

CHEWING GUM AND THE *SHADOWLANDS* OF CONSUMPTION

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Abstract

The history of *chicle* has been largely ignored in the formal academic literature on Mexico and Central America. The absence of research into an international commodity of vital importance to the United States, as well as to Mexico, is in stark contrast with the celebrated literature on *henequen* (sisal) in Yucatan. The story of *chicle* in Mexico is also in marked contrast to the celebration of chewing gum in the popular culture of the United States. *Chicle*, the raw material from which chewing gum was derived, came from the resin of the *chicozapote* tree, which grew in the high forests of the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America. This paper reviews recent thinking on producer-consumer relations and highlights the changing boundaries between local and metropolitan cultures, and the processes through which consumer cultures have become globalised, leaving the marginalized producers in the "shadow-lands".

Key words: Yucatan, chewing gum, *chicozapote* tree, globalised.

Resumen

La historia del chicle ha recibido escasa atención en la bibliografía académica sobre México y Centroamérica. La ausencia de investigaciones relativas a un producto tan significativo para Estados Unidos y para México contrasta con la célebre literatura sobre el henequén en Yucatán. Asimismo, la historia del chicle en México es notablemente distinta de la de la goma de mascar en la cultura popular norteamericana. El chicle, la materia prima de la cual se deriva la goma de mascar, era extraído de la resina del árbol del chicozapote, que crecía en los bosques de la península de Yucatán y América Central. Este artículo revisa el pensamiento actual sobre las relaciones entre productor y consumidor y resalta las cambiantes fronteras entre las culturas locales y metropolitanas y los procesos por los cuales las culturas de consumo se globalizan, dejando a los productores marginados en una tierra de sombras.

Palabras clave: Yucatán, chicle, chicozapote, globalización.

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EL CHICLE: SOMBRAS DETRÁS DEL CONSUMO

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Résumé

L'histoire de la gomme à mâcher (chewing-gum), "chicle" n'a que fort peu retenu l'attention si l'on en croit la bibliographie académique concernant le Mexique et l'Amérique Centrale. L'absence de recherches relatives à un produit aussi significatif pour les Etats-Unis que pour le Mexique contraste avec l'abondante littérature sur le sisal ou *henequen* (*Agave rigida*), du Yucatan. De la même manière l'histoire du *chicle* au Mexique est différente de celle du "Chewing-Gum" dans la culture populaire nord-américaine. Le *chicle* (*mot d'origine aztèque, "tzictli"*), matière première dont provient la gomme à mâcher était extrait de la résine de l'arbre *chicozapote* (espèce de sapotillier) qui pousse dans les forêts de la péninsule du Yucatan et en Amérique Centrale. Le présent article examine les idées actuelles sur les relations entre producteur et consommateur, soulignant les frontières changeantes entre les cultures locales et les métropolitaines, ainsi que les processus par lesquels les cultures de consommation se mondialisent, laissant dans l'ombre les producteurs marginalisés.

Mots-clefs: Yucatan, gomme à Mâcher (*chicle, chewing-gum*); *chicozapote* (sapotier, ou sapotillier); globalisation / mondialisation.

Samenvatting

De academische bibliografie over Mexico en Centraal-Amerika heeft weinig aandacht besteed aan de geschiedenis van de kauwgom. In tegenstelling tot de beroemde literatuur over andere producten van Yucatan is dit belangrijk product voor de Verenigde Staten en Mexico onderbelicht gebleven. Ook is de geschiedenis van de kauwgom in Mexico significantief verschillend dan die van de Noordamerikaanse volkscultuur. De kauwgom werd gemaakt van de hars van de boom *chicozapote*, die in de bossen van het schiereiland van Yucatan en Centraal-Amerika groeit. Dit artikel behandelt recente studies over de relatie tussen de producent en de consument. Ook wordt de relatie tussen de lokale en internationale culturen belicht alsmede het proces van globalisering van de consumptie-cultuur, dat leidt tot de marginalisering van de producenten.

Kernwoorden: Yucatan, kauwgom, *chicozapote*, globalisatie.

The “boom” in *chicle* production, to meet North American consumer demand, began during the first two decades of the twentieth century and reached its peak in the early 1940s. *Chicle*, the raw material from which chewing gum was derived, came from the resin of the *chicozapote* tree, which grew in the high forests of the Yucatan Peninsula and Central America. The demand for *chicle*, from the United States, served eventually to transform the landscape and ecology of the east and south of the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico, and paved the way for new land uses on the tropical frontier. It led to harvesting and production practices which are of contemporary importance, especially for protected tropical forest areas, in which forest products represent a growing market activity (Primack *et al.*, 1998).

Most consumers in the twentieth century were doubtless oblivious of its origins, but nevertheless, by stimulating these distant commercial links chewing gum illustrates the way in which “nature” is actively produced as both material artefact and discursive construct (Bridges and Jonas, 2002). The history of chewing gum during this period has considerable significance for our understanding of the changing boundaries between local and metropolitan cultures, and the processes through which consumer cultures have become globalised. It also bears on current thinking about levels of personal consumption and international political economy in the United States (Brown, 1994; Lebergott 1993) and elsewhere, as consumption is increasingly linked to cultural choices, such as those dictating energy alternatives (Nye, 1999).

Recent research has emphasised the way in which consumer markets, especially for products of extractive industries, are linked, often in complex ways, with environmental and other policies (Simonian, 1995; Bridges, 2001; Redclift, 2001). The areas from which raw materials are sourced have been described as “badlands”: “the marginal spaces in, and through which, broader processes of socio-spatial order are worked out” (Bridges, 2001, 2149). Indeed, it is suggested that today these spaces are rendered even more marginal: “already rendered distant, shadowy spaces by

the value of the commodity chains, these commodity supply zones are pushed further out of sight by the emergence of a post-scarcity discourse that celebrates material abundance” (Bridges, 2001, 2153). In the case of chewing gum, its close association with the values of “abundance”: leisure as well as independence and private disaffection, seem almost to be precursors of the “post-scarcity” and “post-material” age.

THE CONSUMER MARKET

Chewing gum was a product of popular consumption in the United States by the early 1900s. Its early history was associated with the efforts of entrepreneurs, such as Thomas Adams, William White and William Wrigley, who developed new ways of processing, advertising, marketing and processing the gum base they imported from Mexico, *chicle*. This gum base was derived from the resin of the *chicozapote* tree, found in the forests of the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico and Central America. By 1941 consumers in the United States alone accounted for sales in excess of \$6.5 million (U.S.) (Wardlaw, 1997). During and after World War Two, chewing gum reached global markets, as part of American GI’s rations. Gum became part of the standard Ration (“C” and “K” Ration) issued to combat troops, and proved immensely popular among the three million stationed in the United Kingdom and, later, elsewhere in Europe and overseas. In England the catchphrase “Got any gum, chum” epitomised the relations between American troops and the local population (Longmate, 1971; Reynolds, 1996; Calder, 1969; Briggs, 1975). Within a few years, sales in the United States increased enormously: five times more to those pre-war years. This, and the difficulties in sourcing gum during wartime, provided strong incentives for the production of synthetic substitutes for natural gums, based on hydrocarbons, which was given a further boost in 1950 by the Korean War.¹ The U.S. military had

¹ Most commercial chewing gum today is made of vinyl resins or microcrystalline waxes, similar to those used for the covers of golf balls. *Chicle* proved too sticky for use in bubble gum (invented successfully by Walter Diemer in

learned how valuable gum chewing could be during combat. It freshened and cleansed the mouth when toothbrushes and paste were unavailable, it quenched the thirst when water was scarce, induced relaxation under fire, and helped to keep the forces alert, during manoeuvres. Most importantly of all, perhaps, chewing gum, most of which was withdrawn from the U.S. domestic market in 1941, reminded the troops of home.

Chewing gum had already achieved popular "iconic" status in the United States, becoming associated with movies, sports like baseball (especially through the issue of chewing gum cards), and popular music. Interesting parallels also exist with other products such as tobacco, bananas and chocolate (Hilton, 2000; Jenkins, 2000; Burford, 1994). In the United Kingdom chewing gum was a desirable product, especially during wartime and the period of post war sweet rationing. At the same time it was a key element in the growing Americanisation of British culture (Reynolds, 1996). Today over five hundred companies produce chewing gum in 93 countries. The largest of these companies, and the one most closely associated with the product, William Wrigley's, has thirteen factories and sells its product in over one hundred countries, representing global retail sales of over \$2 billion (U.S.) (Wardlaw, 1997).

CHICLE SUPPLIES

The impact of the enormous surge in consumption during the 1930s and 1940s, and the later depression in sales, when synthetics derived from hydrocarbons replaced the natural gum base, was felt particularly acutely in the east of the Yucatan Peninsula, today's state of Quintana Roo. Here, early production had been associated, like many extractive forest products, with transient labour, working under onerous conditions, and in a completely

1928). Both Siamese jelutong and *chicle* were difficult to obtain in wartime, when sugar and spearmint were also in short supply in the United States. The particular "spring-back" quality of *chicle* lends itself to use in high-quality gums, a growing niche market.

unregulated fashion. The principal zone of production was a stronghold of rebel Maya chieftains, veterans of the Caste War between whites and Mayan followers of the "Talking Cross". Their leader until 1931 was the notorious "General" May, who had developed close relations with American gum manufacturers, such as Wrigley's, and whose revenues from *chicle* helped to fund armed opposition (Ramos Díaz, 1999; Reed, 2001). However, the containment, and suppression, of the rebel Maya, and the enlarged role of the Mexican state, especially under President Cárdenas in the 1940s, brought the harvesting of *chicle* within the compass of organised cooperatives, and increasing measures of state regulation. In 1942 nearly four million kilos of *chicle* from Yucatan was sold to four large American-owned companies: Beechnut, Wrigley's, American Chicle Co. and Clark Bros. The commercial and strategic importance of these sources, at their height, can be gauged from the fact that, in June 1943 representatives of *chicle* cooperatives travelled to the United States to "discuss and defend the price of *chicle*, one of the most appreciated war-time materials in the United States" (Encyclopaedia, 1998, 101).

During the 1940s and 1950s the Mexican Government sought to control both the production and the export of gum, through the Agricultural Ministry and the *Banco de Comercio Exterior*. *Chicleros* were encouraged to organise themselves into marketing cooperatives and greater controls were exercised over their production by the Federal Government determined to "settle" the forest frontier of Quintana Roo (and, by the late 1960s, to pave the way for mass tourism on the Caribbean coast south of Cancún). Most of the trees from which the resin was tapped, grew on land held by *ejidos* (peasant communities) or on federal lands, making them, a common property resource. Access to the forests, which was once governed by tradition and personal influence, became officially regulated. Production of *chicle* was increasingly managed through establishing production quotas and targets, and using more competitive tendering.

This period of state regulation, however, did nothing to reverse the fortunes of the industry. By the 1970s a forest industry that was potentially sustainable ecologically, and capable of providing livelihoods for poor families without causing wide-scale

forest destruction, was in sharp decline, and secondary to the demands of global tourism (Primack *et al.*, 1998). Thirty years later the neglect of local forest economies seems more remarkable.

The history of *chicle* has been largely ignored in the formal academic literature on Mexico and Central America and, indeed, by policy-makers (Ramos Díaz, 1999). One of the few contemporary account of the lives of *chicleros* in the 1930s and 1940s, was written by an interested lawyer and journalist, recently republished by the Mexican Education Ministry in the state (Beteta, 1999). Otherwise assessment of *chicle* as a sustainable forest product has been restricted to the last two decades, and largely undertaken in ignorance of its important history in the region. The absence of research into an international commodity of vital importance to the United States, as well as to Mexico, is in stark contrast with the celebrated literature on *henequen* (sisal) in Yucatan. (Before the development of nylon and other synthetics, sisal was an essential ingredient in most carpeting, and ropes.) Clouded in political contradictions, as a product of frontier extraction, and in cultural prejudices, as a consumer product largely harvested by indigenous people, the story of *chicle* in Mexico is also in marked contrast to the celebration of chewing gum in the popular culture of the United States (Hendrickson, 1980; Peebles, 1989; Young, 1989; Wardlaw, 1997; Redclift, 2001).

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