

# Dark Pleasures



*Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World*

Marcy Norton

Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008

352 pp. Illustrations. \$35.00 (cloth)

*Chocolate: Pathway to the Gods*

Meredith L. Dreiss and Sharon Edgar Greenhill

Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2008

208 pp. Illustrations. \$30.00 (cloth)

IN JUNE 2007, on a trip to Bahia to visit cacao estates and learn about the witches'-broom disease that has decimated the Brazilian cacao industry over the last two decades, I met

*Above: Cacao beans at the Fiesta de San Isidro Enrama, Comalcalco, Mexico.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE O. JACKSON JR. © 2000. FROM THE SERIES "ESSENCE OF MEXICO."

a British historian who suggested I look into the relationship between cacao and tobacco. These two crops have often been cultivated together—in Cuba, Brazil, the Cibao province in the Dominican Republic, and as far away as Borneo. Given the dual importance of these commodities to pre-Columbian Amerindian societies and “post-Columbian” European societies, one wonders why they haven’t occupied a more prominent position in general histories of the Atlantic world.

*Sacred Gifts, Profane Pleasures: A History of Tobacco and Chocolate in the Atlantic World* is a response to that

challenge. Focusing on the Spanish Empire from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, Marcy Norton, a professor specializing in early modern European history, examines these two crops with their psychoactive properties—one its leaf, the other its seed (or bean)—which originated in the New World, where they had important sacred and social meanings. They later became commodities in the Old World, subject to vice and luxury taxes, and contributed to the wealth of the Spanish Crown.

*Chocolate: Pathway to the Gods* takes the sacred thread of the equation and weaves the story of chocolate through its connection with divinity. The authors, Meredith L. Dreiss and Sharon Edgar Greenhill, link the early peoples of Mesoamerica—the Olmecs, Maya, Aztecs, Mixtecs, and Zapotecs—to their panoply of gods through the cacao tree, cacao pod, and its prized fruit, the cacao bean, which is the source of chocolate.

We must credit *The True History of Chocolate* (1996) by Sophie and Michael Coe for igniting the current scholarly and lay interest in cacao and chocolate. Their groundbreaking book marshaled support for the theory of the origins of domesticated cacao in Mesoamerica, laid bare the mystery of the bean's ability to produce a much sought-after magical drink, and may even have sparked today's quest by chocolatiers, like Mark Sciscenti of Kakawa Chocolate Shop in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to reproduce hand-crafted chocolate elixirs similar to the Mayan and Aztec brews and later adaptations in sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century Europe.

Norton's book fits within the current scholarly trend in food-and-culture studies that focuses on the history of commodities (for example, cod, salt, tea, coffee, spices, stimulants, oysters, and so on). Clearly her expertise lies in Spain and the wider Hispanic connections. Therefore, the placement of the term "Atlantic World" in the title is a misnomer, for the reader is not privy to the introduction of tobacco and chocolate to other European countries or to the history of the spread of these two plants to other parts of Latin America, the Caribbean, or Africa as part of the larger multistate, imperial enterprise (see Schiebinger 2004).

From their combined backgrounds in anthropology-related educational and entertainment projects and architecture, design, and preservation, Dreiss and Greenhill respond to a more general interest in pre-Columbian chocolate through its iconography in decorative arts and its functions in ceremonial rites and social customs that continue to this day in parts of Central America, such as Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. This more simply written, and thus accessible, study is amply and ably illustrated by

splendid and sumptuous color photographs, many from the collections of Edward Sacayon, Justin Kerr, George O. Jackson, Jr., and Grant Mitchell; there is an accompanying sixty-minute DVD documentary. While certain themes overlap in the two works, their pairing is complementary. Norton focuses on the sacred and the profane, linking Mesoamerica with Europe by following the Spanish conquest and early modern history, and using primary sources, such as early chronicles, to meticulously research her subject. Dreiss and Greenhill focus on the sacred and supernatural realm, spanning over three thousand years in Mesoamerica up to contemporary times, mining pre-Columbian archaeology, mythology, art, and ethnohistory while consulting museum and photography collections, glyphic texts, and secondary sources.

Norton acknowledges that tobacco and chocolate often appeared together in the Mesoamerican region. Both were central to rites and ceremonies and often articulated social and gender distinctions. She questions what it meant for Europeans—bound as they were to an ideology that insisted on their religious and cultural supremacy—to become consumers of goods that they knew were so enmeshed in the religious practices of the pagan "savages" whom they had conquered (p.3). She argues that the European, African, mestizo, and Creole embrace of tobacco and chocolate was not the consequence of either their addictive properties (i.e., biological determinism) or of purposeful efforts to make them fit aesthetic or ideological norms (i.e., cultural constructivism). Rather, she asserts that the material forms of tobacco and chocolate first consumed by Europeans closely resembled Indian concoctions. Furthermore, Europeans welcomed tobacco and chocolate not simply despite the meanings that Indians attributed to them but often *because of* them.

In illuminating a discourse of *mestizaje* and modernity, a central theme is syncretism, which Norton uses to mean an amalgamation of beliefs and practices emerging from different cultural traditions. The dynamic of syncretism (and its disavowal) helps to define why and how tobacco and chocolate arrived in Europe, as well as how and why they endured in America. In chronicles and histories of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tobacco and chocolate became symbols of Indian otherness. Tobacco epitomized diabolically inspired paganism, while chocolate evoked an idealized lost epoch of "noble savagery" (p.10). For the first generation of subjugated Indians, tobacco and chocolate featured powerfully in resistance efforts and helped to anchor precolonial rituals and stories that the Spanish conquest threatened with extinction. Yet for colonists and

Indians alike, tobacco and chocolate exemplified a means to adapt Christianity to traditional beliefs and practices, thus offering a natural bridge between the old and new religious and cosmological traditions.

Norton investigates the systematic entrance of tobacco and chocolate into European discourses and markets. She refutes the commonly held notion that their transformation into European commodities, in significant quantities after the 1590s, was a consequence of their “medicalization.” Countering that their arrival in European society was predicated on their social character, she provides ample documentation that the demand for the goods stemmed from the emergence of trans-Atlantic communities of habituated consumers encompassing elite networks of colonial officials, well-traveled missionaries, merchants, and plebian networks of mariners. On the supply side, cacao production was organized by colonists in New Spain and Guatemala on preconquest systems of production, while tobacco production was organized initially in the eastern Caribbean, a colonial backwater in the sixteenth century, with unlikely alliances among autonomous native American communities and European privateers, merchants, and settlers of various nationalities. Hence, different routes characterized the commodification of tobacco and cacao in the Columbian exchange.

By the early seventeenth century consumption of tobacco and chocolate had permeated Spanish society in both the New and Old Worlds. Along with material practices that were heavily indebted to native American and Creole antecedents, Spaniards absorbed ritual practices and symbolic connotations connected to tobacco and cacao in pre-Columbian times. These American goods were often viewed as agents that could cure physical ailments, assuage emotional discomfort, and bind people through social ties. As the first commodity fetishes of the modern world, they also undermined institutional Christianity and brought an enchanted animism to the secular realm in Europe.

Dreiss and Greenhill pick up the theme that in pre-Columbian America chocolate linked humans with the gods and divine forces, while its uses reinforced foundational cosmological beliefs. Through copious photographs of murals,

glyphs, stone and ceramic figures, vessels, cylindrical vases, and codices, the authors illuminate the sacred meanings and ancient uses of this magical elixir—in calendrical cycles, agricultural rituals, social ceremonies, rites of passage, sacrifice, and offerings. Cacao is brought into focus in its relation to Mesoamerican mythology and creation stories, cosmology and the universe, female fertility, and life cycles (marriage, baptism, funeral rites, and the soul’s journey).

The concept of cacao gods (p.15) is introduced, with highly eroticized images of cacao pods sprouting from their bodies or limbs. Other images show anthropomorphic figures or faces emerging from a cacao tree or pod. Hence, the sacred cacao tree is all encompassing in a dialogue between humans and supernaturals. I especially liked the contemporary photographs of *Semana Santa* in Guatemala and the *Fiesta de San Isidro Enrama* in Comalcalco, Mexico, with images of thousands of multicolored cacao pods lashed to long branches called *enramas* (pp.61, 62), to illustrate that cacao is still incorporated into peoples’ lives and ceremonies in the region today.

Together these texts depict how tobacco and chocolate, two “dark” commodities, can be a bridge between material and symbolic levels of experience, infused with cultural meanings and associations amid the transformations they have undergone over time and space. Curiously, both books end on a note of globalization. With global warming, deforestation, and health concerns stemming from the consumption of psychotropic substances, there is a cry to restore the ancient balance between humans and nature that so characterized Mesoamerica before 1492. “Like the Maya deity who nurtures a cacao pod through his ‘cosmic’ center, we too are linked to cacao and its vital role in balancing our fragile planet” (Dreiss and Greenhill, p.169). ☺

#### REFERENCES

- Coe, Sophie D. and Michael D. *The True History of Chocolate*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1996.
- Schiebinger, Londa. *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004.