

7 Aussiewaska

A cultural history of changa and ayahuasca analogues in Australia

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Introduction

While the complexities of the global ayahuasca proliferation have drawn the attention of scholars in recent years, the cultural career of DMT (N,N-dimethyltryptamine) remains conspicuously under-researched. Most known for its role in the ayahuasca brew – where it is orally potentiated by beta-carboline harmala alkaloids contained in the liana *Banisteriopsis caapi* – the tryptamine compound DMT has made an independent, if gradual, release into the modern cultural bloodstream. DMT's psychopharmacological actions were discovered in 1956 (Szára, 1956) after which it was identified within psychiatry as a “psychotomimetic,” before its appearance as a recreational drug in the 1960s and subsequent classification as a “dangerous drug” with “no medicinal value.”² Given these developments, along with its recognized occurrence throughout world flora and mammals (Shulgin & Shulgin, 1997), its “coming out” in the 1990s–2000s as an “entheogen” (Ott, 1996) enabling access to higher dimensional “hyperspace” (McKenna, 1991), and its role in customizable “ayahuasca analogues,” DMT has had a complex career of its own (see St John, 2015a). DMT is responsible for sudden and short-lasting (20- to 30-minute) effects ranging from complex geometric patterns and synesthesia to out-of-body states and encounters with disincarnate beings, and its impact is apparent within a networked cultural movement of experimentalists, artists, and alchemists. While today recognized as a serotonergic neurotransmitter that crosses the blood-brain barrier, where it has an affinity with various receptor sites (Hanna & Taylor, n.d.), and where its endogenicity to humans has prompted its veneration as “the spirit molecule” (Strassman, 2001) and “the brain's own psychedelic” (Strassman, 2008), the ubiquity of DMT throughout nature and its purpose within the human brain remain a mystery.

The enigmatic character of DMT has helped nourish the ambivalent status it has earned vis-à-vis ayahuasca – from which it has grown independent and to which it remains attached. This tension has dynamized innovation and characterizes debates that are the subject of this chapter. Addressing the career of an Australian invention, this chapter explores the characteristics and implications of this in/dependent tension. Promoted as a “smokeable ayahuasca,” enabling the “ayahuasca effect,” and thereby inheriting the troubled logic of the “ayahuasca

analogue,” *changa* (sometimes referred to colloquially as “aussiewaska,” and explained in greater detail below) is found to be as much, if not more, a vehicle to facilitate an accessible DMT effect. While the pharmacological synergy endogenous to ayahuasca – and indeed its iconic vine – is implicit to *changa*, the existence of this innovation is reliant on independent, esoteric, and enigmatic features characteristic to the use and effects of DMT. Before discussing *changa* and its purported association with ayahuasca, I first outline interrelated practices characterizing DMT use within the entheogenic movement.

Enigmatic DMT and entheoliminality

In this chapter, I recognize DMT user practices under three broad and interwoven use modalities: gnostic, neoshamanic, and ludic. To begin with, DMT use has been closely associated with the deeply personal experience of gnosis, where the experient as seeker or “traveler” arrives at an awareness of the intrinsic nature of reality (i.e., as “it” truly is), a truth-bearing destination to which they may have been previously occulted. As “entheogens” enabling the awakening of the divine within (Ruck, Bigwood, Staples, Ott, & Wasson, 1979), DMT and other tryptamines inaugurate transparencies typically involving a realization of disconnection or alienation from one’s higher self, nature, and relations. Enabling such an “awakening,” DMT is often approached as a sacrament and, in this way, it can be likened to the use of psilocybin-containing mushrooms, mescaline, or indeed ayahuasca in nontraditional contexts, as explained by Wouter Hanegraaff:

Entheogenic sacraments like ayahuasca are credited with the capacity of breaking mainstream society’s spell of mental domination and restoring us from blind and passive consumers unconsciously manipulated by “the system” to our original state of free and autonomous spiritual beings. . . . They are seen as providing *gnosis*: a salvational knowledge of the true nature of one’s self and of the universe, which liberates the individual from domination by the cosmic system.

(Hanegraaff, 2011, p. 88)

As an integral component of ayahuasca, but also as a distinct agent, DMT carries this liberating potentiality, and it can be studied within the context of what Hanegraaff (2013) has identified as “entheogenic esotericism,” which takes its previously neglected place in the history of Western esotericism. Among the unassuming figureheads of “entheogenic esotericism,” psychonautical raconteur Terence McKenna is notable here, not least because he championed the gnostic significance of tryptamines (McKenna, 1993), reporting that DMT facilitates a near-death experience. McKenna was renowned for his formative experiences with the “machine elves from hyperspace,” bearers of gnosis possessing science-fictional personas not inconsistent with Erik Davis’ perception, as reported in *Rolling Stone*, that “there’s something about the televisual, hyperdimensional, data-dense grandiosity of the DMT flash that seems to resonate with today’s

globalized, hyperreal culture” (Grigoriadis, 2006). While Davis’ experiences are consistent with the effects reported from smoking synthetic DMT, they appear to contrast with the experiences reported by pharmacognostic technician D. M. Turner. Bioassaying harmala alkaloids mixed with DMT in smoking blends that prolonged the effects by up to 30 minutes, Turner reported:

I often feel that my body and Being are ‘embraced’ by an ancient earth spirit. And this earth spirit is instructing me to become aware of, and open up, many lines of communication that exist between my mind, body and the external world.

(Turner, 1994, p. 78)

While DMT use is characterized by a range of techgnostic and alchemical practices, it has also been adopted as a self-therapeutic tool in the neoshamanic practice of psychotechnology. In research on out-of-body and contact experiences among Australian DMT users, Des Tramacchi (2006, p. 29) documented practices of “self-shamanizing,” where modern subjects become “their own clients and their own healers,” seeking remedies for alienation and “soul loss” compatible with desired liberation from dependence on biomedical solutions. Finally, since its adoption among small circles of users in the 1960s, DMT is used recreationally, with smoking blends using DMT and other compounds (including *B. caapi*) derived from botanical sources becoming pivotal to this development. Here, DMT space, or “hyperspace,” may be accessed as much or more for its pleasurable, playful, or virtual effects than for divinatory purposes and curative outcomes. But while a “recreational” trajectory could be conflated with usages that are trivial or inconsequential, it seems sanguine to follow the lead of Jonathan Ott, who, circumscribing the modern extramedical use of DMT and other entheogens, preferred the term *ludibund* and its variant *ludible* – deriving from the Latin *ludere* meaning, literally, “playful, full of play” (1996, p. 16). Such terminology recognizes that, if not strictly entheogenic, use may be no less serious, particularly given that “play” transgresses boundaries (e.g., those separating consciousness from unconsciousness, the material from the spiritual, and lawful behavior from its antithesis). In the age of prohibition, in which DMT is classified as a “dangerous drug” with abusive potential, play is suffused with danger; that is, where DMT is forbidden, players are outlaws. But, lest playfulness be made consonant with abusiveness to one’s health and well-being, it serves to be reminded that DMT, like other psychedelics, and unlike those drugs with which they are typically classified and scheduled (e.g., heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine), is nonaddictive.

These use modalities do not necessarily live together peacefully. For instance, adherents of the entheogenic/gnostic modality will caution that the potential for commercial exploitation increases as accessibility expands. These cultural trends affect the proliferation of DMT as their integrated actions modulate the adoption of changa. As perhaps best illustrated by the user community at the DMT-Nexus,³ DMT culture crystalizes at the juncture of these gnostic, shamanic, and ludic trends, which are at the same time integral to a networked entheogenic movement

where *Psilocybe cubensis*, San Pedro, *Salvia divinorum*, iboga, and, of course, ayahuasca, among others, are venerated as “plant allies.” Collaborating with these allies, movement participants research and develop techniques of synthesis; identify botanical sources; share methods of extraction, cultivation, and propagation; augment delivery techniques; build guidelines for safe practice (Nickels, 2014); create visionary art and music; and forge rhetorical strategies for explicating phenomenological experiences (Doyle, 2011). This disparate user-culture has fashioned a variegated ritual practice, quite distinguished from ayahuasca rituals, even the neoshamanic variations. While DMT trance may inaugurate “cultural critique,” like that identified among ayahuasca drinkers in Australia (see Gearin, Chapter 6 in this volume), compared with ceremonial and purgative ayahuasca trance, the typical DMT trance ritual is virtualized, private, and accelerated. Participants typically comport themselves as traveler-initiates who “break through” into DMT “hyperspace” – a quintessentially liminal space-time. Dreadful and wonderful, affirmative and subversive, occasioning veridical aesthetics arriving with a compelling familiarity, the DMT breakthrough is a potent threshold for travelers.

Given the complex range of variables involved (i.e., “set” and “setting”), including the modalities of use described above, the outcome of DMT use is notoriously uncertain. And yet, what remains common to its use is the abrupt potency of the experience, with “travelers” reporting varying “returns” – e.g., beliefs shaken, novel dispensations, patterns of responsibility, like those evident in Oroc’s *Tryptamine Palace* (2009). While Oroc assumed the status of a “modern mystic” who found “G/d” – on DMT relative 5-MeO-DMT milked from the venom of the *Bufo alvarius* toad – and delivered the word, for a great many tryptamine travelers, the “goal” is a liminal condition enabled by venerated alkaloids and their synergistic effects. This is typically not the liminality native to conventional curative or divinatory rites, nor a traditional rite of passage where the neophyte will assume a status at the terminus of a symbolic pathway (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1967). It appears that DMT’s modern users value its analogues more for threshold effects than for the medicinal outcomes that have been documented in a range of ethnobotanical contexts (Schultes & Hofmann, 1979; Ott, 1996), and which are typical of ayahuasca shamanism (Labate & Cavnar, 2014). Not simply awakening divinity within, *entheoliminality* augments and prolongs the inner divine, constituting a set of practices which, often sans intended telos, is directed at that which is happening *now* (e.g., being, grace, existence). This appears consistent with the optimization of *liminal being* within psychedelic electronica (see St John, 2015b), where the interventions of disc jockey/producer technoshamans are devised not to orchestrate the transformation-of-being and status, but a superliminal state of *being in transit* (St John, 2012; Forthcoming), and where sensory technologies, visionary arts, and shamanic plants are adopted to shatter social conditioning and augment visionary experiences; this is not dissimilar to that which is available to participants within the “New Edge” milieu (see Zandbergen, 2011).

While possessing an independent identity and enigmatic liminality characteristic of its modern and contemporary use, DMT remains most known for its role

as a component of ayahuasca. As Oroc (*Tryptamine Palace*, n.d.) comments, ayahuasca use has become “the most commonly available method for individuals to experience both the psychotropic qualities of DMT and the shamanic metamorphosis of death-and-rebirth.” While the identity of DMT is then tied to ayahuasca (like a child to its mother), it is a relationship fraught with ambivalence, echoing DMT’s enigmatic status and perceived de/evolution from ayahuasca. This complex dynamic was apparent at the outset of the “countercultural” gravitation toward yagé, principally through the agency of beat outlaw William Burroughs, for whom yagé (and DMT) assumed a grail-like function. For Burroughs, ayahuasca was “the secret,” a magnetic force that held an occult promise to bestow shamanic/sorcerous powers (e.g., “telepathy” and “divination”); his approach became an amalgam of transgressive adventure and spiritual journey, an ambiguity partly documented in epistolary narrative with Allen Ginsberg in *The Yage Letters* (Burroughs & Ginsberg, 2000 [1963]). This “secret” compelled the desperate “junk”-addicted Burroughs to journey to the Amazon in the early 1950s, originally chasing yagé and eventually injecting a crude DMT synthesis called “Prestonia” in Tangier in 1961 (Harrup, 2010). For more details on Burroughs’ motives and experiences, see St John (2015a, Chapter 2). It had been discovered that the vapors of freebase crystal DMT could be smoked with powerful effect by underground chemist Nick Sand in early 1960s Brooklyn (Hanna, 2009); by 1965, it would astonish Terence McKenna, and subsequently his brother Dennis McKenna, who together trekked to the Putumayo region of Columbia in 1971 in search of “the secret” (McKenna & McKenna, 1975; McKenna, 1993). In subsequent decades, while Terence became an international emissary for the “machine elves” as a renowned ethnopharmacologist, Dennis mapped the psychotropic role of DMT in ayahuasca’s synergistic mechanism. Throughout this development, interwoven interests in the sacramental, instrumental, and transgressive characteristics of DMT are apparent; a mosaic found in subsequent experiments.

The ayahuasca effect and experimental anahuasca

Integral to the story of entheoliminalization recounted in this chapter is the development of practices invested in knowledge of ayahuasca’s unique alchemy. As Ott has commented, the “ingenious discovery by South American Indians of the ayahuasca effect – conceivably the most sophisticated pharmacognostical discovery ever made in the archaic world – bids fair to revolutionize contemporary, nontraditional entheobotany of visionary shamanic inebriants” (Ott, 1999, p. 176). While plant synergies have been implicitly understood among Amazonian ayahuasqueros for millennia, it was not until the late 1960s that ethnobotanists hypothesized that monoamine oxidase (MAO)-inhibiting⁴ beta-carboline alkaloids were affecting the activity of DMT in snuffs and ayahuasca (Holmstedt & Lindgren, 1967; Agurell, Holmstedt, & Lindgren, 1968). Even then, it wasn’t until a series of experiments with rats (McKenna, Towers, & Abbott, 1984), human bioassays (Gracie & Zarkov, 1986; Ott, 1996) and systematic psychonautical experiments with “pharmahuasca” – using precise measurements of pure DMT

and beta-carbolines (Ott, 1994; 1999) – that this hypothesis was confirmed. For his experience on a threshold dose of 120 mg of harmine combined with 30 mg of DMT, Ott found that “effects were quite similar to what I have enjoyed with genuine Amazonian ayahuasca potions in Brasil [sic], Ecuador and Peru” (1999, p. 173). Once the “ayahuasca effect” (Ott, 1999, p. 172) had been discovered, non-Amazonian botanical and chemical sources were experimented with, and the results were referred to as “ayahuasca analogues.” *The Entheogen Review* (1992–2008) was renowned for promoting ayahuasca analogues, especially those found and cultivated in temperate zones:

Creating an approximation of ayahuasca using analogue plants was as simple as making a pot of coffee. A few plants were potent enough to simply run through a wheatgrass juicer, dry, and smoke. In addition, acid–base extraction procedures geared toward enthusiasts with no chemistry background were published. Most chemicals needed to perform extractions were available at hardware stores.

(Hanna & Taylor, n.d.)

Temperate-zone analogues supplying sources of DMT and MAOI inhibitors (MAOIs) were referred to by Dennis McKenna (in Ott, 1996, p. 245) as “ayahuasca borealis,” while Ott has used “anahuasca” for analogues of ayahuasca (Ott, 1994; 1995; 1996).

With the discovery of DMT and MAOI alkaloids in increasing numbers of botanicals, the “ayahuasca effect” seemed poised for an illustrious future. As Ott (1999, p. 174) recognized, since there were more than 70 each of MAOI and DMT-containing plants known at that time, there were several thousand possible combinations, each yielding a unique psychedelic effect; and each of these combinations were compounded by a variety of social, environmental, and personal factors. The staggering array of possibilities and concomitant effects calls attention to the troubling appeal of “ayahuasca analogues,” a problem amplified where commercially available botanicals (e.g., tryptamines and harmala alkaloids) are promoted to facilitate an “ayahuasca effect.” While recent studies, the current volume included, illustrate that dynamic experimentalism is implicit to the phenomenon of ayahuasca, both in its globalizing practices and at its foundations, an apparent “smokeable ayahuasca” is an advent testing the limits of “ayahuasca.”

Aussiewaska

Terence McKenna’s visit to Australia in 1997 would be among the last international adventures of this champion of the neopsychedelic movement. It would be a fitting destination for McKenna’s mission, considering that a self-entitled commitment to leisure, pleasure, and mobility is particularly advanced among Australia’s European descendants. By the time he stepped from the airplane, an underground milieu with an evolved leisure apparatus of its own greeted the man whose message was to open one’s life to chaos and become part of the “will of the

world soul.” In a lecture at the Beyond the Brain club at the Epicentre in Byron Bay, McKenna shared the wisdom that DMT can be extracted from species of local *Acacia*, referred to colloquially as the “wattle.” As he commented at the time, “the national symbol of Australia is the wattle. It’s an *Acacia*. The *Acacia* ecology of Australia is jammed with DMT.”⁵ Perhaps McKenna had been reading a review copy of *TIHKAL: The Continuation*, where Alexander Shulgin digresses “into a bit of ‘Down-Under’ history,” fascinated as he was with the identification among Australians with the genus *Acacia* (there are over 700 species of *Acacia* native to Australia), and especially the “golden wattle” (*A. pycnantha*):

The first Wattle Club was formed in 1899, and in 1910 the first national Wattle day was celebrated in Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne on September 1. Songs and poems were written, and sprigs of Wattle were worn on lapels. The movement grew like topsy. It was used for fund-raising for charities and for public morale connected with the World War I war efforts. There were Wattle queens elected and crowned, Wattle Day badges were worn, and every one pinned on a small sprig of it to wear to school. On the first of September, 1988, at a ceremony in Canberra, the Golden Wattle was officially proclaimed Australia’s national floral emblem.

(Shulgin & Shulgin, 1997, p. 264)

Shulgin then quotes a nursery rhyme recited by a host on a visit he made to Sydney:

Here is the Wattle.
The emblem of our land.
You can stick it in a bottle
Or hold it in your hand
(Shulgin & Shulgin,
1997, pp. 263–264)

This slice of history had already been remixed by local psychonauts, as apparent in the opening lines of “The Pipe Song,” written in 1996 by Neil Pike for his band, The Pagan Love Cult:

This is the wattle
symbol of our scene
you can smoke it in a bottle
or eat with harmaline.

These repurposed lines blink in sharp-hued neon at a critical juncture in the formation of an Australian ethnobotanical synergy, sometimes referred to as an “ayahuasca analogue,” but also designated colloquially, and less contentiously, as “aussiehuasca” or “aussiewaska.” These designations refer to brews and smoking blends where the DMT is sourced from local *Acacias*, with the harmalas sourced typically, but not exclusively, from *B. caapi*. As the historical detail above

implies, *Acacia* is iconically Australian, a circumstance relished by those who cultivate alternative – and sometimes more ancient – visions of “country.” While the “golden wattle” is not itself a widely used source of DMT, phytochemical analyses have purportedly identified DMT in its phyllodes.⁶

While the idea that DMT could be sourced from the Australian floral emblem filled McKenna with enthusiasm, locals had been bioassaying acacias prior to his arrival. Recognizing that harmala inhibited MAO, and thereby potentiated DMT when taken orally (and smoked), they had been discovering botanical sources and combining alkaloids to this end since at least the early 1990s. Entheo-cogniscent were already aware of what they might stumble across in their own backyard – i.e., more DMT-bearing plants (at least 150 species) than anywhere else on the planet. In fact, “big joints of wattle were being passed around the audience” during McKenna’s *Beyond the Brain* appearance (Neil Pike, personal communication, December 8, 2014). The protean culture hero in this story is a brilliant, experimental, and anonymous University of Sydney chemistry student who uncovered crucial botanical information in a 1990 CSIRO publication, *Plants for Medicines*, guiding him to northeastern New South Wales, where he extracted DMT from locally sourced *Acacia maidenii*. The student reported bioassays in an article published in the student newspaper, *Honi Soit*, in 1992, with extraction methodology subsequently leaking to the Internet via alt.drugs newsgroups, the visionary plants forum The Lycaenum, and Erowid (Sputnik, n.d.). Among those who read the *Honi Soit* article was Nen, a then-recent graduate of psychology and ancient history at the University of Sydney, who befriended the chemist and learned his extraction method. Highly motivated, Nen set out in January 1993 on a journey to locate the DMT tree. Scouring the scrub for days, he intuited that he was “on the edge of something massive and unprecedented,” and then, “one day a beautiful tree just shone and whispered to me.” Small branches were pruned, and he returned home to perform the extraction. “My first experience was more profoundly spiritual and enchanting than I could ever have imagined, including a direct addressing by the spirit of the tree, to which I have felt allied with ever since” (Nen, personal communication, July 25, 2014).

As it turned out, the tree Nen found was not *A. maidenii* as initially believed, but *Acacia obtusifolia*, previously unrecognized as a DMT-bearing species of the genus. *A. obtusifolia* was found to contain multiple alkaloids: e.g., 2/3 NMT (*N*-Methyltryptamine), 1/3 DMT, and a small amount of beta-carboline. The effects of the “full-spectrum extracts” cooked up from this tree had a profound impact on a small cohort of pioneers. Nen found the effects of pure synthetic DMT lackluster compared with that of *A. obtusifolia*. “The synthetic DMT was to me like ‘virtual reality’ while the plant extract was like ‘reality.’” The “full spectrum plant extract,” he recalled, “just did more, had more directions and depth.” Nen realized that he and his friends were undergoing a kind of self-induced “initiation.” In a culture where traditional rites of passage, like coming-of-age rituals, had been reduced to getting wasted on alcohol at the age of 21 (the gateway to adulthood), it was a “profound and rare gift from the bush” that marked a beneficent transit into a whole new way of being human. “You die shamanically, you

reconnect to the ancestors and the spirit world, you see the existence of more than the material, you have a profound mystical vision which makes you see that there's more beyond death" (in Razam, 2013). Since this and other acacias possessed a wide variation of alkaloids (and not simply DMT), there was a perception that they supplied a next-level DMT experience. "A few who saw the acacias as a unique tryptamine gateway developed a folklore of deep respect for the plants and, echoing animist traditions, they accepted the alkaloid variations . . . as a 'teaching' of the plant" (Jamie & nen888, 2014, p. 9). In the early years of use, initiates showed great respect toward the trees themselves, recognizing that taking tree bark (but not branches and leaves) kills the teacher. Working intimately and sustainably with acacias over the years, Nen formed a relationship with what he believed was the spirit of the tree, a "plant teacher" with a uniquely diverse internal alkaloidal potency. With *A. obtusifolia* promoted in the mid-1990s as a source of DMT, commercial exploitation of an exhaustible resource soon followed. Over the subsequent decades, as the market for DMT grew, disenchantment advanced with the impact of larger-scale harvesting and trade (Nickles & Nickles, 2014).

Backyard alchemists, "changaleros," and "smokeable ayahuasca"

Downstream from the early acacia research and in the wake of McKenna's visit, there emerged a vibrant ethnobotanical scene in Australia – as chiefly expressed in the appearance of ethnobotany conferences and symposia, namely, Ethnobotanica and, later, Entheogenesis Australis (EGA). In 2003, this development was given considerable publicity through the efforts of freelance writer Kate Hamilton and Fairfax Media. Melbourne's newspaper *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* published in their *Good Weekend* supplement a hysteria-free condensation on the subject of DMT and its growing popularity connected to acacias in the New South Wales' Northern Rivers region. With spreads in two of the nation's most widely read newspapers, the story, "The Freakiest Trip," served as an entry point for those whose interests may have been piqued by how DMT, according to one commentator, enabled access to an "intergalactic telepathic gateway, through which I could commune with 'higher' alien life forms" (Hamilton, 2003).

This period saw the emergence of an ethnobotanical solution with a unique symbiosis: changa (pronounced chāng-uh). A story of homegrown experimentation, changa is a smoking blend involving a variable synergy of DMT and harmala alkaloids, often identified, sometimes rather speciously, as a "smokeable ayahuasca." In changa, which is typically extracted from *Acacia* (and originally *obtusifolia*), DMT is combined with harmalas (traditionally *B. caapi*) via customized infusion and blending techniques to create a smoking mix at a range of ratios normally between 20 and 50% DMT by weight. Changa was created by Australian Julian Palmer as an alternative to smoking or vaporizing DMT crystal, which often left users mind-blown at ground zero with no desire to return there. This practical objective inspired much earlier innovations as well. Since the discovery of the freebase vaporizing method in the early 1960s, underground users

subsequently regulated dosages in smoking blends using synthetic varieties of DMT with a variety of herbs, including cannabis and parsley, in practices that surfaced in Australia by the early 1970s. But the acacia-sourced DMT plus harmalas combination enhanced the experience markedly. Flying countless sorties into the ineffable, beta-testing techniques of extraction, Palmer and his compatriot bioneers became thoroughly convinced by the transformative power of the botanical synergetics they were working with. Over a few years, through trial and error, Palmer grew committed to functionality, learning how to extract alkaloids, optimize blends, and undertake better living through alchemy. An advocate for “intelligent” blends (chocobeastie, 2011), Palmer’s innovation responded to several interrelated concerns. A chief concern was the harrowing confrontation common to using DMT, known as “the nuclear bomb of the psychedelic family” (Leary, 1966), that initiates would typically show little desire to repeat. It would also address the impracticalities associated with smoking crystal DMT, and the elitism characterizing the use of DMT and ayahuasca before changa’s emergence.

Prior to the original changa mixes of mid-2003, regional experimentalists were smoking what they called “luxury joints” – acacia-sourced DMT sprinkled in cannabis joints or mixed with popular herbs like passionflower and damiana, accessible in dried form from herb shops and at festivals. The most popular of these experimental smoking mixes was commercially available as “Dreamtime.” This mix was sold under-the-counter at Happy High Herb shops, where franchise founder Ray Thorpe endorsed it. An herb crusader and drug law reformer, Thorpe held DMT in high regard, not least of all given its origins in the “wattle,” the nation’s own herb. He was committed to dispensing DMT mixes that were less potent than crystal and more appropriate for social-festive contexts (Ray Thorpe, personal communication, December 19, 2014). When Palmer and friends began smoking 100 mg of DMT sprinkled onto “ayahuasca vine joints” (20% DMT) at small gatherings, the effect it had was qualitatively different from earlier blends. When reports came in of users “giving up decades-old meth or coke addictions,” it confirmed to Palmer that he was onto something.

The herbs in the original changa blend included passionflower, peppermint, mullein, and blue lotus, but as knowledge of potentiating, flavoring, and coloring DMT expanded, herbal mixologists experimented with aromatic bouquets by dissolving blends in solvent-soaked herbal infusions like lemon balm, lavender, and spearmint, or lavender, muna, and pau d’arco. The harmala alkaloids present, typically shaved *B. caapi* bark or leaves, but also Syrian rue (a less effective MAO inhibitor when smoked), enabled an experience longer in duration – sometimes up to 40 minutes – to DMT, yet softer and with a more “pleasant afterglow.” This was essential for Palmer, a promoter of the “sub-breakthrough” experience that he believed was a necessary modification on the sometimes-brutal impact of DMT. While users had been regulating doses with smoking blends since the 1960s, the new blends appeared to be an advancement in optimization. Without typically facilitating the visionary out-of-body impact of DMT, changa’s medicinal effects are purported to be consistent with the function of ayahuasca. With a therapeutic agenda underlying this approach, changa was designed to transport users “to places of grace (universal love, total peace), to catharsis, where old patterns, emotions

and beliefs can come up to be released” (Julian Palmer, personal communication, April 26, 2013).⁷ The innovation assisted users to overcome a set of anxiety-inducing impracticalities typically confronting the DMT smoker. By varying blends and ratios, users could effect smoother entries and prolong selected states of intensity by periodically taking more hits, effectively personalizing their experience. “You have the ability to fully customize your blend to fit your exact preferences. You can create a harmala-heavy blend, a one hit breakthrough blend, or anything in between, with various aromas and flavors infused” (Mon, 2014, pp. 48–49).

The accessibility of the experience contrasts with the standard ayahuasca ceremony that Palmer and others have expressed their reservations about – given the expensive fees involved, and the perceived constricting, even oppressive, format of rituals that were not infrequently of dubious quality and often held in big cities with large numbers of participants crowded into single sessions. Affordable, shorter in duration, without heavily structured ceremonies reliant on a shaman, *changa* use had advantages over ayahuasca. These differences are considered appealing in a culture where many “are afraid of facing themselves, their own soul, intelligence and shadow nakedly” (Palmer, personal communication). Responding to ayahuasca ritualization, Palmer expresses a spiritual anarchist sensibility which insists upon the opportunity afforded to individual drinkers to lose control of their minds, “to really face their fears and go into the multitude of so many different levels of reality that can be very confronting to an individual’s cultural programming” (Palmer, 2014, p. 109). But, while loosening the reigns on the mind is reckoned essential to the work of healing, to surrender control (and one’s mind) to others is troubling within scenes where self-knowledge and responsibility are vaunted as the ultimate goals of growth and development – a paradox signaling the ambivalence with conventional forms of shamanism expressed by the likes of Burroughs and Terence McKenna. All this said, Palmer has also conveyed that there are now “*changa* circles” in Australia, South Africa, Norway, and elsewhere. He spoke to me of “Swiss people doing big circles of 100 people in Chile” (Julian Palmer, personal communication, January 13, 2015). How these groups negotiate this paradox would be the subject of a comparative ethnography that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

While ayahuasca rituals provided a point of departure for *changa* use, the association with ayahuasca and its purported “effect” was pivotal to the identity of *changa* from the outset. It was during a mid-2004 ayahuasca session that Palmer facilitated when the “*changa*” name “came through” to him. As Palmer clarified to me:

The ayahuasca spirit is engaging with the human organism and doing what is essential healing work on different layers of the human bio-electrical system – which can often be clearly experienced by those attuned to this experience. You simply will not have this same feeling when smoking DMT crystal – the experience will perhaps feel more empty and less integrated.

Over the last decade, *changa* may well have become the most widely traveled route to an effect debatably analogous to “ayahuasca.” It would inspire a pharmacopoeia of custom smoking blends, including those in Australia like the stronger “*nanga*” (acacia-sourced DMT 50% and matured *B. caapi* vine shavings 45% by

weight) or the variety of blends referred to on web forums like DMT-Nexus as “enhanced leaf,” or “10X changa,” with users extolling the efficacy of *B. caapi* (i.e., its ability to inhibit MAO) and its therapeutic “afterglow” effects. “If you make changa with a high enough maoi concentration,” commented one user on DMT-Nexus, “it becomes more than just a DMT experience and becomes an ayahuasca-esque experience, I mean you are taking ayahuasca . . . , only smoked . . . much more beneficial in my experience as compared to just DMT . . . it’s more euphoric, interactive, healing and lasts longer” (Jamie, 2009).

Palmer claims that from the mid- to late-2000s, he and his friends:

. . . initiated the smoked DMT crystal experience to hundreds of people, and we learnt a lot about how to make sure that people smoked it properly, how to support people to be in the most conducive mindset, to ensure the best physical environment for them to go deep, present to them in a space of witnessing and also, after they had smoked the DMT, listen to their debriefing.

Smoked in bongos, pipes, and joints in living rooms, by rivers, on mountaintops, under wattle trees, and at festivals around the globe, changa use has proliferated. With Australia’s Exodus Cybertribal Festival, Rainbow Serpent Festival, and Entheogenesis Australis event, plateaus of exchange and experimentation, psychedelic dance, visionary arts festivals, and entheobotanical symposia became primary vehicles of changa transmission.

As these contexts suggest, changa use has a noticeably social profile by comparison to DMT, which is typically an extremely personal and often private journey of self-discovery (Palmer, 2014, pp. 39–40). Smoother effects facilitated in blends using herbs, notably *B. caapi*, have made for an experience shared in homes or at social gatherings, like underground outdoor parties and music festivals or “doofs,” where users claim the experience is highly optimized for dancing (i.e., individual “trance” dancing rather than partnered dancing). While social in character, the contexts of changa use (e.g., festive, small groups of two to four people) are decidedly different from those of ayahuasca (e.g., ceremonial, dieta, shamanic guidance, large groups) and require fewer ritual preparations. Further study may reveal otherwise, but I have noted few divisions between ayahuasca and changa users and, while not a noticeable trend, some drinkers will smoke changa following ayahuasca sessions, occasioning a softer return.

In 2006, changa entered the slipstream for inner circles at Portugal’s Boom Festival, after which it took root in far-flung locations, including Brazil, where, according to Palmer, DMT has been extracted from *Mimosa hostilis* to make changa, quickly gaining appeal within the psychedelic trance scene in that country. According to Palmer, since the ambient heat in the region melts DMT crystal, Brazilians developed a preference for changa over DMT (although he added that Brazilians often do not use *B. caapi*, or other sources of harmalas, in their changa). Intriguingly, many Brazilians think changa is an “ancient indigenous traditional blend.” Given that *Anadenanthera peregrina* (or “yopo”) beans (a source of DMT) are known to have been smoked in Jujuy Province, Argentina, some

4000 years ago – based on the discovery and analysis of smoking pipes made of puma bone at Inca Cueva (Pochettino, Cortella, & Ruiz, 1999) – this belief might be based on conflation with historical practices.

By 2008, Jon Hanna had introduced the blend on the Erowid website, and one could buy “changa” or “xanga” – sometimes pronounced “chan-gah” – in Camden, U.K., head shops for around £20–30 per gram (Hanna, 2008). Changa developed commercial appeal from this period, a circumstance apparent at psychedelic festivals in Europe. In July 2013, I attended VIBE, a psytrance festival in the Czech Republic. Near the main dance floor, I fell into conversation with disc jockeys billed at the event, one of whom acquired a bag of changa from a passing dealer offering “acid, MDMA, and changa.” The Russian novice lunged at the opportunity and bought a half a gram for €50 (the regular price for a gram). “This is one of the things I really want to do right now,” the Russian novice said.

Changa has gained currency in the world of psychedelic electronica (St John, 2015a); it even motivated a short-lived commitment to establish psytrance as a “religion.” The initiator of that idea was inspired by an experience at the U.K.’s Glade Festival in 2009, where he smoked changa and saw

... the most amazing alien beings dancing, flirting at me, a couple kissing and exploding into a flood of multicolored tessellated tiled fragments, the Egyptian sun god Horus erupting from a foam of seething fractals. I saw Homer Simpson eating a doughnut and cathedrals of extreme beauty and color. It was the most amazing 15 minutes of my life! Far better than any CGI visuals or computer graphics could generate.⁸

Reports such as this read like advertisements for a temporary religious experience, which also appears to convert the assumed authenticity of ayahuasca into a commodifiable product. While its advent has facilitated an unprecedented semipopular desire for repeat DMT experiences, as Huston Smith (2000, pp. xvi–xvii) has long observed, “religious experiences” (e.g., the “psychedelic theophany”) do not amount to a “religious life.” Changa appears to offer an optimizable spiritual technology without the cumbersome weight, and obligations, of religion. And yet, lest this advent be dismissed as pure entheotainment, Erik Davis offers another view upon his exposure to “smokeable ayahuasca.” At Boom Festival 2008, up on a hill facing across Lake Idanha-a-Nova toward the ancient town of Monsanto, he wrote:

The smoke was sweet, and the entrance into the vestibule of the tryptamine palace was smooth but strong, and I slid gently along DMT’s inside-outside Mobius strips of sentient energy with more clarity and with less anxiety than usual. My fingers folded into spontaneous mudras and the breath of fire sparked without will. Then the vibrating weave of nature’s alien mind fluttered and unfolded us and set us gently back on the scraggly hillside, where the crickets and their ambient chirp-track trumped the distant thump of machines. Boom!

(Davis, 2008)

While this description evokes the gnostic potential of DMT and other entheogens, the apparent Disneyfication of hyperspace worries those lamenting changa as a front for the recreationalizing (and commercializing) of DMT (as “smokeable ayahuasca”). *The Entheogen Review* founder Jim DeKorne, for whom DMT is a molecule to be revered and respected, forecast the mood: “I can’t imagine it ever becoming a recreational drug – its nature is to sear away our illusions down to the core of being – a process few would describe as ‘recreational’” (DeKorne, 1993, p. 1).

Out of the jungle

The advent of “smokeable ayahuasca” ignited debate between ayahuasqueros and changaleros. An article published on web magazine *Reality Sandwich*, “Changa: The Evolution of Ayahuasca” (Dorge, 2010), fuelled the controversy with changa convert Chen Cho Dorge, implying that ayahuasca had “evolved” into the smoking blend – a position he later retracted. For Dorge, the blends exemplified the way psychointegrator plants can “aid in human synergistic relationships with place just as these plants have done for the peoples of the Amazon.” Just as ayahuasca and its effect were migrating “out of the jungle,” changa was being lauded as the “next evolutionary step for the synergistic shamanic technology” (Dorge, 2010). Dorge claims that changa smoking shows influences from South American *vegetalismo* and *curandismo* practices:

A new form of shamanry is being practiced and learned from practicing with these plant teachers. A new entheogenic healing modality, new rituals, new ways of relating to ceremonial structure and the role of the healer as well are beginning to shift and transform – each adapting to the authentic needs of those working with this medicine.

(Dorge, 2010)

But, while ayahuasca was purportedly enjoying a facelift, the natives were getting restless over at Ayahuasca.com. Purist drinkers are typically suspicious of DMT users – who lack a certain legitimacy, if not virtue, so far removed from the cultural and theologically sanctioned traditions of brews and snuffs. In debates on Ayahuasca.com, defenders voice claims that DMT is “the crack of ayahuasca,” that the beings it summons are “Mickey Mouse spirits,” and its users little more than reckless individuals. Ayahuasqueros adopt stances long taken against abuses (and abusers) of psychedelics, especially those who measure their experience in acts of psychedelic bravado and fleeting moments of tryptamine tourism. The accumulation of religious experience and spiritual capital without entering a religious life is disquieting for those whose use of ayahuasca is characterized by a commitment to ceremony, community, and ethos – and not simply “effect.” Among committed ayahuasqueros and daimistas, those who smoke for “effect” and promote their practice or liken the experience to ayahuasca are appropriating and even expropriating tradition. Eyebrows are raised when practices appear

directed more toward peak experience than integrative returns, where experience is not adequately integrated within an ethos by which one lives and acts in the world, and where deep insights do not become the basis for the transformation of self, relationships, and the world.

Responding to Dorge, visionary artist Daniel Mirante got down to brass tacks:

Ayahuasca is the indigenous Amazonian name for the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine, where it has been used for thousands upon thousands of years in healing, sorcery, and cleansing. The vine is used as a gatekeeper to the realm of a myriad of medicinal plants, such as Ajo Sacha and Tobacco, which are ‘dieted’ in close proximity to the Vine.

Furthermore, Mirante stated,

Ayahuasca lives within a unique complex of customs, traditions, knowledge and wisdom which are strong to this day, and continue to develop within syncretic communities and movements.

(Mirante, 2010)

While Mirante consented that analogues have facilitated profound healing and visionary states not unlike that associated with traditional ayahuasca brews, these analogues should be respected as unique ethnobotanical phenomena and not conflated with ayahuasca. Furthermore, and this underlines the insult felt by many a drinker, “the Ayahuasca vine is not merely a facilitator for a DMT experience. It is a profound entheogenic plant teacher in its own right” (Mirante, 2010). The status of the ayahuasca vine as “an ambassador of the plant kingdom” is corroded when it becomes little more than “a delivery system for DMT” (Mirante, 2010).

The advent of changa forced to the surface an underlying resentment over claims that DMT is the active component of ayahuasca – the result of, according to Mirante (2010), a wave of “DMT-centric” entheogenic literature in the early 1990s. By staking claims to the “ayahuasca effect,” users were effectively lauding the “DMT effect,” and the implication that changa was an *evolutionary* improvement upon, or successor to, ayahuasca, was like pouring gasoline on the fire. Critics like Mirante were concerned that the champions of changa and other custom products with an ostensible “ayahuasca effect” were usurping the cultural power of ayahuasca:

To claim any plant combination that enables DMT to become orally active is ‘Ayahuasca’, or more, that the DMT effect = ‘Ayahuasca effect’ = Ayahuasca itself, is trouble on grounds of cultural appropriation, because it ignores a living indigenous tradition, language, etymology, folklore, taxonomy.

(Mirante, 2010)

All of which appears to overlook the circumstance where “ayahuasca” (i.e., typically, *B. caapi* + *Psychotria viridis*) is itself a *construction* that has been inflated into a sacred cow in its expansion beyond the Amazon in the last decade.

While beyond the scope of this chapter, it would be useful to compare the presumed threat posed by DMT-centric sensibilities in the time of “ayahuasca analogues” to the threats to “tradition” imagined to follow the advent of that which has been castigated as “drug tourism” in the Amazonas (de Rios, 1994; 2006), or with the impact of post-traditional urban and New Age ayahuasca practices suspected of being “inauthentic” (Labate & Cavnar, 2014). I suspect that, just as “shamanic tourism” involves a complex ecology of motivations and outcomes (Winkelman, 2005; Fotiou, 2014), so, too, does neoshamanic pharmahuasca, and specifically those practices promising an ostensible “ayahuasca” *effect*. The conceit of “smokeable ayahuasca” warrants scrutiny as an “ayahuasca affectation,” possessing tenuous associations with that which is valued in ayahuasca shamanism, and appears native to its global diasporic practice – its role as a facilitator for communicating with the dead. And yet, the synchronistic mechanism native to ayahuasca is widely reputed among users of changa to be responsible for an effect produced by “analogue” botanical combinations, an *effect* modulated by the gnostic, neoshamanic, and ludic intentions common to the use of DMT and other entheogens.

Palmer has motioned that it is unnecessary to validate changa through an association with ayahuasca-using traditions. In a response to Dorge and Mirante (as online commenter “carpedmt”), in Palmer’s opinion, changa is primarily an augmentation of DMT. It is an optimal vehicle for an “analogue” experience that not only makes DMT accessible but also facilitates the DMT/MAOI mechanism for more users worldwide than ayahuasca (carpedmt, 2010). Referring to changa as a “mini-ayahuasca” experience, Palmer stated that ayahuasca “is not always readily available in every country. Good luck finding ayahuasca in Skopje, Macedonia! However, you may well be able to find people there smoking changa” (Palmer, personal communication, April 26, 2013). Furthermore, he stated that smokers, once adapted to changa, often elect to “go deeper with the brew [ayahuasca].” Neither constituting an evolution from ayahuasca, nor serving as a substitute for it, changa and its own proliferating analogues would then seem to grease the mechanisms of use, even becoming an accessory to the ayahuasca experience.

“Smokeable ayahuasca” and the more general “ayahuasca effect” are conceits received with caution among recent commentators. Given that many plants substituted as “ayahuasca analogues” are known to contain a variety of alkaloids other than the harmalas/DMT (and specifically the standard *B. caapi*/*Psychotria viridis*) synergy, they are recognized to possess varying modes of action. Nen is particularly vocal about this, clarifying that the source of DMT in the original changa (i.e., *A. obtusifolia*) contains multiple tryptamine alkaloids, and that it thereby has “a very different profile to the ayahuasca, with it’s own subjective effects.” Nen likens these multi-tryptamine acacias to snuffs like *yopo* and *hekula* more than ayahuasca (Nen, personal communication, July 25, 2014).⁹ Relatedly, he and compatriots cultivate a respect for the “signature, spirit, or energy” of each plant in ways not dissimilar to the animistic traditions of world plant medicine systems. To promote these plants as “ayahuasca” is then reckoned disrespectful to the plants and those given the brews and the smoking mixes (Nen, personal communication, July 25, 2014).

Conclusion

The troubling appeal of “smokeable ayahuasca” has been explored in this chapter. While being neither DMT nor ayahuasca, changa connotes both pharmacognostic practices and “traditions.” As a hybrid phenomenon, it is a “perfect embodiment of ambiguity,” the phrase used to describe ayahuasca, which Saéz (2014, p. xxi) has suggested “owes its success to being located midway along a scale running from substances that produce light inebriation to others causing a deeper and more dangerous plunge into other worlds.” While changa shares this hybrid variability in common with ayahuasca, it is not simply a transplanted version of ayahuasca. Emerging from the highly active Australian entheogenic movement, where it would facilitate a “friendlier” and accessible “DMT effect” while at the same time reformatting the therapeutic-visionary efficacy implicit in the “ayahuasca effect,” changa is a unique phenomenon. This confluence of “effects” has resulted in a variable mechanism, the optimizability of which it shares with ayahuasca itself, but which can also serve as an accessory to ayahuasca. As Palmer has stated, changa “is already its own tradition, that sprang out of a certain milieu and allows people to go deep with the plants” (Julian Palmer, personal communication, November 13, 2014). As a fully customizable tradition suited to the contemporary entheogen user, it appears that, with changa and its variations, the DMT/ayahuasca effect will continue to evolve. With variations of its aromatic vapors recognizable in locations worldwide, further investigations are warranted on the career and effects of this “smokeable ayahuasca”/“accessible DMT” hybrid.

Notes

- 1 Adjunct Research Fellow, Griffith University, Australia.
- 2 DMT and preparations containing it are subject to restrictions laid out in the 1971 UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances, to which most governments are parties, and where DMT is a Schedule I (i.e., most restrictive) controlled substance. Australia is a signatory to this Convention, similarly outlawing DMT under Schedule I of its own Psychotropic Substances Act of 1976, and DMT is currently a Therapeutics Goods Administration (TGA) Controlled Drug.
- 3 The DMT-Nexus: www.dmt-nexus.me/
- 4 MAO (monoamine oxidases) are enzymes that normally neutralize the psychoactive effects of tryptamines.
- 5 These lines were deployed as a voice sample on “Geometric Patterns” by Australian psytrance musicians Dark Nebula & Scatterbrain (2004).
- 6 While several underground reports have claimed success in the range of 0.5% DMT from the phylloides and bark of *A. pycnantha*, these claims remain unsubstantiated.
- 7 Subsequent Palmer quotes are from the same interview unless otherwise indicated.
- 8 www.psytranceismyreligion.com is now offline (accessed July 1, 2010).
- 9 While ayahuasca has become the paragon of entheogenic tryptamine folk medicine, a discussion at the DMT-Nexus has served to uncover a world of folk DMT and tryptamine use that existed before ayahuasca and continues in a myriad of evolving forms. Changa is among innovations that “present fertile ground for new modes of personal healing, reflection, and insight, beyond just ayahuasca and the curandero” (jamie & nen888, 2014, p. 10).

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