Ceremonial Cacao: The Permeation of Chocolate in Mesoamerican Celebration as the Setting for European Influence

February 20, 2015  ●  Uncategorized  ●  #ceremony, #mesoamericaninfluence, #spanish, #hurs9, Aztec, cacao, Divine, Maya, Thursday  ●  aaas119x578

For the people within the ancient Maya and Aztec civilizations, chocolate served as a tool to bring humans closer to a higher power. The sacred nature of chocolate ensured its utilization during countless rituals and celebrations in Mesoamerica. The prevalent use of chocolate by the Maya and Aztec people was no mystery to the Europeans, whose exposure to the beverage at banquets and ceremonies was a driving force in the adoption of chocolate consumption overseas and eventually around the globe.

This Maya representation of the two gods Chac and IxChel exchanging Cacao provides evidence for the mesoamerican idea of divinity in Chocolate. This god-worthy substance therefore found a special place in many Maya and Aztec ceremonies, where Europeans first tried the beverage.

Chocolate was commonly used in offerings to gods, such as the Sovereign Plumed Serpent, as well as in human sacrifices (Dillinger et al 2058s). Cacao was widely considered a food of the gods, depicted in many Maya creation stories as a divine gift. In one Maya creation story, cacao was given to humans by the god, Sovereign Plumed Serpent, directly after humans were created from maize (Dillinger et al 2057s). Before a human sacrifice would occur, the individuals awaiting death would consume a chocolate beverage for “comfort” (Dillinger et al 2058s). Banquets, during annual festivals and in honor of distinguished guests, featured large quantities of chocolate as well (Dillinger et al 2058s). Spanish Friars and colonists experienced these events within the Aztec Empire, and wrote first hand accounts of what they witnessed, presenting the European world with the wonder of chocolate.
Those who were awaiting sacrifice were often provided with chocolate as a comforting elixir.

From the earliest European accounts of life in New Spain, it is apparent that chocolate was present for many of the initial meetings between the Spanish and the Aztec people. As a gift of hospitality, the Mesoamerican people offered chocolate to visitors, including Hernán Cortés and Fray Bartolome de las Casas, introducing the European explorers to a taste they had never experienced before. One of Hernán Cortés' men noticed the powers associated with drinking chocolate, stating, “this drink is the healthiest thing, and the greatest sustenance of anything you could drink in the world…” (Coe and Coe 84). This statement was published in Venice in 1556, helping to bring the myth of chocolate to a European audience. Similarly, Fray Bartolome de las Casas sheds a light on the taste of chocolate as witnessed at “the emperor’s banquet,” stating “the drink is water mixed with a certain flour made from…cacao. It is very substantial, very cooling, tasty, and agreeable, and does not intoxicate” (Coe and Coe 96). Spanish women were also partially responsible for the adoption of chocolate in Europe, as some of these women were provided with “chocolate served in golden goblets” during a huge banquet in 1538 at the Great Plaza of Mexico and reportedly became, “addicted to the black chocolate” (Coe and Coe 114). Cortés and his men, de Las Casas, and a number of Spanish women began to experience the Spanish taste for chocolate in the new world, and seeking the taste back home as well.

Following Cortes' arrival in the New World, he comes across ambassadors of Motecuhzoma II, who warn him to turn back, but eventually Cortes' and his men are welcomed by Motecuhzoma II with a banquet. The banquets of Motecuhzoma II commonly featured chocolate, as he had a great store of Cacao beans. This is an example of European introduction to the taste of chocolate.

Today, the influence of cacao use during Mesoamerican rituals and celebrations can be seen throughout the world. The first documented introduction of chocolate as a beverage in Spain occurred in 1544 when Kekchi Maya nobles met with Prince Philip (Dillinger 2059s). Within a century, demand for chocolate spread to France, England and other European countries (Dillinger 2059s). Today, chocolate is a global entity consumed in mass proportions. In the United States alone, chocolate sales exceeded 20.6 billion dollars in 2014 (“Statistics and facts on the chocolate industry”). The existence of this enormous market for chocolate has its origins in Mesoamerica, and can be attributed to the sharing of chocolate between the Aztec people and the Spanish explorers before the conquest of the Aztec Empire.

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The Uniqueness of Cacao Bean Currency

February 20, 2015
Multimedia Essay 1
Aztec, chocolate as currency, currency, market, trade

It is relatively well known that Chocolate and its derivative, cacao beans, were of crucial importance to the Mesoamerican civilizations. Not as well-known though is the role cacao beans played as a form of currency in the Aztec Empire. Cacao was a rarer commodity in Aztec than it had been in the Mayan Empire as its tree did not readily cultivate in the region.

As shown in the above maps, the main areas in which cacao was grown fails to overlap with the Aztec Empire. Accordingly, the cacao bean was rare enough to be used as a currency. However, cacao beans played a different role than a typical currency. Due to several key differences between cacao beans and a more standard currency, the usage of cacao beans encouraged different actions in the market than otherwise would have been expected.

Cacao beans are unique as a currency in their short lifespan. Most currencies used over a long period of time have the ability for a single unit of it to stay in circulation for a decent length of time. However, cacao beans fail to have this quality. Instead cacao beans are both fragile when compared to silver, gold, or paper currency, and also fragile as a currency in that they had a tendency to be consumed rather than saved. Following from this, cacao beans encouraged different behavior than other currencies.¹ Specifically, this encouraged the drive for more turn around on transactions. When a cacao bean would be consumed rather than hoarded,
transactions. In essence, as cacao beans would be consumed rather than hoarded for later use. Coupling this, with cacao beans being the least expensive currency used, as compared to cloth or bullion. For example, an entire turkey was worth about 100 cacao beans.

The relative prices of each item is shown by the number of cacao beans adjacent.

The above image reveals the relative costs of various items in cacao beans. The rabbit is worth about ten beans while the egg about three. This meant that for cacao beans to be acceptable for remitting payment it must have been demanding a greater push for profit and growth in trade. This varies from normal currency where, when possible, it is considered proper to save money for a future time of need. Thus, the uniqueness of cacao beans as a currency encouraged a different style marketplace, especially when focusing on the less expensive options.

Another stark difference between cacao beans as a currency as compared to others at the time was the utter lack of access to them within the Aztec Empire itself. This led to strategies being developed by the Aztecs to garner cacao beans. Two main strategies were used. Firstly, Aztecs demanded that conquered territories pay tribute in the form of cacao beans. This allowed for a supply of beans to be added to the coffers already held by the Aztecan elite. Secondly, the Aztecs created a class of “travelling merchants”, pochteca, whose main job was to travel the long distances necessary to trade for cacao beans and then bring their load back to the empire on foot. The first strategy encouraged a greater amount of wealth to be distributed solely to the ruler and top class; however, the second further created a more active cacao trade. As a pochteca would only have cacao beans from their lifestyle, it would be entirely necessary to trade for everything they needed in life. Thus, by forcing trades that otherwise would not be necessary, cacao beans as a currency yielded a more active and profit driven marketplace.

Cacao beans were extremely important to the Mesoamerican peoples. For the Aztecs, it was a rare commodity that was hard to come by. Still, or even because of this, it became an integral part of their currency and market. Due to its unique characteristics as a currency of being more fragile and not internally found, the cacao bean encouraged a more active and profit focused market.

Image Sources (in order of appearance):
Throughout history, humans have been wary of the unknown. This constant vigilance has benefitted us throughout evolution by helping us to avoid possible dangers, especially in the context of items for consumption. Understanding the ways in which our bodies react to different food substances is crucial to our survival. In light of this, it is unsurprising that when cacao—an exotic commodity—was introduced to the Spanish diet in the 16th century, it was met with hesitation. Originally a Mesoamerican good, cacao was undoubtedly foreign and certainly questionable when it was first brought across the Atlantic by Spanish explorers (likely Hernán Cortés) in the early 1500’s (Coe 129). In order for this new product to be accepted by the Spanish (and later European) people, cacao needed to be transformed into a food and a concept that fit in with the already existing framework of diet and medical culture (120). By fitting cacao (in its various forms) into the ever-pervasive humoral scheme of medicine, the Spanish were able to hybridize chocolate into a form that was acceptable by the general population. However, there was a tradeoff for this hybridization: what the Spaniards gained in acceptance through the application of Galenic medicine, they lost in true knowledge of cacao’s medicinal properties. In this way, the medical hybridization of cacao in Spain and Europe was not comprehensive, but rather was a selective hybridization that excluded some of the most medicinally applicable aspects of cacao known to the Aztecs—a more ‘primitive’ people, but a people who understood the world around them better than the Europeans would for years to come (122).

In Aztec society, the tradition of cacao as medicine was well engrained in society. Cacao was used for digestion and elimination issues, anti-inflammatory purposes, or as a source of strength to name just a few (Dillinger et al., 2061S). The Aztec beliefs and disease etiology that backed these medical claims stemmed from an extensive...
with substances like cacao (Coe 122). Cacao was no exception, and though they may not have known about caffeine per se, through experience and acquired knowledge of the *Theobroma cacao* plant, the Aztecs knew that it behaved as a stimulant, increasing alertness and providing energy. Cacao’s slew of medicinal properties added to its symbolic meaning for them—a meaning that was quickly stripped when the Spaniards adopted it into their own culture (126).

Hearing of the abundance of medicinal plants growing in Aztec Mexico, Royal Physician Francisco Hernández of Spain was sent to study and classify the native botany in terms that the Spanish would understand (Dillinger et al., 2063S). Hernández recorded data on many plants, fitting them all into the theory of Galenic medicine that Europe so heavily relied upon. He classified cacao as a “cold” substance, concluding that it would be good to treat “hot” conditions like fever and hot temperaments. However, he also conversely concluded that depending on the flavorings added (chilis, etc), cacao could also be a “hot” substance used to combat colic (Coe 122-3). The contradictions did not end here. Physician Juan de Cárdenas reported that cacao could lead to fatigue, but physician Henry Stubbe concluded that it was a “speedy refreshment” that was especially helpful to restore energy (Dillinger et al., 2064S). In this way, there was no clear consensus about the medicinal effects of cacao in Europe, and this is largely a result of the general vagueness and inadequate evidence backing the heavily lauded humoral theory of medicine.

Yet, these inconsistencies did not seem to bother the Spaniards, nor the Europeans at large. To me, this suggests that the general population was not looking for truth in exchange for their approval of cacao, but merely a sense of familiarization and the reassurance of safety that we evolutionarily crave. The Aztecs had the answers behind the powers of cacao, and though they may not have been easily communicated, Francisco Hernández and others like him were so caught up in mapping the exotic plant onto their own mental schemas, that the real meaning (and symbolic meaning) was lost somewhere over the Atlantic. In this way, the introduction and subsequent hybridization of cacao was less of a hybridization and more of an adoption with appropriation to appease the masses. I can’t really be mad though, because as much as I’d like to know exactly what the Aztecs knew about chocolate, I can’t blame the Europeans for not needing a real medicinal reason to dive in to some cacao.

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Today, it is not so uncommon to walk into a coffee shop and order a classic hot chocolate, but the sweet, rich flavor we know and love now has not always characterized a typical “hot chocolate” drink. In fact, the first “hot chocolate” was served cold and had no sugar at all (Martin). The Aztecs and Mayans had very basic chocolate drinks, and one of the first descriptions of the Aztec chocolate drink by a European, Girolamo Benzoni, was that chocolate “seemed more like a drink for pigs, than a drink for humanity” (Coe and Coe 110). It was not until European intervention that sugar was added to those drinks (Martin). Europe’s addition of sugar to indigenous “hot chocolate” beverages transformed the drink from a cold, bitter drink to the warm, delectable drink we know today, and this transformation helped contribute to the expansion of chocolate consumption.

One of the first known chocolate drinks was made and consumed by the Mayans and Aztecs. This drink, known as cacahuatl, was made of cacao, ground maize, water, and sometimes chili, vanilla, or other indigenous spices (Miller). The video above shown in lecture shows a woman preparing a Mayan chocolate drink. The great care taken when grinding the cacao highlights the importance of the chocolate drink to the indigenous people (Martin). While the Aztecs and the Mayans enjoyed and respected this drink, the Europeans were not so fond of the bitter taste. As previously mentioned, Girolamo Benzoni was one of the first Europeans to record his experience with the cacahuatl, and he added that “the taste is somewhat bitter, it satisfies and refreshes the body, but does not inebriate” (Coe and Coe 110). That is, to the Europeans this chocolate drink was an acquired taste, and even after getting used to the taste, it was not necessarily desirable (Martin).

The Europeans solved the “bitterness problem” by adding their own ingredients to the original chocolate drink. Specifically, the Spaniards added sugar and spices such as cinnamon, anise, and black pepper (Miller). These more familiar ingredients were likely added to make the chocolate drink more appealing to the palates of the Europeans at the time. The video above details European intervention in chocolate recipes, including the addition of sugar, spices, and eventually, milk. While modifications to hot chocolate recipes continue today, sugar is still a main ingredient in the drinking of chocolate, and it is hard to imagine a drink without it.
ingredient, and a drink made of cacao, water, and cornmeal would still be considered an acquired taste. This makes it difficult to picture cacahuatl making it onto the menu of a typical coffee shop such as Starbucks or Dunkin’ Donuts, but it does give a new perspective as to how the addition of sugar to chocolate recipes helped increase chocolate consumption.

When the Europeans added sugar to the basic chocolate drink, the sugar changed the flavor of the drink. This change in flavor satisfied the “sweet tooth” of the European population at the time, and because of this, more people were inclined to try the chocolate drink, and soon, chocolate houses became a common social venue (Martin). The spread of chocolate truly began once the chocolate drink started to satisfy the palates of a greater number of people. The expansion of chocolate continues today as new ingredients are added to create more complex hot chocolate recipes like the ones described in the video above. Just like sugar, ingredients such as peanut butter, caramel, and nutella serve to alter the flavor as to satisfy all sorts of tastes. This new wave of modifications is even diverging from sweet hot chocolate at times to appeal to those looking for salty, savory, or even spicy chocolate drinks. All of these changes serve to appeal to a wider range of people and sustain the chocolate culture we know today.

Works Cited


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**The Evolution of Drinking Chocolate**

February 20, 2015  •  Uncategorized  •  Aztec, Aztec Elite, cacao, Chocolate Beverage, chocolate consumption, chocolate drink, Chocolate Drinks, history, Maya, Mayans, Michael D. Coe  •  aaas119e93

In modern times, hot chocolate is enjoyed by people around the world. The most familiar types found in the grocery store are made up of a pre-sweetened powder that comes in a small package and may or may not contain 15% cocoa depending on the type of drink. Other types of drinking chocolate, such as Abuelita, come in pressed chocolate bars that are then dissolved in milk. Today, hot cocoa is available to people of every social and economic class. However, historically chocolate drinks were made in a very different manner, and they were most often only available to
The cultivation of cacao began as early as 1900 BC with the Olmec civilization (Presilla, 2001, p. 10), but the oldest known cacao recipes come from the Maya and the Aztec civilizations. For the Maya civilization, cacao was available to people of every social and economic class, although little evidence remains of the drinking vessels used by the less affluent members of society (Presilla, 2001, p. 12) As cacao is difficult to grow, it is likely that the more affluent members of society had easier access to drinking cacao due to its rarity. Maya drinking chocolate was often made from water that contained the starch of lime-treated corn mixed with the cacao beans that had been ground into a paste. Mayan cacao was also flavored with ear flower, vanilla, honey, allspice, and chiles (Presilla, 2001, p. 13, 14). Frothy chocolate was favored by the Maya, and it would later also be favored by the Aztecs and the Spaniards.

Unlike the Maya, the Aztecs limited cacao consumption to the elites and the warrior class. Aztec cacao drinks were available (to the members of these social classes) in the market, and the makers of these drinks were considered true artisans, as:

“She who sells remade cacao for drinking first grinds it in this fashion: At the first [grinding] she breaks or crushes the beans; at the second they are slightly more ground; at the third and last they are very well ground, being mixed with boiled and rinsed corn kernels; and being thus ground and mixed, they add water [to the mixture] in any sort of vessel [vaso]. If they add little [water] they have beautiful cacao; if they add a lot, it will not produce froth.” (Saghagun, Historia General)

Frothy cacao was considered to be the very best of the Aztec cacao drinks, and all other cacao drinks were considered inferior (Presilla, 2001, p.19-20). Today, cacao is drunk throughout the day or as a nightcap, but the Aztec elites drank their cacao at the end of meals (Coe, 2013, Kindle location 1330). The Aztecs, much like the Maya, used locally available ingredients to flavor their cacao. These ingredients included honey, vanilla, allspice, earflower, magnolia, piper sanctum (pepper flower), and chiles. Today, chocolate is often flavored with ingredients like vanilla and aromatic spices.
honey, ear flower, vanilla, string flower, magnolia, piper sanctum (pepper flower), heart flower, chiles, and allspice. According to Coe in *The True History of Chocolate*, Aztec cacao was made with roasted ground cacao beans and sopata seeds that were mixed with ground corn and spices (Coe, 2013, Kindle location 1314).

The Spanish assimilated their own flavors when they brought chocolate over from Mesoamerica, including: cinnamon, sugar, and black pepper (Coe, 2013, Kindle Location 1599). The Spanish also began mixing cacao with cow’s milk. In order to grind the beans, a heated metate was used, and the precious and sought after froth was obtained using a molinillo stirring stick (Coe, 2013, Kindle Location 1599-1614).

While the historical flavors of drinking chocolate remain, cacao has become a much sweeter drink in modern times, and flavorings have continuously expanded. With the current trend towards a diet low in refined sugars, I wonder if the Maya and Aztec way of drinking unsweetened cacao might make a comeback.

Sources


Image 1: Swiss Miss Cocoa Collection, from the Swiss Miss website

Image 2: Abuelita Cocoa, from the Abuelita website

Image 3: Maya cocoa frothing, from the course slides

The Rise Of Chocolate Bars Over Drinks

Chocolate bars currently dominate food and drink originating from cacao. Huge brands such as Hershey’s, Cadbury, Nestle, and others are sold in nearly every gas station, convenience store, pharmacy, and grocery store. When chocolate is brought up in conversation, a chocolate bar is often the first association made.
chocolate has been an obsession of people with access to it throughout history, current chocolate bars are a recent phenomenon in the history of chocolate. The Mesoamerican people who first began eating cacao products primarily drank a mixture of ground cacao and other things. The complex process of creating the original drink made it difficult to transport, but Europeans were able to spread chocolate by sending across the Atlantic in bricks. Chocolate drinking was also popular in Europe at the outset, but as popularity and mass production spread the chocolate bar became the biggest chocolate product due to the ease with which it can be consumed and transported.

Sophie and Michael Coe detail the process the Aztecs used to make their chocolate drink pre-European contact in their book, *True History of Chocolate*. The Coe’s describe how the Aztecs would grind their cacao, meticulously sift through, and mix with other spices to make a type of gruel drink that would provide a large amount of sustenance. The following object is a molinillo, used as a stirring tool in this process of creating the chocolate drink. The tool was adopted by Europeans as they began mixing their own version of chocolate drinks as well. The meticulous process involved in preparing the chocolate drink and usage of tools in order to make the product made this difficult for people, especially Europeans who didn’t know much about the culture of chocolate, to conveniently indulge in chocolate on their own.

The process of bringing chocolate from the Americas to Europe fueled the creation of the modern chocolate product. Rather than shipping the final chocolate drink to Europe, it was easier to send bricks of cocoa and create the drink in Europe. During the period of time after chocolate was introduced in Europe, it was consumed as a drink in a similar fashion as the Aztecs and Mesoamerican peoples would consume chocolate. According to Sidney Mintz in *Sweetness and Power*, chocolate during this time was consumed by the elite Europeans as a drink. The reason it wasn’t more accessible to other classes of people can be attributed to the difficulty involved in making the drink and the idea that drinking chocolate together was a social activity.
In the 19th century, the British began to cash in on the increased sugar demand observed by Mintz and began distributing chocolates in solid tablets similar to modern day candy bars. The natural human tendencies to enjoy chocolate and sugar made the bars very popular and lead to the massive industry growth we see today. The major change between Mesoamerican inspired chocolate drinks and European candy bars is accessibility. These bars, like the blocks of cocoa powder pictured above, were easy to transport and mass produce from the supplier side. From the consumer side these chocolates were much easier to eat. Buying and eating a chocolate bar is much more convenient and a lot cheaper than going to elite clubs and having someone grind chocolate drink for you. The rise of chocolate candy bars as the dominate chocolate product is primarily due to the ease with which it can be consumed and distributed as opposed to the more traditional chocolate drink.

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5. “Chocolate Bars” https://chocolateclass.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/chocolate5.png

Chocolate is available to hungry consumers in a variety of tantalizing culinary mediums. It is prepared in bars and disks, as a dusting on nuts, or poured as a silky sauce over creamy desserts. Although innovative chefs will continue to produce chocolate in a myriad of traditional and unorthodox ways, chocolate in liquid form will likely remain the most cherished mode of consumption.
This begs the question, what makes liquid chocolate special? To be sure, creaminess and thickness make the drink seem especially delightful. Flavor through added ingredients plays an important factor as well. For the Aztec and Maya civilizations, and even the early European culture, what made drinking chocolate a true indulgence was its froth and foam.

According to the records of Berdardino de Sahagún, a Franciscan friar whose written records provide first-hand insight to Aztec culture and customs, “cacao well made and beautiful” was “smooth, frothy, vermilion, red, and pure, without much corn masa” (Presilla 20).

Before the frothing process can begin, a mixture of ground cacao beans, corn “flour,” and water must be combined to create a patty-like substance. Then, water is added slowly and carefully until the chocolate is a liquid. At this point, froth is brought forth by transferring the drink from one vessel to another, usually from great heights. It is assumed that “during the pre-Conquest past, this was the exclusive method, all over Mesoamerica” (Coe & Coe 85). Below is an image of a woman engaged in such a process.

To better understand how the Mesoamericans drank their chocolate, and more specifically, to better appreciate the effort required to transform cacao from a gruel-like drink to a cherished elixir, I attempted the ancient preparation. Using a Taza Chocolate disc (vanilla flavor), Maseca Corn “Flour,” and a little bit of milk, I made a mixture that filled three-quarters of a small mug.
I collected the ingredients, chopped the chocolate and made a corn flour paste, keeping in mind that the Aztecs believed, “the effort would go for naught if the mixture had been cheapened by too much corn or thinned with too much water.” (Presilla 20)

After the ingredients were well combined, I poured the mixture from mug to mug.

The height from which the chocolate was poured in the video above is likely not the most authentic representation of how the Maya and Aztec created froth. According to the records of Sahagún, “after straining, it is lifted up high so that it will pour in a good stream, and this is what raises the froth” (Presilla 20). This type of shoulder-height, floor-to-ceiling pouring is a difficult process. In my preliminary frothing attempts, I found that as the height from which I poured the chocolate increased, the difficulty and associated mess did also.

Ultimately, a small froth rose in the chocolate.

The finished product confirmed the Aztec penchant for froth and validated the effort expended to produce it. The richness and thickness of the chocolate contrasted with the lightness of the froth, suggests that truly, liquid chocolate was then (and now) a beverage fit for “lords [to] drink” (Presilla 20).

Works Cited:

“They seemed to hold these almonds at a great price,” wrote Ferdinand Columbus as he reflected on Aztec veneration of cacao. “I observed that when any of these almonds fell, they all stooped to pick them up, as if an eye had fallen.” This insight would prove critical as the Spaniards attempted to conquer the indigenous people of Mesoamerica: since the earliest interactions between the two peoples, it was apparent to the Spaniards that the multifaceted economic and religious significance of cacao was essential in understanding—and exploiting—the native peoples.

In many ways, the Spaniards relied on the natives’ preexisting economic dependence on the Mesoamerican cacao trade. The value of cacao both in New and Old Spain rapidly grew, and so did the Spaniards’ knowledge of the methods of distribution and storage used. Alvarado and his men stole a reported 43,200,000 beans from the Emperor’s massive stock house—a substantial portion of his wealth, though not nearly all of it (Coe 83). As the Spaniards grew more familiar with the cacao trading system, they began to collect tribute and profit from the established market for cacao. With this knowledge the Spaniards were able to influence and control the cacao trade routes in the New World.

Yet the Aztecs, too, used the Spaniards’ dependence on cacao as currency to their advantage. Numerous reports reveal Spaniards’ complaints of an influx of “counterfeit” cacao on the trade route that they had seized (Moran 67; Coe 100).

As the conquistadors discovered the power of cacao in the New World, so did the missionaries that closely followed. Religious officials allowed longstanding traditions of cacao worship to integrate with Catholic traditions, simultaneously facilitating the economic exploitation of the native peoples. One example includes an early Jesuit, Joseph Gumilla, who witnessed a mass plague of the annual crop of cacao pods and declared that such an event was a “divine judgment on people who didn’t pay their tithes to the church.” (Presilla 36). He further attributed the success of other crops to the “punctuality” of a church member’s dues. In the 16th century, friar Thomas Gage described the rapid wealth that religious figures could accumulate should they encourage the practice of cacao offerings; he later left Colonial America with vast amounts of jewels and gold he had acquired from tributes (McNeil 275-6).

Though cacao was frequently described as sinful due to its alleged “aphrodisiacal” properties, catholic officials clearly found its integration beneficial—both in their economic and their religious domination of the indigenous peoples. Many monasteries today have ancient works of art revealing the advantageous fusion of
cacao worship and Catholicism. One 16th century statue, “El Señor Del Cacao” or “Christ of Cacao,” still exists today in the Cathedral of Mexico city; resting adjacent to the Templo Mayor—considered the “great ancient temple of the Aztec”—the Aztecs were able to continue their familiar tradition of making cacao offerings right next to their sacred temple (McNeil 276; Aguilar-Moreno 339).

At the same time, the fusion of Catholicism with these types of local traditions both encouraged participation and allowed religious officials to rapidly gain wealth (Aguilar-Moreno 339-40).
Natives carrying cocoa, fruits, and other produce, as tribute to the Spaniards

Indeed, the Spaniards used the economic and spiritual properties of cacao in the eyes of the Mesoamerican peoples to pillage and to profit. In the eyes of the Spaniards, Cacao was more than a food of the New World—it was a weapon.

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A Chocolate Fetish: How The Candy Industry is Molding Our View of Mayan and Aztec Culture

Marketed as a pure, healthy and an ancient delicacy, the recent trend in chocolate consumption is largely influenced by the sweet treat’s Mesoamerican origins. Citing the Aztecs and Mayans as “inspirations”, chocolate brands are making products flavored with honey, chiles, fruits and spices to recreate the flavors and texture consumed in these civilizations. While most chocolate lovers know that the Hershey bar has undergone quite an evolution since the Mayans first brought chocolate making to a high art, few have any accurate depiction of the food’s history. Fueled by stereotypes gathered from high school history class, branding certain chocolate products as “Mayan”, “Mexican” and “Aztec” when they are only reminiscent of ancient creations contributes to a fetishization of the Mayan and Aztec culture.

This new chocolate trend is generally characterized as “earthier, spicier and generally made with less sugar than sweet, creamy, European-style chocolate” (Dizik). Employing
An Aztec chocolate bar, made by Cadbury (Taken from the Cadbury UK website)

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the lengthy process of roasting and hand-grinding cocoa nibs with a metate, a mortar like vessel, craft chocolate companies like Taza Chocolate in Somerville, MA and Xocoatl in Taos, NM are able to make small batches of authentic stone-ground chocolate. The end product is a “consistency a bit like crunchy dirt” (Dizik) and a “vaguely smoky, cherrylike flavor that’s deeper and more lingering than the usual Swiss stuff” (Clark). Although the products of these companies come closer to depicting the ancient origins of chocolate when compared to products like Cadbury’s Aztec bar, a milk chocolate bar with a caramel filling, it is important to remember that Mexican-style eating chocolate does not really exist. Chocolate was consumed as a bitter, frothed beverage.

Advertising and marketing depicting stereotypes of Aztec and Mayan culture is also a concerning aspect of these new chocolate products. “Aztec”, “Maya” and “Mexican” are often used interchangeably in labeling, merging the identity of these three unique cultures.

“Spicy” and “Pure” are also common packaging labels along with images of chile peppers, cinnamon sticks, suns, and Mayan glyphs. This advertising is not limited to candy bar products, but includes chocolate-flavored products such as beer and ice-cream.

After conducting this research, I decided to do my own search in my local Whole Foods to see what Aztec, Mexican and Mayan “inspired” products were available on the shelves. I found several that fit the stereotypical model described above; here are some of my findings:
As this trend becomes more popular, the chocolate industry is responding to please these curious and excited consumers. However, instead of providing accurate and informative resources, the chocolate industry is sharing a history “based on a true story”, creating a breeding ground for stereotypes surrounding Mayan and Aztec civilization. For example, the Hotel Maya in Los Angeles is hosting a cooking class for couples focusing on chocolates-based dishes including mole chicken and stuffed crepes. The class itself is not problematic; however, the hotel advertising the course’s inspiration as “celebrating the Mayan’s discovery of cocoa for cooking” suggests numerous historical inaccuracies (Bennett). Not only did the Maya have nothing to do with the two dishes listed above, but they were not the first to use cacao for consumption; Mesoamerican cultures first discovered and used the plant.

Cadbury World in the United Kingdom also hosts a popular event called Aztec Weekend at the popular chocolate-themed tourist attraction. Visitors can walk through displays of the “Aztec jungle” with actors portraying Montezuma and other Aztecs dressed in stereotypical animal-print robes and feathered headdresses. Other highlights of the exhibit include sampling “special chilli con carne with a chocolatey twist” and learning about the “exotic origins of the cocoa bean” (Godsall). Aside from historical inaccuracies, the portrayal of Aztec civilization makes this event controversial. Targeting primarily children, the exhibit is heavily covered in faux plants and dimly lit portraying Aztec civilization as mysterious, wild and exotic.

For so many people, chocolate is associated with fun, holidays and childhood memories. It can be difficult to separate fact from fiction when learning something we have an emotional attachment to. I do not want my intentions to be misunderstood—there is nothing wrong with enjoying a spicy hot chocolate or chicken with mole sauce. However, we should exercise caution when trusting chocolate companies to provide us with history lessons.
The Role of Pochteca Merchants in Aztec Cacao Consumption

February 20, 2015

When discussing the production and consumption of Cacao in ancient Mesoamerica, it is generally well known that the Aztecs were believed to have treated this food source with a very high degree of importance, making use of it as a cold beverage consumed by nobility and also as a form of currency. It is also understood that the Aztecs imported the cacao they consumed from the Mayans (Coe). However, what is often overlooked in this discussion is the role of those given the task of transporting the cacao beans from the Mayans to the Aztecs. These people, known as Pochteca merchants, were a far cry from the average peasant or slave commonly found amongst the Aztec people. By looking at the Pochteca Merchants and their role of transportation in more detail, I believe not only that the ideology stating how the Aztecs believed cacao to be an extremely luxurious food source can be strengthened, but it can also be suggested that Cacao was regarded as a luxurious good due in part to this specialised trade system with the Mayans.

The capital of the Aztec empire was the city of Tenochtitlan, where the most powerful Aztec nobility resided. Located in the central highlands of modern day Mexico, Cacao trees were not able to grow well in this region, and thus, in order to satisfy the Aztec royals strong desire for the luxury food, it was required that cacao beans must be imported via trade from the Mayans located in the south, as well as other places (NCA).
Different social classes played a major role in Aztec society. A large proportion of the empire was made up of peasants and slaves, who performed the majority of the tasks regarding agriculture and food production, as well as trade and combat (Sanders). However, when faced with the task of transporting cacao beans from the Mayan regions, the Aztec nobility instead relied upon the Pochteca merchants (Coe).

A small but highly regarded class of people, the Pochteca merchants had far more wealth and authority than any peasant or slave in the Aztec empire. Solely hereditary, the ability to become a Pochteca merchant was both difficult and highly valued. The Aztec royals had great respect and trust for them, and, as a result, granted them permission to roam outside the lands ruled by the Aztecs, an ability given to no other member of the society. Because of this, it was deemed appropriate that the Pochteca merchants be the ones to trade cacao with the Mayans (Smith).

The Pochteca merchants were able to gain great wealth, which they usually kept hidden to avoid intimidating the higher-class nobility. They also gained further trust from the Aztec royals, who began using them for

By performing these Cacao trades with the Mayans, the Pochteca merchants were able to gain great wealth, which they usually kept hidden to avoid intimidating the higher-class nobility. They also gained further trust from the Aztec royals, who began using them for

It is clear that Tenochtitlan was far from any source of cacao, and the areas of major production were predominantly located to the south.
trade in other areas of Mesoamerica and also for spying on other societies (Smith).

As previously stated, the Pochteca Merchants consisted of a small selection of people in comparison to the Aztec society as a whole. By solely using them for the transportation of cacao beans, the supply to the Aztecs was always going to remain low. This constant low supply of cacao beans may have contributed to the high value placed on them by the Aztec nobility, as, although the royals may have consumed them in abundance (Coe), they would have remained a relatively rare commodity throughout the Aztec empire.

Thus, upon looking deeper at the roles of the often over looked Pochteca merchants, it is clear that they were a vital ingredient in the Aztecs consumption of cacao beans. Furthermore, it can be argued that not only were they evidence for the great value that Aztec nobility placed on the cacao bean, but also that there exclusive assignment of transporting the cacao may have played a factor in creating and maintaining the luxury status of the food source in the first place.

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