual leader.



'It was love at first sight'; Glauco's first cartoon

[20] What was he like as a man, this cartoonist-cum-spiritual guru? Wanting an informed opinion, I asked Otávio Frias Filho, Folha's editorial director and scion of the family that owns the newspaper. "It might sound kitsch but there was something of Saint Francis about him," Frias Filho commented. "Everywhere Glauco went, the children and animals seemed to follow him." It was this gentleness and humour that drew so many people to his church. There he directed all-night ceremonies where a holy tea was served; I was curious, of course. Santo Daime has strict taboos about proselytising but when I asked Beatriz, she told me there was a ceremony in three days' time. I was welcome to attend.

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[21] Anyone taking ayahuasca for the first time is assailed by doubts and expectations. Will I emerge a changed person? If so, how? The reality is more prosaic. One reason ayahuasca will never become a recreational drug is the personal internal effort involved: Santo Daime even calls its sessions "works". Another reason is the intense vomiting it can produce. The tea, used for centuries by indigenous groups as a medicine and divinatory technology, is made by boiling together two rainforest plants, one a leaf and the other vine. Its active psychedelic ingredient is N, N-Demethyltryptamine, or DMT, illegal when synthesised but not in its naturally occurring state.



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The murderer. Carlos Eduardo Sundfeld Nunes or 'Cadu' in 2010, after his arrest for Glauco's murder

[22] “It’s a fascinating compound with a great deal to be learnt from its effects,” said Dr Charles Grob, professor of psychiatry at UCLA, who helped launch one of the first in-depth studies on ayahuasca’s effects in 1993 in Brazil. The so-called Hoasca project found positive transformations among alcohol and drug addicts, and a greater receptivity among ayahuasca users to serotonin, a mood-regulating chemical that plays a key role in the treatment of depression. Subsequent studies found similarly positive effects.

[23] Yet Grob was also quick to list ayahuasca’s dangers, especially when taken by people on antidepressants or with a history of psychological disturbance. And ayahuasca’s soaring popularity has lately produced another set of problems. In the Amazon, “shaman tourism” has become a burgeoning business that has inevitably attracted charlatans. Internet chat rooms suggest one reason for Henry Miller’s death may have been because he drank a tea mixed with datura, or Jimson Weed, a deliriant that can enhance ayahuasca’s effects.

[24] “Careful attention to set and setting, and being aware of any underlying medical or psychiatric vulnerabilities optimises the probability of positive outcome and reduces risk,” Grob said. “It is very important to screen prospective participants for indications of underlying vulnerability.”

[25] I bore all this in mind when I returned to Céu de Maria on a bitterly cold Friday night. Beatriz greeted me in the driveway where Glauco had died — a sapling marked the spot — and led me to the church she had shown me around a few days before. A simple structure, measuring about 20m by 20m, it now had white plastic garden chairs arranged in concentric circles around a wooden altar adorned with images of the Virgin Mary, the Saints and other icons of folkloric Catholicism.



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The church. Céu de Maria from the outside

[26] Beatriz pointed me to a seat near the front and rang a captain's bell to announce the start of the service. The congregation filtered in, some 200 people chatting easily among themselves. There were all types: young, old, fat, thin, black and white. Some looked like pirates, their faces etched with poverty; others like bank managers with the complexion that only a good diet brings. I was impressed by the social mingling and sense of community, so rare in Brazil, one of the world's most unequal countries.

[27] Beatriz nodded. To her left, four guitarists and a flautist, all men, began to play; to her right, a choir of women began to sing. The rest formed a queue at the back of the church where the tea was served in shot glasses. I knocked back an acrid brown mixture that tasted of rotten leaves and sat down again. The songs continued and a gentle lassitude filled my limbs. Two hours later we drank another glass. Some of the congregation sang; most sat quietly, absorbed in inner states. Occasionally, someone would go outside and I would hear vomiting. All the while the singing continued.



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Serving the ayahuasca tea

[28] “I have had a dream,” comments Bottom when he awakes in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “past the wit of man to say what dream it was.” I remember a feeling of waves. Around midnight, Beatriz had handed me a book of songs that Glauco had composed. The room suddenly seemed to fill with energy and joy. A drum began to sound, joining the guitars, flute and falsetto voices of the girls, and I remembered a phrase of St Teresa, the Catholic mystic: “Words lead to deeds . . . They prepare the soul, make it ready and move it to tenderness.” I heard the music as if listening to stereo for the first time, and the high chorus of a song penetrated me with its words: “I pray to my holy Father with extraordinary joy, extraordinary joy . . .”

[29] As if watching an interior film, I saw some members of my family whose health I have been worried about, bathed in light. The vision left me feeling relieved and I wondered if it was the embrace of some subtle spiritual energy or perhaps just self-suggestion.



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A service in full swing

[30] According to Freud, our minds are like an iceberg, the conscious part only the tip of a vast “unconscious” that manifests itself in our dreams. As it happens, this conforms well to new research into the therapeutic use of psychedelics for treating depression that is taking place after a nearly 30-year research ban. From brain scans, it seems that psychedelics such as LSD scramble those brain networks that are associated with the ego. This effectively “removes the general ruminative thoughts that occupy our minds most of the time”, Dr Robin Carhart-Harris, of Imperial College’s centre for neuropsychopharmacology, had told me. It also allows other parts of the brain, such as Freud’s unconscious, to re-emerge. Meditation and dream states may do the same.

[31] Back in São Paulo, the evening ended abruptly a few hours after the second glass. By then the tea’s effects had worn off. Everyone stood for a last cycle of songs. Beatriz pronounced a closing prayer, made some routine church announcements about a picnic (“all welcome”) and everybody filed out for refreshments. I returned to my hotel before dawn, slept for a few hours and awoke feeling refreshed without a trace of a hangover. The next day I returned to London and, unusually after the 12-hour flight, arrived at Heathrow feeling recharged. It was a beautiful day, and both the balmy weather and my state of mind held through the weeks that followed.

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[32] The current interest in ayahuasca — the conferences, the growing academic literature, the celebrity endorsements, the scientific research, the cult online following — recalls a distant time when chemical self-discovery was not demonised as it is now. Those were the days when R Gordon Wasson was respected for being an urbane vice-president of the bank JPMorgan and for introducing Americans to magic mushrooms in a learned 1957 article published in Life Magazine. Clearly, neither banking nor bankers are what they once were.



Examples of Glauco’s work in his home studio

Jordi Burch

[33] Yet ayahuasca’s increasing diffusion outside the Amazon also comes with risks, and not just those of chemical adulteration. In *Antipodes of the Mind*, Israeli psychologist Benny Shanon recounts how the tea transformed him from a “devout atheist” into a spiritual believer awestruck

by the mysteries of God and nature. But he also quotes a shaman who warns that “ayahuasca can be the worst of liars” and lead vulnerable people to delusions.

[34] Certainly Cadu, a mixed-up and lonely rich kid of divorced parents, seems to have been an extreme case of that. His mother was schizophrenic, he lived with his grandparents, suffered a history of drug abuse and had long had troubles with his studies, consecutively abandoning university courses in law, visual arts and cooking. He had, for a while, found succour in the shared experience and emotional connection at the rituals he first attended in 2007. But somewhere along the way, abetted by the other drugs he reportedly took, his mind turned.

[35] From news reports at the time, relatives said they found him praying in the rain to the plants in his grandparents’ garden. But when they suggested psychiatric treatment, Cadu refused and grew agitated, saying he did not want to end up hospitalised like his mother. Soon after, police reportedly said, Cadu bought a gun with funds from cannabis-dealing. So was initiated the terrible denouement of Glauco’s death.

[36] After the ceremony at Céu de Maria, I had mingled with the congregation and talked to João Pedro, a family friend who witnessed the murder. An articulate 37-year-old, he told me in chilling detail how Raoni, Glauco’s son, had arrived at the house just as Cadu was leaving with Glauco, a gun still pointed to his head; how Raoni had tried to calm Cadu; how Cadu at one point had lifted the gun to his own head and both Raoni and Glauco had then shouted “No!”; and how Cadu had then laughed hysterically, shot Glauco and then Raoni, and begun spraying bullets around the yard. “I should have been killed too,” João Pedro told me. “But somehow [the bullets] missed me.” It took a long time for the media storm that followed Glauco’s death to simmer down. An initiative to ban the tea, filed in Congress by an evangelical Christian, was also abandoned on the grounds that Santo Daime was a sincere religion with deep cultural roots. Meanwhile, Cadu was hospitalised for two years with another year of outpatient treatment. “Only three years for two lives?” João Pedro said. “It still makes me angry.”

[37] Glauco’s murder is filled with ironies. He was a gentle artist who depicted a country’s neuroses in his cartoons, and then met a violent death at the hands of a neurotic. Should Cadu, who was so obviously disturbed, have been barred from the rituals? “Perhaps. But Glauco felt it was wrong to turn anyone away,” Beatriz said. When I then asked her if the church had since started screening newcomers for psychiatric disorders, she said “Yes” but had then shrugged her shoulders in a non-committal way. It strikes me that it may be true that psychoactives, mixed with mysticism, make for a potent brew that can produce troubled people — but it is also true that they tend to attract problematic people in the first place.

[38] And there the story would otherwise end — were it not that Cadu’s name resurfaced again on the front pages of the Brazilian press six weeks after I returned to London. Tragically, he was now charged with shooting somebody else, a 21-year-old student, while attempting to steal his car. This time, though, coverage focused on the failings of Brazil’s health and judicial systems instead of the exoticism of a religious sect. Three murders in five years, after all, was more than a coincidence. “I warned everyone that Cadu was crazy and this could happen again.” Beatriz told me. “It wasn’t the tea that caused Glauco’s murder. It was the man.”