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It seems safe to write that we are fully in the age of the history of things. Historians have long written about things—from the sacred to the profane. Partly due to the combined influences of Sidney Mintz’s magisterial Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History (1985) and Arjun Appadurai’s The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective (1986), a whole host of commodities have come to enjoy close analytical readings that situate them in the histories of capitalism, colonialism, emotion, and affect. At their best, these studies take a simple thing—a fish, a bean, or in this case an Amazonian plant—and weave it into a narrative that illuminates so much more than one seems to see at first glance. Seth Garfield’s study of guaraná does this admirably, and much more.

Commodity studies tend to pick up the concerns of social and cultural history and the histories of science, food, and flows, while remaining rooted in the materiality of the object of study. Sugar, cod, coffee, and guaraná are linked to a host of abstractions, including political and economic power, regimes of knowledge, innovation, and a variety of shifting cultural traditions, but they are also physical things, all of them organic products that exist in specific contexts, develop according to set limits, and when consumed by users produce specific effects over time. It is the materiality of the thing that shapes its history; in the case of guaraná, the conditions under which it can be favorably cultivated, the knowledge needed to extract the stimulating alkaloids from the plant’s seeds, the relative potency of those alkaloids relative to other caffeine bearing plants, and the human attraction to those forms of stimulation have shaped the long history of this plant.

Garfield’s deeply researched account situates guaraná within a series of different systems of knowledge and culture over a period that stretches from the earliest moments of colonization of the Amazon to the present. Traditionally cultivated by the Sateré-Mawé people along what is now the border of the states of Amazonas and Pará near the Madeira River, guaraná has long functioned as an integral aspect of Sateré-Mawé
cosmologies. It entered into the colonial world first as a component of an emerging Brazilian pharmacopoeia and ultimately as a core component of a nationalist soft drink industry.

The account of Sateré-Mawé agricultural technologies is particularly fascinating. In a region that remained largely remote from outside intervention and where cultivation was made challenging by local conditions, the methods used for the cultivation and preparation of guaraná were both innovative and painstaking. Sateré-Mawé techniques maintained species diversity and embraced technologies that effectively addressed the tendency of harvested seeds to rot quickly in the heat and damp conditions. After harvesting, they undertook a months-long process that involved pulverizing the seeds, preparing a paste, and drying it into sticks through a lengthy smoking process, after which the sticks could be stored and shaved, the shavings mixed with water to prepare a drink. The resulting product could be transported over great distances and sold to communities in Bolivia, Manaus, and elsewhere in Brazil, but due to the labor-intensive process and relatively meager output, it was not easily converted into a source of ready cash for either intermediaries or the Sateré-Mawé. Given that these circumstances persisted for centuries, it may be that the nature of guaraná production played a role in helping the Sateré-Mawé to limit market penetration in their communities.

Garfield is expert in exploring the tensions between community production and local meaning and the gradual penetration of missionaries, the state, and extractive capitalism. Some of his findings reveal what one might expect. Orientalist tropes, the denigration of Sateré-Mawé technologies and agricultural knowledge, and the imperial gaze of outsiders who sought to monetize and extract wealth from the Amazon are well-known narratives. Guarana plays a particular role in this story, as it does not seem to have raised the ire that some other, more powerfully psychoactive substances consumed in Indigenous communities did, perhaps also because guaraná itself seems to have played both quotidian and sacred roles in Sateré-Mawé communities (though, to be sure, the distinction does not cleanly apply here). What is clearer is that, having understood the powerful stimulant effect of the plant, outsiders tried to create outside markets for it even in the early nineteenth century.

Could guaraná have had a place in global commodity chains akin to that of coffee or tea? Brazil seems to represent an ideal setting to ask such a question, as coffee itself was emerging as a key national commodity at the very time a growing array of Amazonian merchants turned their attention to guaraná, which has the highest natural caffeine content of any plant on earth. Garfield implies that these aspirations were dashed at least in part due to the challenges in cultivating the plant and its relatively lower output relative to other caffeine-bearing plants. Well into the twentieth century the principal cultivators of the plant remained the Sateré-Mawé, and industrial-scale production, while impressive, could never challenge coffee. But this is where the story takes a fascinating twist. Though guaraná did not emerge as a global commodity, during the early twentieth century a shift from pharmaceutical use to the inclusion of traces of guaraná in the emerging national soda industry did give the plant a particular place in the market. Overlain with nationalist imagery—it was Brazilian, it was Amazonian, it was a traditional drink of Amazonian peoples—guaraná-based sodas, which used only traces, if any, of the plant, became a dominant drink in Brazil, and remain so today.

Traces, indeed. Garfield notes that in the early heyday of soda production adulterations sometimes meant that there was no guaraná in guaraná sodas at all. He states that “according to the Gazeta da Farmácia, in 1932, of more than nine hundred pharmacies, laboratories, and herb markets in Rio de Janeiro that sold medicinal plants, all
plied doctored products, which the author attributed to the dishonesty of the ‘legendary woodsmen’ who served as suppliers of botanicals” (pp. 118-19). In a remarkable twist, the scandal over ingredients yielded regulations that required a set percentage of guaraná in the sodas, which in turn acted as an impetus to grow guaraná on an industrial scale.

If this was then, the story of simple appropriation of subaltern cultures and identities (akin to rock ’n’ roll or country music in the United States, or southern foodways, or Taco Bell), the narrative would offer a familiar arc of the erasures wrought by colonialism. To be sure, as guaraná cultivation became part of the supply chain for the domestic soda industry, efforts to purify and select plants for commercial needs reflected the agro-industrial preference for monocropping. And yet, throughout the twentieth century native cultivators persisted in preserving biodiversity among guaraná varieties while producing on a small scale oriented toward local consumption and very limited participation in the market.

In part due to changes in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, which recognized limited territorial autonomy, and larger shifts in global consumer habits, these practices have remained robust over the past three decades. Indeed, the nature of Sateré-Mawé cultivation practices, which eschew industrial levels of production and maintain a sheen of the organic, the natural, has given rise to new markets in the US and western Europe, where the Indigenous origins of their guaraná entices consumers to pay a premium for the product. In exploring this development, Garfield offers a compelling coda to centuries of engagement between the Sateré-Mawé and outsiders, a narrative in which colonialism is always in the foreground but where local actors have long shown the ability to defend their practices and customs while engaging the forces of the outside world.
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