



Artists and the rise, fall, and rebirth of pulque in Mexican culture and identity

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Abstract

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Pulque, a centuries-old alcoholic beverage made from agave sap, has been an important component of “Mexican” cultures and identities since before the European invasion. The author, starting from considerations on its ethnobotany, analyses, in the construction of a national identity, the ambivalent relationship of Mexican artists with the drink, from before independence to the present day.

Keywords: pulque, ethnobotany, Mexico, identity, Mexican artists

Artistas en el ascenso, caída y renacimiento del pulque en la cultura e identidad mexicana

El pulque, una bebida alcohólica centenaria elaborada con savia de agave, ha sido un componente importante de las culturas e identidades “mexicanas” desde antes de la invasión europea. El autor, a partir de consideraciones sobre su etnobotánica, analiza, en la construcción de una identidad nacional, la relación ambivalente de los artistas mexicanos con la bebida, desde antes de la independencia hasta la actualidad.

Palabras clave: pulque, etnobotánica, México, identidad, artistas mexicanos

Artisti in ascesa, caduta e rinascita del pulque nella cultura e nell'identità messicana

Il pulque, una bevanda alcolica secolare a base di linfa di agave, è stato una componente importante delle culture e delle identità “mexicane” sin da prima dell'invasione europea. L'autore, partendo da considerazioni sulla sua etnobotanica, analizza, nella costruzione di un'identità nazionale, il rapporto ambivalente degli artisti messicani con la bevanda, da prima dell'indipendenza fino ai giorni nostri.

Parole chiave: pulque, etnobotanica, Messico, identità, artisti messicani

Introduction

The majority of artists usually belong to the highest strata of a given society. This is simply because being an artist (a painter, a writer, a sculptor...) is seldom considered a particularly well-paid profession, and not everyone who decides to follow that path can afford it. Nevertheless, artists have been employed – and artistic works have been deployed – by governments and companies to influence society's perception of, and/or affect toward, specific cultural products. These processes acquire particular importance when this cultural product plays a part in the consolidation of national identity. That has been the case of pulque, an ancient Mexican alcoholic beverage made from various species of agave.

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In this article I will explore the role that Mexican artists have had in shaping the social perception of what can be called “the rise, fall, and rebirth” of pulque. I am not attempting to give a comprehensive review of all the artists – or of all their different perceptions – who have communicated their vision about pulque from pre-invasion times until nowadays. But I will endeavor to provide a complete sketch on: 1) how pulque has been a recurring topic in artistic and intellectual works; 2) how pulque has been, at least, a problematic issue in discussions of social identity in Mexico, and finally; 3) how this tension – within ancient and contemporary, or primitive and modern – has been inextricable from the construction of Mexican national identity.

In order to do so, I will first present the philosophical issue posed by the intersubjectivity at the heart of the concept of “Mexican identity” during the construction of the nation-state. Then I will briefly summarize the ethnobotanical features of agave among Mesoamerican cultures and follow with the study, from the point of view of history and philosophy of science, of the cultural clash that began with the Spanish invasion and continued, powered by the scientificist ideology of modernity, through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Finally, I will analyze the role of Mexican artists in the rebirth of pulque in contemporary Mexico.

So, what ideological or philosophical challenges arouse in the crafting of Mexican identity face?

1. A few words on Mexican identity

The project of creating and constructing national identities, according to Benedict Anderson (1991), lies at the very heart of modernity and started during the nineteenth century with the invention of the modern nation-state. But while, in Europe, the project faced, among others, the challenges inherent to establishing a cohesive territory with a unified idea of a national culture for diverse societies that, in some cases, included a diversity of languages and traditions, as in the cases of Italy and Spain, in America¹ that project faced the additional challenge of deciding which would be the point of departure for our own history. Thus, some governments of the newly formed American states, like Chile and the United States, decided to reject their American heritage and placed their historical point of departure in Europe; some others, like Mexico and Peru, decided to embrace their American heritage to some extent, while some others resolved to do none of the above, as was the case of Haiti.

But to embrace our ancient American heritage was not an easy task for at least two reasons. First, all the wars of independence, with the exception of Haiti, were predominantly won at the end by generals who were of European descent – or even Europeans –

¹ I will use the word “America”, and correspondingly “American”, in geographical terms referring to a continent stretching from the Strait of Bering to Tierra del Fuego. This use is made because most of the analysis will refer to a period prior to the twentieth century, when the word “American” was equally applied for anyone born in the continent.



and not by the leaders with native or African ancestry who were fighting since the beginning.

These Euro-American generals and their entourages faced the challenge of being a racial and cultural minority leading a different racial and cultural majority, as was the case in most Latin American states, or of being a minority “surrounded” by diverse racial and cultural majorities, as in Argentina or the United States. Second, and related to the former, it is one thing to embrace an ideal common past, as in the case of France, and a very different one to try to embrace a past rooted in national geography where, nevertheless, the direct descendants of that ideal past – the ones who recognize themselves as the inheritors of that great culture, as in Mexico and Peru – belong to the lowest socioeconomic strata.

The ideal of a national identity was an ideal of modernity and, accordingly, it had to signal to a past of greatness that could project our present into a greater future. And so, the debate around national identity was also one that pitted civilization against barbarism.

Were ancient Aztecs and Mayans, with their traditions of human sacrifices, barbarians?

Or, on the contrary, were Aztecs and Mayans, with all their advances in astronomy and mathematics, civilized societies that succumbed to European barbarism and were, during the process of national identity’s construction, on the verge of resurrection?

These questions are at the basis of the debates that led to the fall and rebirth of pulque. But first, some elements of historical background on Mesoamerican cultures and the rise of pulque.

2. The rise of pulque

The opossum – a female individual, of course – went to the skies to steal fire from the gods. A marsupial, she hid the fire in her pouch and then gave it to humans, so we could cook and warm up during cold nights. Tlacuatzin, as she is known in our mythology (this is why we call these animals “tlacuaches” and not “zarigüeyas” as in Spain), also used her skilled hands to drill an agave plant to extract its sap or aguamiel. The sap fermented and Tlacuatzin became the first drunk being in the whole cosmos. And she saw that it was good, and she promised that «cuidaré el pulque... para que mis hijos los Mè’phàà conozcan la alegría» (Matiúwàa, 2016: 61). This quote is from a poem published in 2016 by Hubert Matiúwàa, a writer from the Mexican state of Guerrero, and it is our first example of the use of ancient motifs in contemporary arts and literature (Image 1).

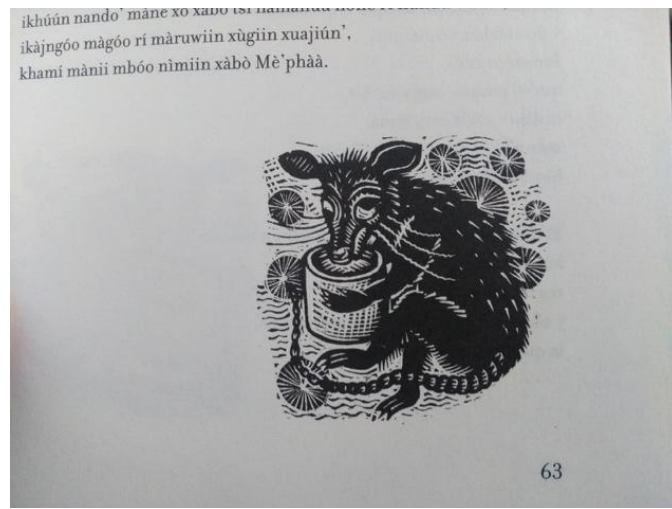
Other accounts maintain that it was not Tlacuatzin but Mayahuel, the Aztec or Mexica goddess of vegetal life and fertility, who gave pulque to humankind as a present after teaching a noble young woman, Xóchitl – meaning “flower” in Nahuatl – how to prepare it.

Raúl Guerrero, an early twentieth-century ethnologist and writer born in the Mexican state of Hidalgo, opens his treatise about pulque with a poem: «Mayahuel,/ con amor amamanta a una criatura./ Más el niño no mama leche pura,/ lo que bebe es riquísima aguamiel» (1985: IX). This same legend was reproduced in 2018 by contemporary artist Perla López Ledezma in her piece *Madre Mayahuel*. But Mayahuel, as other American



deities, was also merged with the Virgin of Guadalupe and has been painted in that fashion in *retablos* and *ex-votos* since the 16th century. For example, in the *retablos* painted by Luis Vilches found in the Parroquia de la Peña de Francia in Villa del Carbón, State of Mexico.

Image 1 - Shamir Nazer, *Tlacuatzin drinking pulque*, Mexico City, 2018



Source: Verses by Hubert Matiúwàa and illustration by Alec Dempster, Photograph by Shamir Nazer from p.63 of the book *Xtámbaa*, by Hubert Matiúwàa (2016), Courtesy of the author.

Of course, there are many other versions of the discovery of *aguamiel* – unfermented pulque – and the development of pulque. That proliferation can be explained by two simple facts. On the one hand, the original versions were lost and/or modified after the European invasion and, on the other, the number of different Mesoamerican cultures that used and use agaves – and drank and drink pulque – are more than half a hundred. So, it is to be expected that different cultures may have different foundational mythologies involving pulque.

In any case, drinking pulque was in vogue when the European invasion of present-day Mexico began. Certainly, as with any other alcoholic beverages in other cultures, pulque was the subject of moral debate. For example, historian Sonia Corcuera de Mancera, in her book *El fraile, el indio y el pulque* (1991) argues that among the Aztecs it was forbidden for people younger than fifty-two years old to drink pulque. Also, the legend about the fall of Quetzalcóatl is well-known: it has been told in Mexican elementary school textbooks. In this legend Quetzalcóatl, the highest, and relatively new divine entity among Nahuatl cultures – known as K'u'uk'ul Kaan among Mayan societies – started to drink pulque for medicinal purposes, but then he got drunk and ended up repudiating the drink and its usage. Nevertheless, according to Guerrero, this story was told by Bernardino de Sahagún, a Spanish friar. It can accordingly be viewed as part of the Christian strategy to forbid pulque,



since Quetzalcóatl was used by the monks as a simile for Jesus Christ and the legend says that, after the former got drunk, «se acabó la fortuna de Quetzalcóatl» (Guerrero, 1985: 26). But I am getting ahead and that facet is part of the next section. Before getting into it, it is important to situate pulque within the context of Mesoamerican ethnobotanical knowledge.

Mesoamerican ethnobotanical knowledge was vast and was established prior to any of the European invasions. The De la Cruz-Badiano codex, for example, provides accounts for more than two hundred plant species used for medicinal reasons. Some of these species had and have both curative and religious usages. An example of these practices is the renowned case of peyote (*Lophophora williamsii*). Peyote balm was and is produced to treat rheumatic pains, for instance; also, the peyote plant as a whole has been used for religious purposes for centuries among the Wixárika cultures of Jalisco and Nayarit, and by the cultures congregated around the Native American Church in the United States (Terry *et al.*, 2011).

Another famous example of this combination of medicinal-religious ethnobotanical practices is the use of several species of fungi known popularly in Spanish as casitas, pajaritos, derrumbes, etc. These species of fungi acquired international fame when the British pop band The Beatles claimed as gossip that their musical ingenuity had been improved after consuming some of these fungi in a spiritual ritual guided by María Sabina, a female x̱ita'én shaman and herbalist from Huautla, Oaxaca.

In the case of the agave species used to make pulque, there are ritual, medicinal, and recreational practices too. Pulque is produced with the sap of various agave species and varieties, all of these commonly known as “agave pulquero” and which grow mostly in the highlands of central Mexico. Among these are *Agave salmiana*, *A. marmorata*, *A. atrovirens*, *A. americana*, *A. mapisaga*, et cetera (Escalante *et al.*, 2004). The process for collecting the sap or aguamiel and fermenting it through the action of *Zymomonas mobilis*, a gram-negative anaerobic bacterium, is long and meticulous (Valdivieso Solís *et al.*, 2021).

For instance, agave plants may take up to 12 years to mature, then the sap is collected, left to rest for days; after that, as in other biotechnological processes such as the making of yogurt or beer, the fermenting microorganisms are added (usually, through a squirt of already fermented pulque) and the mixture is let to ferment for some other days. Once the mixture is ready – having reached a level of 2-7% of alcohol – it will be called pulque. If a flavor is added – mainly with seasonal fruits – the drink will receive the name of “curado”. In any case, as pulque or curado, it has to be consumed within a few days because the fermentation process is continuous. The length and diversity of steps in the process of preparing pulque signals to the long path of trial-and-error through which knowledge was carefully recorded and transmitted among several cultures and generations in central Mexico.

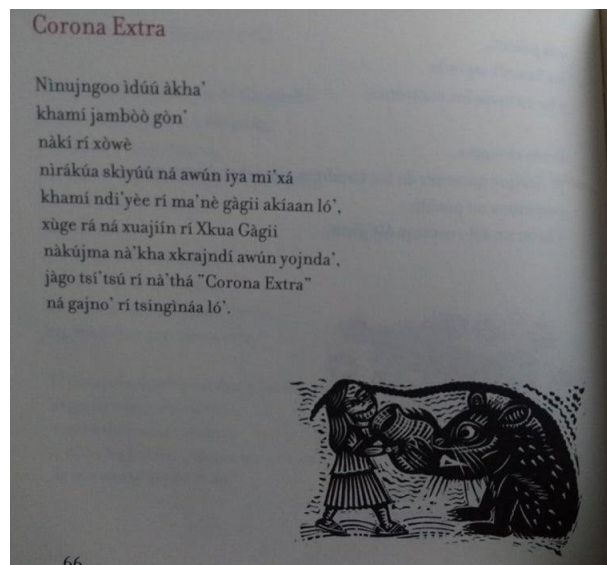
Regarding the ritual or religious usages, according to Corcuera de Mancera, ritual drunkenness or *tlauua* was the voluntary cession of the human body to the *tochtli*, or rabbit gods, and it was always mediated by an herbalist priest (1991). As a product endowed with medical value, pulque is known to have mild antibiotic and anti-inflammatory properties and, among others ailments, it has been consumed to treat gastritis and esophagitis (García-Arce and Castro-Muñoz, 2021).

Its associated recreational practices are easy to imagine. But the species of agave, maguey, or *metl*, utilized to extract aguamiel and make pulque did not, and do not have



only those usages. Aguamiel and pulque are and were employed as nutritional supplements. Also, both were sipped instead of water in times of drought. Aguamiel is/was used to make vinegar, «honey», and sweeteners (nowadays known as «agave syrup» and marketed to people with diabetes). The flowers are/were eaten in quesadillas and other dishes. And among many other practices, as shown in Image 9 with the detail of Diego Rivera's mural, the dried leaves are/were pressed to obtain *amate* paper, ropes, thread, fabric, et cetera (Corcuera de Mancera, 1991: 19).

Image 2 - Shamir Nazer, Corona Extra, Mexico City, 2018



Source: Poem by Hubert Matiúwàa and illustration by Alec Dempster, Photograph by Shamir Nazer from p.66 of the book *Xtámbaa*, by Hubert Matiúwàa (2016), Courtesy of the author.

I have been using the past and present tenses, or even combining them in the same sentence, because there is a *continuum* in the ethnobotanical tradition of our region. In fact, this *continuum* and the tensions it provokes is what has been underlying the debate about Mexican identity for centuries, as mentioned in the previous section, but this *continuum* and its tensions also highlights and sheds critical light on the use of ancient motifs in Mexican contemporary cultures.

3. The fall of pulque

The fall of pulque begins with the Spanish invasion. It therefore unfolds over four centuries. There are many attempts to explain why these Europeans did not like pulque. But all of those, unfortunately, are impossible to verify due to temporal distance. But let's



try a few anyways. To begin with, and taking into account the characteristic machoism of Spanish culture in that era, it is easy to imagine that they didn't like the idea of a wise engineer female deity, the inventor of both fire and pulque, like a female Prometheus: Tlacuatzin. And they certainly wouldn't have liked the idea of giving alcoholic beverages to newborns: Mayahuel. Even today, in many parts of the European or Europeanized world, such as the United States, the image can be shocking for a big share of the population: knowledge is a female scientist that has a baby and likes to get drunk.

So, according to Corcuera de Mancera and Guerrero, European monks from almost every corner of Central and Western Europe launched a crusade to demonize pulque while, at the same time, promoting wine – a beverage that had to be imported from Spain as its processing was forbidden in the American colonies. The crusade, as many others the Spaniards deployed in their invaded territories, was only partly successful. That was in part because it was convenient, too, for their racist administrative system, to stigmatize Indigenous populations as drunken people (Corcuera de Mancera, 1991). In part because, as the British and French also would find out centuries later while invading Africa, it was impossible to modify an entire culture by decree (Parker and Rathbone, 2007). And finally, in part because the scientific knowledge of the Spaniards was limited. Up until the *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, scientific knowledge resided among the Jewish and Muslim populations, but they were expelled and/or prosecuted by the Inquisition and, later, after the second half of the sixteenth century, organization and dissemination of knowledge resided in the Jesuit international community, but they were also expelled from the Spanish Empire in 1767.

So, in the American territories, colonial governments had to rely on Indigenous knowledge to solve many or most of their problems. A simple illustration of this lack of systematized knowledge among the Spanish can be seen today in the absence of truly popular “common names” for plant and animal species. For instance, while in the English Wikipedia tlacuache appears only as “opossum”, in the Spanish Wikipedia it appears as tlacuache, zarigüeya, carachupa, guasalo, huanchaca, raposa, fara, runcho, zorro de cola pelada, mykurē, churro, and comadreja overa, among others.

Added to the relative absence of a sustained Spanish enterprise devoted to the systematization of knowledge – which, in turn, could have erased all other knowledges – was the fact that, at least during the first century of colonization, the Spanish typically traveled to America with almost no Spanish women at all. Spanish men thus “married” American women, or enslaved African women, initiating an aimless dual process of biological and cultural *mestizaje*.

While the latter term can only be translated into English as a concept related to animal husbandry or biology, “interbreeding”, in Spanish it also conveys cultural connotations in a broad sense: including ethical, moral, aesthetic, and epistemic features. According to ecofeminist scholars such as Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1997), ecologists such as Víctor Manuel Toledo (1992), and philosophers of science such as Clifford Conner (2005), women have been the developers, carriers, and transferors not only of botanical knowledge but also ethnoecological knowledge. These two factors – lack of systematized knowledge



by the Spanish and cultural mestizaje – may explain, at least in part, the preservation and further development of ethnobotanical knowledge in Mexico.

That last concept is important: further development of knowledge. No knowledge is static. Progress, or what we call progress from a *realistic* philosophical approach, is not exclusive to the scientific realm but extends to non-scientific, non-institutionalized knowledges (Feyerabend, 1993). While it is possible to talk about a mestizaje of knowledges (i.e., the use plants of Asian origin among Mexican shamans or the use of Asian fruits to prepare curados of pulque), it certainly sounds misguided to talk about an “interbreeding” of knowledges. In this light, it is not surprising that while scholars of Anglo-Saxon and French heritage, such as Franz Boas – or, worst, Charles Darwin, Charles Lyell, Buffon, etc. – thought about African and American Cultures as primitive, ancient, unevolved or stuck in time, in the American Spanish territories this idea was challenged from the very beginning, particularly by the Indigenous and mestizo women who held the ethnobotanical knowledge². This anti-hegemonic challenge continued throughout the following centuries and enlisted many artists in its ranks. In Mexico, they used pulque to dispute pro-European hegemony.

We are now in the nineteenth century but time for Mesoamerican cultures is not linear. All the recently liberated or created countries are eager to define themselves and, in the case of Mexico it is not clear if we want to do it as Afro-Americans (as in the ideals of Vicente Guerrero and José María Morelos), as Europeans (as in most of the Conservative Party programs), as Europeanized Americans (as in most of the Liberal Party programs), as Americans (as in a few proposals both from the Liberal and Conservative sides) or as mestizos. Artists and writers took part in that debate on all sides. In the middle of the century, we can take a look at four examples to illustrate the debate: Manuel Payno, José María Obregón, Agustín Arrieta, and Hipólito Salazar.

Manuel Payno was an author of novels. But in 1864, the same year the French invasion of Mexico began, he published his *Memoria sobre el maguey mexicano y sus diversos productos*. There, in a non-fictional work, the author discusses at length many of the ethnobotanical uses for the several species of agave, including pulque. He states that further research is needed to «averiguar exactamente las propiedades medicinales del maguey y del pulque... interesan a la industria, la agricultura y la humanidad misma, que quizá encontrará en el agave un nuevo medio, que sin los inconvenientes del mercurio, lo pueda sustituir» (Payno, 1864: 3). Manuel Payno believed in scientific and social progress and, thus, in linear time. Nevertheless, he was able to see the value of American knowledges and he aimed to introduce them, at least the ones pertaining to agave, in the main European scientific discussions of the era in positivist and capitalist terms.

In 1869, two years after Maximilian I, the member of the Habsburg family that was installed by the French as a king of Mexico, was killed by a firing squad in Cerro de las Campanas, José María Obregón painted *El descubrimiento del pulque*. In the painting (Image 3) one bare-chested woman holds an agave plant, probably representing

² A lot of ink has been used in discussing de Buffon’s and Darwin’s racism: i.e., about the chapter *Les nègres blancs* in George-Louis Leclerc de Buffon’s *Histoire naturelle* (1749-1804) or Darwin’s impressions about the Patagones in *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839), but not so much about Lyell. A good contemporary analysis of Lyell’s racism can be found in Yusoff (2018).



Mayahuel, and another one, Xóchitl, is offering a recipient with pulque to the king of Tula, Tepalcatzin.

Image 3 - José María Obregón, *El descubrimiento del pulque*, Mexico City, 1869



Source: Museo nacional de arte, *Inba acervo constitutivo*, Mexico City, License Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

The main difference here with the European machoistic tradition of the era is that the scientists – or developers – of pulque are women and they stand by themselves in front of the emperor. Even though intermediaries are present – Xóchitl’s parents, as shown in the painting – this was particularly odd in the European cultures during the nineteenth century. Think, for example, of William Herschel’s wife, of the upheld prohibition for women to enroll in a university, and of the disdain the British Royal Society had for women scientists³. But, following the European tradition, the discovery of pulque *had* to be accepted by the king in order to be a *royal* or *real* discovery – actually, the word “real-ity” comes from that ethnospecific European tradition of presenting the discoveries to their kings to receive their approvals. Thus, Obregón’s position can be understood as pro-American, even though adopting some European elements.

But before Payno and Obregón, José Agustín Arrieta painted, in 1851, *Tertulia en la pulquería* (Image 4). The painting is not trying to glorify an imagined American heritage,

³ For the struggle of women to tear down the misogynist ban in European universities during the nineteenth century see, for example, Koblitz (2000).



but to portray an everyday gathering of inebriated men and a woman in Puebla. Here it is worth noting the European clothing, compared with the photograph of the Casasola archive shown further below (Image 7) and that, although all the characters but the woman have dark skin, most of them are bearded, which points to the ideal of a mestizo identity of European faces with brown skin color. Another hint of mestizaje is the plate of talavera – a pottery technique, with debated origins in China and Spain, popular in Puebla – laying on the table with sopes or chalupas, American dishes both of them.

Image 4 - José Agustín Arrieta, *Tertulia en la pulquería, Puebla, 1851*



Source: Creative Commons License Attribution 4.0 International.

Even more, the female character is not only the whitest person portrayed, but she is also dressed in a typical Spanish attire. This could be signaling the opposite of what happened during the Spanish invasion: now, in the nineteenth century, the macho Indigenous and mestizo Mexicans were the criminals trafficking with white Spanish women. Finally, the perspective and the technique employed by the artist is oddly similar to some works made by the French impressionists during that decade or later, such as *Les joueurs de cartes*, painted by Paul Cézanne in the 1890s (Image 5).



Image 5 - Paul Cézanne, *Les joueurs de cartes*, c. 1892



Source: Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France, License Creative Commons.

Arrieta's painting, in sum, portrays mestizaje while demonizing the latter's American or Indigenous components. The last image is the lithography *El pulquero* made by Hipólito Salazar in the 1850s, for his collection *Los Mexicanos* (Image 6).

Here, mestizaje is portrayed not through the combination of a particular skin color and a beard, even though the character does have long sideburns, but by the fact that: a) he is selling pulque; b) there's a characteristic Spanish hat hanging on the wall; c) one of the images on the wall depicts a *picador* during a Spanish bullfight, while d) the other image, judging by the hat and the hairless face, shows a mestizo or Indigenous Mexican man with a sword in one hand and a decapitated head hanging from the other, e) the attire of the pulquero is a mix of Spanish clothing covered with an Indigenous sarape and a turban on the head, and finally f) the face of the pulquero, with his prominent chin, resembles the images used to represent Vicente Guerrero, the celebrated Afro-descendant general that fought for the independence of Mexico against the Spaniards and was the second president of the nation.

Mestizo identity will finally triumph one century later, after the Mexican Revolution, with the cultural and educational programs led by José Vasconcelos and the *indigenismo* ideology of Manuel Gamio (Vasconcelos, 1925; Gamio, 1916). Vasconcelos and Gamio,



somehow resembling Payno, were able to reconcile the idea of mestizaje with the idea of technological progress.

Image 6 - Hipólito Salazar, El pulquero, c. 1853



Source: Museo nacional de arte, Inba, donación Patronato del museo nacional de arte, A.C., Mexico City, License Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.

That triumph may suggest that the time had finally come for pulque to be embraced by Mexican society as a whole. But the opposite happened, due to the international hygienist movement and the rise of beer-brewing companies in Mexico. The fact that pulque production was not an industrialized process, was used to once again demonize the beverage by arguing that it could cause intestinal diseases, such as salmonellosis, since pasteurization could not be formally audited. Of course, that was partially true. But it was also the new mask don over the faces of racism, and finally, it was in part a convenient advertising campaign for beer-brewing companies. Beer was associated with modernity, with technological and scientific advancement, with an optimistic future (Gallo, 2005). Beer was even associated with that marvelous new apparatus called “the radio”.



An advertising image of the 1920s, depicted two bottles of *XX Moctezuma* beer on top of two radio towers in the heart of Mexico City's downtown. The beer's name *XX Moctezuma* is not coincidental. It refers to the nation's designated letter for radio broadcast channels in Mexico, the "X", and to two of the last Aztec emperors. Consequently, if beer evoked a bright futuristic Mexican utopia – connected, at least through advertising, to Aztec royal lineage – pulque was necessarily coupled with backwardness, with that Mexican identity which belonged to the past, that persona Mexico had to leave behind as nothing more than a memory or a bad memory, because that was what the Revolution was for: to take a great leap forward toward radio waves, away from that uncivilized and picturesque image of pulque drinkers photographed in 1910 by Agustín Víctor Casasola (Image 7).

Image 7 - Agustín Víctor Casasola, El brindis, c. 1910



Source: Gustavo Casasola Collection, Mexico City, Courtesy of Casasola México Cooperativo.



The Casasola archive, as a whole, is considered the most important visual document of the Mexican Revolution, in particular, and of the Mexican early twentieth century in general. It is an artifact through which to envision the past, and everything in it had to remain in the past – those almost barefooted drunk Mexicans, and the beverage they were drinking, had to be banished from our inevitable and progressive future.

Another archive usually visited by scholars, artists, and politicians looking for the “true Mexican identity” is the collection of lithographs made by José Guadalupe Posada. The artist made around 20,000 lithographs throughout his life, several of them around the topics of pulque and pulquerías. One of the most iconic is *Gran fandango y francachela de todas las calaveras* (1910), since it depicts the typical and famous Catrina skeletons and includes a poem for Día de Muertos (Image 8).

Posada’s lithograph, after four centuries of debate around pulque, was seen by racists and hygienists as a nightmare. It went against their dream of technological progress. So, they objectivized that dream in the image of a chilled beer bottle, and this symbol intended to mark the end of pulque as a popular beverage. Artists and writers have produced accounts of this change. In the same book where Hubert Matiúwàa published his poem on the opossum, quoted above, there is another poem entitled *Corona Extra* (Image 2): «nìrákúá skìyúú ná awún iya mi’xá/ khamí ndi’yèè rí ma’nè gágii akíaaan ló’/ xùge... jàgo tsí’tsú rí nà’tá “Corona Extra”/ ná gajno’rí tsingínáa ló’» («After the opossum gave his strength to pulque/ seeking our happiness,/ now... comes with the words “Corona Extra”/ our sadness») (Matiúwàa 2016: 66; my translation from Spanish).

Image 8 - José Guadalupe Posada, *Gran fandango y francachela de todas las calaveras*, 1900



Source: Asociación cultural El estanquillo, Mexico Cit, License Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.



And Juan Rulfo, one of the most celebrated Mexican writers, published in 1953 the short story *Luvina*, where one of the characters says to another: «Pero tómesese su cerveza... O tal vez no le guste así tibia como está... Yo sé que así sabe mal... Cuando vaya a Luvina la extrañará. Allí no podrá probar sino un mezcal que ellos hacen con una yerba llamada hojasé» (1997: 122). Cold beer as a symbol of modernity, either to conjure sadness or find joy.

Image 9 - Diego Rivera, detail of El maguey y el amate, mural, 1951



Source: Palacio nacional, Mexico City, License Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International.



Of course, this story can be analyzed beyond the clash of ideologies of identity. The explanation might be more mundane or vernacular: the development of household refrigeration, the fact that cold beer has a smoother taste than pulque, and that cold beer can more effectively quench thirst in hot weather than most hot alcoholic beverages (i.e., drinking wine or whiskey during the noon hour, under the sun in the Mexican desert sounds truly disgusting), may have aided the success of that crusade where the monks sent by the Spaniards had failed. In any case, this fall was only a temporary phenomenon and pulque consumption was yet to resurrect.

Although pulque consumption diminished considerably during the twentieth century, it did not cease. It also continued to be a topic for Mexican artists. Nevertheless, it was usually approached as a thing from the past. Examples of the works referring to pulque that were produced in this era are the novels *Mala yerba*, by Mariano Azuela (1909); *José Trigo*, by Fernando del Paso (1966); the children's song *El jicote aguamielero*, by Francisco Gabilondo Soler, a.k.a. Cri Cri (1963), and certainly and alongside many other books, films, songs, and paintings, the section of the mural painted in the Palacio nacional by Diego Rivera in 1951: *El amate y el maguey*. In this mural, it is possible to see all the steps of the process through which pulque and paper are produced: from scraping the plants for its sap to the women fabricating *amate* paper from the dried leaves (Image 9).

4. The rebirth of pulque

Gilles Lipovetsky, in *Hypermodern Times* (2005), argues that our contemporary micro-era of globalization, internet, and cellphones, is also marked by the commodification of the past (i.e., in museums of all sorts) to cope with the loneliness produced by the rapid and continuous changes in our everyday life. The heuristic power of this hypothesis is part of a larger debate. But it may be a possible explanation for what happened with pulque consumption in Mexico after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

In January of 1994, coinciding with the start of the implementation of the North American Trade Agreement (Nafta) between Mexico, the United States of America, and Canada, a new guerrilla announced its presence, shocking Mexican Society. It was the Ejército zapatista de liberación nacional (Ezln), in Chiapas, probably the first post-modern guerrilla in world history (Yehya, 2012). The Ezln, or neo-Zapatistas, were and still are an Indigenous guerrilla movement that aims to reclaim the heritage of original Mexican cultures, a heritage that pursues forms of government, economics, and social organization which differ from the so-called *Western* ones.

If during the first years of the uprising some Mexican artists and intellectuals criticized the movement, such as Nobel laureate poet Octavio Paz (1994), and a few satiric books were also published, such as Edgardo Bermejo's *Marcos' Fashion: O de cómo sobrevivir al derrumbe de las ideologías sin perder el estilo*, soon most Mexican artists



and intellectuals were supporting the neo-Zapatista cause through newspaper articles, books, and artworks.

Some of those artists even went to reside for a while in the newly formed neo-Zapatista societies, called *caracoles*, such as the poet Hermann Bellinghausen or the playwright Jesús Mario Lozano. In 2018, when the neo-Zapatistas proposed María de Jesús Patricio Martínez as their presidential candidate for the Mexican government, almost every renowned Mexican artist and writer supported them, including some of those who typically stir and stoke ongoing personal feuds.

From that 90s scenario to this day, the recuperation of Mexican traditions became trendy. The rock band *Caifanes* included “Aztec” rhythms and sounds in their songs during that decade. In the turn of the century, another rock band, *Café Tacuba*, was not only using ancient Mexican rhythms; but leading an international protest against multinational mining companies to defend Wirikuta, a sacred site to the Wixárika people, a hill where peyote grows. Also, Mexican governmental institutions gave an unprecedented push to the promotion of bilingual education, opened the category of Indigenous languages in fellowships and grants for artists and writers, and created national prizes for poetry and fiction written in Mexican languages different from Spanish, such as the Premio nezahualcóyotl de literatura en lenguas indígenas, created in 1993 and, in 2017, awarded to the above-mentioned poet Hubert Matiúwàa.

The shift towards the revival of Mexican traditions was not only marked by a spirit of resistance against globalization. But, as suggested by Lipovetsky, also by the commodification of some of these particular ancient traditions. As regards Mexican alcoholic beverages, this was first carried out with tequila and then mezcal. Both products, propelled by the commercial opportunities opened in the international market by Nafta and other free-trade agreements signed by the Mexican government, had not only become trendy, they were now classy. The quality of those products diminished due to their production on a much larger scale.

Nevertheless, and particularly with mezcal, the aura of sophistication and progressiveness imprinted upon them by advertising – “I drink organic, fair-trade mezcal because I care about my/their ancient traditions” – remained untouched. Regarding the domestic market, the commodification of ancient traditions has gone hand in hand with a variation of the process of gentrification of neighborhoods, a practice which has, intentionally or not intentionally, deployed or used artists to achieve its goal (as has been the case in many non-Mexican cities too).

Across the Mexican territory, hipster cafés, mezcalerías, and now *pulcatas* or *pulquerías de barrio* have become part of the “gentrified” landscape of neighborhoods such as La Condesa, Roma, and the Regina Street corridor in Mexico City; the Chapultepec Avenue corridor, in Guadalajara; or the twin towns of San Pedro and San Andrés Cholula, near Puebla City.

In the case of the Cholula twin towns, in San Andrés, an expensive private university was established in 1940: Universidad de las Américas. And it remained a university town for decades, following the model of U.S.A. university towns, but inserted in a locality with a strong Indigenous culture and numerous traditional pulquerías. It is there



that, in 2001, Hugo Puig inaugurated *Pulque para dos*, probably the first “gentrified” pulquería in town, targeting university students, musicians, and artists who did not want to go to the traditional ones. As stated by artist Cristina de la Concha, *Pulque para dos* was going to be a pulquería, but the farthest thing from «una vulgaridad de borrachos» (Tulancingo Cultural, 2007: s.p.).

Puig named his business after a famous 1920s danzón singed by *Los Xochimilcas*, and soon it became both a successful business and a thriving cultural center that offered music concerts, art exhibits, and book presentations. The path initiated by *Pulque para dos* was followed by many other entrepreneurs, and nowadays Google Maps lists more than a dozen expensive and trendy pulquerías in the Cholula twin towns area, such as: *La Pulkata*, *La Norberta*, *Terraza Pulkito*, *Cuatro Conejo* (in clear reference to the *tochtli* goods), *La Sagrada*, *pulquería alternativa*; *El nectar de los dioses*, et cetera. In these new “alternative” pulquerías, it is possible to buy a small glass of pulque for twice the price of a beer and enjoy exotic varieties, such as pulque curated with tumeric – a plant species from South East Asia. Needless to say, traditional pulquerías have been disappearing from the area and remain only in the outskirts.

The establishment of “gentrified” pulquerías in Cholula illustrate, nuances aside, the same process that took place in other “gentrified” neighborhoods across the Mexican territory, either in those cities that had a tradition of preparing and drinking pulque, such as Mexico City, and those that did not, such as Guadalajara. In Mexico City, pulquerías have once again become epicenters for cultural activities. Traditional pulquerías that managed to survive the twentieth century, such as *La hija de los apaches* (founded in the 1940s), offer art exhibitions and reggae, ska, surf, rock concerts, et cetera, every week. And new establishments, such as *Pulquería Insurgentes*, offer concerts and art exhibits, too, as well as book presentations, stand-up comedy shows, and even *pulque-cinema* for alternative films and short documentaries

Regarding cinema, the most celebrated Mexican movie of 2018 received 10 nominations during the 91st Academy Awards of the United States, including *Best Picture*; and won, among others, in the category of *Best Foreign Language Film*. The film is entitled *Roma*, was directed by Alfonso Cuarón, and the dialogues are in Spanish and Mixtec. In the movie, of course, there is a scene where the Mixtec workers of the rich mestizo-white family drink pulque. According to the Mexican writer Alejandra Bernal, the sequence in which we see a clay mug filled with pulque falling to the floor from the hands of Cleo, the Mixtec main character of the movie, and breaking and spilling pulque across the ground floor, giving back to the soil the fruits of the soil, to Mayahuel the fruits of life, is a premonitory scene which suggests that Cleo is going to lose the baby growing in her womb (Bernal, 2019).

The commodification of pulque has yielded the development of canned pulque for the domestic and international markets through many commercial brands, such as *Pulque hacienda*. Mexico City’s government, as if following an imaginary script written by Lipovetsky and a revenge-thirsty Mexican independentist ghost, opened in February 2019 the Museo del Pulque y las Pulquerías in a building that was formerly the Convent of San Hipólito. This convent had been erected shortly after the fall of Tenochtitlan, it



was dedicated to the preferred saint of Hernán Cortés, and for a short period of time it housed the offices of the Spanish Inquisition. Among the cultural activities of the museum, artists are invited to paint portraits of the costumers' while they all drink pulque *in situ* (Image 10).

Image 10 - Pável Valdés, Web flyer for the performance Dibujo de pulquería en vivo, Mexico City, 2019



Source: Museo del pulque y las pulquerías, Mexico City, Courtesy of the author.

The fact that the Museo del Pulque y las Pulquerías was placed in a former friar's convent dedicated to the patron saint of the invader of Tenochtitlan, could be a mere coincidence and not part of an intentional rewriting of the histories of pulque and national identity. But it performs as a symbol of these constant writings and rewritings of Mexican identities and Mexican histories that I have been illustrating throughout this article.

Mexican social identity has never been hegemonic nor static, starting from the fact that there was a variety of legends accounting for the discovery of pulque among Mesoameri-



can cultures, and going all the way through the cycles of representations, demonization, and glorifications of pulque in the subsequent centuries.

The use of ancient motifs, such as pulque, in contemporary Mexican culture and arts can therefore be seen as a *continuum* of cultural resistance in which producers, consumers, and artists have been constantly playing a role to maintain these motifs' several ancient meanings and, also, a role in re-signify them to preserve them from cultural oblivion. However, this constant use of ancient motifs such as pulque – throughout more than five centuries of history – can likewise be seen from another angle: these ancient motifs with all their inherent variations are, in fact, part of the hegemonic Mexican culture, and artists and business managers simply incorporate alien cultural expressions to dialogue with the rest of the world, as in the case of this *Barbie pulquera* (Image 11).

Image 11 - Angélica González, *Barbie pulquera*, Facebook advertising of Pulques tacuchiz, Acolman, Mexico, 2023



Source: Screenshot of Pulques Tacuchiz, Acolman, Mexico, Facebook webpage, consulted July 17, 2023, Composition by Angélica González, Courtesy of the author.

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