

The Santo Daime without Daime Tactics, Agency, and Ritual Change in Ayahuasca Religions under Prohibition in Italy

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Abstract This article examines how ayahuasca religions in Italy have reconfigured their ritual practices following the 2022 legal ban on ayahuasca, including replacing the brew with water and creating new forms of religious travel. The Amazonian psychoactive brew ayahuasca, traditionally used in Indigenous rituals and healing, is at the centre of transnational religions that have spread globally. Drawing on anthropology, lived religion, and ritual studies, the article explores the interplay between lived religion, ritual change, and law in the use of controlled substances, and therefore how prohibition reshapes ritual practice and everyday life.

Keywords Ayahuasca. Lived religion. Practice. Agency. Ritual change. Italy.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Circulation of Ayahuasca Religions from Brazil Worldwide. – 3 The Diffusion of the Santo Daime Religion in Italy. – 4 Legal Proceedings Over the Years. – 5 Lived Religion and the Ritual Use of Ayahuasca. – 6 Replacing Ayahuasca with Water. – 7 Pilgrimages: Gender, Family, Time and Money. – 8 Impacts on the Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Dimensions of People. – 9 Conclusion.



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1 Introduction

Ayahuasca is an Amazonian psychoactive brew widely used by indigenous groups in shamanic contexts for ritual and healing purposes.¹ There are three religions founded on the sacramental use of ayahuasca in Brazil, each with its ritual structure and doctrine: Santo Daime (Saint Daime), União do Vegetal (Union of the Vegetal, UDV) and Barquinha (Little Boat). These all emerged in the Amazonian region in the first half of the twentieth century, and then spread and diversified, settling in several countries around the world (Assis, Labate 2017; Labate, MacRae 2010). In recent decades, ayahuasca preparations have been incorporated into a wide range of ritual and healing practices, including shamanic ceremonies, religions, contemporary spiritual movements, and therapeutic treatments (Labate, Cavnar 2014; 2018). In this heterogeneous landscape, ayahuasca is regarded as a plant medicine, a sacrament, and a teacher, but also as a commercial product, a chemical compound, and a drug. The Dutch scholar André van der Braak (2023) argues that Western ontological categories are too narrow to grasp the multiple discourses on the nature and function of ayahuasca.

Ayahuasca compounds vary depending on the plants used and their modes of preparation, though it is most commonly brewed from the native Amazonian *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the leaves of the *Psychotria viridis* shrub. As ayahuasca has spread beyond its traditional Amazonian context, it has undergone numerous transformations. Ayahuasca materialities are adapted for international circulation and developed into various ayahuasca analogues. Its plants have been acclimatised to grow outside the Amazon (Labate et al. 2017).

Ayahuasca's legal status differs significantly between South America, where it is in many cases legal for ritual and healing purposes, and other parts of the world, where it is often criminalised (Labate, Cavnar 2023; Labate, Jungaberle 2011). Ayahuasca is frequently confiscated by customs officers or national drug enforcement agencies in countries where it circulates, and individuals are arrested for possession and transportation of the brew (ICEERS 2017; 2019). These regulatory regimes reduce ayahuasca to “illicit drug use and drug trafficking”, isolating its chemical compounds from the broader contexts in which it is embedded, such as ritual practices, communities, health systems, cosmologies, and politics (Blainey 2015). This raises complex questions about religion, culture, and law,

¹ Ayahuasca derives from the Quechua *aya* (dead, soul) and *waskha/huasca* (vine, liana), meaning ‘the vine of the souls’. Ayahuasca is known by various names among Amazonian indigenous groups. In the Santo Daime religion, it is called Daime or Santo Daime. In this text, I use sacrament and Daime interchangeably.

particularly in light of the increasingly transnational dimension of such practices (Groisman 2009; Labate, Feeney 2012; 2014).

On 14 March 2022, the Italian Ministry of Health publicly announced a new law banning the use of ayahuasca in the country. The decree,² signed on 23 February of the same year, classifies ayahuasca, its extracts, ground and powdered forms, the plants *Banisteriopsis caapi* and *Psychotria viridis*, as well as the alkaloids harmine and harmaline, as Schedule I illicit drugs (Berazaluce 2022; Casolaro 2022; Labate et al. 2023). DMT (N,N-Dimethyltryptamine), ayahuasca's principal active compound, has been classified as a Schedule I substance by the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances since 1971 (De Loenen et al. 2017).³

Two days after the publication of the Decree, the news reached the Italian Santo Daime religious groups with whom I am in contact, as well as scholars and specialists nationally and internationally.⁴ I was also among those who received the news that day, witnessing the shock, bewilderment, and distress of those involved. Sabrina,⁵ an artist in her fifties and a Santo Daime member for ten years, told me: "Suddenly, you become an outlaw, punishable simply for gathering to praise God, singing and using the vehicle Santo Daime, which is our sacrament". According to Franco, a forty-year-old teacher, his world immediately collapsed beneath him: "From one evening to the next, my spiritual life was forbidden". Emanuele, a sixty-year-old lawyer, stated: "The Santo Daime is a school. These rituals are meant to help you grow spiritually and prepare for the passage (death). This law seriously compromises my freedom of religion".

Due to legal prohibition, many ayahuasca practitioners have ceased their rituals, gone underground, or replaced ayahuasca with other substances in their ceremonies, as ethnographically documented in the Netherlands (Talin 2024). Larger institutionalised religions, like Santo Daime in Italy and in France, and the UDV in the US, have pursued legal action and paved a legal way to continue their practices (Labate et al. 2023). The board of the ICEFLU Italia,

² Gazzetta Ufficiale Serie Generale, 61, 14-03-2022. <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2022/03/14/22A01608/sg>.

³ Ayahuasca and other plants and preparations containing small percentages of DMT were excluded from the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances in 1971 (De Loenen et al. 2017). The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) does not consider ayahuasca to be under international control and advises national authorities on the interpretation of the treaty in relation to ayahuasca (Tupper, in Labate et al. 2017). However, some states have classified ayahuasca and its constituent plants as controlled substances (ICEERS 2022).

⁴ <https://www.iceers.org/italys-decision-schedule-ayahuasca/>.

⁵ All participants' information has been anonymised, and their names replaced with pseudonyms.

composed of Italian Santo Daime leaders, convened shortly after and agreed to respond to the decree through legal action, continuing their ritual practices, temporarily suspending the use of ayahuasca and replacing it with water. One of the religious leaders and board members explained to me:

The choice to conduct the rituals with water is a conscious decision to maintain the firmness of the Santo Daime spiritual work in Italy, even in the absence of the sacrament. Our spiritual school requires our sacrament, Santo Daime.

Alice, a teacher and a member for twenty years, added: “The doctrine is done by drinking Daime. You can keep the ritual alive and be together, but it is not like drinking Daime. Our sacrament is missing”.

This article examines the impact of the 2022 legal change on ayahuasca users in Italy, focusing on how legal restrictions currently shape the lived experience of the Santo Daime in Italy, affecting both ritual and daily life. From 2022, Italian Santo Daime members practice their rituals in the absence of ayahuasca, their sacrament and ritual foundation of ayahuasca religions. This article argues that, in this specific context, lived religion consists of temporary and multi-layered forms of agency and practice, which reconfigure ritual forms in fluid and transitional ways, particularly when practised in restrictive or oppressive contexts.

This research is based on multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted between August 2024 and March 2025, specifically focusing on 25 semi-structured interviews with Santo Daime members. This study is informed by long-term ethnographic research on the Santo Daime religion, involving participant observation of ritual and social activities in Daimist communities in Brazil and Italy (Talin 2012; 2024; Talin, Sanabria 2017). More broadly, it is grounded on multi-sited ethnography on the circulation and reinvention of ayahuasca rituals and materialities in Brazil and Europe (Talin 2024).

I provide a historical contextualisation of the diffusion of the Santo Daime religion in Brazil and abroad. Then, I outline the history of Santo Daime in Italy and the key legal proceedings that have taken place since the 1990s. Following this, I analyse personal experiences, temporary adjustments of ritual forms, and the creation of new ritual practices, such as the preparation of water used in ceremonies, and the development of new forms of religious travel.

Looking at this ethnographic context is particularly significant because it sheds light on how religion is practised when it is associated with the use of controlled substances. Drawing on literature at the intersection of anthropology, lived religion, and ritual studies, this article analyses ritual and everyday practices, materialities, and participants’ experiences. This ethnographic example demonstrates

how religion-as-lived is continually shaped by the interplay between multiple factors, as its transnational dimensions and ever-changing legal status across different countries. The relationship between religion and broader social context, particularly the dynamics between individual agency and social structure, is central to the analysis of lived religion. Nevertheless, it is still partly addressed in this field, requiring further investigation (Knibbe, Kupari 2020).

Ayahuasca literature extensively describes Santo Daime rituals, detailing their structure, uniforms, performances, music, and associated experiences and meanings.⁶ Building on this rich literature, the present article focuses on unexplored aspects, specifically the adaptation of Santo Daime rituals in the absence of the central ayahuasca sacrament. While the Italian Santo Daime is not the only group to have replaced ayahuasca with water during legal proceedings (see also, for instance, the UDV in the US), scholarly attention to these ritual adaptations remains limited. This article offers an original examination of the use of water and how ayahuasca religions adapt their practices to different legal regimes in their international expansion, focusing on the lived dimension of such changes in Italy. Doing so, it advances the study of transnational religious movements and circulations of psychoactive substances and ritual uses.

Although there is a wide range of scholarship on ayahuasca religions, these are relatively unexplored in the field of lived religion, with the notable exception of Paulina Valamiel (2023), who explicitly engages with the lived religion theoretical approach in her study on the feminisation of the Santo Daime religion. The present article is set on this literature and aims to contribute to this field of study, as much as to anthropology of religion and ritual studies, expanding the discussion on ritual change, agency, practice, bodily experience, and materiality.

2 The Circulation of Ayahuasca Religions from Brazil Worldwide

The three *religiões ayahuasqueiras* (ayahuasca religions) emerged in the Brazilian Amazon in the first half of the twentieth century.⁷ These progressively developed inside Brazil until the 1980s, spreading to metropolises in the south of Brazil, and diversifying in the new contexts with innovative characteristics and adaptations.

⁶ For a helpful introduction to Santo Daime rituals, see, for instance Blainey 2021; Cemin 2006; Groisman 1999; Moreira, MacRae 2011 among others.

⁷ The term ayahuasca religions distinguishes Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, and Barquinha from *neo-ayahuasca* groups (*grupos neo-ayahuasqueiros urbanos*), which emerged in urban contexts with ayahuasca's diffusion in the 1990s (Labate 2004).

In the 1990s, this expansion gained an international dimension, expanding to Europe, the US, China, and Australia, among other countries (Assis, Labate 2017; Gearin 2024; Labate, Cavnar 2023). The international expansion of the ayahuasca religions exemplifies the major role of Brazil in the transnational circulation of modern religiosities, together with other Brazilian religious expressions travelling around the world, like Umbanda and Vale do Amanhecer, among others (Csordas 2009; Oosterbaan et al. 2019).⁸ According to the Brazilian anthropologist Alberto Groisman, the first informal Santo Daime ritual outside Brazil occurred in the United States in 1987 (Groisman 2009). The first *trabalho oficial* (official ritual) occurred in Spain two or three years later (Labate, Goulart 2005; Menozzi 2021).⁹

3 The Diffusion of the Santo Daime Religion in Italy

According to Menozzi (2021), the first Santo Daime ritual in Italy took place in 1990, with approximately fifty participants, including several psychologists. It was organised in collaboration with a Spanish group and the psychiatrist Claudio Naranjo. In 1991, the Santo Daime religious leader *Padrinho*¹⁰ Alfredo Mota de Melo visited Italy for the first time, followed by his brother, Padrinho Valdete Mota de Melo, in 1993. In the following years, the Santo Daime religion grew around two locations: near Genoa and in Assisi. The Santo Daime group Caminhos das Estrelas (Path of the Stars) was founded in 1995, and it later developed into the Santo Daime group Luce di Vita (Light of Life) in the Liguria region. Casa Regina della Pace (Home of the Queen of Peace), now Fondazione Casa Regina della Pace, in Assisi, is the most well-known Santo Daime community in Italy. It was founded in 1985 by a group of *suore laiche* (laywomen) inspired by the values of St Francis, and still today the community is very active, collaborating with the municipality and the Catholic church to provide shelter and support to vulnerable people.

From the second half of the 1990s onwards, visits by Brazilian Santo Daime religious leaders to Italy and the rest of Europe became increasingly frequent, and the Italian Santo Daime community gradually expanded. In 2003, the Italian Santo Daime groups made

⁸ The Barquinha religion remains more local, with few groups spreading outside the Amazonian context.

⁹ 'Official ritual' means a Santo Daime ritual following the official calendar of this religion, a fixed structure, with *fardas* (ritual uniforms), division between men and women, and a prescribed spatial arrangement.

¹⁰ *Mestre* (Master), *Padrinho* (godfather) and *Madrinha* (godmother) are the names given to religious leaders' roles in the ayahuasca religions.

an initial attempt to initiate the procedure for registering their religious organisation, the Italian branch of the Brazilian Santo Daime religious institution CEFLURIS (now ICEFLU), in the Albo degli Enti di Culto del Ministero degli Interni (Register of Religious Entities of the Ministry of the Interior). Five years later, the Italian Santo Daime groups founded their religious association, CEFLURIS Italia.

There are around ten Santo Daime groups in Italy, ranging from a few members to several dozen. The ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in 2024-25 indicates that the 2022 legal change significantly reduced the number of participants, causing some groups to dissolve or temporarily suspend activities.

4 Legal Proceedings Over the Years

Ayahwasca religions, since their beginnings, have consistently navigated legal processes to legitimise their ritual use of psychoactive plants (Labate, Feeney 2012; Labate, Jungaberle 2011; Meyer 2014). In Italy, the Santo Daime has faced legal persecution at various times. This section outlines the main legal proceedings involving this religion. In 1995, the police first intervened during a Santo Daime ritual in Italy. They entered the space at the beginning of the ceremony, pointing firearms at the participants, who were already seated in ritual formation: some meditating, others praying, and some conversing quietly while awaiting the arrival of the remaining attendees. On this occasion, police seized thirty litres of Daime and searched the homes of three event organisers. In 2004, one of the Italian Santo Daime religious leaders was stopped at Perugia airport, where the police seized thirty litres of Daime from his luggage. The investigations continued for several months, leading to the seizure of Daime from the other centres. At the beginning of 2005, he was arrested, and the following day, twenty other active members of Santo Daime were also taken into custody on charges of international drug trafficking, criminal conspiracy, incitement, proselytism, drug possession, and distribution. Arrests lasted from a few days to four months of house arrest. In the same year, the Supreme Court of Cassation overturned the arrests and all precautionary measures, and the case was dismissed in 2006. Through a further legal action, Santo Daime requested the return of its sacrament, which was handed back in 2008. Another significant legal proceeding took place in 2012 when a Santo Daime leading figure received ayahuasca by post. The judge, considering the legal precedents of Santo Daime cases in Italy, dismissed the case at the preliminary stage. The ritual leader was released, and the seized Daime was returned (Menozzi 2021).

Over the years, the Italian Santo Daime has won five legal cases, and on three occasions, the Daime was returned to them. According to information gathered from my interviews, in at least five instances, airport police allowed Santo Daime members to travel with Daime and their relative documents. Despite ayahuasca not being regulated in Italy, “these legal precedents indicated a favourable situation rather than a mere legal grey area”, as one of the board members stated. This favourable condition shaped the trajectory of the Santo Daime and other ayahuasca uses in the last years. Sara, a thirty-year member of the Santo Daime, recounts her personal experience of these legal processes:

This news reflects the increasing restrictions in our country. But I feel fortunate that, until 2022, we could hold rituals freely and travel back and forth from Brazil without issue. It felt like a miracle, a respite. I’ve been in Santo Daime for 30 years, and there have been tougher times. In 1995, I couldn’t attend my first ritual because the police came and seized the Daime. For a while, we continued without it, as it had been confiscated. We felt like early Christians in the Catacombs. For me, it was beautiful to sing together. In 2005, several members were arrested. I was one of the few who weren’t, but Marika [another active member] and I feared we’d be next. Our children were young, and my ex, my son’s father, was among those arrested. We prepared our families, even giving them instructions on how to raise our kids if we were arrested too.

In response to the 2022 Decree, the Italian Santo Daime, União do Vegetal, and a small ayahuasca group in southern Italy filed an appeal with the Regional Administrative Tribunal (TAR) of Lazio, requesting a temporary suspension of the ministerial measure. The TAR rejected the appeal, so they lodged an appeal against this ruling with the Council of State. The Council of State likewise rejected the appeal, but indicated that, rather than the annulment of the decree, the religious groups should ask for a controlled and regulated use of the substance through an exemption-based authorisation. When the Ministry of Health finally received these groups, all proposals for collaboration were rejected again. At this point, the Santo Daime submitted an appeal to the TAR against the Ministry’s refusal. A Santo Daime leader explained to me that “under Italian law, the Ministry of Health was required to consult religious institutions such as ours before issuing the decree”. The interviewees also stated that the Ministry of Health did not adequately consider the extensive international and interdisciplinary scientific literature on ayahuasca.

For the participants, it has been a significant challenge to understand how to continue the Santo Daime doctrine without their sacrament. One of the Italian Santo Daime leaders told me, “We

don't agree with it but respect the law". Indeed, adherence to legal frameworks reflects the core values of the religion, such as harmony, love, truth, and justice. For Sara, the purpose of continuing Santo Daime practices in Italy is "to keep open something that is not in the system. This is not just about the Santo Daime". Differently, many members, both *fardados* (official members) and regular participants, disagreed with the decision to suspend and replace the Daime with water, and so they left.

5 Lived Religion and the Ritual Use of Ayahuasca

Religions are social forces operating within a landscape of multiple actors and counterforces and intersecting with other religious and broader social contexts (Lambek 2013). Religions are neither static nor "self-contained spheres", but rather, their ontologies, practices, and cosmologies are constantly evolving, as Knibbe and Kupari (2020) explain. Religions are made by a diverse range of agents, including laypeople, specialists, scholars, and policymakers, whose activities, possibilities, and limitations in framing the religious field are based on their socio-cultural conditions (Hall 1997; Knibbe, Kupari 2020). Therefore, individual actions and social structure dynamically interact in constructing religion-as-lived (Orsi 1985). In particular, Orsi (1985) demonstrates individuals' crucial role in shaping religion through their everyday lives.

If what we call 'religions' are inherently shaped by multiple factors, both religious and secular, and by a variety of actors, analysing this field becomes even more complex when domination, repression, or legal prohibitions impede religious practices, such as the ritual use of psychoactive substances.

Ayahuasca religions, particularly due to their transnational presence, legal status, and cross-cultural dimensions, serve as compelling examples for examining the dynamics between religion, culture, and controlled substances law (Antunes 2021; Labate, Feeney 2014). This article discusses these topics through the lens of the interplay of social structure, ritual practice, and agency. According to Valamiel (2023), ayahuasca religions challenge Western conceptions of religion. Santo Daime members refer to it as a 'spiritual school' and a 'doctrine' rather than a religion. In some ways, Santo Daime departs from institutional religion, yet it needs to be considered a religion to secure its legitimacy in using ayahuasca (Valamiel 2023). Ayahuasca religions have undergone institutionalisation, developing structured forms of order and hierarchy in their ritual and social dimensions to a greater extent than indigenous and other hybrid or urban ayahuasca practices (Sztutman 2003). Institutionalisation has sustained the existence of these religions since their inception and

throughout their diffusion, while striving to avoid being labelled as a drug sect, delegitimation, and the prohibition of ayahuasca use in different countries. Recognising these processes is essential to understanding agency and practice in the studied contexts, especially how Santo Daime has shaped its space and identity over the years.

A central, albeit debated, topic in lived religion concerns the distinctions between prescribed, institutionalised religion and individuals' trajectories, practices, and experiences within the religious sphere; in particular, how religion is practised beyond prescriptions, official texts, and recognised ritual and sacred spaces. As Nancy T. Ammerman (2016) states, a simplistic juxtaposition between everyday life and organised religion is not necessarily helpful in the analysis of lived religion. A dichotomic perspective about the differences between religion-as-prescribed by institutions and religion-as-practised by individuals produces a partial view of the dynamics at the core of individual religiosity (Knibbe, Kupari 2020).

Joseph E. Sanzo (2024) argues that in late antiquity, individuals were situated within multiple religious and cultural contexts, with overlapping hierarchies and power structures, which placed them as both 'orthodox' and 'heretical', depending on social relationships and context. Rather than a dichotomous distinction between elite and non-elite groups, Sanzo's (2024) notion of boundaries highlights the intrinsically ambivalent nature of interreligious practices. Based on these approaches, in this research, I examine the actions of members of an institutionalised yet ostracised religious group, challenging dichotomous perspectives on laypeople's everyday lives and traditional religious institutions.

Since its foundation, the field of lived religion has been deeply connected to theories of practice, especially with Bourdieu's theorisations of how personal and collective daily life is intertwined with structures of power (Knibbe, Kupari 2020). Focusing on practice is crucial to understanding the complex interplay between social structure and individual agency, which underpins both the reproduction and transformation of social systems (Giddens 1984; Vorhölter 2024). Practice reveals social structures and relationships, expresses forms of resistance, alters and reproduces practitioners' social statuses. Therefore, it is essential in understanding the relationship between identity and power (Bourdieu 1977; de Certeau 1984).

Michel de Certeau (1984) theorises the relationship between practice and power, distinguishing between strategies and tactics. Strategies are actions put into practice by groups in power, constantly adapting actions to ever-changing conditions, to reproduce established and dominant structures of power. Tactics are the actions people use to appropriate their spaces in contexts dominated by powerful others. People who are subjected to the

conditions imposed by other dominant groups are not passive or completely without power; they use tactics to create their own space and to resist oppression. Examining the ritual practices studied here, such as the suspension of ayahuasca use, its replacement with water, and new travels, through the lens of tactics highlights how these actions are both adaptations, negotiations, and forms of resistance.

6 Replacing Ayahuasca with Water

When the ICEFLU Italia board decided to interrupt ayahuasca use, local groups adapted logistics, calendar, and ritual practices according to their specific circumstances. Most of the Santo Daime members I interviewed use *acqua diamante* (diamond water) in their rituals, while some drink spring water from their local mountain area or simply tap water.

Acqua diamante and *acqua informata* (informed water) are names given to natural water, which people elevate energetically, raising its vibrational frequency through prayers, words, crystals, and images, based on the principle of water memory. According to the interviewees, these waters have a higher energetic vibration than regular water, and there are several ways to prepare them. Some participants follow the lunar phases, while one person simply placed a jug of water next to a small bottle of Daime, letting it be influenced by its proximity to the sacrament for two hours. Germana, a fifty-year-old member, is responsible for preparing the water used in the rituals in one of the larger groups. She explained that water is a special medium and retains intentions. I interviewed Germana in her kitchen, and she told me that, long before the current legal situation, she had a dream:

More than ten years ago, I had a dream: there was a Santo Daime ceremony, and I was sitting at the table. The only participants were children between five and eight years old, and I thought, “What do we do now?” I then poured the Daime into a jug of water and gave it to the children. This dream had a profound impact on me, so I asked the ritual leader for three drops of Daime. Using a dropper, we measured three drops of Daime and added nine drops of *acqua diamante*. While praying, I multiplied this mixture up to one litre and stored it, calling it *acqua di Daime* (Daime water). It is a kind of homeopathic dosage. In 2022, following the new regulations, we retrieved it, and the water was still fresh. From that original Daime water, I have continued to multiply it using only diamond water, five litres at a time. You can’t achieve with water what Daime provides due to its chemical composition, but it is all about a vibrational level.

The fact that the practice of diluting the Daime with water originates from a dream is particularly significant within the Santo Daime conceptions.



Figure 1-2 Bottles of aqua diamante at the homes of two interviewees. Italy, 2024-25. Photos by Piera Talin

Serving is a fundamental moment of the ritual. Like the Daime, water is served at different moments during the ritual – at the beginning, in the middle, and towards the end. While Daime is typically served two to four times, depending on the length of the ritual, water is given only once or twice. “Water is so potent that you only need one or two servings!” one of the ritual leaders joked with a laugh.

One of the small groups I studied has fewer than six members and uses only the central table, where they sit during the ritual and where the serving also takes place. They used to keep the jug of Daime on the central table, and they now do the same with water. Large groups maintain the usual ritual structure as much as possible, including the *mesa do despacho* (the table where the Daime is served). On this table, placed on the opposite side of the entrance, there are typically jugs of Santo Daime, small glasses, sacred images, flowers, candles, and a basin for washing the glasses. In orderly lines, men approach the table from the right side and women from the left. Mirka, a member for over thirty years, explained:

For me, it’s really important to keep the moment of lining up at the table where the Daime is usually served. Water is poured by someone in charge, just like the Daime. You stand in line, focusing on your intentions before Mestre Irineu. When your turn comes,

they look at you and pour water into a small glass. Many make the sign of the cross before drinking, just as they do with the Daime. These same gestures and bodily sensations are like an anchor.

Most interviewees emphasise that when they first started drinking water, they maintained the usual ritual structure, wearing *fardas* (ritual uniforms), and even fasting just as if they were drinking Daime. This led some to realise how powerful Santo Daime ritual settings are, as Ester remarks: “It felt as if I had drunk Daime”. Differently, others said, “Are they crazy? I don’t feel anything”.

Several of them told me that they didn’t immediately realise how exhausting it could be without Daime: “The first ritual with water was a very beautiful experience from an energetic point of view, but we had not taken into account the tiredness”. Indeed, Santo Daime rituals require sitting in silence or engaging in hours of dancing, singing, and live music, ranging from six to twelve hours for the longest rituals.

Groups gradually adjusted the ritual form to accommodate the logistics and physical needs, rather than spiritual purposes. Adjustments involve various aspects of the ritual, such as shortening its duration, rescheduling official dates to facilitate weekend participation, holding rituals during the day instead of in the evening, and simplifying the decoration of the ritual space: “After two or three rituals, many stopped attending, so we had to rethink the organisation and logistics to keep things simple. Now, we can’t spend hours setting up and taking down decorations anymore. We used to have our star-shaped table and large icons, and now they’re stored in my cellar”.

As part of these adjustments, there have also been changes in the music, which is a crucial aspect of Santo Daime. The two musicians I interviewed, both guitarists, affirmed that playing long *hinários* (hymnals) without the sacrament is extremely exhausting. “After three or four hours, halfway through the ritual, you’re completely drained, with intense pain in your hands and fingers”. Such bodily experiences have brought the members to reframe rituals by singing only part of Mestre Irineu’s *O Cruzeiroinho* (Little Cross) at the end of concentration rituals – from the hymn *Flor das Águas* (Flower of the Waters) onwards – or dividing long *hinários* into smaller sections, singing fifteen hymns per ritual in the months leading up to festivals. “By the time the official date arrives, we have already sung 100 hymns, and on the official day, we complete the remaining ones”.

This ethnographic example highlights the theme of ritual reinvention and how the studied ritual practices are temporally reframed through adjustments to their bodily, material, and structural characteristics in response to legal change.

Rituals are still often perceived as falling into two distinct categories: fixed and authentic forms versus reinvented and flexible ones (Coombes, Brah 2000). Anthropologist Charles Stewart (2011) stresses the importance of analysing the politics and temporalities of rituals to contextualise these dichotomies within specific historical and situated contexts. Politics and temporalities are central to the ritual transformations, practices, and experiences of the Italian Santo Daime examined in this study. Despite the clear intentions behind the suspension of ayahuasca use and participation in rituals with water, continuing Santo Daime rituals without the sacrament is challenging for many of the participants, causing doubts and reflections about the significance of these adaptations: “Why do we sing the hymns of the despacho of the Daime while merely serving water? What is the meaning of this?” Eugenia shared with me:

I faced it head-on – I had to go, partake in the rituals. My bond with the group is strong, and I didn’t want to give up. But deep down, I never accepted it. A part of me wished the leader would tell us to stop with Santo Daime rituals. Each ceremony reopens the wound of having my spiritual life taken away. So, will I stay home on January 5th?¹¹ No, I’m a fardada, an Italian Daimist. That’s how it is. Distance never bothered me before, but now I wonder: why drive 800 km? Yet, I do it, but *obtorto collo* (against my will).

Beyond these doubts and reflections, Santo Daime members hold diverse opinions and judgments about the members who have left. Fabio told me: “From the very beginning, there was some judgment towards those who left because there was no Daime – too easy, some said. I didn’t feel like judging them. The whole doctrine revolves around the Daime, and without the sacrament, it is very difficult to keep the doctrine standing. I felt it too”. These interviews reveal the diverse, and at times conflicting, emotions and reflections of Santo Daime members as they navigate their religious practice without ayahuasca. These ethnographic examples highlight, in Sanzo’s (2024) terms, the boundaries between proper and improper practices and behaviours within the studied group.

The analysis of individual agency frequently highlights creativity and subversion (Knibbe, Kupari 2020). For Laura Leming (2007), religious agency is “a personal and collective claiming and enacting of dynamic religious identity”, which examines how individuals participate in the ongoing processes of structuration and change within social structures, including religious institutions.

11 Eve of the *Dia de Reis* (Kings Day) on the 6th of January, one of the most important celebrations in the Santo Daime calendar.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood (2005), for example, argues that agency, intended as the “capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable”, is not solely manifested in acts of resistance and transgression but can also be found in actions that support and reinforce hegemonic structures and social norms. Alexandra Probst (forthcoming) demonstrates these relations within young Catholic women. Sanzo (2024) argues that, in the dynamics between orthodoxy and heresy, the heretical use of dominant elements targets not the orthodox or powerful but other deviant or less powerful groups, highlighting the multifaceted, blurred, and contextual nature of agency and religious differentiation. In examining the agency and practices of Santo Daime members, it becomes clear that agency is multilayered, arising from the complex interaction of individual and collective dimensions, motivations, bodily experiences, beliefs, and relationships, and materiality, among other factors. These elements collectively shape both personal and communal religious experiences.

7 Pilgrimages: Gender, Family, Time and Money

Another significant change brought about by the 2022 Decree concerns travel as a central part of the Santo Daime culture. Coleman and Elsner (1995) stress the need to look at pilgrimage in the context of culture, not solely as religious events. As a new religious movement, travelling has always been a central dimension of the Santo Daime religion and its transnational and cross-cultural dimension. While the largest Santo Daime groups ceased renting venues within Italy in 2022, they have, in turn, started renting spaces and organising trips abroad to countries where ayahuasca is permitted.

Generally, two types of travel characterise the long-term experience of Santo Daime members. One involves journeys to Santo Daime communities in Brazil, where members can participate in the harvesting and preparation of the sacrament and “know the doctrine from the source”, told me Sara. This includes spending time with the *Padrinhos* and *Madrinhas*, learning from their knowledge, and practising the doctrine as it is lived in Santo Daime communities, where multiple families reside and engage in daily activities and regular gatherings. These gatherings include the rosary at dawn or in the late afternoon, the collective cleaning of public spaces, and rituals beyond those in the official calendar, among other practices.

The other type of travel entails visiting other local groups, both nationally and internationally. This occurs during events such as the *Encontros Europeos* (Santo Daime European Meetings), when Brazilian ritual leaders visit Europe, attracting larger gatherings, as well as for personal reasons such as holidays, international study

exchanges, or business trips. Depending on these circumstances, *visitantes* (members from other churches) participate in one or more rituals in another Santo Daime church. The current legal situation has led Italian Daimistas to increase their travel, visiting other European churches more frequently when they are able.

A new way of travelling has emerged from these legal changes, as Italian Santo Daime churches now organise some rituals abroad. This involves renting a venue, transporting all necessary ritual objects, such as pictures, tables, and buckets, setting up the *salão* (ritual space), and preparing for the ceremony. These gatherings are typically held on weekends to facilitate participation, and they are economically accessible events, ensuring that members with limited financial resources can participate.

The ethnography reveals various factors influencing travel to Santo Daime churches in Europe and Brazil, including gender roles, caregiving duties, finances, and work flexibility. Some Italian members have never travelled abroad, while most visit European churches two to three times a year today. Travelling requires financial means, planning, time off work, and family coordination, as Marika explains: “My husband and I can only participate in a ritual with Daime every six months. We have to plan far in advance, set a budget, make sure other family members can take care of our elderly parents, and take time off work. Before, we used to attend every ritual. Our participation was taken for granted”. Despite her joy of travelling (even to the oldest and largest Santo Daime communities in the Amazon) Marzia emphasised: “I like the Santo Daime in my everyday life. I like my community and the place where I live”. Fabiano highlights the role of hospitality within the doctrine: “When you travel to other churches, it’s not just about you getting to know the others. They also need time to get to know you and understand how you behave in rituals and daily life”.

The Italian Santo Daime groups examined in this article carry out actions that can be interpreted as tactics, as defined by de Certeau (1984). Although the religious practices I studied do not defy but respect legal norms, they become political acts in ritual spaces. I argue that they are ritual tactics and that these ritual spaces become a site of resistance. Ritual change is both imposed by the legal prohibition and chosen as a means to keep the religion alive and to affirm the Santo Daime identity in front of the law. This underscores the multiplicity of factors, meanings, and actors involved in these ritual transformations and how they are practised. In this sense, agency is multi-layered, as well as distributed. The interruption of ayahuasca use by the Santo Daime religion in Italy carries significant implications. By halting the use of their sacrament, the Italian Santo Daime groups demonstrate their respect for the law, despite their disagreement with it, and protect themselves from potential legal

issues. However, in doing so, participants also highlight that, until 2022, the use of ayahuasca was permissible and that the religious practice operated within the bounds of legality. The current moment in Italy is perceived as a possibility to regulate the use of ayahuasca. Sara told me: “Even in Brazil, there was no legality of Santo Daime and we got there. Now we do not drink it because we are fighting for our rights”. For these reasons, in this context, lived religion can be analysed using Orsi’s (2010) framework, described as a “dialectical stance”, where religion, as it is practised every day, constantly shifts “back and forth between structure and agency”, and between vision and reality.

8 Impacts on the Physical, Psychological, and Spiritual Dimensions of People

This final section focuses on the personal experiences of Santo Daime members, specifically examining the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of these adaptations.

When I asked about the physical impact of not drinking Daime after many years of nearly weekly participation in Santo Daime rituals, every interviewee stated that the absence of ayahuasca does not lead to any withdrawal symptoms or cravings. As Mirka explained: “The Daime doesn’t create physical, psychological or religious dependence”. Rather, individuals have noted a diminished psychological and physical well-being. Fernando, a ten-year member, explained: “When I used to drink Daime, it alleviated tensions in my stomach, almost like a medicine. Now, without it, I feel its absence in my body”. According to the interviewees, this affects both everyday life and ritual performance. From a psychological and mental health perspective, Sabrina explained that her participation in Santo Daime is both a spiritual and therapeutic journey:

For me, Santo Daime was truly the saint who lifted me out of a recurring depression. I struggled with feeling like I didn’t belong in this world, but Santo Daime helped me re-enter the world and also start going to church again. Now, I pray daily and attend Mass every two days. Even though they took away the Daime, I don’t want to distance myself from God for any reason. At first, after stopping Daime, things felt normal, but then depression knocked on my door again, bringing back a taste I hadn’t felt in a long time. I see it is looming again. Now I have more tools to cope, but when I was drinking Daime, this didn’t happen. It’s not just an antidepressant; it also brings social connection through our ritual practices.

The relational and communal dimension is, in fact, central in the Santo Daime religion (Talin 2012). Interviewees shared that, at first, they felt deeply saddened that many members left, as these were people they used to see regularly and considered important relationships, part of their *irmandade* (brotherhood). On the other hand, some of the participants in this research saw the positive side of having more time for other activities and projects, such as spending more time with family and friends, and sharing meals and drinks with them. As Cinzia explained: “I used to follow the rule of three days of abstinence before and after each ritual and participated in every scheduled ritual, plus any additional ones. This meant I had no opportunities to drink alcohol. Now, I do the things that most people do: I have a social life and more occasions to drink”.

From the perspective of spiritual practice, some of the interviewees intensified other ritual practices, such as attending church, reading the Gospel and the Koran, and practising yoga. Others did not engage in any other spiritual path. They continue to participate in the Santo Daime, living their faith despite the lack of the Daime. As Sara told me: “Some say that in any case the spirit is the spirit, even without Daime. But for me the two things are not separated”. This also pertains to their interpretation of the current situation and the spiritual ‘work’ involved: Emanuele added: “The absence of the sacrament forces us to a greater depth, which is not induced by its effects but by our own will. This situation helps us draw closer to the Holy Spirit”.

These ethnographic examples stress the embodied nature of religious practice (Knibbe, Kupari 2020; McGuire 2007). In ayahuasca religions, as well as in other traditions where altered states of consciousness are sought through music, dance, physical deprivation, and the use of psychoactive substances. Therefore, the body plays a crucial role in ayahuasca’s experience and ritual performance. Marika stresses that ayahuasca rituals are embodied practices: “With the legal change, I felt the Santo Daime lacked its essence. This is a practice; only faith is another thing”. Embodiment and experience lie at the core of lived religion and its contribution to understanding how religion is practised and situated in social life (Ammerman 2016). For McGuire (2007), embodied practices are “ritual and expressive activities in which spiritual meanings and understandings are embedded in and accomplished through the body”, expressing and reproducing different kinds of spiritual experiences. She stresses that intense bodily experiences are considered integral to achieving heightened spiritual awareness (McGuire 2007). For Merleau-Ponty, the body is the vehicle through which individuals engage with the world, meaning that the “lived body”, emotions, and extraordinary experiences are essential to the analysis of how religion is situated within social life (according to McGuire 2007). In rituals with water, the bodily experience, deprived of ayahuasca’s effects, is still at the

core of the experience. In these adjusted ritual forms, the body serves as an indicator of what is needed for participants to tolerate the fatigue and physical pain of performing long rituals crafted around ayahuasca's effects, without using ayahuasca.

9 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has examined the lived dimension of the Santo Daime religion in the wake of the legal ban on ayahuasca in Italy, exploring how practitioners navigate continuity and change in their ritual practices and everyday lives. In response to the legal prohibition, the group has pursued legal action and reconfigured its ritual practices, suspending the use of ayahuasca and replacing it with water, even though ayahuasca plays a central role in the group's religious ceremonies.

This has also led them to develop new forms of religious travel to countries where the use of ayahuasca is legally permitted. Rather than simply accepting the legal prohibition, this study demonstrates that these modifications serve as *ritual tactics* aimed at preserving the stability of the Santo Daime doctrine in Italy and advancing the legal struggle for religious rights. In this way, members also actively negotiate their religious identity with the State.

The analysis highlights a creative engagement with their religion, while revealing various consequences for members and their religious practice, including the impact of legal changes on their mental health, social life, and financial ability to travel abroad to participate in their religion. The analysis of these contexts shows that agency is multi-layered, functioning both as a means of resisting and adapting to repressive legal frameworks and as a way of shaping and reinforcing identity in front of legality and other ayahuasca users.

This study demonstrates that lived religion, particularly when practised in restrictive or oppressive contexts, consists of temporary and multi-layered forms of agency and practice, which reconfigure ritual forms in fluid and transitional ways. The studied adaptations of ritual forms and embodied practices show how ritual change can be temporary and malleable due to legal, social, and cultural factors. The body is central to ayahuasca ritual experiences as well as to the modifications of ritual forms without ayahuasca. Practitioners' lived experiences highlight the intertwinements between ayahuasca's effects, ritual time, and performance, and thus provide insight into religion-as-practised.

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