

*The Saints of Progress* is relevant for scholars of Costa Rica, as well as anyone interested in inter-American relations, immigration studies, and identity-formation in the transnational context.

**Atalia Shragai**

*Kibbutzim College of Education*

JOHN R. GUST & JENNIFER P. MATHEWS, *Sugarcane and Rum: The Bittersweet History of Labor and Life on the Yucatán Peninsula*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020.

When scholars think about agricultural production in Yucatán, it is generally henequen—not sugarcane—that comes to mind. This fibrous material helped build the fortunes in the region from the end of the nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth centuries; but sugarcane and rum helped to ensure henequen’s success. In their fascinating study of the region, Gust and Mathews demonstrate that henequen, sugarcane, and rum went hand in hand; workers in Yucatán that labored on henequen haciendas often soothed their tired bodies and minds with the rum produced in the area. Over-consumption of alcohol could also lead to acts of violence in homes and communities, and it sometimes created conditions by which individuals found themselves hopelessly tied to an hacienda. As poor workers found themselves with unpayable bar tabs, Gust and Mathews illustrate that rich hacienda owners offered to pay the bills in exchange for workers. The consumption of locally produced rum, the authors argue, assured a plentiful and compliant workforce on sugar or henequen plantations. By default, then, sugarcane and rum exacerbated the divisions between elites and workers in the unfree labor system that dominated the Yucatecan economy. Thus, Gust and Mathews use sugarcane and rum as an avenue to explore the economic and social realities of Yucatán. As the authors point out in their Introduction, “to understand the henequen hacienda, we must understand rum, and to understand rum, we must understand the henequen hacienda” (6).

The first two chapters of this book are comparative in nature. Sugar production was not a major part of the economic output of New Spain during the Spanish colonial era. While it thrived in the Caribbean, sugar production took some time to be established in Mexico. The authors situate Yucatán within the larger sugar-producing world, which is an excellent way of introducing the material to readers. These chapters in particular are accessible to specialists and non-experts alike, regardless of academic discipline. Chapter One explores the history of sugar cultivation worldwide and briefly examines the importance of the crop to European imperial powers. In Chapter Two, the authors turn to the

darker nature of sugar production worldwide, which was the labor system used to procure sugar that—depending on location and epoch—ranged from slavery to debt peonage. This chapter, while bleak in its reality, also illuminates ways in which workers attempted to circumvent the labor systems so as to secure some means of escaping the awful realities in which they found themselves entrapped. One of the ways plantation workers attempted to ameliorate their lives was through the consumption of rum, a byproduct of the sugarcane that they grew (or a commodity on henequen plantations). Gust and Mathews illustrate that rum was often used as a way to “control” workers (37), though drunken workers could and often did rebel while under the influence of rum.

In Chapter Three, the authors turn specifically to the conditions under which sugarcane was produced in Yucatán, and how, despite their differences, studies of henequen and sugarcane haciendas provide a vehicle for understanding economic and social realities. The system of debt peonage that emerged in the late-colonial era expanded by the end of the nineteenth century. As haciendas grew and peasant farmers found their land bases shrinking, many workers had to indebt themselves in order to make a living. The authors demonstrate that hacienda owners controlled land and goods, which indigenous farmers could only access through the plantation system. The economic realities for so many poor workers were such that even the act of drinking rum in a cantina could lead to a debt cycle that was hard to escape. And given that henequen production was so labor intensive, hacienda owners had to find ways to ensure a steady labor force. Gust and Mathews point out that paying bar tabs for workers, in addition to other schemes, ensured that (52). As studies of resistance to slavery have illustrated, workers used small acts of rebellion to protest their conditions; drunkenness was but one way to do this (59). However, consumption of alcohol to relieve or protest the realities of hacienda life often led to violence between drunken workers and workers and their families.

A close examination of the machinations of sugarcane production in Yucatán is the subject of Chapter Four. Blending history and archaeology, the authors focus on two haciendas: the ruins of Xuxub and San Eusebio, which are located in the state of Quintana Roo. Gust and Mathews conducted excavations at both sites and came to some important conclusions. Despite their relatively small sizes and difficult-to-access locations, the sugar production that occurred at Xuxub and San Eusebio tied the two places into a global market. Sugarcane and rum production in Yucatán occurred mostly for local consumption, but trade was widespread enough that goods from elsewhere—especially the United States—found their way to Xuxub and San Eusebio.

Finally, in Chapter Five, the authors use rum as a metaphor for development and escapism in the region. Specifically, they look at the evolution of

drinking culture, from pre-contact indigenous ceremonial use of pulque and other beverages, to the emergence of the cantina as a place for men to lose their inhibitions. They also show how the development of tourism essentially replaced the hacienda system, but similarities between the two remain. While the plantation system in the region declined after the Mexican Revolution, the new tourism model that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century in some ways copies the dichotomy between elites and the working class. Massive hotels in Cancun and hacienda resorts closer to Mérida, which are owned by either foreigners or elite, non-indigenous Mexicans, employ indigenous laborers for the benefit of foreign tourists. Like henequen, grown for the world market at the turn of the nineteenth century, tourism is not aimed at locals, thus replicating “the continuing cycle of inequality in the workforce” (113). And in these resorts, drinking exemplifies the escape that tourists desire, especially those who travel to Cancun.

There are many elements of this book that are executed exceptionally well. Gust and Mathews successfully use sugarcane and rum to tell the history of Yucatán and the first three chapters are accessible to a non-specialist audience; I could envision assigning some of them to my survey classes. Chapter Three especially encapsulates the history of Yucatán using sugarcane as the vehicle. I found parts of Chapters Four and Five appealing, especially the discussions of the links between small, relatively isolated haciendas with the larger global market (Chapter Four); and the development of the cantina as a social space fraught with dangers for broad sectors of the population (Chapter Five). I also thought that the explanation of Yucatán’s tourism sector would appeal to undergraduate readers.

My only quibble with this book is Chapter Four. While I valued the archaeological surveys that the authors conducted, I found the placement of them in the book a bit jarring. Up until that point, I admired and appreciated the fine quality of historical analysis that the authors put forth. The descriptions of the artifacts found at Xuxub and San Eusebio seemed to disrupt the flow of the narrative. Granted, I say this as an historian and so it is more a critique of the style than one about substance.

**Michele McArdle Stephens**

*West Virginia University*