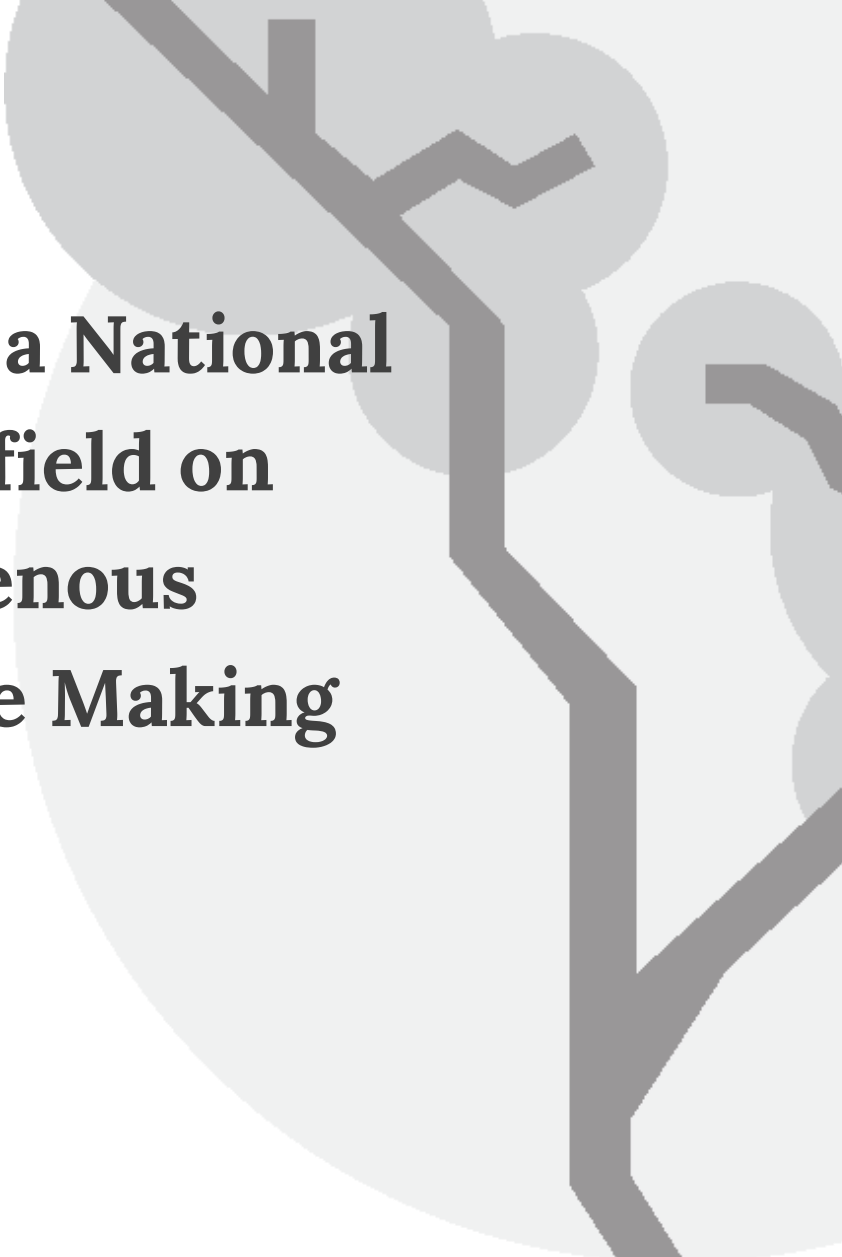




A Sacred Plant, a National Myth: Seth Garfield on Guaraná, Indigenous Science, and the Making of Brazil

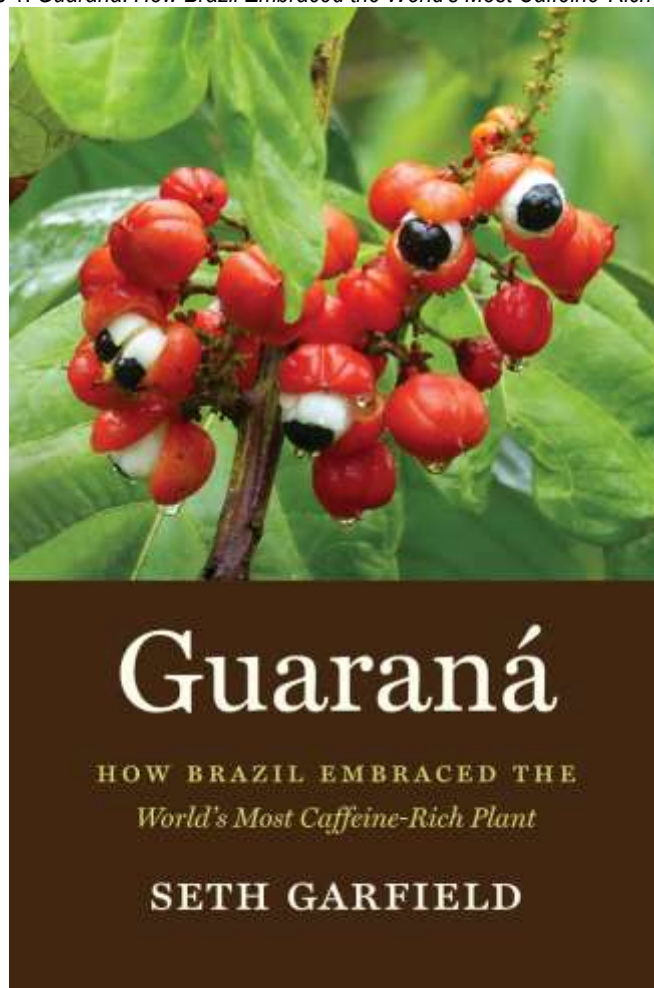
Interview:

Seth Garfield is Professor in the Department of History and former director of the Brazil Center at the Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. His research spans Brazilian history, environmental history, commodity history, indigenous policy, and the history of race and ethnicity in Latin America. This interview was conducted by **Marcos Colón**¹ and is published here in recognition of Garfield's singular contribution to Amazonian environmental history – a body of work that reframes the Amazon not as a passive backdrop to Brazilian modernity, but as a site of contested knowledge, indigenous agency, and ecological consequence that scholarship in this field can no longer afford to ignore.

¹ Doutor em Estudos Culturais pela University of Wisconsin-Madison. Professor Assistente de Mídia e Comunidades Indígenas na Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication da Arizona State University. ORCID: 0000-0002-2975-4696. E-mail: marcos.colon@asu.edu

What if the history of Brazil, its indigenous cosmologies, its colonial violence, its military regimes, and its contested modern identity, could be told through a single Amazonian plant? A plant with twice the caffeine of coffee, sacred to the Sateré-Mawé people, later bottled into a national soda and turned into a mass-consumed item during the dictatorship's so-called “economic miracle.”

Figure 1. *Guaraná: How Brazil Embraced the World's Most Caffeine-Rich Plant.*



Source: Courtesy of University of North Carolina Press, 2022.

It sounds like a provocation. But that is precisely the argument Seth Garfield makes, and sustains, in *Guaraná: How Brazil Embraced the World's Most Caffeine-Rich Plant* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

We are honored to present this conversation with Professor Garfield, one of the most rigorous and imaginative historians working on Brazil and the Amazon today. A

professor in the Department of History and former director of the Brazil Center at the Lozano Long Institute for Latin American Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, Garfield has spent decades building one of the most coherent and consequential bodies of work in Latin American environmental and indigenous history. His scholarship does not orbit the Amazon from a distance. Rather, it moves through it, scrutinizing the people, the policies, and the plants that have made the region one of the most contested on earth.

His first book, *Indigenous Struggle at the Heart of Brazil: State Policy, Frontier Expansion, and the Xavante Indians, 1937–1988* (Duke University Press, 2001), was a pathbreaking historical monograph on the relationship between the Brazilian state and its indigenous populations. Through the experience of the Xavante, Garfield traced how successive governments, from Vargas's nationalist developmentalism to the military dictatorship's expansion into the interior, deployed indigenous policy as a mechanism of territorial control and cultural assimilation. It was also a study of indigenous survival against the state, tracing battles over sovereignty, citizenship, and who counts as Brazilian.

His second major work, *In Search of the Amazon: Brazil, the United States, and the Nature of a Region* (Duke University Press, 2013), recipient of an Honorable Mention for the Bolton-Johnson Prize from the American Historical Association's Conference on Latin American History, examined the Amazon as a geopolitical and ecological battleground during World War II, when the United States turned to Brazilian rubber after Japanese forces cut off Southeast Asian supply lines. Garfield showed how the Amazon's "nature" was never simply organic; it was produced through labor systems, racial ideologies, wartime anxieties, and state interventions. The book placed Brazil squarely at the center of global history and challenged readers to see the Amazon not as wilderness, but as a place where real people lived, worked, and died under structures that served interests far beyond their own.

With *Guaraná*, Garfield completes what reads, in retrospect, as a trilogy: a sustained inquiry into how Amazonian landscapes and peoples have been seen, used, and transformed by those who claimed to protect them –or simply profit from them–

and their resilience in the face of development projects. This latest book, winner of the Bolton-Johnson Prize, the Warren Dean Prize, the Robert W. Hamilton Book Award, and numerous other distinctions, is not just a history of a soft drink. It is a social biography that rewrites commodity history from the Amazon outward, insisting that we cannot understand Brazil's modernity without first reckoning with what was extracted, erased, and repackaged along the way.

Across these pages, guaraná becomes a portal. It reveals how Indigenous science, specifically, the centuries-old cultivating knowledge of the Sateré-Mawé, survived colonial violence and persists today with the support of a fair trade movement that entails as much a fight for epistemic sovereignty as for economic survival. It also exposes the mechanics of Brazilian developmentalism: how a sacred plant was turned into an instrument of industrial capitalism, and how nationalist mythology was literally bottled and sold through the workings of corporate capital and the Brazilian state.

What makes the book genuinely riveting are the questions it refuses to let go: Who gets to call knowledge “science”? How do we understand cultural “authenticity” and “tradition”? And what do we lose, precisely, when we erase indigenous histories and worldviews in the name of modernization and nationalism?

Garfield's work does not simply center Brazil in global history; it forces a reckoning with the structures and epistemologies that have long determined whose histories get told and (dis)connected. His scholarship, taken as a whole, underscores that the Amazon is not a backdrop to Brazilian history, but a site where critical struggles over land, identity, race, and sovereignty have played out, and continue to play out today. This interview is an invitation to follow some of these leads.

Marcos Colón: Guaraná never became a global commodity like coffee, chocolate, or sugar, yet you argue it can also be revealing of Brazilian history in other ways

precisely because of that. Why does this native plant, and its namesake soda, challenge what we think we know about the other commodity histories of “soft drugs”?

Seth Garfield: That's an excellent question. There are several components to it. Let me start by addressing guaraná's failure to achieve global status, or at least on the scale of coffee or sugar, which were so critical to Brazil's economic development.

Guaraná is native to the Amazon region. Historically, and even today, it has been a small farmer's crop, so it never achieved large-scale production. It was not part of a plantation economy like sugar or coffee. There were also serious distribution challenges because of its remote location, its distance from European and North Atlantic markets relative to coffee and sugar.

In terms of its modern-day application as the trace ingredient of a namesake soft drink, guaraná faced formidable competition from companies like Coca-Cola, a gigantic multinational that had the assistance of the U.S. government as part of its story of globalization.

What does happen is that guaraná becomes part of Brazil's domestic consumer market and national iconography – it becomes Brazil's “national” soft drink. That is the story I found very intriguing for a commodity history, because it is rather different from the standard narratives about export commodities from Latin America that strike it big on the world market. Here is a story of a commodity whose overwhelming consumption takes place domestically in Brazil. And it's not just economically important, although that is tremendous, since it is a multi-billion-dollar industry, but culturally important too. It comes to be seen as a quintessentially Brazilian product, something uniquely and authentically Brazilian: both because of the plant's Amazonian origin and because the companies that historically developed the industrial product were based in Brazil.

MC: Your book uses guaraná as a lens to reinterpret Brazilian history in all its complexity. What is the most counterintuitive insight this social biography of a plant reveals about Brazil's development?

SG: I think you've really gotten at the heart of what the book aimed to do, which was to illuminate Brazilian history, with all of its complexity, diversity, contradictions, and inequalities, through the social biography of a plant.

I adopted a multi-sited approach; a commodity, after all, can be explored through consumption, production, and distribution. If it is a food, which is the case with guarana, it can also be explored through taste, commensality, symbolism, and value. That allows the historian to engage with many aspects of human experience.

The particular trajectory of guarana, from an indigenous plant of fundamental cosmological importance for the Sateré-Mawé people to its roundabout transformation into the key ingredient of a national soda, offers a fascinating intellectual journey for a reader trying to understand Brazil in its complexity.

I had both English-speaking and Brazilian audiences in mind. For non-Brazilian audiences, it was an opportunity to showcase the diversity and complexity of Brazilian history. Through this plant, we can look at indigenous history, Amazonian history, and also the history of industrialization, consumerism, advertising, and agribusiness. As a professor of Brazilian history, I wanted to write a book that could open readers' eyes, to dispel stereotypes and complicate assumptions.

For Brazilian audiences, I hoped to illuminate the intricate and often contradictory history of a soda they consume daily, to reveal what went into making it, and what that process erased or reinforced along the way.

MC: The book moves geographically, from Amazonia to wealthy Brazilian cities, and back again. Why structure it this way, and what did each region reveal to you?

SG: Historians are very much dependent on sources, because we need to substantiate all our claims about the past through evidence. In many ways, the sources dictated the approach I would take in any given chapter, because the types of sources varied significantly.

For the pre-colonial period, it's archaeological sources, the work of historical ecologists, physical evidence in the landscape, and indigenous accounts and narratives

about the domestication of the plant. Moving into the colonial period, one relies more on missionary reports. By the 20th century, advertising becomes very prominent, the way in which marketers use certain imagery, tropes, and fantasies to sell the soda.

Figure 2. *Guaraná Antarctica* ad, 1944.



Source: *A Cigarra* 128 (November 1944): 124. Hemeroteca Digital, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy of Arquivo O Cruzeiro/EM/D.A Press.

²But within each historical period, what I found fascinating was how differently people spoke about guaraná, and how differently they imagined or used it. One of the

² Guaraná Antarctica ad, 1944. Conjuring for urbanites the “natural” lifestyle of indigenous peoples, Companhia Antarctica Paulista affirmed: “The reason for the fortitude of the Indians is in their food, above all the insuperable attributes of guaraná, source of health, energy and vigor, at the reach of all in this delicious drink.” *A Cigarra* 128 (November 1944): 124. Hemeroteca Digital, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy of Arquivo O Cruzeiro/EM/D.A Press.

most eye-opening sets of documents I encountered was 19th-century material in which military engineers raved about guaraná's potential as the next cash crop for the Amazon. They saw it as geopolitically important, a much sounder, even more moral crop for the Amazon than the historical extractivist industries: the so-called *drogas do sertão* from the colonial period, or rubber in the 19th century.

This was a lens through which people thought about guaraná at that particular moment. And that becomes the basic common denominator of the entire book: how did different people think about guaraná differently, in different historical moments and geographic regions—to respond specifically to your question about the geographical movement over the course of the book's chapters? People might be “naturally” drawn to guarana because of its stimulant qualities, but this still begs the question: how have they assessed and consumed it in different times and places and why?

The 19th-century example was particularly eye-opening because state planners and military officials invested a geopolitical importance in guaraná as a model crop, one they believed could transform both indigenous and non-indigenous populations in the Amazon into sedentary, market-driven agriculturists who would ensure a more stable form of settlement in the region.

MC: You place the Sateré-Mawé at both the beginning and the end of your book, bookending the entire narrative with their experience. How did their scientific knowledge of guaraná define, and defy, colonialist assumptions about indigenous peoples?

SG: For the colonial period, when these initial encounters and transfers, or appropriations, or exchanges are taking place, I had to rely primarily on Jesuit accounts, since the Jesuits were key actors in the Amazon in the 17th century.

The first written source we have about guaraná dates from a Jesuit missionary in the late 17th century. To my frustration as a historian who has predominantly worked on the 20th century, where historical documentation is often abundant, the colonial record here is very sparse. The Jesuit mentions guaraná, notes some of its physiological

effects--that it is a diuretic, that it fights sleep--but there is no reference to where he obtained the information. We can assume it came from indigenous people, but it is telling that he puts the source of knowledge in the passive voice: "it is said that it does this." We never get a clear sense of how that transfer of knowledge took place. Did the Indigenous informants – or more accurately, plant scientists–also recount their myths of origins embodied in the plant only to be suppressed by the horrified missionary?

Drawing on other sources and on the historiography of missions in colonial Amazonia, we can infer the types of exchanges that did occur. The Sateré-Mawé were missionized in the 17th century by Jesuits, which entailed relocation, and their own oral histories refer back to this. So, the question I explored was: how is the first documented instance of this indigenous plant, its knowledge, its uses, its preparation, being written about by a European? Why was the European interested? And how did the missionaries put their own spin on it?

The Jesuits were deeply involved in the transfer of plants and medicines throughout the Portuguese empire, which at that time spanned Asia, Africa, South America, and Europe. We are already seeing a value judgment in how indigenous knowledge is being appropriated: it is used to circulate the commodity, while the intellectual authorship of that knowledge is rendered invisible. Based on the description of the plant's physiological effects, it's also evident that the missionary is assessing its pharmacological qualities and therapeutic value according to the prevailing European notions of humoral theories of health and disease.

MC: Early missionaries and natural historians repurposed guaraná for European tastes and markets. What did this transformation erase about indigenous meanings, and what stubbornly persisted, even into the present?

SG: You are absolutely right. I think we see a through line from the 17th century to the 21st century: the commodification of the plant because of its revenue-earning possibilities is almost a constant. And this came at the expense of a proper valuation of

indigenous cosmologies, indigenous ways of understanding the world, and of indigenous science and knowledge production.

It is not a complete erasure, however. The myth I read at the beginning of our conversation, the opening section of my book, was recorded by a non-indigenous Brazilian, a military engineer named João Martins da Silva Coutinho, and published in Rio de Janeiro in 1870. In the colonial period, at least for guaraná, I found no direct reference to Sateré-Mawé cosmology. But by the 19th century, there is already a kind of indigenismo that recognizes the cultural value of indigenous peoples, their labor potential, their botanical and medicinal knowledge.

The way Coutinho presents the myth is ambivalent. On one hand, he seems to offer it as something beautiful and exotic, evidence that indigenous peoples have their own understandings of the world. On the other, he disparages it as "superstitious" or "childlike." There is a strange "salvage ethnography" at work: showcasing and preserving indigenous knowledge or folkways while simultaneously dismissing it.

As you move into the latter part of the 20th century, anthropology becomes more culturally relativist and respectful of non-Western epistemologies, and that kind of explicit value judgment largely disappears. But we can credit Coutinho for sustaining that myth in written form and making it accessible to literate Portuguese readers, even if the framing was condescending.

MC: Guaraná became a national symbol, yet advertising for decades excluded Black Brazilians or relegated them to stereotyped roles. At the same time, it was initially marketed toward women as a modern, non-alcoholic alternative. What do these patterns reveal about race and gender in Brazilian consumer culture?

SG: That was a complex issue to address. Let me approach the answer through a couple of dimensions.

³Guaraná was initially marketed toward women and children because it was non-alcoholic, but it was also associated with the "modern woman", the woman who went out, who worked, who frequented restaurants, cinemas, and nightclubs. In some ways, the aura surrounding guaraná tracked with the shifting gender roles in Brazil during this period. Yet it also aligned with or reinforced gender hierarchies in that hard liquor and public drunkenness remained taboo for "decent" women, who would reaffirm their propriety through the consumption of sodas. Men, of course also consumed sodas, but just as they historically had the liberty to be impetuous, rash, and aggressive, so too their drinking options were not culturally restricted to sugary soft drinks. The stigma attached to women consuming hard alcohol, and the implicit permission granted to men to behave badly without consequence, reveals deeply entrenched double standards that were mirrored in consumer culture.

Looking at the historic advertising, another trend becomes abundantly clear: for decades, non-white Brazilians were not featured in these ads. The messages conveyed by that absence are that Black people are not as modern, not as "cool," not the embodiment of this vision of Brazilian progress. And if indigenous peoples appeared on product labels or marketing, their images served to exoticize the beverage for urban consumers, or to reinforce the supposed therapeutic qualities of the soda (based on indigenous peoples' proximity to nature), or to reinforce the "authenticity" of a Brazilian national product.

³ Guaraná Brahma ad, 1953. Ads for soft drinks typically depicted beverage consumers as white, reinscribing the social hierarchies in Brazil that linked notions of comfort, health, beauty, leisure, and progress to whiteness. *O Cruzeiro* 6 (November 21, 1953): 42. Hemeroteca Digital, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy of Arquivo O Cruzeiro /EM/D.A Press.

Figure 3. *Guaraná Brahma* ad, 1953.



Source: *O Cruzeiro* 6 (November 21, 1953): 42. Hemeroteca Digital, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy of Arquivo O Cruzeiro/EM/D.A Press.

The 20th century was characterized by mass consumerism, particularly in the second half, which became deeply entwined with notions of identity, personhood, and status, but also with a rhetoric of democratization in access to industrial goods. That was part of the story that proponents of industrialization and mass marketing celebrated. And it has a certain basis in truth. The price of a guaraná soda is relatively low (and certainly much lower than when they were marketed in the 1920s), meaning Brazilians from various walks of life, regardless of race or class, can in principle purchase it. But critics are correct to point out that cheaper access to soda by no means

eliminated the deeper structural inequalities, in class, gender, and race, that define these societies. You have what I'd call "cheap consumerism" enabled by industrial mass production, alongside persistent inequality in the things that actually enable social mobility: income, health care, education.

MC: You argue that guaraná's failure to go global, despite many Brazilian efforts, is itself revealing. Does its resistance to becoming a global commodity like Coca-Cola actually make it a more distinctive marker of Brazilian identity?

SG: It's not that Brazilians didn't try, since the 19th century, to hook foreigners on guaraná. At international world fairs and expositions during the 19th century, Brazilian delegations brought Amazonian products, including guaraná, that they hoped to promote as therapeutic remedies. It never took off, for several reasons. First, there were structural problems on the Brazilian end: much of the capital, infrastructure, and labor were concentrated around coffee, which was the driving force of the Brazilian economy from the 19th century onward.

On the international side, coffee and tea, the two primary stimulants of the 19th century, already had established distribution networks, deep financial interests, and consumer cultures: think of the coffee houses of Europe, or tea time in England. Guaraná's limited large-scale production made it expensive and difficult to obtain abroad, and there were already entrenched markets for these other beverages.

Going into the 20th century, guaraná was still consumed primarily in Mato Grosso, until around 1950, actually, reflecting centuries-long trade networks that sent the product down river routes to the interior areas of the South American continent – central-western Brazil and even eastern Bolivia– where it commanded hefty prices and addicted local populations. Producers and distributors had little incentive to break from those trade circuits until the soda industry in Brazil expanded and demand grew in the cities of eastern Brazil.

That said, if you want some food for thought for the future (no pun intended): no one would have predicted that açaí would become a global craze. Those of us who went

to the Amazon in the 1970s and 1980s knew açaí in Belém, whose point of sale was announced with its distinctive red signs, but we never imagined it being sold around the corner from us at the local café or smoothie shop. Guaraná Antarctica, the largest guaraná soda company in Brazil, now part of a giant multinational corporation, is trying. They have bottling plants in Japan, Portugal, and most recently in New York. I don't think they aspire to displace Coca-Cola. But the story is not finished.

MC: You mention that the military dictatorship played a significant role in guaraná's commercial expansion. How did the regime's developmentalist policies, including the so-called Green Revolution in the Amazon, shape the commodity's trajectory?

SG: Yes, because the military government clearly prioritized certain goals for Brazil's economic development, particularly agribusiness. The creation of Embrapa, the state agricultural corporation, led to intensive research on many crops. In the case of the Amazon and the Cerrado, the most consequential outcome was soy, which became one of Embrapa's success stories, to the dismay of many local populations and native flora and fauna because of its devastating environmental and social impact.

Guaraná was also researched as part of a concerted effort involving universities, corporations, and government support to boost production to meet rising demand for the soft drink as well as with an eye towards exports. But there is also a more diffuse dimension to the military's role in this story: urbanization.

Sodas have always been primarily urban industrial products. Guaraná's mass consumption is inseparable from the history of urbanization and industrialization in Brazil, and it is under the military that you see intense rural-to-urban migration, with Brazil's population becoming predominantly urban. In urban areas, people adjust their diets to support shifting lifestyles and household dynamics, increasingly purchasing processed, industrial and grab-and-go foods. The leisure industries expand. Schools enroll more students, and soda manufacturers can ensure large-scale distribution at

schools. There are simply far more opportunities and venues for guaraná to be marketed.

But this explanation for guaraná's commercial expansion is a little different from the other, where scientists working for or with government agencies were strategizing how to modernize agricultural production and market guaraná more widely. The urbanization dynamic is more of a side effect: Brazilian officials were not necessarily planning how to sell more sodas in schools. but their policies produced the cultural and social transformations that shaped how people forged new relations to food, especially industrial foods. Guaraná soda is a clear example.

MC: I would like you to read a passage from Chapter 8, the second paragraph on page 173, beginning with "Guaraná" and ending with "existential paralysis."

SG: Sure, thank you.

"Guaraná long operated at different registers in Sateré-Mawé communal life. The product of a primordial being's dismemberment, the plant's mythic origins signify a source of knowledge, the dialectic of predation and transformation of life common to Tupi ontologies, the conflictive relations among affines, and aspirations for transcendence through consensus and sehewakwat, or 'good words.' The latter, fundamental to a chief's persuasive power, is believed to be directly linked to the consumption of guaraná. In bygone times, the chief's recitation of the good words inscribed in the sacred porantim that inspired communal work projects or conflict resolution was accompanied by ritual drinking of the beverage. More commonly, in formal drinking ceremonies, the consumption of çapó is marked by solemnity, concentration, and the contemplation of common values. As also noted, guaraná granted the Sateré-Mawé access to coveted Western goods since the colonial period. Non-Western peoples have long managed foreign arrivals without existential paralysis."

MC: If readers take one lesson from guaraná history to rethink how we approach other commodities, what should it be?

SG: I think the lesson should begin with how much material objects factor into human experience and human history. Historians like to say that everything has a history, and they like to denaturalize, to problematize, what people take for granted

about the world around them. When you apply that lens to an everyday object, a commodity, it can become a genuine source of wonderment.

Guaraná itself is a source of wonderment because of its stimulant qualities, its psychoactive properties. That is one of the keys to its appeal across centuries, for indigenous and non-indigenous populations alike. History, ideally, can produce a similar kind of wonderment: it makes us question what we have taken for granted, what we assumed to be normal or “just always that way.” Especially when it never was.

Commodity history is particularly rich because of its everyday relevance. All of us can become historians with any object that surrounds us. And commodity histories allow us to access so many different dimensions of history simultaneously: who made that product, and under what conditions? Who consumed it, and why? What messages were embedded in its usage? What did people believe it did for them or made them? These questions bring us into anthropology, economics, social history, environmental history, the full range of human experience.

MC: Your book explores how guaraná evolved from an indigenous Amazonian plant into a mass-consumed national product. What does this journey reveal about cultural appropriation, globalization, and environmental change in Brazil?

⁴**SG:** On a certain popular and romanticized level, Brazilian nationalist discourse has long stressed exchanges among different ethnic and racial groups, the idea of “racial democracy” and the ideal of a melting pot achieved through the fusion of different populations and their cultural traditions. Gilberto Freyre was the most prominent popularizer of this idea, stressing how the Portuguese relied on indigenous foodstuffs and medicinal knowledge, for example, to forge a new civilization in the tropics.

⁴ Guaraná Antarctica ad, 1944. Conjuring for urbanites the “natural” lifestyle of indigenous peoples, Companhia Antarctica Paulista affirmed: “The reason for the fortitude of the Indians is in their food, above all the insuperable attributes of guaraná, source of health, energy and vigor, at the reach of all in this delicious drink.” *A Cigarra* 128 (November 1944): 124. Hemeroteca Digital, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy of Arquivo O Cruzeiro/EM/D.A

Figure 4. *Guaraná Antarctica ad, 1944*



Source: A Cigarra 128 (November 1944): 124. Hemeroteca Digital, Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro. Courtesy of Arquivo O Cruzeiro/EM/D.A Press.

“Cultural appropriation” is how more contemporary commentators, more skeptical of the benevolence or innocuousness of such interethnic interactions, might label these exchanges. The term I prefer is uneven exchange. Cultural appropriation can be a problematic concept for anthropology and history if it posits any interethnic exchange as sanctionable, when exchanges, of course, are central to the historical formation or evolution of every culture. Appropriation is sanctionable, however, when it involves exploitation and marginalization of the subordinate group.

Yes, the story of guaraná is one of uneven exchanges, a history of appropriation by pharmaceutical and soda companies that did not allocate to indigenous peoples the credit they deserved, in both financial terms and in terms of scientific knowledge. But

indigenous peoples have always been historical actors, and we must recognize the agency they brought to these exchanges, however disadvantaged by power dynamics. The Sateré-Mawé tried, and continue to try, to get the best they could from their encounters with missionaries, naturalists, government officials, and NGOs. "Cultural appropriation" has marked this indigenous history, but it can obscure the more nuanced types of interaction and the kind of agency that the Sateré-Mawé have exhibited throughout this history.

In terms of globalization and environmental change: the entire history of the Amazon in the 20th century must be understood through this lens, because it is global market demands for Amazonian commodities that have had such a devastating impact on the region's environments and local populations. The Sateré-Mawé communities have experienced this directly, their territory invaded, deforested, and contaminated by petroleum exploration by large multinationals in the early 1980s. This is a world closing in on communities that have had contact with outsiders for centuries, but not at this scale, or with this level of potential destruction.

That is precisely why, as I show at the end of the book, these communities have settled on a project of reclaiming guaraná and taking ownership of it, marketing their product through fair trade and slow food networks, targeting European markets where it can command higher prices. This recent history cannot be understood without looking at national development, globalization, and environmental change together. But I think we see glimmers of hope in the ways indigenous peoples have continued to struggle and adapt to these very challenging circumstances.

MC: Your book includes a rich visual archive, advertising images, family photographs, commercial ephemera. What can underused sources like these reveal that traditional historical documents cannot? And how did you depict the emotional dimension of guaraná nostalgia without romanticizing the past?

SG: I was determined to show how guaraná became a mass-consumed product, how the soft drink came to be a quintessential Brazilian product. I should mention that

I did not have access to the business or corporate archives of the soda companies, which would have allowed me to reconstruct the economic decision-making within these corporations. That is a limitation I would have liked to overcome if I could.

Instead, I relied on advertisements, which were more accessible through the digitization of periodicals like *O Cruzeiro* at the Biblioteca Nacional in Rio de Janeiro. And there I came across images that were genuinely fun to work with, revealing in what they communicated about notions of comfort, health, and vitality, and indicative of how the soda companies and their advertising agencies were trying to hook Brazilian consumers on this product.

A great deal has been written about Coca-Cola's use of advertising to become a nationally and internationally consumed beverage, including in Brazil. But I think the images I found for guaraná captured several key points with particular clarity. One was the very romanticized, exoticized depiction of indigenous peoples, which I argue was critical to marketing the product because of the associations of indigenous people with health, robustness, and proximity to nature. Another was the depiction of leisure, physical exercise, and sexual appeal, all of which, until today, are the standard tools of soda marketing.

What is especially fascinating is that some guaraná soda ads literally show the berry of the plant dripping into the bottle or cup. That is something Coca-Cola never did and could never do: they were not going to show a coca leaf going into their bottle. But guaraná marketers seized on this as a distinctive cachet: the supposed purity of the beverage, the Amazonian provenance of the key ingredient, visually infused into the product. At the time, in the 1940s and 50s, guaraná sodas were often using a substitute ingredient, so it was often false advertising. But it was remarkably effective.

When I have presented my work, Brazilians in the audience frequently approach me afterward and say: "My mother would never let us drink Coca-Cola, she said it was unhealthy, but she let us have guaraná because that was healthy." Where would that belief come from? Precisely from that advertising strategy: linking the berry to the product, and investing the product with the mythical, therapeutic qualities of its Amazonian source. Advertising, as I argue in that chapter, operates as a kind of magic,

it imputes to certain products qualities that the consumer, by extension, is believed to incorporate or embody.

And that connects to a broader argument in the book: sodas are consummate modern products, industrial, mass-produced, linked to urbanization. Yet they are sold through images of nature, escapist fantasy, and other non-rational or “pre-modern” ideals. That contradiction is not accidental. It is part of the marketing formula. I no longer place much stock in these categories of “modern” and “pre-modern,” but the tension between them is very much alive in how these goods are marketed and, aside from their sugary, caffeinated, carbonated, energizing zip, how they hook their consumers, especially adolescent ones.

MC: As a final question: if guaraná’s history teaches us one lesson about protecting Amazonia’s future, what is the take-home for readers?

SG: Guaraná has achieved a kind of mythic, monumental status in Brazil, and the plant does apparently have genuine important therapeutic qualities, numerous to numerous studies. Similar to what other studies of caffeinated products, such as coffee and green tea, have revealed. That raises a question with much broader implications: how many other plants, among the tens of thousands species in the Amazon, with pharmacological significance, have already been destroyed, or are at risk of destruction, because of a model of destructive extractivism, logging, extensive cattle ranching, and large-scale development projects that have ravaged the Amazonian biome?

History, as I suggested earlier, has the potential to prod people to reconsider the world around them. Perhaps guaraná offers one such opening. Here is a single plant: our knowledge of it, our understanding of its properties, we owe entirely to indigenous peoples. And look at how it has enchanted and enthralled us, not to mention generating industrial development and employment. Now think about the other plants that exist in the Amazon, and about the indigenous communities that hold this knowledge, and that are threatened by development projects that completely devalue their way of life and their scientific knowledge. That is a tragedy, and a largely preventable one.

The story of guaraná is a bittersweet one. It shows the resilience of an indigenous population that had all the odds stacked against its survival, yet rebounded from the traumas of colonial violence. Guaraná, as both an ancestral totem and method of interethnic exchange, is part of that story of survival. But there is also a haunting of past and future loss: the destruction of cultural and biodiversity in the Amazon due to short-sighted policies aimed at immediate economic and political gain. If this book leaves readers with a greater sense of what is at stake in the Amazon, and with a greater respect for the peoples and knowledge systems that have stewarded its ecological treasures, then it will have made a small contribution to solving an enormous problem.

Marcos Colón: As we conclude this conversation with Seth Garfield, I am left thinking about guaraná not just as a plant or a soda, but as a living archive, one that holds indigenous knowledge, colonial violence, capitalist ambitions, and the bittersweet taste of Brazilian nostalgia. Seth's work challenges us to ask: who gets to define authenticity and tradition? Who profits from progress? And how do we honor Sateré-Mawé science and sovereignty in a world that still too often erases both? If there is one takeaway from *Guaraná: How Brazil Embraced the World's Most Caffeine-Rich Plant*, it is that the stories we consume about commodities are never just about taste or trade. They are about power. And as the Amazon faces new frontiers of extraction, the history of guaraná, from sacred vine to military-era monoculture, feels more urgent than ever. Thank you, Seth, for this illuminating and generous conversation.

Seth Garfield: Thank you, Marcos. It has been a pleasure.

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