

*Sugarcane and Rum: The Bittersweet History of Labor and Life on the Yucatán Peninsula*. John Robert Gust and Jennifer P. Mathews. Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2020. 192 pp. \$29.95. Paperback ISBN-13: 9780816538881.

With an interdisciplinary approach, archaeologists John R. Gust and Jennifer P. Mathews examine “how rum has touched and still touches most parts of Yucatán [México] life and society” (8). They make visible the connecting role that aguardiente or crude rum played between the eastern and western sides of the peninsula during the nineteenth century. Sugarcane and rum produced in the eastern coast were pivotal in the western coast’s production of henequen or sisal; one of the most important exports of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Mexico. Its production would not have been possible without the exploitative labor practices of debt peonage and slavery in which rum “was instrumental in securing a cheap and plentiful workforce on haciendas.” The authors end their book discussing the current role of rum in the economy and life of the Yucatán peninsula in the last decades.

In chapter 1, the authors remind the reader that despite its sweetness, sugar has one of the most bitter histories of human exploitation and subjugation. With molasses produced in the Caribbean, Europeans distilled rum, which in turn was sold in Africa and traded for slaves, who came to the Americas to work on plantations producing, among other goods, sugar. In contrast, in Yucatán, sugar production was scarce since the European conquest in the sixteenth century. Labor shortages due to the rebellious nature of the Maya limited its production.

Chapter 2 discusses the role of drunkenness, racism, classism, and profits. In Yucatán, sugar hacendados [plantation owners] used mostly the debt peonage system, supplemented by some day workers and immigrant slaves, mostly Chinese and Korean. Hacendados paid meager wages to the peons, mostly in the form of company script and kind rather than cash. This monopolistic practice reinforced not only dependency, but also increased the owners’ profits. Hacendados, Spanish-descendants, constantly criticized Maya workers for their drunkenness. But they failed to recognize that they were the ones offering crude rum to boys to develop a taste for it and trapping these young men to work for them, paying their bar tabs at local cantinas, providing the beverage as part of the weekly wage, and making it available in the company stores. Many of these hacendados were also politicians and lawmakers. In their hands was the possibility of discouraging drunkenness among the lower classes, which caused criminal behavior and domestic violence, among other issues.

While recognizing differences in size and operations, the authors compare henequen, a bale twine, and sugar haciendas’ debt peonage in chapter 3. In the 1840s, the Casta War broke out in the peninsula. Mainly Maya individuals rebelled against the land seizures and labor exploitation that hacienda owners had imposed on them. While rebels failed to get rid of Spanish descendants and mestizos, they managed to keep control over the west coast from the mid-1850s to 1901 and slowed the expansion of haciendas for about a decade. In the rest of the peninsula regained by the white elite, landowners found in debt peonage the best way to guarantee a steady flow of workers and profits, deteriorating the situation of Maya and other non-white groups. Due to the mangrove

swamps of the area and the outcomes of the war, sugarcane growing became the most suitable option in the east coast. Although dangerous and low-paid, debt peons and day workers had almost no other options and had no choice but to accept the forced use of company stores through payment in scrip.

Gust and Mathews detail in chapter 4 their archaeological findings on two sites, San Antonio Xuxub and San Eusebio, sugarcane and rum haciendas. Their discussion on the challenges on researching the history of the sugar industry is the strongest part of the book. They highlight the archaeological and historical invisibility of this industry and its workers. The isolation and environment of the east coast resulted in limited archival sources (e.g., parish records). Furthermore, patriarchal views excluded from the labor records women and children who usually contributed to the household income. The archaeological evidence is thin as well. The sites in question contain almost no metal artifacts because many of the latter have been removed and sold as scrap. Subsistence-related artifacts, such as plates, bowls, or pots that the workers might have employed in their daily lives, have been hard to find as well. However, the authors fail to acknowledge that the Maya still use gourds as bowls and instead of silverware, there is no food that a tasty, hand-made tortilla cannot hold. Other challenges are environmental in nature. Some infrastructure has been partially destroyed by hurricanes, and workers' housing, mostly made of perishable materials, has disappeared. In consequence, the authors resorted to historical comparison and ethnographic interviews to fill in the blanks. This chapter represents a solid contribution to the history of alcohol and Mexican historiography.

The authors examine the function of rum in the economy of the peninsula in recent decades in the last chapter. They analyze the role of the state in regulating and promoting the sale of alcohol. They intend to compare the aguardiente-fueled cantinas of nineteenth-century west coast with the alcohol-driven tourism of the twenty-first-century east coast. In the historiographical absence of studies on cantinas, an urban space, in nineteenth-century Mérida, one of the two only cities in the peninsula at the time, the authors rely on anthropological and ethnographic studies on early-twentieth-century Central American drinking establishments and 1960s Yucatán cantinas. The authors intended to contribute to the understudied topics of cantinas and the role of women as owners, bartenders, facilitators, and domestic victims of alcohol consumption in the peninsula, which is commendable. Unfortunately, the current state of the scholarship and scarcity of sources presents a hindrance. However, this is a great opportunity for graduate students in search of a dissertation topic.

Gust and Mathews close their book by comparing the role of distilled sugarcane in the Yucatán peninsula in the 1870s to the 1910s and in the 1980s to the present day. Rum consumption in the Riviera Maya, in the eastern coast, in the last decades provides tourists the temporary relief from daily pressures that a bottle of aguardiente did for debt peons in the late nineteenth century. Similarly, the isolation that characterized the sugar plantations in Quintana Roo in the past characterizes the resorts and touristic area of Cancún and the Riviera Maya which are segregated from the towns where the local employees live. Both sides of the peninsula attract different tourism to the region, as in the past, when both had haciendas growing very different crops.

The sections on the Casta War, henequen production, anti-alcohol campaigns, and the development of Cancún and the Riviera Maya provide solid information for those interested in learning about the history of the Yucatán peninsula in the last centuries. While Mexicanists might find the relevant information of this book scant, non-Mexicanists will discover the role of the peninsula in the Americas and the world economy interesting. Scholars teaching anthropology, history of alcohol, labor history, and of course, Mexico and Latin American history can be assured that it is a useful book to assign to undergraduate students.

Aurea Toxqui, Bradley University