Bia Labate, PhD Candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Campinas, spoke to us about the public debate and competing discourses around Ayahuasca, a psychoactive brew of two plant extracts used around the world in shamanism, healing, sorcery, divination, warfare, and hunting. Because one of the plants, *psychotria viridis*, contains the Schedule I narcotic DMT, Ayahuasca (the bush, the extract from the bush, and the preparation) has been subjected to a number of diverse regulations worldwide. Labate showed how these regulations are embedded in different local and global discourses, producing new meanings and uses for Ayahuasca. In Brazil it is allowed for ritual and religious use, though not therapeutic use. Whereas in Peru it is considered the “traditional medicine of the indigenous people” and protected as cultural heritage. In the U.S. the regulation of Ayahuasca created tensions between religious freedom and drug laws; for the moment religious freedom has prevailed. While in France Ayahuasca was connected to brainwashing by cults and sects, creating a total ban that includes not just the extract but the bush as well. Through these examples, Labate showed how Ayahuasca became entangled in discourses of religious liberty, traditional medicine, personal use, and religious cults.

In the second half of her talk Labate discussed competing narratives of therapeutic vs. religious use and harm vs. healing. She showed how these categories were difficult to define and took on different contours based on national and cultural specificities. These categories raise important and difficult questions: How do you define a religion? How do you insert traditional medicine into a public health system? Is scientific legitimization the only route to prove therapeutic properties? How can we define and police cultural authenticity? As different groups try to answer these questions, Labate argues that there is a reciprocal appropriation of legal, anthropological, biomedical discourses. For example, the anthropological category of “ceremony” is taken up by shamans who prepare Ayahuasca. As a sacred ceremony rather than a practice of everyday life, “the Ayahuasca ceremony” is something that can be marketed at pan-indigenous festivals. Labate concluded her talk by arguing for the space of the social sciences in this debate; she believes that if Ayahuasca is studied only in a biomedical framework that we lose important insights into cross-pollination of discourses and identities that happens in this collision of legal, biomedical, and religious categories.

In the Q&A members of the audience were interested in categories that betrayed the simple equation of Ayahuasca with DMT. Andrew Matthews, drawing from his fieldwork on forestry in Mexico, suggested that defining Ayahuasca as more than just the drug could be important for these questions of regulation. Guillermo Delgado suggested that it was necessary to use specific indigenous terms for Ayahuasca use rather than use anthropological or pan-indigenous terms like “shamanism.” Martha Kenney asked if the term “sacred technology” that appeared in the
newsletter description of the talk was a useful term in Labate’s work. Craig Reinerman asked about the value of the sociological categories of “set and setting” for understanding how “the same drug” can have different effects in different cultures.

As Labate answered these and other questions, she provided a greater sense of the complexity of Ayahuasca worlds. She explained, for example, how psychotria viridis was introduced to Hawaii (and the crisis of regulation that ensued), how she tried to understanding Ayahuasca as inducing the experience of “becoming plant,” how “shamanism” is a term that is embraced by many indigenous Ayahuasca preparers, and how environmental regulations were taking the place of drug regulations in some contexts. By illustrating the complexities involved in the global understanding and regulation Ayahuasca, Labate illustrated how the skills of social scientists can contribute to the ongoing dialogue.