

The Global Açaí: A Chronicle of Possibilities and Predicaments of an Amazonian Superfood

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Introduction

From its origin myth¹ as a salvation food to its regional expansion as a low-income staple to its fame as antioxidant-rich status symbol in the hands of global celebrities, the story of açaí fruit² embodies multiple narratives of the superfood. More than a superfood, however, the açaí palm is considered a tree of life and a miracle-plant in its region of origin. Today, the açaí palm defines the landscape along the Amazonian floodplains and increasingly the hinterlands as well. To rural and urban residents alike, the gracious açaí palm is a metonym of place, pride, and identity celebrated in songs and poems, paintings, objects, toys, religious events, local festivals, and in government and corporate advertising (Figure 9.1a). In the Amazon estuary-delta region, residents use the açaí palm in over twenty-five different ways.³ Unknown outside of the Amazon region until the 1990s, açaí consumption has become ubiquitous in Brazil today and increasingly a symbol of the Amazon and Brazil across the globe (Brondizio 2008).

The presence of açaí fruit in Amazonian life dates back millennia. During the last four decades, a complex regional economy has evolved accompanied by the expansion and intensification of production; multiple types of commodity supply chains; and new nutritional, cosmetic, and pharmaceutical industries, all of which have transformed a humble regional fruit into an international household name. As açaí has gained economic importance in the region, it has



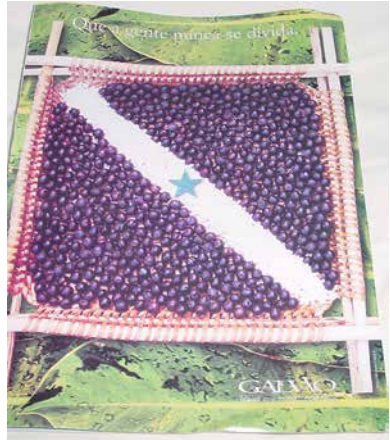


Figure 9.1a Symbolic values and narratives associated with the açai palm and fruit.

permeated the politics of regional development, discourses of sustainability, and regional social identity.

Today, it is virtually impossible to discuss development and conservation, economic opportunities, and inequalities in the Brazilian Amazon without invoking açai. It has become the most important regional crop and a symbol of the potential of the region's biodiversity to engender regional development (see McDonnell, this volume, on the construction of development potential), slowly measuring up to soy and cattle; it is today foundational to the economy of an ever-increasing number of municipalities, small-scale farming families, and urban entrepreneurs throughout the region.

Açai fruit production has become one of the largest and most economically inclusive agricultural sectors of the Brazilian Amazon. Just on the production side, it involves over 110,000 production units, 90 percent considered family production units.⁴ Costa estimated that the growth rate of employment associated with the regional açai pulp economy was over 12 percent from the mid-1990s to 2011, representing around 125,000 people per year (2016). Income from açai has afforded sharecroppers and small-scale producers more security, local niche economies to emerge, and an alternative to the dilemma of deforestation versus conservation in the region. Its centrality in regional life has reified its position as a symbol of local and regional pride and a marker of identity.

I have been working with and documenting the story of açai producers and the social life of açai palm and fruit since the late 1980s. My concern has been to understand the implications of a rapidly expanding economy for local producers and landscapes, for local consumers who depend on it as a food source, and for regional economic development.⁵ In what ways does an expanding economy create opportunities for value aggregation that benefits producers and the larger population? Although the açai economy represents a story of economic inclusion, today, the region at the center of açai production continues to fall behind other areas of Brazil in most indicators of human development. Most small-scale açai producers still depend on government aid and cash transfer programs (Brondizio 2011; Brondizio et al. 2013).

In what follows, I present a brief reflection on the phases of expansion of the açai fruit economy from a regional staple to a global craze, a process marked by a growing complexity of agents, market chains, technologies, and narratives of açai's multiple values. First, I examine how local producers, who have engendered açai's agroforestry intensification, have been underplayed as agents behind açai's economic expansion. Second, I examine the process of meaning-making and

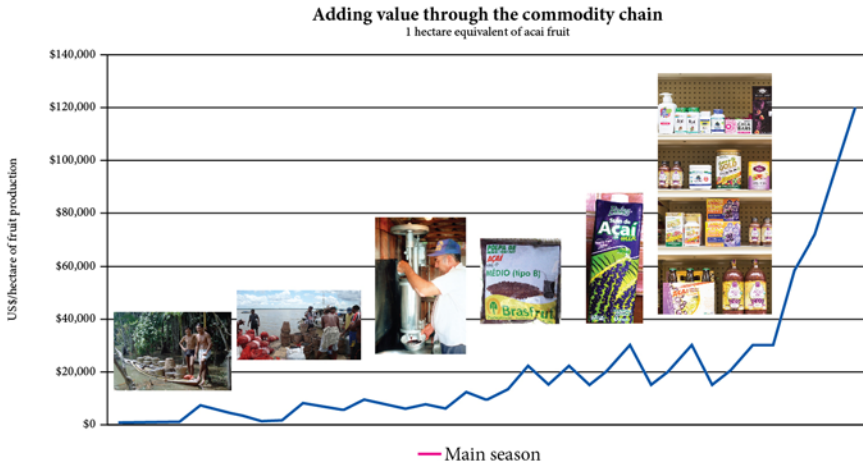


Figure 9.1b Value aggregation of the pulp produced in 1 hectare of açai fruit.

value creation associated with the transformation of açai for an expanding consumption basis and, in turn, its impact on local low-income consumers. These two processes, the framing of açai production and the creation of symbolic and economic values, are closely interconnected and have had direct implication for the distribution of benefits of this expanding economy. On the one hand, açai shows both the potential of local agroforestry knowledge and small-scale production to respond to market opportunities, and, on the other hand, the persistent colonial position of the Amazon within global market chains, that is, exporting raw material that aggregate value proportionally to their distance from the region, arresting the potential benefits of an expanding market for local populations and municipalities (Figure 9.1b).

In examining these interactions, I discuss how açai, as a commodity and as a story, is endowed with interpretive flexibility, that is, allowing for the development and appropriation of multiple narratives about its production, nutritional properties, symbolic meanings, and role in economic development. From its role as low-income staple food to its growth as an inclusive and agroforestry-based production system to its nutritional and health claims as a superfood, the expansion of açai as a material commodity cannot be separated from its transformation as a symbolic good,⁶ and both are intertwined with the social-economic history of its region of origin. I conclude with a brief reflection on the implication of the açai globalization story for small-scale producers and for the Amazon.

Framing Agroforestry as Extractivism⁷

Esther Boserup once said: “Any classification of the systems of land use with respect to the degree of intensity is necessarily arbitrary to some extent” (1965, 15). This could not be truer than in the açai fruit production system.

The açai palm has been managed along the eastern Amazonian floodplains for centuries, as captured in archeological records and in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travel accounts and natural history accounts. The current regional economy of açai and the expansion of açai fruit production started in the late 1970s and early 1980s, largely as a response to the growing demand for açai fruit in urban centers of the region. Replacing a declining açai heart-of-palm economy, açai fruit had already become a major food production phenomenon in the Amazon estuary-delta region before it had taken off in the mid-1990s as a production system supplying national and international markets. This expansion was based on a combination of the intensification of local agroforestry systems and the progressive expansion of floodplain forest management, both of which are based on local techniques (including forest thinning, selective cutting, pruning, planting, vertical and horizontal intercropping, variety selection, and annual maintenance). In essence, these techniques transform the açai palm (the plant is a clump with multiple stems) into the dominant production unit in an area, forming diverse configurations of açai agroforestry, or, as locally called, *açaiçais* (Brondizio 2008). These techniques were progressively enhanced and disseminated based on the exchange of experiences among farmers, but also with support from studies of riverside agroforestry (e.g., Anderson et al. 1985 and many others) and the participation of research and extension institutions and NGOs.

The impact of agroforestry and forest management techniques on the production of açai fruit is tremendous. Açai palm management is undertaken at the plant (clump and stems) and forest levels, which makes this agricultural transformation not easily recognized by outsiders and potentially invisible or disregarded if one takes a dichotomic view of between forest and agriculture. For instance, in an unmanaged floodplain forest, the “importance value” of açai palm (a combination of frequency, density, and dominance of a given species in relation to others) lies between 18 percent and 30 percent. As açai farmers manage and plant these areas, the importance value of açai palm rises to 70 percent and in some cases more. Different than monocropping, most small-scale producers along the floodplains tend to maintain a diversity of other

useful species or crops, precisely because açai fruit production depends on pollinators that depend on other species to reproduce (Campbell et al. 2018). The number of açai clumps and stems per hectare increases five- to ten-fold from unmanaged to intensively managed agroforestry. Along the floodplains, farmers maintain interspersed areas of intermediate to highly intensive areas where the density of the production unit can average from 500 clumps/2,000 stems per hectare to over 1,200 clumps/3,000 stems per hectare, respectively. The level of density of the latter, that is, an intensively managed açai agroforestry, is equivalent to that recommended for monocultural açai in upland areas, usually requiring irrigation. The productivity harnessed in these systems is equally impressive, increasing from 1–2 tons/ha in unmanaged forests to 4–6 tons/ha in sites of intermediate intensity to 8–12 tons/ha in intensively managed sites, the latter equivalent or superior to açai monocropping plantations (Brondizio 2008). Productivity varies widely in these sites because of variation in cycles of management, the density of other species and other environmental factors. In sum, it has been through the knowledge and hands of riverine farmers that açai production has increased from an estimated 25,000 tons in the early 1970s to about 50,000 tons in 1980, 137,000 tons in 1986, and 443,000 tons in 2018 (IBGE 2018a, 2018b).⁸

Ironically, as the açai economy and production base expanded, small-scale riverine açai fruit production became framed and narrated as a system of extractivism and, as a consequence, its producers as passive extractivists.⁹ The development of this narrative has been based on transposing a historical social category, the extractivist, to the açai agroforestry production system, regardless of its agronomic qualities. “Extractivism” as a regional economic category is intrinsically associated with social categories such as rubber-tappers, caboclos, and ribeirinhos, encoding their positions at the base of the regional social hierarchy. The social category of extractivist associated with riverine residents was consolidated during the rubber economy in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it has been re-signified in various ways since the 1980s. On the one hand, the extractivist identity has become the banner of social movements for land rights, as in the case of rubber-tappers (Schmink 2011) and others; on the other hand, the term has served as a general designation for several rural and forest economies, as in the case of açai. Consolidated in the social hierarchy of the region, the extractivist social category not only prevailed but has been reinforced throughout the economic expansion of açai.

The irony is that while the region observed a phenomenal expansion of açai fruit production through the hands of small-scale riverine farmers, its image as a product of native forests harvested by local extractors has been reinforced in academic, policy, and popular narratives. In a telling representation of this reality, a news article (among many examples) describing how a new company is teaching local producers about how to manage and cultivate açai (i.e., repackaging local management knowledge), the following portrayal emerges:

Integrated with nature, they know the hour and direction of tides and the dangers of the forest, such as confronting a jaguar during harvesting, but they do not know agricultural techniques that increase açai production, a palm typical of the Amazon region ... before that, the producer would only see the açai tree during harvesting.

(Suplemento Agrofolha, Folha de São Paulo, 2003)

Paradoxically, an economy that is born from local knowledge and practices is repositioned as a contribution from new agents who can rationalize and “agronomize” the same practices of the local productive system.

Agronomically and aesthetically, açai agroforestry defies the perception of clean and homogeneous, domesticated land that has characterized the agrarian history of Brazil since the late sixteenth century. An açai agroforest can be seen as a messy, complex ecosystem or the most agronomically sophisticated intercropping system. It is beautiful, it is untidy, it is organized, it is chaotic depending on the eyes of the beholder. In Brazil, the social and legal recognition of productive land and private property have been historically based on the cultural concept of land “cleanness.” Keeping the land “clean” from forests or secondary vegetation (or savanna) is a way of expressing a farmer’s work ethic and technical ability and the social value of property. A production system such as the açai agroforestry hardly fits the rigid dichotomy between forest and agriculture, productive and unproductive.

There are also historical reasons for such invisibility. For much of the region’s colonial history, the majority of riverine families were sharecroppers, indentured servants, or had, at best, customary land rights, as many still do today.¹⁰ Demonstrating “land improvement” based on deforestation and planting of annual crops increases the ability of sharecropper tenants to claim land rights, thus representing a threat to absent landowners. In such a context, the way riverine farmers have managed agroforestry systems, such as açai, can be seen as a form of everyday resistance. Nurturing forests into “invisible” production systems (built upon local forest species, ethnobotanical knowledge, and low-cost

technology) minimized the risk of expulsion by absentee landowners. In this sense, the view of the açai agroforestry as an extractivist economy also reflects the historical stereotype associated with riverine residents (and extractivism) as lazy (“only see the açai tree during harvesting”) and ignorant (“they do not know agricultural techniques that increase açai production”), and commonly invoked as a “social pathology” impeding regional development (Nugent 1993). While riverine açai producers have gained a more positive image, it is still inherently attached to the image of extractivism, an image further reinforced with the expansion of monocultural açai in upland areas.

From Local to Global Consumption: Meaning-Making, Transformation, and Value Aggregation

The transformation of açai fruit from a local unsweetened main dish to a multitude of sweetened and blended food items that appeal to a wide range of urban consumers was marked by a shift not only in form, taste, and composition but also in terms of the symbolic value it carries for different groups of people. In this sense, the expansion of the açai economy benefited from açai’s interpretative flexibility, that is, a fruit that encodes multiple material and symbolic meanings and narrative possibilities: a blessed food staple, a marker of regional identity, a healthy and youthful energy drink, a connection to indigenous Amazonia, a development solution for the Amazon, a mystical exotic forest product, a new type of agriculture, a fruit blessed with superlative biochemical and nutritional properties. The coevolution of açai’s material transformations and meanings underlies its expansion, from local to global spheres, from a staple to a fashion food to a superfood and a symbol of sustainability.

In the eastern Amazon, açai juice is consumed fresh and daily as part of a meal. In the region, the fresh pulp of açai is referred to as *vinho do açai* (literally translated, açai wine) (Siqueira and Brondizio 2012). It is a purplish liquid of varying thickness depending on the amount of water dilution. In general, mixed generously with manioc flour, it is eaten with a spoon rather than drunk. Fresh açai is an acquired taste; it is “roughly creamy, metallic, and slightly oily” (Rogez 2000), and it has a mild earth-like taste. In addition to its high energetic value, açai pulp is rich in fibers, protein, lipids, vitamins such as A, C, E, and B1, minerals such as calcium and potassium, and fiber. Indeed, açai pulp is recognized to have superlative antioxidant properties. Three main kinds of açai wine are sold fresh daily in the thousands of small processing stalls throughout

urban areas of the region: thick/special, medium, thin/popular. The thickness of açai (besides origin, ripeness, and overall quality) defines its price to local consumers, as discussed below (see Figure 9.3).

As açai consumption and uses expanded nationally and globally, it has become associated less with its material qualities, and often irrespective of that, than for what it came to represent to different groups of people. Although one can find high-quality frozen açai pulp in many parts of the world, many products claiming and advertising açai barely have any trace of it; they gain economic value by fetishizing açai's name, images, and stories. Conversely, besides its availability, the value of açai as a local staple food is based on its material qualities: ripeness, freshness, fatness, and thickness. As açai pulp is transformed into a multitude of products for new consumers—beverages, snacks, sweets, concentrates, powder, ice creams, vitamins, cosmetics, remedies, and so forth—the material qualities of açai fruit pulp that are valued locally are replaced by a semiotic combination of signs, images, and narratives associated with its name and nutritional virtues, indigeneity and exoticness, and connections to sustainability.

Likewise, many companies associating their name with the sustainability of açai production are not directly involved with local producers, communities, or sustainability practices. Independently associating a company's supply chain to açai production, or with forest extractivism, connects it to a productive and inclusive agroforest-based economy, largely organic and not linked to deforestation. And there lies açai's power as a symbolic good. Açai has enough interpretive flexibility to be appropriated and mobilized as a boundary object by and between producers, market actors, researchers, politicians, industries, media, social movements, the regional population, and groups of consumers in different parts of the world (Figures 9.1a and 9.2).

Changing Meanings and Narratives along Phases of Expansion, Transformation, and Consumption

The meanings and narratives of açai have coevolved with the phases of expansion of its production, industrial, and consumption basis, which, for analytical purposes, can be organized in four overlapping periods (Figure 9.2). Multiple stories and narratives about açai as a superfood have evolved along the process and have taken on a life of their own. As an "indigenous staple," açai was part of the diet of indigenous populations occupying large areas of the estuary-delta region prior to and post-European arrival and colonial expansion. Indigenous populations throughout the Amazon consume açai fruit today. As a "riverine

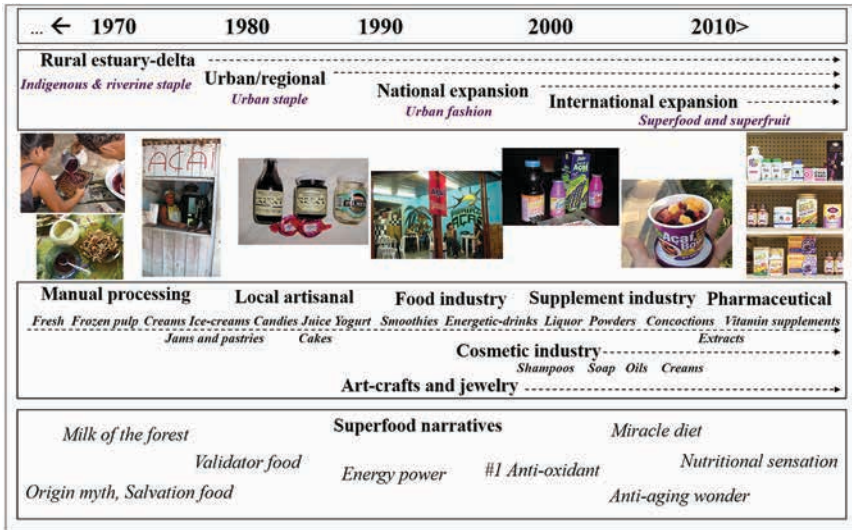


Figure 9.2 Phases of expansion in transformation and consumption of açai fruit, from a regional staple to a national favorite to an international craze.

rural staple,” the consumption of açai fruit dates back to the seventeenth century, expanding during the period of directorate policies (mid-eighteenth century) and the rubber economic boom (mid-nineteenth century). During the last fifty years, açai consumption continued to grow in importance among riverine families and communities, the main producers of açai, throughout the estuary-delta region.

The importance of açai as a “regional urban staple” led to its first phase of large-scale expansion, as demand for açai increased rapidly as a low-cost staple food in regional urban centers. This process took place during the 1970s and 1980s and was associated with urban population growth, as rural migrants brought their food culture, taste preference, familiarity, and the need for accessible food items, particularly, but not only, to state capitals such as Belém and Macapá. Locals talk with emotion about the “magical flavor” of açai and its importance in everyone’s diet, from babies to the elderly. An older generation of local producers talk about this period as the onset of the “açai boom,” the *açaização*, of the Amazon estuary-delta region (Hiraoka 1994). Pulp extraction technology had a direct influence on the expansion of açai as an urban staple. The development and dissemination of electric machines in the late 1960s used to pulp açai replaced the traditional *amassadeiras de açai* (women who crush the fruit by hand), allowing the provisioning of expanding demand (Mourão 1999). Estimates of annual per capita consumption of fresh

açai in its main area of production range from 15 to 60 liters/person, with the highest amount among families with the lowest income (Bezerra et al. 2016; Rogez 2000). As noted by Rogez (2000), açai consumption in the region is twice that of milk. Açai also has a historical place in celebrated regional desserts, particularly among the regional elite, including ice cream and popsicles, creams, and cakes. In fact, açai was appreciated as ice cream when the first iceboxes were introduced to the state capital Belém around the beginning of the twentieth century.

After 1990, along with the popularization of other Amazonian fruits outside the region, açai fruit consumption expanded to other parts of Brazil into what I have called the beginning of its consumption as a “fashion food”; international consumption followed rapidly (Brondizio 2004, 2008). During the first phase of national and international expansion, industrial processing was minimum, focusing on the production and export of frozen pulp, usually with the addition of guarana syrup, making it sweeter. Açai fruit and pulp spoil quickly, the former molding and decaying and the latter coagulating. For this reason, frozen açai pulp started to be exported to other regions with the addition of guarana syrup to disguise its original unsweetened taste, which becomes very pronounced with coagulation. Initially exported mainly in the form of frozen pulp packages, açai fruit was served first as smoothies (*suco de açai*) or in bowls (*açai na tigela*) in food huts serving surfers on popular beaches in Rio de Janeiro (e.g., Ipanema, Barra, Leblon, and Copacabana) and in gyms, boosted by the promotion of açai by the Gracie family, who are originally from Belém and considered founders of Brazilian Jujitsu.

Açai bowls are mixed and decorated with fruits, granola, powdered milk, condensed milk, and a creative array of additives, forms of consumption never imagined or considered taboo in its area of origin. Soon, the popularity of açai juice spread to gym lounges, shopping centers, and progressively to a wide range of *lanchonetes* (sandwich shops); specialized açai fruit stores (*açaiterias and açai bars*) emerged throughout Brazil with menus presenting dozens of variations of mixed açai pulp. From surf shops and gyms, açai consumption entered into Brazilian soap operas and TV shows. By the late 1990s, açai had become a recognized icon for health- and body-minded teenagers and adults alike in urban areas throughout the country. In parallel, açai gained association with environmental sustainability and social inclusion.

As açai gained an ever-growing consumption basis, a phase of “industrialization” emerged already in the 1990s, initially in the food industry and progressively into cosmetics and pharmaceutical products, each targeting

different groups of consumers, from the youth to elders. During this period, new small-scale artesian shops also emerged in the Amazon producing an array of jewelry and art-crafts, as well as local medicines (e.g., cough syrup, energy potions), beauty products (e.g., shampoo, conditioner, soaps), and new food and drink items mixed with chocolate, açai jams, candies, and liquors. Recently, the pit of açai, an abundant by-product mostly used as fertilizer or burned as fuel, has been roasted and ground to produce what is being called “açai coffee.”¹¹ New technology, such as dry freezing, for pulping and storing açai pulp became central to the expansion of industrialization and export of açai, eliminating the need for adding guarana syrup and allowing the storage of large stocks for export. The juice, yogurt, and ice-cream industries were among the first to jump in with a variety of flavor combinations. Pasteurized container versions of açai juice sweetened with guarana syrup and Gatorade-like beverages were launched by the hundreds into the market. Large food corporations, such as McDonald’s, started to serve açai as part of their menus in Brazil. The industries for these products range in location but are mainly in southeast and southern Brazil or internationally, in the United States but later expanded to Europe and Japan. Today, these products are available in supermarkets throughout Brazil and in most large cities around the globe, and specialized açai bars are currently expanding, particularly in the United States.

In the early 2000s, as açai was becoming known as a nutritive energetic beverage in Brazil, the United States, and beyond, new narratives about its pharmaceutical qualities emerged along with increasing biochemical research and the development of a multitude of health products. By 2004, mega-celebrity Oprah Winfrey endorsed açai as the world’s number one superfood. The appropriation and remaking of narratives associated with açai’s superpowers took a life on its own. Hundreds of food products, concentrates and supplements, and cosmetics emerged promoting açai miracle cures and diet, almost always comparing its nutritional and biochemical properties to other superfoods.

Many of these products only slightly remind one of açai fruit’s taste as consumed in its place of origin. Their narratives focus on promoting açai’s energetic and pharmaceutical values and its connections to multiple causes associated with the Amazon. Claims about the product focus on statements such as “the power of the Amazon,” “Amazon’s milk,” “shamans’ power,” “#1 superfood,” among others. However, more so than in the national market, açai’s international expansion gained a stronger emphasis on the environmental and developmental advantages of açai fruit production as sustainable; it also comes

to symbolize fair trade and other forms of supporting local communities. Through the consumption of açaí, the consumer is put in direct touch with the symbolic power of Amazonian nature, indigenous wisdom, and a socioenvironmental cause.

Value Aggregation away from the Region and the Impact of Inflation on Low-Income Consumers

While most of regional açaí production is consumed in the Amazon region, export continues to increase as the consumption for açaí pulp continues to grow nationally and internationally and new industrial uses emerge. A combination of a solid regional market and the fast expansion of external markets and transformation industries underlies the increasingly complex socioeconomic structure now in place in the açaí economy, intertwined with the equally complex system of land and resource ownership in the Amazon. For producers, capturing the economic benefits from an expanding market has been strongly based on one's land tenure condition (particularly for sharecroppers), level of access to infrastructure (particularly transportation), and type of price agreement with buyers (e.g., daily or seasonal contracts). Because açaí fruit spoils within three days, dependence on middlemen and transportation cost can severely affect profitability. The emergence of an export sector and transformation industries has created periods of high inflation of the local value of açaí, directly affecting local consumers. On the other hand, most fruit-producing municipalities do not have fruit processing industries and as such have minimal participation in value aggregation. As Figure 9.1b illustrates, the value of açaí fruit and pulp (i.e., from the producer to the market to urban vendors to frozen pulp for export) may increase by fiftyfold after leaving the farmers' hand and many-fold higher once it is converted into industrial products.

The national and international expansion of the açaí fruit economy had a direct impact on local consumption, particularly among low-income urban and rural residents. After 2000, the inflation of the price of fresh açaí hit hard both local processors and consumers. Between 2006 and 2007, as part of ethnographic research among açaí processors and consumers, we were able to record daily prices for one açaí fruit basket (15 kg) and one liter of fresh açaí (thick/special, medium, thin/popular) in four açaí stalls in the capital and interior of the state of Pará. The wealth generated by the açaí export economy was affecting the very core of local diet and food culture, a topic widely discussed in local newspapers

and radio shows. Dilution and adulteration of açai pulp became commonplace, particularly during the off-season when the price of açai baskets can reach very high prices (Figure 9.3).

To compensate for fruit price increases, local processors started diluting the pulp of açai thin/popular (and to some extent medium) to the extreme: “it is pure tinted water” as I heard many times from both processors and consumers. As price continued to increase, processors selling açai in low-income areas (the

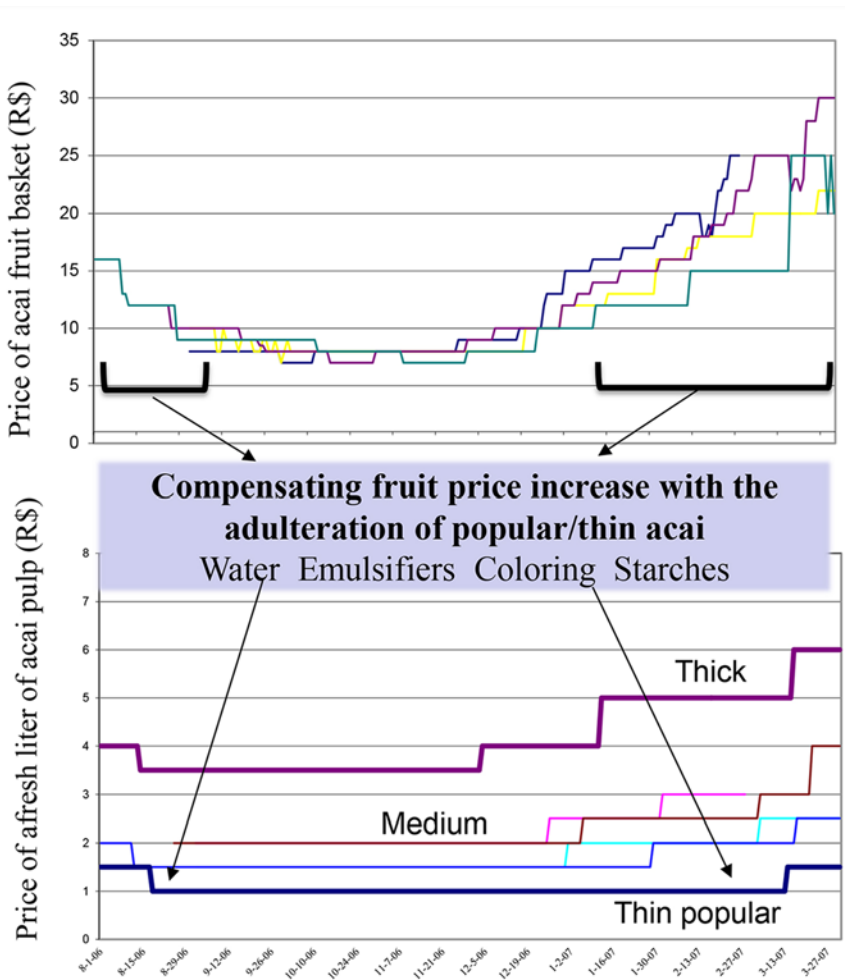


Figure 9.3 Data from four açai processors, 2006–7, Ponta de Pedras and Belém, Pará State.

majority) started to add food dyes, manioc flour, and corn starch, and even ice-cream emulsifiers as thickeners; to keep consumers coming they had to keep prices as low as possible throughout the year. A series of vignettes collected during fieldwork is illustrative of these dynamics:

Processors/vendors

To make any profit I had to make 30 liters of açai from this single basket; and people still buy it! Some people need it, they cannot live without it. I use corn starch, beets, and ice cream emulsifier when I need to. (Interior, August 2006)

The Marajoara has to drink açai even if it is no more than dirt water; one just wants to make sure it is part of a meal. (Interior, July 2008)

Here in the periphery, price came close to R\$4 when a basket was selling for R\$40, but I could not sell it any higher because people here just cannot pay for it. (Belem, July 2008)

This year was terrible, the price of a basket reached R\$45, so I had to sell "water." (Belem, July 2007)

Consumers

I found a blob of wheat flour inside my açai ... no wonder it makes me feel stuffed. (Belem, August 2006)

It is pure water, but people buy it because otherwise they do not feel they had a good lunch. (Interior, July 2007)

The açai is so adulterated that it makes me feel bloated, with heart-burn, but still, I can't live without it. (Interior, July 2007)

I just stopped consuming it when I cannot afford a better açai (thicker), but my dad must have it every day, so here I am to buy his açai. (Belem, August 2006)

In spite of the significant increase in açai fruit production in the region, its international market continues to expand, and inflation continues to be a concern for Amazonian consumers.

Concluding Thoughts

On many grounds, the açai story is a tale of success. Açai fruit has never been as important to the regional economy as today, and not surprisingly, throughout the region açai fruit is considered a blessing, a superfruit, one that provides both a beloved food source and an unrivaled source of income. Yet, while local producers and the region have benefited greatly from the economy they have created, progressively the largest share of the booming açai market—the value aggregation through the material and symbolic transformation of the fruit—is captured elsewhere. The lack of transformation industries that aggregate value to açai in the region has limited the ability of municipalities, mostly struggling and insolvent, to capture tax benefits from industrial transformation and jobs for the local youth (Brondizio 2011). The commercialization of açai fruit, as with other resource economies in the Amazon, runs from the hands of producers to family-middleman-broker networks to local consumers and corporations, thus bypassing the formal economy of municipalities. Not surprisingly, the scale of the açai fruit economy is many times that of the budget and revenues of the municipalities where it is produced. As a story relevant to many other crops and regions, multimillion-dollar local açai economies co-exist with some of the most insolvent and poor municipal realities.

Returning to the main title above, the açai story encapsulates the possibilities and predicaments associated with the globalization of local food systems and invites us to reflect on the position of small-scale farmers within larger market chains. As in other cases in this volume, such as that of quinoa, the açai story shows that the expansion of local agricultural economies goes through quickly evolving phases, marked by changes in agents' markets, narratives, technologies, regulations, and institutions, all of which have implications for shifting economic opportunities (Brondizio 2004, 2008). As new entrepreneurs enter the supply chain, small-scale producers are both romanticized and dismissed in their ability to respond to market demands. As in the case of açai, the unfavorable position of riverine small-scale farmers in the region has been reasserted by new agents and in narratives reproducing historical-cultural and economic stereotypes. In this process, local knowledge has been repackaged and reintroduced as new agents gain positions in a profitable production system. As production areas expand and supply balances demand, profit and surplus shift progressively to other sectors and agents, such as processing, controlling product stocks and export, and the transformation industries and distributors. The lack of policy incentives and infrastructure supporting a

larger participation of the regional population in processing, transformation, and commercialization of this valuable superfruit arrests benefits to the region as a whole. Today, the açai story puts the Amazon at a crossroads: to pursue an inclusive and transformative economy based on its biodiversity and local knowledge, adding value to its resources to benefit the regional population, or to maintain its colonial position and destructive land use.

Many hopeful signs are also emerging. Some industries are starting to be located in the region, while others are seeking to engage directly with local producers. Throughout the interior of the region, small-scale producers and rural communities are creating new micro-scale pulp industries, forming local cooperatives and collective financing mechanisms. New programs, such as the inclusion of fresh açai in public schools, have created opportunities for producers to process and sell açai directly at a higher price. However, significant constraints remain in terms of agricultural credit, support for sanitary compliance, processing and storage facilities, transportation, and support for commercialization. For Amazonian small-scale farmers, challenges are always ahead of opportunities.

Currently, the Brazilian government is aggressively expanding commodity production and promoting deforestation as a pathway to “development” of the Amazon, taking away the rights of and disregarding the contributions of indigenous peoples and local populations to the region. In this context, the açai story offers powerful counterfactual evidence, an alternative narrative, and a reflexive mirror of the possibilities and predicaments of the region. Lessons learned from the açai story could give hope of a more inclusive and sustainable future for the Amazon.

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Notes

- 1 The myth of origin of açai portrays a drama of famine, infanticide, tears, and the miracle salvation provided by a superfood. A short version goes as: “In the place known today as Belém (the capital of the state of Pará in the Brazilian Amazon), once upon a time there was a large Indian group facing a scarcity of food. In order to control population growth, the chief decided that every newborn child would have to be sacrificed. Shortly after this order was given, the chief’s own daughter, Iaçá, gave birth to a beautiful girl. She too was soon sacrificed. Iaçá was very sad and desperate, and every night she cried. One full moon night, she listened to a baby cry and when she got out of her hamlet, she saw her daughter close to a palm tree. Full of hope and happiness, Iaçá ran to hug her daughter. As soon as she did it, the girl disappeared mysteriously. The next morning the other villagers found Iaçá dead and hugging the palm tree. In her face they could still see her happiness and her black eyes stared at a palm that was full of little purple-black fruits. The chief ordered the fruits harvested and made a tasty juice with them. This fruit provided enough food for everyone, and soon the chief suspended his order and babies were allowed to live. The chief named the fruit palm açai in honor of his daughter Iaçá, the fruit that cries.”
- 2 Açai from the Tupi language (also *Yasa* “*y(i)*”, *Içá-çai*, *Assai*) meaning crying fruit, fruit with water, or palm of the water. Scientific name: *Euterpe oleracea* Mart, from the Greek *Euterpe*, meaning grace or pleasure. A multistem palm, it produces fruit bunches of small purple-black drupes. It occurs naturally in the Amazon estuary-delta and surrounding regions, where it is often referred to as the tree of life.
- 3 Many uses of the palm are losing importance as locals have more access to plastic and other materials.
- 4 66,296 production units are considered “extractivist” (or 60 percent of total units) of which 92 percent are considered family units, and 47,855 production units are considered agricultural, of which 86 percent are considered family production units (IBGE 2017, 2018a, 2018b).
- 5 In this text, I speak particularly about the region at the center of açai fruit production in the Amazon, the estuary-delta region and surroundings, which includes around fifty municipalities in two Brazilian states, Pará and Amapá. Today,

- açai fruit is produced throughout the Amazon region, but the estuary-delta region remains the most important center of production. The estuary-delta region as referred here is broadly equivalent to what Costa (2016) refers to as the *Grão Pará* region.
- 6 This is a loose analogy to Bourdieu's analysis of cultural production (1971), which I still find useful.
 - 7 This section overlaps partially with an article written in Portuguese for the Brazilian report on indigenous and traditional local communities: "Contributions for Biodiversity, Threats, and Public Policies," edited by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, Sônia B. M. Santos, and Cristina Adams (n.d.).
 - 8 Even though impressive, I consider these figures to be underestimated. Rogez (2000), for instance, estimated production to be closer to 500,000 tons by the year 2000. Since the 1990s, and particularly after 2000, açai production expanded to the Amazon as a whole. Currently, it is expanding to other parts of Brazil and other countries. This expansion included the intensification of açai agroforestry in the floodplains and planting of açai in upland areas, both in small-scale agroforestry systems and in large-scale monocultural plantations, using new varieties of upland/dry soil açai developed by the Brazilian agropastoral research agency EMBRAPA. This expansion has allowed the inclusion of a large number of small-scale farmers previously depending on manioc shifting cultivation, off-farm employment, and in some cases cattle ranching. The largest expansion taking place currently, however, is that of large-scale plantations, in many cases replacing pastures or secondary forests. Since 2015, IBGE has included planted açai areas in its assessment, but estimates vary significantly among reports; for instance for the North region, it ranges from 273 million (IBGE 2017) to 1.5 million tons (IBGE 2018a).
 - 9 In the mid-1990s, we argued that açai production is a system of "forest farming" by "forest farmers" (Brondizio and Siqueira 1997).
 - 10 Since the 1990s, there has been significant improvement in land titling throughout the region. The agricultural census indicates that today most açai producers are considered "landowners."
 - 11 To my knowledge, this product was developed by a women's association, AMABELA, in the Belterra Municipality in the lower Amazon and Tapajos river region.