

Materializing morality: religious drug use in Amazonian popular Catholicism (*)

Matthew Meyer
University of Virginia

This modern world is fascinated with drugs. One might even say that we moderns fetishize drugs—and I mean this in the pejorative sense: we attribute to them magical and agentive powers that actually belong to human social relations. This is equally true whether we are talking about drugs in the sense of pharmaceuticals—silver bullets that will put us in control of nature, sickness, and frailty—or the more widespread, unmarked sense of drugs as dangerous, exotic, even alluring substances that offer us a Faustian pact: a feeling of temporary transcendence in trade for moral ruin.

Perhaps we students of drugs and drug use have progressed beyond the fetishism of drugs. Constructs such as Zinberg's "drug, set, and setting" have helped us to include situational and cultural aspects in our analyses of the social meanings and subjective experiences of drugs. More recent work, such as Philippe Bourgois's study of crack dealers in El Barrio, has done for drug dealing something like what Evans-Pritchard did for Azande "witchcraft," giving it a plausible social logic so that we can see an alternative to the uncut pathologizing of individuals and communities that engage in these practices. But while Bourgois makes it clear why Primo and the rest would look to drug entrepreneurship as a means toward some version of the "American Dream," the larger system of which drug consumption is a part is mostly naturalized, with the subjective appeal of crack use seeming to be given by the fact of structural racism.

What I want to do in this paper is to offer a perspective on drug use that, precisely because of its distance from commonsense notions of motivations for making, distributing, and consuming drugs, may help us really give up our habit of naturalizing drugs.

Between 2002 and 2007 I carried out approximately fourteen months of fieldwork in the Brazilian Amazon, in the states of Acre and Amazonas. The focus of my work was the so-called Brazilian ayahuasca religions, a congeries of folk Catholic brotherhoods which, over the last century, have integrated the production and consumption of the psychoactive indigenous plant drug ayahuasca into their ritual practice. In the last three decades, the expansion of some of these groups to places beyond the Amazon, including North America and Western Europe, has brought the question of their legality to the forefront.

In the rest of this paper I will sketch the moral context of ayahuasca production and consumption at Alto Santo, the brotherhood that I studied most closely, and then ask what lessons about defining drugs we might draw from this ethnographic example.

Alto Santo

The founder of the Alto Santo brotherhood was a man named Irineu Serra, one of the tens of thousands of poor migrants from Brazil's arid north and northeast who went to the Amazon to work in the rubber boom, which lasted from about 1850 to 1920. According to Alto Santo lore, Irineu Serra learned of ayahuasca around 1920 while working for the Territorial Guard in the border region between Brazil and Peru. In the 1930s he established himself as a small farmer and began holding spiritual sessions with ayahuasca in Rio Branco, capital of the Acre territory. Irineu Serra's rituals combined aspects of Peruvian ayahuasca curing, such as whistled melodies to call the spirits, with cosmological ideas and ritual forms from folk Catholicism and Spiritism.

Around 1945 Irineu Serra, accompanied by a number of followers, moved his residence to a large parcel of land on the city's outskirts that was donated by the government as an agricultural colony. (Such colonies were one of the main ways the Brazilian state attempted to deal with the fallout of the rubber economy's collapse in 1912.) He called the place Alto Santo, or Holy Heights, in reference to its topographical situation on an escarpment and to his intention that it be the seat of his spiritual mission.

This mission, according to Alto Santo oral history, was given to Irineu Serra during his time in the borderlands by the Virgin Mary herself, who appeared to him during an ayahuasca vision in the guise of the "Queen of the Forest." Ayahuasca, which is quite widespread in indigenous and mestizo cultural contexts in the upper Amazon, has traditionally had an ambiguous moral valence, being used to bring good fortune to the hunt, to divine the future, to cure, and to do spiritual battle with enemies. In the "mission" that the Forest Queen gave to Irineu Serra, however, ayahuasca was to be a force for good alone:

Instead of the "devils" that the mestizos were said to encounter with ayahuasca, Irineu Serra saw the Virgin herself! "What you are seeing now," she is supposed to have asked him during their encounter, "do you think anyone has seen it before?" He was not certain, since "so many have drunk this drink," but she assured him, with the persuasive force only the divine can muster, that it was indeed a new revelation.

Such claims to uniqueness are the stuff of which prophetic movements are made. The point here is that this key moment removes ayahuasca from its ambiguous moral context and discursively authorizes its insertion into a Christian cosmology. In recognition of the

transformation of ayahuasca into a vehicle of Christian communion, Irineu Serra re-baptized it “Daime,” a nominalized form of the Portuguese rogative “give me,” a frequent supplication to the divine in the brotherhood’s hymns. I’ll use the term Daime in the remainder of this paper to distinguish it, as a cultural product, from the sense of ayahuasca as a pharmacological entity.

Making Daime at Alto Santo

Unlike pharmaceutical or black market drug production, with its ideals of efficiency, purity, and potency, making Daime at Alto Santo is about cultivating Christian virtues and honoring the relationship between Irineu Serra and the Forest Queen.

A special subset of the brotherhood, known as the Bush Crew [*Equipe da mata*], is charged with the transformation of the raw materials from the forest into the sacramental drink taken by the entire group.

In the first days following the new moon, the Bush Crew must harvest the vine, which in Linnaean terminology is *Banisteriopsis caapi*, and the leaf, *Psychotria viridis*, that are used in making Daime. Although today these plants are often cultivated in backyards or planted in secondary forest, the process is still characterized as “going into the bush.”

Before each *feitio*, as the preparation of Daime is called, the Bush Crew members—all of them men—are expected to purify themselves by adhering to a “diet” centered on sexual abstinence, but also including dietary and social precautions, such as taking extra care to avoid arguments and dissension with their fellows.

These ritual taboos echo practices of the Peruvian *vegetalista* curing traditions from which Irineu Serra learned to use ayahuasca, but their moral valence is different: rather than a means to accumulating greater personal power, at Alto Santo the abstinences of the “diet” are indexes of the community’s moral status as a whole and of the individual’s commitment to its moral code. The Bush Crew must purify themselves morally to demonstrate to the divine that they have put aside disunity through mutual forgiveness and humility before God.

As a member of the brotherhood told me, “Daime absorbs the intentions of those who make it, so if someone doesn’t respect the diet, it affects the quality of the spiritual work that we do with the Daime.” Likewise, it is thought to bode well for the Daime, and by extension for the congregation’s spiritual work with it, if the Bush Crew unites in its task, thus proving itself worthy of divine intercession.

During the *feitio*, or production of Daime, the Bush Crew is isolated in a special “house” at the edge of the forest. This house is a sacred place that most members of the brotherhood never enter, and which is specially restricted during the *feitio*. Ideally, Bush Crew members perform their work with a contemplative demeanor: they cut firewood to heat the ovens, pound the vines with hardwood mallets, and move 100-liter pots on and off the fire. Everything is done by hand under the supervision of the Daime maker because “that’s the way Mestre Irineu taught.”

The marked traditionalism of this process implicitly contrasts it with economies of mass production, in which the goal is to make more product with less effort. The contrast is made explicit in Alto Santo talk about the total impropriety of selling Daime, a charge that is sometimes leveled at rogue members of other brotherhoods. According to oral history, the Forest Queen told Irineu Serra that he must never charge for his spiritual ministrations, since he himself received the power of Daime as a gift. This suggests that Daime is intended to circulate within a gift economy rather than a commodity market, as does the notion that makers of Daime imbue the substance with something of their own person.

This mingling of persons within the substance of Daime gives rise to a moral economy at Alto Santo that connects the social life of the brotherhood to the initiatory relationship Irineu Serra had with the Forest Queen. In performing the *feitio*, the members of the Bush Crew draw on the iconic resemblance between the contemporary congregation and the founder’s epiphany. He, alone in the forest, kept the diet in anticipation of meeting the Virgin, then was authorized by her to bring ayahuasca to Christians in the town. They, likewise, periodically renew the relationship by going carefully into a place in which the sylvan is linked to the urban, the indigenous to the Christian, and the past to the present.

Daime’s medial position between these sets of contrasts is part of what motivates its value as a sign capable of rooting the families of the rubber boom migration in the local landscape.

The opposition between Daime and “drugs” is another important aspect of its value. The category is invoked in documents read regularly during rituals, where it is grouped with “bad habits that may diminish our personal morality.” Drugs commonly used in the region, such as cocaine and cannabis, tend to be understood within the brotherhood as harmful substances that lead to organic deterioration, failure to fulfill social obligations, even alienation from reality. In other words, Alto Santo ideas of drugs resemble, in many respects, widespread commonsense notions in which they are granted epidemic status and morally corrosive agency.

It is this constellation of signs against which Alto Santo members chart the nature and significance of Daime.

Conclusions: Materializing morality

Alto Santo use of Daime does not imply a radical critique of the globalized discourse of drug control. The fact that “drugs” are condemned at Alto Santo as substances that corrode morality makes it clear that we are dealing, not with an open embrace of altered states of consciousness, but with a culture in which the category of drugs helps structure the value of Daime as an anti-drug, an anti-commodity, and a sacred substance. At Alto Santo Daime is strongly associated with pro-social values derived from Christianity: forgiving one’s fellows to be forgiven by the divine; helping one another; showing integrity in one’s word and deed; displaying steadfastness in face of the “world of sin.”

The fact that there is so much different in the ways that Daime is produced and consumed from, say, the systems of production, distribution, and consumption of cocaine might seem to make comparison between the two untenable. But these differences should stimulate our inquiry, rather than convince us that we are dealing with apples and oranges. A proper ethnographic investigation would bring together a number of variables, including assumptions about the nature of the substance, the motivations of those who produce it, distribute and consume it, its semantic relationship to other categories (food, kinship, work), even the technical aspects of its extraction and refinement. All these are variables whose importance will be revealed to the extent that we stop taking for granted the cultural work that goes into making drugs desirable and available. To do otherwise is to fetishize drugs, because it means taking as naturally given phenomena that are socially and culturally constituted.

This paper was originally presented at the annual meetings of the Society for Applied Anthropology, Santa Fe, New Mexico, March 17-21, 2009.

Reference for quotation: Meyer, Matthew. Materializing morality: religious drug use in Amazonian popular Catholicism (2010). Núcleo de Estudos Interdisciplinares sobre Psicoativos (NEIP). Available at: www.neip.info