

THE VARIOUS USES OF CHOCOLATE IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD

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ABSTRACT:

This paper focuses on the various uses of the cacao bean in the early Atlantic World. Indigenous groups, such as the Olmec, Maya and Aztec, all used the cacao bean for various functions, such as commodity, pleasure, medicinal use and in ceremonies. They also equated the cacao bean to that of Godly power, wealth and the overall livelihood of humanity, as they believed it was a gift of the Gods. Hernan Cortes, the first conquistador to bring the cacao bean back to Europe, arguably ignited an entirely different function of the cacao bean. With experimentation, including mixing the bean with different ingredients, and the trade of the cacao bean, chocolate would be born into the Atlantic World. The sweetened version of the cacao bean, chocolate, would travel throughout Europe in different capacities, serving different functions. Regardless of the function it grew to serve, one thing is indisputable about what it would come to be: a favorite of many in both modern and past worlds.

Cultivated and created originally in early Mesoamerica, the cacao bean, the decadent ingredient in chocolate, would essentially find itself engaging in different trials and tribulations of those who came across it. Whether integrated as a form of trade commodity, as a tasty treat or even as a medicinal or ritualistic component, chocolate would become an integral part of everyday life for many societies. Each society in the early Atlantic World had their own interpretation of chocolate, and it would reflect in the way they utilized and prepared it. This paper poses the question: what was the purpose of chocolate in early life within different societies of the Atlantic world? This paper argues that the various functions of chocolate in the Atlantic world encompassed that of the ability to consume for pleasure, to be traded or used as a form of commodity and profit, as well as the eventual incorporation into medicinal and ritualistic purposes amongst cultures and societies.

It was not without various experiments among the hands it passed through that the cacao bean would find itself mixed and manipulated to create what was later known as, and what is still known today as, chocolate. To understand the different uses and attributes of chocolate, it is first important to understand how it is created. Each cacao plant has pods, and each pod contains approximately forty cacao beans.¹ In order to turn the cacao into cocoa, or chocolate, the beans found within the pods are dried, or sometimes roasted.² Of course as different societies began to engage in experimenting with the beans, such as the Europeans, they began to add ingredients like milk and sugar to make the tasty treat sweeter.³ Similar to the fact that different societies held chocolate for its different purposes, they also held it esteemed for its different tastes.

¹ Jack Kim. "A Brief History of Chocolate." Chocolate.org. October 16, 2019. ; History.com Editors. "History of Chocolate." History.com. A&E Television Networks, December 14, 2017.

² Jack Kim. "A Brief History of Chocolate." ; History.com Editors. "History of Chocolate."

³ Ibid.

The first recorded cacao plants were grown in modern-day southern Mexico around 1500 B.C., as the Olmec civilization would introduce the crop into their everyday life, as well as the everyday lives of many other indigenous societies.⁴ The Olmec peoples would essentially utilize the crop for rituals and medicine, as they grew to believe it had healing powers.⁵ Indigenous societies in South America grew to support a consensus that cacao beans and chocolate held properties similar to that of the Gods.⁶ To both the indigenous people and the Europeans who came to manipulate it, chocolate symbolized power and wealth, similar to that held by their Gods. Mayan societies even believed that cacao was a gift from the gods and was meant to be used for ceremonial purposes. For this reason, they viewed chocolate as very important and even ceremonial, often utilizing the beans in the case of important festivities or in the presence of guests.⁷

One of the first accounts of indigenous societies equating chocolate to that of the Gods finds origin within the Mayan Creation story, or the Popul Vuh. Upon the creation of humankind, there was the creation and cultivation of various fruits and plants.⁸ If it were not for the creation of humankind and of the universe by the Gods as Mayan peoples viewed it, there would be no cacao bean or chocolate.⁹ Similarly, when the Maize God is brought back to life in the Popul Vuh by the “hero twins,” maize and cacao played a pivotal role in the successful creation of humanity. This further imitates the idea of cacao being essential to life and humanity, as well as equatable

⁴ Marcy Norton. "Conquests of Chocolate." OAH Magazine of History 18, no. 3 (2004): pp. 14-15.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Segel, Adam and Axel Borg. “Chocolate.” Oxford Bibliographies Online. December 2012.

⁷ Segel, Adam and Axel Borg. “Chocolate.” ; History.com Editors. “History of Chocolate.”

⁸ Popol Vuh. Translated by Dennis Tedlock. New York: Touchstone Books, 1996.

⁹ Popol Vuh. Translated by Dennis Tedlock. New York: Touchstone Books, 1996.

to Gods and otherworldly power.¹⁰ Interestingly enough, as the Olmec and Mayan civilizations passed their knowledge of chocolate throughout neighboring indigenous societies, the Aztec peoples would also equate chocolate and the cacao beans to that of importance. The Aztec peoples would also use chocolate as a form of trade commodity, acting as one of the first indigenous societies to embrace its profitable attributes.¹¹

The Aztecs held similar ideas to the Mayan society, as they also thanked the Gods for chocolate. In an early recollection of the Aztec creation of the world, it states “that is how the gods gave food to humankind. And when you yourself next eat...rich, dark chocolate...remember who first blessed you with these things ... and be thankful.”¹² In fact, Aztec leader Montezuma would be rumored to drink several gallons of chocolate a day, as he equated it to good health and godly power.¹³ Conquistador Hernan Cortes would witness this first hand, as well as the incorporation of chocolate into indigenous rituals and celebrations, as he would come to conquer the Aztec Empire.¹⁴ Cortes was initially thought to actually be a God, so he was offered not only Montezuma’s throne, but their commodities and affinity for chocolate as a decadent treat and as a form of currency.¹⁵ Through Hernan Cortes’ conquest of Tenochtitlan would come the introduction of chocolate into European societies as he brought it back to Spain with him.

Upon the arrival of Hernan Cortes back into Spain, many Spaniards and Europeans were intrigued by his stories of the delicious treat. Without much addition, the cacao bean itself can be

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Segel, Adam and Axel Borg. “Chocolate.” ; Popol Vuh. Translated by Dennis Tedlock. New York: Touchstone Books, 1996.

¹² Diana Ferguson, Tales of the Plumed Serpent: Aztec, Inca and Mayan Myths (London: Collins & Brown, 2000), p.135.

¹³ History.com Editors. “History of Chocolate.”

¹⁴ (ed.) Miguel León-Portilla, ed. The Broken Spears. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press., 1992.

¹⁵ Miguel León-Portilla, ed. The Broken Spears.

very bitter. In order to make the bean sweeter, there would need to be experimentation. Native Englishman the first Earl of Sandwich would venture to Spain in the 1660s and experiment with chocolate, as he recalls the various ways in which it was prepared.¹⁶ Essentially, in Europe, the Spanish were the first to experiment with chocolate, oftentimes adding sugar, cinnamon and vanilla to try and make it sweet.¹⁷ As different Europeans grew interested in obtaining the “foreign-marketed” commodity, the Earl of Sandwich’s written recollection of recipes would prove useful.¹⁸

Labeling chocolate as a “foreign commodity” added mystery and intrigue throughout Europe to try the newfound treat.¹⁹ Aside from the fact that, when combined with other commodities such as sugar and milk chocolate was sweet and enjoyable, chocolate would also come to have a purpose in the growing Atlantic World’s economy and medicinal fields. Per normal European fashion, when something seems mysterious and ritualistic, it is oftentimes further experimented with and acquires an expanded use. Through social interaction and discussion, Europeans began to realize that chocolate was something indigenous peoples claimed to use for religious and ritualistic purposes.²⁰ Noticing that indigenous societies labeled chocolate with Godly importance, Europeans felt their ego expand as they felt almost valued upon their

¹⁶ Kate Loveman. 2013. “The Introduction of Chocolate into England: Retailers, Researchers, and Consumers, 1640–1730.” Journal of Social History 47 (1): pp. 27-28.

¹⁷ Margarita De Orellana, Clara Marín, Salvador Reyes Equiguas, Quentin Pope, Anahí Luna, Martha Few, Johanna Kufer, Nikolai Grube, Michael Heinrich, Michelle Suderman, Jorge Betanzos, Timothy Adès, José Luis Trueba Lara, Rafael Vargas, and Guadalupe Loaeza. “Chocolate III: Ritual, Art and Memory.” Artes De México, no. 110 (2013): p. 80. ; Leigh Hunt Bacchus in Tuscany: A Dithyrambic Poem from the Italian of Francisco Redi, with Notes Original and Select (London: John and H.L. Hunt, 1825), pp. 122–23.

¹⁸ Kate Loveman. 2013. “The Introduction of Chocolate into England: Retailers, Researchers, and Consumers, 1640–1730.” pp.27-29.

¹⁹ Ibid.; Marcy Norton. “Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics.” The American Historical Review 111, no. 3 (2006): pp.666-668.

²⁰ Pilcher, Jeffrey M. The Americas 66, no. 1 (2009): pp. 113-14. ; N/A. “Chocolate and Tea.” National Museum of American History, January 10, 2017.

regular use of chocolate. As a result, chocolate would not just be used as a drink or a tasty snack, it would be incorporated as a healing drink or a medicinal substitute.²¹ Marie de Villars, wife of the French Ambassador to Spain, would write in a letter to a friend, in the 1680s, that “I observe my chocolate diet, to which I believe I owe my health. I do not use it crazily or without precaution....there is nothing better for the health.”²² Interestingly enough, chocolate would also become addictive to many Europeans, as they consumed it very often, that it’s overconsumption would also become a medical issue.²³

While Europeans were able to make profit off of chocolate through its mysterious and adventurous advertisement, they were also able to make a profit through large scale production. Eventually, this would mean planting and tending to cacao plants. In a recollection of production of the cacao plant in British and Spanish colonies, The Earl of Oxford, in 1690, would recall that there was “....such prodigious profit with so little trouble ...in their transplanting cocoa...”²⁴ In other words, chocolate, produced from the cacao plant, was growing so popular that it was creating a large profit for any Europeans involved in its cultivation and preparation. During the mid to late seventeenth century, the demand for chocolate, and hence the cacao plant, was at an all time high.²⁵ It was new and exciting, and Europeans were still figuring out its use. The possibilities were endless, and the profit was immense.

In conclusion, upon its introduction in European colonies, chocolate was a quickly growing commodity with various purposes. Such purposes would grow to include that of

²¹ Margarita De Orellana et. al. "Chocolate III: Ritual, Art and Memory." Artes De México, no. 110 (2013): p.80.

²² Coe, Sophie D and Michael D. Coe, The True History of Chocolate (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996), p. 138.

²³ Marcy Norton. "Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics." p.668

²⁴ Brandon Head. The Food of the Gods: A Popular Account of Cocoa (London: R. Brimley Johnson, 1903).

²⁵ Brandon Head. The Food of the Gods: A Popular Account of Cocoa.

ritualistic or medicinal aid, a way of profit and trade as well as serving as an all around tasty and delicious treat. The use of chocolate in the early Atlantic World was not only at an all time high in the seventeenth century, but it also seemed as if it had endless use. Through different experimentation and shared social interactions, chocolate was essentially a large part of the Atlantic World societies, just as it continues to grow and expand into creative purposes in modern day society.

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