Transcript

Episode 9: Maya, Inca, Aztecs and their Alcohol Use, Aurea Toxqui (Bradley University)

Lauren Dogaer

Have you ever found yourself asking why alcohol plays such a big role across so many cultures? Striking a balance between moderation and excess isn't just a modern struggle. It goes back to ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and the Roman Empire. I'm Lauren, and I'm a postdoctoral fellow in Egyptology at the University of Oxford. I'm fascinated by how today's issues mirror the past, from ancient health warnings to peer pressure at Greek symposia. We're exploring it all. Join me as we get Drunk On History and uncover the timeless truth behind our drinking habits. Hello, everyone, and welcome to the ninth episode of the Drunk On History podcast, for which we are going to Latin America. I am therefore talking with Aurea Toxqui, professor at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois. She is a specialist in the history of Latin America, having also worked for several museums in Mexico, including the National Museum of History. Her research primarily focuses on the social, cultural, and political history of alcohol in Latin America, exploring how its production and consumption intertwine with race, class, gender, and state building. And she also serves on the editorial board for the academic journal, The Social History of Alcohol and Drugs. So, Aurea, welcome to the podcast.

Aurea Toxqui

Thank you so much for the invitation, Lauren. What an honor.

Lauren Dogaer

We're going to Latin America, which is of course a very big region. There were plenty of already small states and societies going back as early as even 5,000 BCE when agriculture developed and for this episode I would like to focus on the civilizations of the Maya, Inca and Aztecs and their alcohol use of course. So let's start with the Maya culture. What is the Maya period exactly? Which centuries was the civilization active and which modern countries does it cover?

Aurea Toxqui

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.



So, for the Mayas, they expand from a very long period of time. The early, early Maya villages that archaeologists have found come from the 2000 before the Common Era and last all the way to what is considered the post classic period of Mesoamerica and the 1539 if we talk about the specific central conquest of some areas or 1697 if we talk about the last village falling in the hands of the Spaniards. In terms of countries, it encompasses parts of Mexico, southern Mexico, that is what nowadays is the state of Chiapas, that is the most southern state of Mexico, and then the Yucatan Peninsula or the states of Campeche, Yucatan and Quintana Roo are located and then we're going south and we have the countries of Guatemala, and Belize and parts of El Salvador and parts of Honduras so that's the area mostly where the Mayas developed.

Lauren Dogaer

Thank you. And which kind of beverages did the Mayas consume? Because they seem to have been made especially from like maize and honey. And in addition to the consumption of these kinds of alcohol, the Mayas also used these enema bags, which did have like hallucinating effects for faster intoxication. Can you explain a little bit all of this more in detail, which kinds of alcohol did they have and how did this work together with these enemas that they were using.

Aurea Toxqui

So, Maya, specific drinks, we have two that the archaeologists have found that is sacca that was produced with corn and balché that was produced with the bark of the balché tree and honey. And they were added water that they considered virgin water meant that it was not touched by human hand before so usually from the cenotes in Mexico they will take the water to make these drinks They added honey particularly to the balché because the bark of the balché is very bitter so they have to boil the balché and then they let it dry for a while and then it was boiled again with this virgin water and honey to make it fermented and make balché. Corn was the same thing, corn was seen also by the Mayas as a sacred crop even in their origin story, the Popol Vuh. They said that humans were made out of corn, that the gods made humans out of corn. So, it's their main crop and is a god. Particularly, the saqqa was highly used during anything related to the planting, the plowing, planting, weeding and harvest. So, everything related to the process of agriculture. And during the ceremonies related to the gods of the rain Chaac that was the name of the god of the rain also there was this sacred beverage that is a communal ingestion and offer also to the ground where the seeds were going to be planted. And then when the seeds are growing, they offer saqqa and they consume it as well. They also drink it during Holy Week as well. You were asking also about the enema bags. This is a practice

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.



that is common throughout Mesoamerica as well. But in the Maya cultures, there's a lot of representations of this practice of the use of these instruments to introduce liquids into the lower digestive tract. There are several uses. The first one is medicinal use, then to purify the body and as well as ritual and pleasure practice these enemas were made out of perishable materials such as gourds intestines and even rubber, however there have been found a few ceramic enemas as well. Usually they have of course alcohol and sometimes to enhance the intoxicating power of that liquid, they will use hallucinogen, mind-altering substances to potentiate that. So, for example, for medicinal purposes, the idea was to have purgative qualities. So, the idea was to clean out the intestines. In fact, in Guatemala nowadays, some Maya groups still use enemas to cure dysentery. So in that way, these enemas were part of a ritual of purification, either related to religion or just in general as a way to get rid of the disease and that included probably most likely fasting and cleansing and bathing and a sweat bath called temazcal. There is particularly representations of the Mayas inserting using enema syringes or clusters to consume pulque and then the person that had consumed pulque starts vomiting. So that was the intention of purifying the body. In terms of the ritual ecstasy and pleasure, for those purposes, Mayas used enemas that were already had a spike, to say it, with hallucinogenic or mind altering substances in order to attain more intense trans states. There is also the possibility that other substances were used besides tobacco and cacao that could be peyote, toad venom, mushrooms, and water lily. And it hasn't been fully studied, the pharmacological activity of the water lily, but it's very commonly represented throughout Mesoamerica. The Aztecs consumed something similar to water lily for ritual ecstasy.

Lauren Dogaer

So I believe we have learned quite a bit already about the Maya culture. So maybe now we can move on a little bit towards the Inca. The Inca, they were living in the Andes also around 13th till 16th centuries, until the area was conquered by the Spanish invaders. And the most popular drink consumed by the Inca was the chicha, made also from corn. And the term chicha is actually often, as far as I understood, more used as an umbrella term for all of the fermented beverages that you can find in the Andes in general and was actually only introduced after the Spanish conquest. So it refers to many more varieties of drinks that existed in the Andes region. And chicha was really used as a way also to signal social ranking and to ensure people's loyalty to these Inca rulers. And I've read that you can really speak of an Inca feasting economy in which this concept of loyalty was really important. Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.

Aurea Toxqui

Sure. So, as you mentioned, the Inca is almost at the end of this long history of Andean civilizations started from the 3500s before the Common Era. And I'm making this remark because the use of fermented beverages throughout those centuries all the way to the Incas was a common thing certainly the corn beer was probably the most common one but as you mentioned it was made out of other different seeds and particularly when we talk about the Incas that is the last culture of the Andeas is because before some of the cultures like the Tijuanaku or the Ruquai have been using Chicha to consolidate reciprocity and alliances and get followers from the chiefs or the lords of these communities provide that to their followers getting their loyalty. That was a common practice that later on the Incas are going to build upon and use it even more to reinforce their power. Based on that idea of reciprocity, for example, Inca Emperor will offer lots encourage feast in which everybody can drink and it was millions of liters of beer for these events and of course in reciprocity of course the subjects are not going to go and offer beer to the Inca emperor, right? What they are going to repay that generosity is by providing more service to the state.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, thank you so much. The chicha, as far as I understood, was also mainly brewed by women who were brewing it almost exclusively for the state, actually. But they did not seem to have been really consuming it at the same level as the men were consuming the chicha. So it seems that they were sort of almost excluded from these Inca feasting practices. Can you say a little bit more about this quite big gender difference?

Aurea Toxqui

Yes, so Chicha was always in the realm of women's production, right? There's a lot of pots throughout different areas of the Andean region and different time periods in which archaeologists have found these different pots in which beer or fermented beverages have been made and is completely related to the women's labor. When the Incas were in power by demanding more and more production of beer, it is through research on isotope data. It suggests that before the arrival of the Inca, men and women were consuming the same amount of corn. So that suggests that men and women were participating of the events at the same level. But once the Incas conquered these different communities, in this case the Xiaoxia, then women were producing more beer, consuming much less, and men, for example, were eating more meat and drinking more beer. So, what scholars

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.



think is that since alcohol was essential element of Inca politics, the lower consumption of beer by women means that they were excluded from many of the feasts that Incas employed to link their subjects to the state. Also, the practice of requesting women from communities to just brew chicha became very common they were called mamakona that means sequester or chosen women and they literally work exclusively for the state producing the beer for these important occasions.

Lauren Dogaer

It's of course not that surprising to hear that it's a very male dominated society, but it's just really stood out to me that there is such a big difference and also this change as opposed to the earlier societies with when the Incas came in. And then, of course, at some point the Spanish showed up and when in 1532 they arrived and they saw the Inca Empire, they were equally fascinated, but also shocked by the alcohol consumption in Peru. People were really consuming a lot more alcohol than they were used to. Literally drinking until they were unable to stand. And also the majority of the household pots, they were actually used for making alcohol. And even more, the Spanish conquistadores, they refused a cup of beer from the Inca emperor Atahualpa, who was very insulted because this kind of reciprocal gift exchange was a very long tradition in the Andes region, and then not a lot later, the actual conquest began. Can you tell me a little bit more about why the emperor would have been so insulted by this.

Aurea Toxqui

Well, it's because in this practice of reciprocity of the Inca providing this generosity of giving you beer and cementing a relationship between him and other lords or subjects, the fact that they were refused that carol was also making the signal that the Spaniards, the conquistadors were refusing the authority of the Inca.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, thank you so much. I think it's a very fascinating example of when alcohol really, really matters in history. And then the final Latin American civilization that I would like to address are the Aztecs who lived in Mexico from also 14th till 16th century until again, the Spanish invaded. For the Aztecs, the main alcoholic drink was pulque, which is made from agave. It was extremely strong and the effects could also be highly problematic. And many measures were actually already taken by the Aztecs to control the alcohol usage, often with little success. But they did have some rather strict rules that I found interesting because only individuals of a very old age as well as pregnant and nursing women were allowed to consume pulque outside of a ritual context. Why was this the case?

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.

Aurea Toxqui
Bradley University

Aurea Toxqui

So yes, so pulque was a holy beverage and it is produced from the fermented sap of the agave called Mague Pulquero in Spanish and it may be the agave salmiana and the agave mapizaga and when it's taken the sap is taken from the agave is called nutli or aguamiel that literally means honey and water and because it's very sweet and has a lot of chores and once it's fermented then is when it becomes extra octli or becomes pulque what nowadays we call it pulque By the time of the Aztecs, that is in the Postclassic period in the 1300s to 1521, the Aztecs are a militaristic state that is based on the power of war, client states. They need a lot of commodities and things that they don't produce, so they need things from others. So in consequence, they have to make sure that people are productive and not integrated. And that's one of the reasons of why they control the consumption of pulque. But also, if pulque is a sacred beverage, they don't want to make it something common for everybody. They want to restrict or have the exclusive access for certain groups among the Aztecs and not everyone. They also understood that drunkenness creates discord, dissension, revolt, tension, so in consequence can lead to rebellions. So, the Aztecs were aware of all of that, but particularly, one of the reasons why I think they limited or have exclusive access is because of that, because they wanted it mostly for themselves, the intoxicating beverage for certain groups and not for everybody. Who can drink it were priests who required to connect with the gods, warriors who are going to be in the battle as well as they might be sacrificed later on as prisoners so they need that encouragement. But if you think about it these two the priests and the warriors most of them are part from the elite so again that exclusivity elites already have access because they were consuming it as part of their duty, As you also mentioned, there were other groups that consumed pulque. So, we have the elders, people who were 52 years or older, they were allowed to consume up to four cups. That was the measurement, up to four cups for those who were on duty. Priests, warriors, elders. Why 52? Why elders have to be 52? Because for the Aztecs in Nahuas a century had 52 years so anyone who had passed a full era was by default allowed to drink to keep warm, to make them feel well, to remember if they get drunk, they could remember their early years. So, it was a reward for the elderly. For pregnant and lactating women, they were allowed also to drink these jars, but they were very small cups. and why was that because pulque is a very healthy beverage has a lot of nutrients and particularly one that pregnant women and nursing mothers consume nowadays. Folic acid. So that's why it is a very healthy one and women were consuming it for that reason even in central parts of Mexico women do that when they are nursing or they are pregnant. And of course also pulque was allowed for those who were ill because of the curative properties. The rest were

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.

allowed only to drink pulque in very small amounts during certain religious festivals and some social events like weddings, but there were festivities that were communal drinking festivities and in which even kids were allowed. So, for example, the Pilaguanazliztli, that is the festivity in honor of the goddess Xochiquezal. It was called the drunkenness of the kids. But for example, in festivities in honor of the dead, that is the ancestral practice of the Day of the Dead nowadays, everybody has the permission to drink pulque.

Lauren Dogaer

Wow. There are so many detailed rules that the Aztecs had about the alcohol consumption, because I only read about like the elders and then the pregnant and nursing women. And I was like, why are they on earth allowed to drink this if, if it was forbidden for everyone else. But there was clearly a lot of thought behind how they made these rules and sort of tried to, to moderate the alcohol usage. Which brings me to the fact that with the arrival of the Spanish, there seems to be a shift because beforehand you have all of these controlled substances that were consumed during specific ritual acts. There is a lot of religious connotation associated with it. But then it sort of seems to change to a more commercial practice with when the Spanish arrive, when people are just starting to drink at all kinds of social events and chicha and pulque seem to be transformed from like sacred beverages into just general commodities. So, what was the impact on all of these traditions when the Spanish arrived?

Aurea Toxqui

Yeah, with the Spanish conquest and colonization that goes from the 16th century to the early 19th century, not only pulque, not only chicha, but many other indigenous fermented or non-fermented beverages that were considered sacred, they lose that character and became not only commodities but become demonized, controversial, cheap commodities. And that's a reflection of all the changes that were happening in what nowadays is Latin America, right? The arrival of the Spaniards with their culture and structures are going to have very profound social, economic, religious, and political transformations in these overseas kingdoms in the Viceroyalty of the New Spain, which is Mexico nowadays, or Viceroyalty of Peru, right? And evidently that clash between the Spaniards and indigenous groups is going to have a change in the way the substances that were controlled either by the state because it's a way to control your subjects and get reciprocal labor or exclusive consumption by the Aztecs. All of a sudden, anyone can drink it, particularly in Mexico. Pulque becomes this cheap consumption. The Spaniards did not regulate drunkenness right away because for them moderation and wine was part of their humanistic view at the time so they were not concerned with that at the beginning

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.



and that allowed for the spread of consumption of pulque and increasing and to the point that later on missionaries and other religious authorities are going to be very concerned because drunkenness leads to heresy, leads to rebellion, so in consequence they want pulque to be eradicated. However, pulque in the first century is in the hands of native towns that are going to be paying tribute by producing pulque and giving it to the vice royal authorities. And of course, there is the sale of pulque and produces a lot of money. But later on in the 18th century, the pulque production comes in the hands of the descendants of the Spanish colonizers. And evidently it's a lot of money for these descendants. And that are the new nobility of the area. So, of course they don't want to eradicate the production of pulque by opposite. They are living magnanimously because a lot of money comes from pulque and the crown doesn't want to eradicate pulque because pulque taxes and the sale of pulque produced a lot of revenues to the Crown's treasury. So, in consequence, the beverage is not eradicated. It's something that, yes, is criticized by many, but at the same time, the local authorities and royal authorities don't want to to get rid of that.

Lauren Dogaer

Yeah, I think this also plays a bit of a role later on, and this is my final question. In more recent times, in the 20th and even 21st centuries, I think, these traditional fermented beverages, the pulque, the chicha, they also played a role in nationalist movements even. Can you shortly explain a little bit more about how this long-standing tradition suddenly played a role in this?

Aurea Toxqui

In the case of Mexico and Pulque, this is very interesting because in the late 20th century, we have different things. We have the Washington Consensus that imposes a lot of neoliberal policies in Latin America, and of course affects the way of living in Mexico. For example, there is a lot of economic crisis. And so we have that. We have movements of resistance, like for example, the Zapatista movement of 1994 against NAFTA and global capitalism that was leaving marginalized communities completely out to survive to their own means. At the same time that this is happening and it's also part of these global capitalism, we see tequila companies begin negotiating with multinational corporations for the distribution of their products globally. So, all of this is happening. And of course, for young Mexicans at the time, tequila is no longer a national beverage because anyone can drink it and the owners are not Mexicans. And so they find in pulque kind of a tool or a weapon to combat the damaging effects of globalization and neoliberal policies that are affecting their daily lives. And they claim that pulque is the authentic national

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.



beverage because its pre-Columbian origins and traditional method of elaboration and commercialization. And it's because few elements on its production and commercialization have changed since the pre-Hispanic times or pre-Columbian times to nowadays. Pulque cannot be bottled. There are different efforts, but in general, there is no bottling, no large distributors, and sometimes not even intermediaries. The beverage remains less expensive than many other industrialized alcoholic beverages. So, because pulque has the natural limitation of constant fermentation up to the point that it spoils and becomes like vinegar, it cannot be fully commercialized by these multinational corporations and cannot be gentrified as tequila or mezcal have. So, in consequence, they have used these as their sign of nationalism and be proud of their cultural patrimony and their tradition, right? So pulque, for example, nowadays in Tlaxcala, that is one of the central states in Mexico, has a protected geographical indication that is commonly used in the European Union for food and wines. Is not completely a denomination of origin but has similar connotations. For example, the production of pulque is considered cultural immaterial patrimony of Mexico City. In some events particularly when electoral campaigns, politicians drink pulque and praise pulque as their favorite campaign, promising to support the pulque industry, but it's not really something that happens. That is, for example, for pulque. But in Peru and the Andean region, Chicha is very interesting because Chicha has become the pride of the Inca heritage and they have been using it for political ceremonies and talking about how it's out of those external influences, very similar like in pulque, right? And so it's a symbol of perovanidad or peroness and resistance like in Mexico. And it's very funny because in many rallies, political rallies and movements or demonstrations of nationalist movements, particularly from the left, it has been used to consume chicha at the end of these events as part of showing heritage and resistance in the idea that they are not willing to take external forces. So very similar to pulque but in different ways and similar in terms of resistance, identity, cultural patrimony, but more political in Peru than in Mexico. However, and also want to mention for Peru, now the term Chicha is used for Chicha culture. That means music and dance and other artistic representations and all of that under the umbrella that is a symbol of nationalism that comes from the pre-Hispanic origin, from the Incas.

Lauren Dogaer

I believe this is an excellent way to end this very fascinating episode, the impressive cultures of Latin America, the Mayas, the Incas, the Aztecs. They used alcohol such as chicha and pulque to their advantage by organizing lavish feasts for political support. Well, a practice that apparently sort of lives on in a way as the traditional alcoholic

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.



beverages are still playing a very important role in politics nowadays. And that is also why the history of alcohol and getting drunk on history is so important. So thank you so much, Aurea. It was really lovely. I learned a lot today.

Aurea Toxqui

Thank you so much for inviting me. It was an honor and it was a pleasure.

Lauren Dogaer

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Drunk On History. If you're thirsty for more tales from the ancient world, don't miss our next episode. It's full of even more drinking stories from past civilizations. Drunk On History is made in cooperation with the New Media Center of the University of Basel.

© Drunk On History Podcast 2025
all rights reserved.